

## PUBLISHED VERSION

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African authors and work, many of whom have received too little attention elsewhere. If the figures presented in the main essays (which also include Emecheta, Brutus, Oket p'Bitek) are in this case largely familiar ones, the reviews are exemplary in focusing on and giving attention to material primarily published from within Africa. This space, perhaps as much as the critical material itself, seems to me to be one of *African Literature Today's* continuing achievements in this, the penultimate issue before the retirement of Eldred Jones as editor.

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**Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: an environmental history of Africa, 1800–1990** by JAMES C. McCANN  
Oxford: James Currey, 1999. Pp. 201. £12.95 (pbk.).

The history of human-nature interactions in Africa has been widely written about, but *Green Land ...* is a welcome addition to the literature. Based on primary and secondary sources and McCann's own field experiences in Africa, *Green Land ...* provides a thoughtful and penetrating analysis of the history and changing nature of Africa's environmental landscapes over the last two centuries.

Structurally, the text is divided into two parts. Part I (chapters 1–3) presents an overview of Africa's environmental characteristics and an analysis of its geo-political and environmental history. Part II (chapters 4–7 and epilogue) uses case studies from sub-Saharan Africa to highlight natural resource degradation, desertification and the role of human agency in these processes. Each chapter contains notes for further reading and there is an extensive bibliography. Illustrative figures, maps and photos are used effectively throughout, making *Green Land ...* a valuable reference for both students and professionals.

The text's central argument is that modern African landscapes are the result of the interaction between human activity and natural change processes. From a perspective that considers humans as both agents and victims of landscape dynamism, McCann challenges widely held notions of Africa as some kind of special Eden threatened by humankind and therefore worthy of preservation regardless of the implications for rural African livelihoods. Early misreading of Africa's landscapes, argues McCann, culminated in misdirected conservation policies that sought 'to freeze the landscape's dynamism and achieve a scene that conforms to prevailing ideas about Africa's "natural" state' (p. 75), a viewpoint also shared by other commentators. In fact, McCann's fundamental point is that natural change processes, cumulative effects of specific human technologies, growing population, changes in agriculture and global capital penetration are all central to appreciating Africa's

environmental history. In pursuing this argument, McCann cleverly reveals how the survival strategies of African people were, and still are, designed to counter and adapt to nature's harsh realities.

McCann is critical of the role of the colonial and post-colonial state in environmental conservation. In both phases, as McCann expounds, state policies based on the false but resilient 'degradation narrative' sought to transform human behaviour to correct nature's own dynamism, with obviously limited success. Implementation of inappropriate policies further compounded Africa's environmental crises, as McCann demonstrates with cases from Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Mali, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Lesotho. McCann also blames the global media for perpetuating stereotypic images of Africa's environmental crises as a function of overpopulation and mismanagement, citing footage from the 1980s documentary film *The Desert Doesn't Bloom Here Anymore* as an example.

By examining African history through an environmental lens, McCann fulfils his objective to 'offer a new and enriching perspective on Africa's impressive political histories' (p. 23). In the process, he successfully challenges orthodox narratives based on Malthusian theory that blame Africa's environmental problems on human factors, primarily overpopulation and mismanagement. His analysis transcends current victim-blaming narratives and acknowledges that nature's extremes inherent in landscape dynamism – droughts, floods, fires – have always made survival more challenging in Africa than elsewhere in the world. Citing new research, McCann observes that 'there is evidence that human action and population growth indeed has [*sic*] changed the physical landscape by altering vegetative cover, but the meaning and direction of that change contradicts the human degradation narrative ... [and] ... evidence from new climatological and historical research questions the human hand in climatological degradation and adds new insights into Africa's history as a whole' (p. 58).

This new body of research clearly supports assertions that attribute desertification to global warming; that is to 'global climatic processes more than local human action' (p. 59), so that African communities are 'more likely to be victims of a changing environment rather than its perpetrators' (p. 60). In relation to early African empires like Great Zimbabwe, McCann uses an environmental perspective to argue that their demise was triggered largely by unfavourable temperatures, unreliable rainfall patterns and a general shift in climatic conditions, not simply human perfidy as earlier historians suggested. Indeed emerging archaeological and climatic evidence challenges existing perspectives on such issues as deforestation, desertification and soil erosion in Africa. For example, evidence from Lesotho blames colonial agriculture and soil types for soil erosion, gullies, deforestation and desertification.

However, the book has its shortcomings. As McCann himself professes, 'Africa's physical size, the scale of its human mosaic, and its biological diversity defy both generalisation and full coverage' (p. 5), and 'works of synthesis invariably invite a critical eye from specialists whose depth of knowledge and experience in a particular place necessarily exceeds the author's' (pp. xiii–xiv). Attempting to cover the environmental history of such a vast geographical expanse over two centuries in one text means that certain

themes remain thinly analysed or completely neglected. There is, for example, a paucity of information on the changing roles of the state and civil society in environmental conservation in Africa over the years, or on the major global implications of Africa's current environmental crises. However, to his credit, McCann uses detailed case studies to effectively analyse some key themes throughout the text.

In summary, *Green Land ...* is an insightful addition to the literature as it offers a valuable interdisciplinary assessment of Africa's environmental history. It will be an invaluable resource to students, and all those with an interest in African history and environmental studies.

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**Credit, Currencies and Culture: African financial institutions in historical perspective** edited by ENDRE STIANSEN and JANE I. GUYER  
Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. 1999. Pp. 174. SEK200 (pbk.).

This is an insightful and engaging collection of essays on the development of credit and currencies in Africa. The influence of local culture on this development is explored in each of the works. The studies are pithy and easily read, without a great deal of jargon. Almost all of this collection of seven papers by various authors were first presented as a seminar series, at Northwestern University, USA, in 1996. The editors are specialists on economic, political and social aspects of African society.

The editors stress that the essays presented are not meant to be an overview of the entire subject of African Financial Institutions, but essentially case studies which describe institutional structures for the management of money in Africa. They claim to address the challenges posed by monetary change and suggest lines for further research and debate.

A rich re-creation of economic and social life in pre-colonial and colonial Africa is presented in many of these papers. The overall influence of the tribal chief or King as the 'controller' of all types of financial activity was far-reaching. This could range from control over the supply and distribution of cowrie shells, to the authority to impose death duties, and control over the practice of 'pawnsip' – a debt bondage, not very different from slavery. The lack of institutions is reflected in a practice of 'private justice', by which private citizens could kill thieves or sell them as slaves ('Finance and Credit in Pre-Colonial Dahomey', Robin Law).

Cowrie inflation and problems with local monetary structures gave the perfect excuse to colonial merchants and their governments to ban the use of indigenous currencies. These were replaced by imported monetised metal coins, and ultimately regulated colonial currencies. Slavery and pawning human beings for debt was fairly widespread ('On Currency and Credit in the Western Sahel', James Webb). A quote from the French trader Saugsnier