

Nancy J. Jacobs. *Environment, Power and Injustice: A South African History.*
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Three words immediately come to mind when reviewing Jacobs's socio-environmental history of Kuruman: Power, Adaptation and Resilience. Essentially, the book looks at how power relations within and between communities have affected access to land and environmental resources from the eighteenth century to the present day. It explores how Africans, regardless of their gender, or their political, economic, and social standing within society, have adapted to ecological opportunities and constraints. Finally, the narrative also highlights the resilience of local African ideas and practices towards the land, which were increasingly challenged by the agenda of outsiders, and in the twentieth century, by a racially segregationist, technocratic state that reached its apogee under apartheid (1948-1994).

Jacobs's opening chapter provides a clear synopsis of her main arguments as well as a lively and colorful description of the district she chose for her case study--Kuruman in the Northern

Cape. She describes her work as a socioeconomic account about "power, social difference and the biophysical realm," which examines "how people related to the environment as they interacted with each other" (p. 1). The environment here does not just constitute an historical backdrop, but is an agent in its own right, providing a "material base for the power to dominate others" as well as the "power to endure domination" (p. 219). Her objective is not to deny the importance of political, economic, social, and cultural factors in the history of the region, but to address the contention that socioeconomic historians of South Africa have tended to under-estimate the role the environment has played as a factor in production, and overlooked its value as a prism through which to explore changing political and social relationships. Throughout the book, she consistently draws upon the American environmental historiography developed by Alfred Crosby, William Cronon, Carolyn Marchant, and Donald Worster,

whose ideas serve as models for interpreting the socio-environmental history of Kuruman. In this way she is bringing South Africa into broader international debates about agricultural and ecological change, the relationship between power and the environment, questions surrounding local forms of land use and rural knowledge, as well as the moral question of social justice.

The topographical and ecological context of this study is the harsh, arid environment of the thornveld, just south of the Kalahari Desert. The human timeframes span c. 1750 to c. 2000 and focus on the experiences of the Tlhaping and Tlharo Tswana who inhabit this area. Environmentally challenged by poor soils, erratic rainfall, and searing summer temperatures, the area is nonetheless watered, to some extent, by the underground supplies that reach the surface through springs, such as the Kuruman Eye. The vegetation is a mixture of grassland and shrub, with the latter becoming more pronounced, especially in the river valleys, during the twentieth century. Water and grasslands facilitated both pastoral and arable production, the implementation of which varied in nature and intensity at different points in response to fluctuating climatic conditions, changing power structures, population pressures, and alternative economic opportunities.

Drawing upon archival material in London and South Africa, as well as extensive group and individual interviews and Rapid Rural Appraisal techniques, Jacobs conjures up a vivid picture of environmental and occupational continuity and change in the Kuruman thornveld over approximately 250 years. Chapters 2 to 5 take a broad chronological course from c. 1750 to 1903 and are followed by far more thematic chapters for the segregationist and apartheid period. Chapter 2 looks specifically at pre-colonial Kuruman and explores frontiers of interaction between Khoekhoen pastoralists and Tswana agro-pastoralists. The population during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was sparse enough to

enable an extensive style of farming, involving shifting cultivation and transhumant styles of husbandry, with the livestock dispersed to far-flung cattle posts. However, despite the availability of land, social inequality reigned, ensuring that even in pre-colonial times there was no political sense of environmental justice. Women were unable to keep cattle, while power converged in the hands of chiefs and others who could accumulate substantial herds. Systems of clientage prevailed as those who could not produce their own food sought the protection of patrons to avert destitution. Nonetheless, despite acknowledging social and economic inequalities, Jacobs contends that the environment did provide succor for the even weakest in society. Women reacted to political exclusion and environmental opportunities by planting crops, while even the poorest could resort to foraging on wildlife, fruits, and roots. Jacobs goes on to illustrate how the gradual erosion of these mechanisms for survival during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries threatened human adaptation to environmental contingencies and undermined the subsistence economy of these rural communities.

The third chapter delineates the arrival of the London Missionary Society in the early nineteenth century and its efforts to turn its mission stations into productive, intensively cultivated plots by diverting water from the Kuruman River to irrigate the land. Tswana outside the mission stations copied this technique, theoretically portending a revolution in agriculture, by shifting from extensive to intensive production. However, Jacobs argues, this change was only partial. To mitigate the impact of drought, the Tswana adapted irrigation to suit their "traditional" extensive farming methods. As this and the following chapter show, there was little incentive to intensify as land was plentiful and labor short, and with the discovery of diamonds at Kimberley in 1867, opportunities to make money through trade in fuelwood and migrant labor presented themselves. Yet decisions were not based on economic oppor-

tunities alone. The poverty of the soils, which are deficient in phosphorous and other minerals, and the unpredictability of the climate militated against intensification and access to land was also sufficient to accommodate a small population.

A major turning point in the environmental history of Kuruman came at the end of the nineteenth century, as traced in chapters 4 and 5. The British annexed the area in 1884, eventually ceding it to the Cape government, which began to parcel out land to white settlers. The rich water source of the Kuruman Eye was granted to whites, leaving displaced Africans with only 11 percent of the land, downstream from the main water supplies. This process of dispossession and relocation increased during the twentieth century, especially during apartheid, and resulted in the convergence of more and more people on less and less land.

