

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nancy J. Jacobs. *Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xxi + 340 pp. \$69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-81191-0; \$26.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-01070-2.

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## Frontiers, Imperialisms, and Biophysical Environments in African History

*Environment, Power and Injustice* is a very consciously written and thoughtful book. Having discovered a people and a place through doctoral research, Jacobs gave them, and her own intellectual processes, respect by not publishing her dissertation as a book. Instead, she pursued a more interesting question revealed by the data: the environmental justice dimension of environmental history. Jacobs consistently asks questions about how gender, class and power affected peoples' experiences of historical and environmental events and processes. As a result, new dimensions of environmental history are revealed, a link between environmental history and the formulation of public policy is provided, and a well-documented socio-environmental history of South Africa's Thlaping and Tlharo people of the Kalahari thornveld was produced.

This book is specifically about the residents of Kuruman, a South African town and an administrative district north of the Orange River and south of the Kalahari desert. Because of the place's obscurity and the unfamiliarity of its extreme environmental conditions to readers from more humid or temperate regions of the world, the author plays with the idea that "an historical narrative has an approach" (p. 16), offering several in the first chapter. The biophysical environment is accessed through words and images, while explorations using various research methods are described. The vantage points offered by the concepts of frontier, colonialism and segregation are suggested, and directions provided by different formulations of socio-environmental history are

discussed. The exploration of other academic disciplines' perspectives is advocated as a research technique.

The history of Kuruman is complex. Not only were pre-colonial populations in major transitions, but the imposition of colonial rule was followed by the elaboration of a segregationist state. Starting in the late seventeenth century, Jacobs examines the environmental implications of these different social conditions. The arrival of the Bantu agro-pastoral culture's frontier to this region of Khoisan and Bantu foragers only slightly pre-dated the appearance of the settler-created Cape frontier with its new implements and economic forces. The changes wrought by these frontiers are assessed in terms of how they were experienced by different classes and genders, and how these, in turn, affected relations with the biophysical environment. Accepted truths about gender and agriculture are queried. Not only did social roles and status change in the shift from foraging to agro-pastoralism, those of the environment did as well.

According to Jacobs, although these changes were fundamental, it was late-nineteenth-century colonialism that created a profound revolution in environmental and social relations at Kuruman, causing twentieth-century disruptions. The settler state's confiscation of 89 percent of the land meant that African risk-minimizing extensive land use systems could no longer function. The essential survival strategy of foraging was criminalized as stealing. Peoples' responses to a variety of stressors—from the arrival of rinderpest and crop failure to war—are ana-

lyzed in terms of their constraints on the extensive land use system. Despite the colonial state's successful use of these catastrophic events to generate workers for its expanding cash economy, a persistent theme is the ways in which Kuruman residents, regardless of class background or gender, found ways to persist, preserving at least the cultural form—if not the methods—of extensive production.

After considering historical experience from a local perspective, attention turns to the environmental consequences of indirect rule as applied by the South African state. Jacobs argues that since land (and water) alienation was central to the official segregationist vision, government policy was fundamentally environmental. One expression of the compulsion to ensure white privilege was the formulation of conservation programs. Over time, emphasis shifted from applying “scientific principles” intended to sustain Africans on their inadequate land base to forcibly removing Africans from areas claimed by white settlers. Examples of increasingly coercive conservation programs demonstrate the environmentally abusive possibilities of indirect rule.

The detail presented in each chapter is used not only to build a coherent history, but also to discuss important themes. The Thlaping and Thlaro's transition from purely foraging lifestyles to agro-pastoralism raises the question of extensive versus intensive agriculture. However, instead of pursuing the interesting implications of a people in the process of transition to a more settled production system in an environment not conducive to agriculture, there is discussion of Esther Boserup's ideas about agricultural intensification in relation to population increase. Interpretation might have been easier had Jacobs focused on Boserup's observation that the typical sequence of agricultural change was gradual and took place over long periods of time. If the Thlaping/Thlaro were following Boserup's model, they would have been at the early experimental stages of what theoretically would be a multi-generational process.

That the biophysical environment is real, and acts independently of human beings, is clearly established. This is contrasted with “nature,” which Jacobs identifies as a social construction. Although analysis of the biophysical environment is important in evaluating many forces shaping human relations (including gender, class and power), consideration of environmental constraints need not lead to environmental determinism or declensionist narratives. The challenges presented by Kuruman's semi-arid reality resulted in varied and creative

responses. Although the people of Kuruman were politically victimized and lived in difficult environmental conditions, they were neither passive nor powerless.

Importantly, Jacobs criticizes a theory of biological imperialism concerned only with the biological expansion of Europe to “neo-Europes,” that claims the African continent was bypassed, and that fails to provide an accepted term for the consequences of colonialism outside of the “neo-Europes.” Colonialism, Jacobs argues, caused a revolution in environmental relations by introducing a new tool: colonial administration. This “pest” allowed a few Europeans to arrogate power and control over entire societies' relations with their biophysical environment(s). Given the enormous environmental consequences of European colonial administration in Africa, one is left to wonder whether this major conceptual deficiency is yet another dimension of the racism and marginalization to which the African continent has long been subjected—perhaps a theoretical form of environmental injustice?

*Environment, Power and Injustice* should be of interest to teachers, researchers and writers. Although the subject matter will be of particular interest to South Africanists and Southern Africanists, the theoretical discussions are broad enough to challenge and stimulate debate among all concerned about history on the African continent. Careful organization of the text and images equips readers to consider an obscure place and ever more complex ideas. Kuruman's history adds to the nascent discussion of the moment of conquest and its violence, as well as to the meanings of boundaries, borders and frontiers. Both the successful use of Rapid Rural Appraisal in historical data collection and the analytical perspective of environmental justice are useful contributions. World environmental historians should respond to Jacobs's call for a reconsideration of biological imperialism so that it includes not only the continent of Africa, but also the environmental dimensions of colonial administration. Finally, the book's structure should be studied by those who would write their own environmental histories. Not once does Jacobs descend into the recitation of lists, the bane of much historical writing.

The most frustrating aspect of this book is Cambridge University Press's substitution of chapter notes for a bibliography. This structural annoyance should not deter readers. *Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African History* would undoubtedly make a good textbook, and belongs in both personal and institutional libraries.

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