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Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from the Earliest Times to the Present

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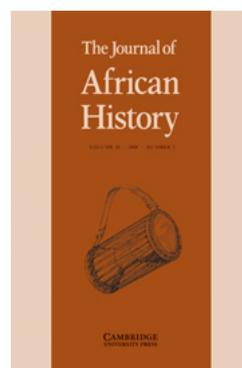
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CHANGES OF ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL LIFE IN THE SERENGETI *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from the Earliest Times to the Present.* By Jan Bender Shetler. Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv+378. No price given (isbn 0-8214-1750-9).

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relegates healers and practices of public healing to the realm of the irrational. In so doing, he fails to recognize the manner in which these figures and the ideas upon which they drew both shaped and guided politically sanctioned violence. This criticism aside, Reid has produced a useful book that will serve as inspiration for future scholarship on violence and conflict in eastern Africa and beyond.

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CHANGES OF ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL LIFE IN THE SERENGETI

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Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from the Earliest Times to the Present. By JAN BENDER SHETLER. Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv + 378. No price given (ISBN 0-8214-1750-9).

KEY WORDS: Tanzania, environment, memory, oral narratives/sources, spatial patterns.

In *Imagining Serengeti*, Jan Bender Shetler examines time, space, cultural life and landscape in eastern Africa. The book's impressive collection of oral history contributes to a broad time-scale – about 2,000 years – which reveals how social life changes along the western woodlands of the Serengeti–Mara ecosystem. While the oral traditions do mark certain places, they also contain discernible patterns of spatial imagery describing particular landscape types. The *longue durée* approach adds teeth to a pointed critique of the Western-style conservation that led to the formation of the Serengeti National Park, which, she argues, has impoverished the peoples now shunted away from its boundaries in favor of the park's pristine wildernesses.

Elders from the western Serengeti region contributed extensively to the project; the book cites almost 200 interviews. Shetler's careful interpretation identifies the various biophysical spaces occupied by an open-ended system of agropastoralism, which for centuries successfully exploited the region's diverse natural resources. The evidence suggests that the ongoing interactions among autochthonous groups and newcomers fostered cooperation along the western Serengeti's ecological transition zones where exchanges occurred among herders, farmers and hunters. In the book's early chapters, Shetler draws upon what she refers to as the 'core spatial imagery' of diversification and adaptation that stressed the preservation of landscape health, and therefore food security. As another hedge against insecurity, people rooted their spirituality in particular places, which they believed held power over fertility, healing and evil. In this way, over many centuries, the western Serengeti's peoples built landscapes.

The extended time-scale allows Shetler to stress historical continuity, but the oral traditions tend to underplay the historical role of conflict. The very presence of a landscape management strategy designed to avert risk suggests very strongly that climatic and ecological stresses regularly visited the western Serengeti, situations that have in more recent times produced regional and local violence. The interaction of social change and ecological stress, however, is more clearly drawn for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Imagining Serengeti* provides a significant contribution to the historiography of this era in East Africa by explaining how generally open societies reorganize spatial perceptions under pronounced

disruption. Under the now well-known conditions of nineteenth-century drought, disease epidemics and increasing poverty, the western Serengeti's agropastoral communities defined territory more rigidly, protected it militarily and invented pronounced ethnic boundaries. They essentially remapped their territories.

Shetler provides a thorough critique of the subsequent imposition of colonial conservation policy, which, without reference to the region's ecological or social past, redefined the Serengeti as a wilderness, initiating the present era of fortress conservation. Shetler identifies, for example, the limits of the colonial legal power to criminalize local hunting in the Serengeti. Until the 1950s, poaching laws remained unenforceable and men in the western Serengeti continue to hunt, both to provide food and to acquire wealth. Shetler finds in the oral histories a distinct imagery of constriction that characterizes modernity.

By now, students of eastern Africa's history will know the many ironies that surround the history of the region's national parks and game reserves. Shetler argues that, for Serengeti National Park, the process saw the clash of two fundamentally different ways of understanding a landscape's value. Of course, by the middle of the twentieth century, extensive political power buttressed the park-as-pristine-wilderness ideal, which Nyerere's independence government uncritically accepted and perpetuated. Under the implementation of Tanzania's massive relocation project of the late 1960s and 1970s, the government continued to force people away from the park's western boundary. Shetler indicts these exercises in power, which have practically obliterated the historical memory of sacred space within the park.

Imagining Serengeti succeeds in creating a collaborative history that highlights the indigenous past. The book's pronounced spatial perspectives and ecological focus demonstrate how meaningful the history of place is to the people whose ancestors claimed, measured and manipulated this region. In the context of those drawn-out historical rhythms, Serengeti National Park's relatively sudden appearance has shaken the established foundations of agropastoralism. People have learned to manage this newest crisis, but while the Mara-Serengeti National Park brings tourist revenues to the state, Shetler convincingly argues that it also impoverishes the people whose history is tied to the 14,500 square kilometers it now encloses.

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SHORTER NOTICES

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The Women Writing Africa Project. Volume III: *Women Writing Africa: The Eastern Region*. Edited by AMANDINA LIHAMBWA, FULATA L. MOYO, M. M. MULOKOZI, NAOMI L. SHITEMI and SAÏDA YAHYA-OTHMAN. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2007. Pp. xxv + 478. \$29.95, paperback (ISBN 978-155861534-2).

KEY WORDS: Eastern Africa, oral narratives/sources, text editions, women.

Women Writing Africa: The Eastern Region is the third volume in a remarkable series of four books designed to restore the lost voices of African women. With a blend of oral and written texts, including poems, songs, speeches, stories, letters, biographies and reminiscences, the collection documents women's reflections and