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Sub-Saharan Africa: An Environmental History

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GEOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT, AND DEMOGRAPHY

Gregory Maddox. *Sub-Saharan Africa: An Environmental History*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2006. Nature and Human Societies Series. ix + 355 pp. Photographs. Maps. Illustrations. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. $85.00. Cloth.

Gregory Maddox's *Sub-Saharan Africa: An Environmental History* follows ABC-CLIO's Nature and Human Societies Series dictum and synthesizes "the intertwined fates of humanity and the natural world" on a continent whose natural history has fostered a substantial environmental diversity, and whose human history is the world's longest.

The early chapters recount how African societies adapted to and transformed tropical forests, savannas, highlands, coastlines, and deserts over the course of humanity's evolution through the conclusion of the Atlantic slave trade. The book's second half brings Africa and Africans into more intimate contact with Europe, the Americas, and Asia, and the final chapter presents three well-chosen case studies that cover landscape histories from the Sahara, the Serengeti savanna, and the forests of southern, eastern, and central Africa. Maddox follows the narrative with a pedagogically useful set of documents that include oral history, explorer accounts, literary accounts, and international agreements. A useful chronology follows. In order to create a cohesive narrative that includes very large and dynamic processes, Maddox sometimes presents a vague and generalized Africa. However, three thematic threads help to bind together the occasionally diffuse narrative.

The early chapters stress the role of local initiative in the evolution of food production systems, an emphasis aimed at disabusing students of the notion that technological and cultural innovation diffused into Africa. Maddox argues repeatedly that Africans initially domesticated difficult environments with plants and animals endemic to Africa. Mobility, a second unifying theme, serves as the keystone feature of humanity's ecological colonization of the continent through foraging, cultivation, and herding. Mobile communities avoided disease vectors and spread the ecological stress associated with their land use in such a way as to reduce risk.

The dynamic function of regional and global exchanges in commodities and ideas marks the book's third important narrative thread. Here Maddox's analytical emphasis switches from space and landscape to commodities, and he aptly characterizes the imperial and colonial era's "Scramble for Africa" as a resource grab. Unfortunately, the very complexity of Africa's modern political, economic, and demographic history absorbs some of the drama of ecological transformation. Maddox evokes instead the violence and conflict inherent in the transfer of power to colonial authorities, whose scientifically based economic policies had begun to intervene directly in African land use systems with the aim of directing the production and flow of livestock, crops, and minerals. This colonially

inspired developmentalist discourse has continued under the auspices of independent African states, though now the commodities include biological diversity and oil.

The place-based case studies in chapter 7, which supplement the central text, help contextualize the book's overarching themes. The Sahara case demonstrates how over thousands of years people responded repeatedly to climatic variability with movement. The second case treats wilderness preservation on East Africa's Serengeti savannas, where fortress conservation, as well as indigenous land use patterns, cover a huge swath of land bordering Kenya and Tanzania. Here on one of Africa's iconic landscapes, local pastoralists, wildlife advocates, and the tourism industry each march to their own drummer. The final case examines the spread of agriculture in eastern, central, and southern Africa from 1500 BCE to 1500 CE. Maddox's periodization covers one of African history's great historiographical conundrums, the Bantu expansion.

In some ways the book reflects the difficulties of environmental history generally, in which the landscape as a complex ecological entity too often remains a backdrop. Students will nonetheless benefit greatly from this book, especially if instructors use it in conjunction with the growing body of work in the historical sciences.

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