

Book Reviews

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Conservation Song: A History of Peasant-State Relations and the Environment in Malawi, 1860–2000

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The same dynamic that inflicted so much hardship on the peasantry of Mulwafu's *Conservation Song* is at work today in Malawi: a government incapable of providing significant social services besides repression. Today, it is an unruly dictatorship sufficiently strong to plunge the impoverished country – known in the colonial era as Nyasaland – into the dark ages of no electricity, water, petrol, or foreign currency. Yesterday, it was a colonial regime powerful enough to terrorise poor villagers during the annual anti-erosion campaigns but unable to hire a qualified staff to collect data on the ecological processes occurring in the country. It is impossible, as a result, to move Nyasaland's environmental history beyond the record of peasants' confrontations with the government over agricultural regulations, collectively known as *malimidwe*.

In ten substantive chapters, *Conservation Song* provides an overview of government campaigns aimed at conserving the environment. The first two establish the baseline, consisting of the initial meeting of Africans with European travellers, missionaries and traders. Africans brought to the encounter their ideas about, and ways of exploiting and conserving the environment as part of their daily struggles for survival. Europeans' understanding of the same African reality was shaped simultaneously by the belief that with technology society could conquer nature and by Edenic myths that gave Europeans the mission to save a supposedly pristine environment that was in danger of being despoiled by 'ignorant' and 'irresponsible' Africans. That conviction among the country's British rulers set the stage for the next act, made up of chapters 4 and 5.

The American Dustbowl and random reports about environmental degradation in Britain's new colonies reinforced the resolve of Nyasaland's rulers to alter Africans' relationships with nature. In this mission the government received the support of the newly founded Imperial Forestry Institute (IFI) at Oxford University, which manufactured and broadcast the fear of an impending environmental disaster, while training 'experts' to lead the war against the looming tragedy. Some of these 'experts' founded Nyasaland's Natural Resources Board (NRB), an organ charged with the responsibility of fighting the damage done by Africans. Finally, chapters 8, 9 and 10 detail how class, gender, religion and nationalism shaped people's responses to the NRB project before 1964, when political independence shifted the anti-erosion agenda from the realm of action into a moment of 'discourse', when officials would sing

their conservation song behind closed doors, unable to impose their questionable theories on the cultivator. For most peasants in the country, independence meant nothing much beyond freedom from the unpopular *malimidwe*.

Conservation Song is the first book-length study of its kind on Malawi, concentrating on the Shire Highlands from the late nineteenth century to the present. The long historical period and presence in the region of both peasant and commercial farmers forced the author to address substantive and methodological issues of interest to researchers of other parts of Malawi and Africa. For example, the book effectively debunks the idea, central to environmental studies inspired by underdevelopment theory, that East Africans during the nineteenth century lived in perfect harmony with such natural forces as the tsetse fly, an equilibrium that would only be upset by colonialism. From *Conservation Song* the same period emerges as a dynamic moment when villagers in the region, like other human beings elsewhere, could control some but not all aspects of their natural setting. And, in an important departure from what has become standard interpretation, Mulwafu shows how the IFI did more to influence the conservationist movement in British Africa than the Dustbowl experience did. It was men from Oxford who became the object of rural resistance in Nyasaland.

It seems that resisting villagers took James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* very seriously. Moments of open violence were an exception. The more common and, ultimately, effective weapons of the weak were individual and non-violent in character. Unlike their religious and political leaders, who championed against the government's betterment programmes as part of their broader grievances and agendas, villagers fought *malimidwe* in defence of their very existence. The state threatened peasants' livelihoods when it blocked forests of firewood and game and undermined their autonomy when it imposed laborious and time-consuming mechanical methods of farming, such as contour-ridging, box-ridging, bunding and terracing, forcing growers to assume all the risks of the untried techniques. Moreover, women in matrilineal communities were frightened at the prospect of losing their rights to land. Mulwafu is correct to emphasise that there was already plenty of discontent in rural Nyasaland; the elites did not create it – they only mobilised and channelled the smouldering opposition into a political movement that finally buried the colonial regime.

The success of rural resistance, Mulwafu reminds us, also depended on the weaknesses of the colonial regime itself. Understaffed and underfunded, the NRB could not undertake sustained investigations into the problems officials were expected to solve. The Board relied on the personnel from Southern Rhodesia for the few snapshot surveys that were conducted. As late as 1955, the Director of Agriculture, R. W. Kettlewell, lamented the dearth of knowledge about 'the biological aspects of the problem [soil erosion] and the technical means whereby high yields may be obtained and maintained without impairing

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the productivity of the soil'.¹ In Nyasaland colonial science was bad science not because its practitioners were prejudiced; it was bad science because no science was done. The country's few experts grabbed whatever ideas scientists in other countries created, regardless of their relevance to the specific conditions of Nyasaland. Official diagnoses of the problems represented a classic case of 'received wisdom', ideas whose life depended less on experiments and more on the existence of a community of believers who moreover had the power to impose those ideas on their subjects.² And the regime was also too poor to formulate its own bylaws; it copied, word for word, the anti-erosion legislation of Southern Rhodesia. Not surprisingly, it only promoted those agricultural techniques that did not require government expenditures, measures that, in another sign of the rule of the feeble, were applied uniformly on every piece of land regardless of the kind of degradation affecting it.

The government's financial impotence became patently evident when officials half-heartedly and belatedly tried to impose *malimidwe* on commercial farmers. Without the loans and subsidies of Southern Rhodesia, officials in Nyasaland were unable to move their 'enlightened' farmers and their bad farming practices. Thus, when their tenants refused to do the work, estate owners simply ignored the rules and there was nothing the state could do. Such, indeed, were the workings of imperialism-on-the-cheap.

Evidence from other parts of the country, including the Lower Tchiri Valley, suggests another reason for the state's ineptitude vis-à-vis commercial farmers. On private estates it did not have the equivalent of chiefs or Native Authorities who made the otherwise weak regime so powerful against the peasantry on Native Trust Lands. Chiefs played a crucial role in the anti-erosion drive among villagers and they should have received more space and even a chapter in *Conservation Song*. Short on money and personnel, the NRB turned to chiefs, adding the second most important challenge, after tax-collection, to their burden as representatives of both their people and a coercive state. Different chiefs responded to the new obligation differently, with some overseeing compliance and many others quietly supervising everyday resistance. Chiefs mediated the transition between hidden struggles and mass nationalism and, as such, do deserve a closer examination, if not by the indefatigable Mulwafu himself, who manages to write while carrying many administrative and heavy teaching responsibilities, but, hopefully, by his students. Meanwhile, Mulwafu has done us great service through this well-researched and much needed introduction to an important chapter in Malawi's history.

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1. Elias Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859-1960* (Madison, WI & London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 203.
2. M. Leach and R. Mearns, eds., *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996): 1-33.