

# African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 2

Spring 2005

## **Highland Sanctuary: Environmental History in Tanzania's Usambara Mountains.**

Christopher A. Conte. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004. 215 pp.

*Highland Sanctuary* situates the Usambara Mountains of northeastern Tanzania within the environmental history of the highlands which stretch through eastern Kenya and Tanzania. Conte uses contrasts between the eastern and western massifs of Usambara to reveal some of the under-appreciated diversity in environmental change, which may be found throughout the "Eastern Arc" mountains. For despite their very long geological history, rich diversity of flora, and importance as sites of early cultural, agronomic and metallurgical development, these highlands remain inadequately studied. With stylistic economy, Conte's two opening chapters provide a vivid introduction to the environment of Usambara, and to its natural and human history before the twentieth century. They also introduce the Wambugu, a pastoralist Cushitic minority who lived alongside Usambara's more numerous Bantu-speaking Washambaa farmers and exploited its high forests for grazing.

The heart of this book lies, however, in the following five chapters, where Conte examines environmental change during the colonial period and, in one chapter, since national independence in 1961. These chapters focus primarily upon highland forests. Conte shows that European colonialists and the indigenous inhabitants of Usambara valued forests very differently. A point which emerges prominently from his discussion of European – and particularly German - perceptions of Usambara is that they were shaped by a fundamentally aesthetic and culture-bound appreciation of mountain landscapes. Yet, while Europeans gradually moved towards a more conservationist valuation of mountain forests, believes Conte, demographic pressure and incorporation into a market economy increasingly led the indigenous peoples of Usambara in the opposite direction. Mounting pressures to obtain money led villagers and pastoralists to clear and exploit their forests for commercial timbering and market farming.

It is this finding which leads Conte away from the perspective advanced by the other book which must be read alongside *Highland Sanctuary* for a full appreciation of colonial Usambara – Steven Feierman's *Peasant Intellectuals*. Where Feierman emphasizes the enduring salience of an old political culture, Conte sees the old culture crumbling under the weight of destructive colonial pressures. Feierman suggests that desire for the revival of the sort of political authority which had been capable in precolonial society of "healing the land" --a desire which might be read as evidence of indigenous commitment to conservation--underlay nationalism in Usambara. By contrast, Conte sees the colonial economy causing expansion of market production, aggressive clearing of fragile mountain land, and soil erosion. As a result, he believes that the increasing scarcity of arable land and declining security of land tenure forced many of the poor either to leave Usambara or to join the nationalists. It was the "tensions of hunger," he argues, "[which stoked] the fires of resistance, [as] the ancient ties that bound the mountain peoples with their environment strained under the pressure of agrarian change" (145).

Conte's argument helps to show why environmental historians should be careful of throwing around the concept of "healing the land" without Feierman's care and nuance. It is far too simplistic to see "healing the land" as an ethic uniting of agrarian communities. This ethic also legitimizes power, which could be deployed coercively and divisively. In demanding the revival of such power in the 1950s, Washambaa villagers surely were not simply critiquing colonial power, but were seeking to rein in members of *their own communities* who exploited their neighbors' labor, land and forest as market opportunities widened dramatically. The fault lines of division ran not only between the colonial state and local communities, but also through the interior of mountain communities. Another fault line ran between local residents and the outsiders who came to the mountains from Kenya and elsewhere in Tanganyika for market farming and timber harvesting. The post-independence TANU government sought to resolve this particular division by allowing national interests to override local and tribal claims to resources. Unfortunately, the primacy given national interests left the mountain communities, which had the most to lose from the rapacious exploitation of their forests with little ability to control intruders. Here *Highland Sanctuary* reveals, I think, the cost of allowing nationalism – indispensable as it was in the late-colonial, Cold War moment --to supplant older, more localized political cultures. As Conte shows, precolonial political authority in Usambara found ways of controlling pastoralist newcomers while permitting them access to certain ecological niches. Nearly half a century after independence, the national state of Tanzania is still struggling to find equally successful ways of regulating similar competition for land and natural resources.

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