As described in her fifth chapter, which includes in its title the "failure of extensive food production," Jacobs sees the closing years of the nineteenth century as pivotal. Rinderpest decimated African herds in 1896-97 and drought and famine followed. Reminiscent of Alex de Waal's work on famine in Sudan, the local Tswana referred to this famine, not as hunger, but as death. [1] Drawing upon the entitlement theory of Amartya Sen,[2] Jacobs argues that "under the new circumstances of colonial rule, their entitlements, the resources that they had to get food, failed" (p. 116). Environmental misfortune, combined with colonial politics, undermined subsistence agriculture, changed the social fabric of Tswana society, driving greater numbers into the settler economy as wage laborers. Under these circumstances, Jacobs depicts the Tswana as victims of the process of colonisation, rather than as opportunists, who could voluntarily take advantage of the chance to earn cash and acquire alternative forms of wealth. Interestingly she surmises that the failure of the Langeberg Rebellion (in response to the Cape government's drastic measures to deal with rinderpest), discouraged the Tswana

from actively defying state authority during the twentieth century, as they offered little resistance to state policies that entailed forced removals and the frequently unwelcome agricultural incursions, that came under the name of "betterment" (p. 182).

Chapters 7 and 8 examine perceptions of environmental change and official interventions during the last century. Jacobs details the ongoing appropriation of land by the state on behalf of white settlers, and the ecological and agricultural impact of concentrating large numbers of relocated people in an arid African reserve. A denser population and inadequate access to land led to agricultural intensification, not out of choice but out of necessity. Jacobs contextualizes government interventions in Kuruman as political responses to popular movements to the cities, officially designated as white domains. Environmental planning became a prerequisite for trying to stall urbanization and from the 1940s the South African Native Affairs Department, followed by the puppet regime in Bophutatswana, enforced conservationist methods to try to improve production. As in the rest of South Africa, these measures, which included a focus on curbing erosion, were often introduced with little, or no, scientific enquiry and without negotiating with the farmers who used the land. Nonetheless, there remained a spark of resilience and local adaptation to the realities of land shortages and the meddling of civil servants. None but the rich could accumulate sizeable herds of cattle for status or commercial production, but the poor adopted donkeys as their animal of choice. Donkeys reproduced rapidly, could survive on the worst of drought-shrivelled grasses and were useful for transport and draught. Cattle ranchers and colonial range officials, however, blamed them for degrading the landscape by devouring grasses and tramping the veld. Periodic culls of donkeys, resulting in the indiscriminate shooting of approximately 10,000 animals in the so-called Donkey Massacre of 1983 reflected local power and class dynamics and

showed how arguments about environmental sustainability, whether valid or spurious, could be directly aimed against the poor and those who lacked political representation, such as women. Jacobs accounts for this incident, executed in the name of "betterment," but unprecedented in its savagery, as an indication of class tensions, as those who had access to cattle, and consequently political influence, wished to severely reduce the number of commoners' donkeys on the veld.

In her final chapter, Jacobs revisits the ways in which the environment has affected power, class, and gender interrelationships in Kuruman over time. In the pre-colonial period power was defined by gender and class, whereas race becomes a dominant political determinant of opportunity in the colonial period, complemented by new forms of class formation, as exemplified by the "Donkey Massacre," during apartheid. Using material from recent interviews, she also explores Tswana theories of environmental justice. She found that popular perceptions of climatic and environmental change challenged some of the assumptions of official scientists and planners, whilst the current strength (at least at the time of writing) of the "pro-donkey position" continues to reflect the interests of the poor. Economic development that addresses the issue of poverty and contributes towards social justice, Jacobs concludes, requires a more equitable distribution of land and water resources, as well as the promotion of small scale sustainable production.

Much of the political context of this book will be familiar to scholars who have worked on colonial and apartheid South Africa. What Jacobs adds to the historiography is a study of the impact of particular political processes in a specific region. For example, the discussion on "betterment" goes beyond the theoretical narrative of political objectives and generalizations about implementation to show how these policies were carried out in a particular African reserve and the variety of local responses they invoked. Her interviews and dis-

cussion of Tswana views on environmental change and adaptation seek to address the dearth of African accounts about the land and its resources. From a broader environmental history perspective, however, what is absent from the book is how other agriculturists in the area viewed ecological change as well as environmental constraints and opportunities. In comparative terms, so much more has been written about white farmers and, understandably, Jacobs opted to exclude them from the narrative and focus on the African voice. It would have been interesting, however, to have read some of their views as points of comparison. In that way, the nature of state power, during the segregationist/apartheid eras, and the impact of its interventions on the environment of subsidized white farms and in the congested African reserves could be more clearly analyzed. Overall though, this is an excellent book that should appeal to readers interested in colonial and African history, as well as those who wish to pursue the more theoretical debates about environmental history and its academic and moral purpose.

Notes

- [1]. Alex de Waal, *Famine that Kills Darfur Sudan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 2005).
- [2]. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

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