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Wapulumuka Oliver Mulwafu. *Conservation Song: A History of Peasant-State Relations and the Environment in Malawi, 1860-2000*. Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2011. xiii + 269 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874267-63-8.

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Soil Conservation, Society, and the State

Wapulumuka Oliver Mulwafu's study of soil conservation in Malawi contributes to a growing body of literature that deconstructs the history of conservation in Africa by introducing the knowledge and experiences of peasants, who have historically been at the frontline of conservation efforts. Like other works in this field, Mulwafu uses oral interviews to interrogate and supplement colonial accounts.[1] The result is a rich social and environmental history that contextualizes contemporary environmental concerns in Malawi by illustrating both the "historical roots" of these issues and the social, political, and environmental impacts of earlier conservation efforts (p. 3).

An important undercurrent of this history is the continuity Mulwafu sees over the 140 years covered by his study. Indeed, the title, *Conservation Song*, refers to an analogy that he draws between conservation efforts in Malawi and a song whose "basic lyrics and underlying tune remain essentially the same," despite the modifications made to it over time (p. 2). Significantly, Mulwafu also rejects "the artificial pre-colonial and colonial divide in order to explore the many common challenges that rural growers faced over time" (p. 12). The study thus begins with a chapter that examines precolonial cultivation in the Shire Highlands, located in southern Malawi. Drawing on written and oral sources, the chapter examines peasant efforts to manage their environment, and it may be useful for those seeking material for undergraduate courses. It also provides a critical context for un-

derstanding later encounters between peasants and the colonial state over the intertwined issues of conservation and cultivation.

The focus of this study, however, is on the colonial era, and particularly the period between the 1930s, when soil erosion became a central concern of the state, and 1964 when Malawi became independent. One reason for the increased state attention to soil in the 1930s was the object lesson of the U.S. Dust Bowl and the conservation ideology emanating out of the United States. Mulwafu argues, however, that this was only part of the story. Citing William Beinart's recent work (*The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock, and the Environment, 1770-1950* [2003]), which points to the "hybridity of scientific knowledge," Mulwafu briefly considers conservation movements in multiple colonies, the United States, Nazi Germany, and Britain (p. 66). In particular, he argues that the Imperial Forestry Institute at Oxford University played a central role in shaping the conservation ideals of colonial officials working in Malawi.

The focus that Mulwafu places on a few influential officials verges on perpetuating a history of "big men," in the form of colonial technocrats. The oral histories that he cites, however, provide a helpful counterweight to this tendency. Moreover, the analysis in this section deftly grounds colonial policies in both local contingencies and international scientific discourse. The overall picture that he presents underscores the contested nature of conser-

vation ideology in Malawi in the 1940s and 50s and offers suggestive insight into the failure of several policies in this era.

The final third of the book considers peasant resistance to colonial conservation methods, an issue that is more often considered from the perspective of nationalist politics. Examined within the context of peasant-state confrontations, however, the resistance in this era emerges as a separate movement that dovetailed with, rather than being catalyzed by, nationalist campaigns. As Mulwafu shows, peasants “had deep-rooted grievances against the colonial state, which they expressed in the form of resistance as and when they saw fit to do so” (p. 207).

The most critical element of these final chapters is his analysis of the roles religion and gender played in peasant resistance and the corresponding impact of colonial policies on social structures. The question of religion is particularly important to Mulwafu’s approach. Little attention is paid in most histories of conservation to religion, yet, as he shows, religious beliefs shaped colonial and peasant perceptions of the environment and the relationship between humans and nature. In chapter 9, Mulwafu uses two fascinating case studies to show how religious leaders could form an important node of peasant resistance. Ultimately, however, the exceptional nature of these examples coupled with the fact that he concludes that their opposition “had little to do with the fundamental elements of conservation” leaves this chapter sitting a bit oddly with the rest of the text (p. 166).

In contrast, Mulwafu’s analysis in chapter 10 of the complex legend of *napolo*, which can be loosely understood as a big snake, adds significantly to his discussion of peasant perceptions of the environment and how such ideas continue to shape “the lives of peasants in and around Zomba” to this day (p. 189). Indeed, this chapter, which involves a case study focusing on the contests between peasants and the state in the Domasi region of the Zomba district, is one of the broadest yet arguably most instructive of the book. Alongside his discussion of indigenous beliefs, Mulwafu describes how colonial officials’ insistence on working with men, in a region where land was inherited through the matrilineal line,

amounted to “social engineering” and “tended to subvert the economic and social power of women” (p. 210).

Mulwafu concludes his study with a discussion of postcolonial efforts, which highlights the continued relevance of colonial environmental issues in the present. However, a similarly explicit discussion of the continuities and ruptures between precolonial practices and colonial prescriptions would have been helpful. Several precolonial practices, such as planting banana trees and various grasses to prevent soil erosion, seem to mirror policies introduced by the colonial state. Yet Mulwafu never directly compares the practices, leaving the reader wondering if they were, in fact, the same or not. The value of such a discussion is suggested by his analysis of *bunding*, a process of building long earthen mounds to slow water runoff. Bunding became a frequent point of contestation between peasants and the state, but it is unclear at first why this policy was so hotly contested when peasants had long practiced “mound cultivation” (p. 24). In chapter 8, though, Mulwafu details bunding and explains that it took the average peasant a full month to raise bunds across their land, enabling the reader to understand what was being demanded of peasant cultivators and why they frequently resisted bunding campaigns.

Conservation Song is an interesting study that furthers our understanding of conservation in Malawi by highlighting the contested development of conservationist thinking, the social effects of colonial conservation policies, and the agency of peasants. The fifteen years Mulwafu spent researching this topic shows in the depth and breadth of his analysis. One hopes that the result will achieve his goal of informing future conservation efforts in Malawi.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Henrietta Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994); and James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savannah Mosaic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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