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A History under Siege: Intensive Agriculture in the Mbulu Highlands, Tanzania, 19th Century to the Present

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A History under Siege: intensive agriculture in the Mbulu Highlands, Tanzania, 19th Century to the present (review)

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an uncritical approach towards the many new formulas introduced by the neo-liberal phenomenon of globalization, such as so-called 'good governance'. It is simply taken for granted that such formulas are well-founded and no energy is expended on questioning whether such formulas are part of the problem rather than the solution.

In the opinion of this reviewer the book reveals an important oversight in the section on economics, in that there is no chapter on the evolution of the labour force in contemporary Africa, while there are two dedicated to 'business' and 'management'. Perhaps this methodological approach is deliberate and reflects the apparent 'disappearance' in the neo-liberal era of the political role of labour. The role of women (an integral part of the African labour force) is analysed in Chapter 21, even if with a certain misplaced optimism. It is true that women are politically organized in Africa and that in this way they make their voice heard within governments and cooperation organizations, but the chapter overlooks the fact that the condition of 'inferiority' in the treatment of women, both at work and in the family, derives from a history which is not 'European', but is rather totally African. In seeking to attack at all costs the shortcomings of the nation state, many of the authors have failed to address African responsibility (through African culture) for some of the ills of the continent.

These observations are by no means intended to diminish a work of importance which, precisely because of its scope and wide-ranging approach, merits being taken into consideration as a textbook at undergraduate level. Very useful in particular are the questions on central issues dealt with by each author which can be found at the end of every chapter as well as the many maps (which are all too often missing in history books). It would perhaps have been useful for the book to have included a list of acronyms used in the body of the text as well. Finally, some pruning of the entries in the thematic index and some minor corrections of facts and figures (for example, South Africa did not become independent in 1961 (p. 166) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo did not exist as such in the years 1960–3 (p. 183)) would not have gone amiss.

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LOWE BJÖRNSÉN, *A History under Siege: intensive agriculture in the Mbulu Highlands, Tanzania, 19th Century to the present*. Stockholm: Department of Geography, Stockholm University (pb \$82.50 – 9122020950). 2004, 187 pp.

The East African highlands have interested scholars for over a century. For archaeologists, historians and geographers, the mountains' agricultural landscapes are themselves historical documents containing the cultural and biophysical artifacts of centuries of use. In keeping with this tradition of scholarship, Björnsén's fine dissertation, now available as part of Stockholm University's series in Human Geography, examines one hundred and fifty years of change among the agropastoralists on Tanzania's Mbulu Mountains. In keeping with the intellectual roots of his discipline, Björnsén's study creates a synergy among the fields of history, geography, ecology and anthropology in order to draw a dynamic and interactive picture of how people shape environments to create landscapes.

Björnsén's landscape is small, just 12 square kilometres, and constitutes a section of the larger area known as Iraqw'ar Da/wa, which colonial ethnographies and histories claim to be the birthplace of Iraqw culture. According to this received wisdom, the growth of the Iraqw population led to an expansion

out of Iraqw'ar Da/wa, which began at some time in the distant past. The trend reversed during the nineteenth century, when cattle raids from surrounding Maasai and Datoga herders forced what had become dispersed Iraqw hamlets to pull back together into their ancestral space. As the homeland population density grew, so the story goes, the siege forced the Iraqw to intensify their agricultural systems to produce more on less land. The siege motif concludes with colonial pacification and yet another dispersal from an overused and degraded Iraqw'ar Da/wa.

Björnsen unravels the standard narrative in order to tell a different, less apocryphal story of transformations in demography and land use. As is customary, the dissertation includes a thorough examination of theories of agricultural intensification, as well as relevant case studies for its history in eastern Africa. The unique methodological contribution to this literature, however, is the study's intense focus on one ridge and valley in Iraqw'ar Da/wa, where an intensive and sustainable agropastoral farming system has remained operational. The analysis hangs upon Björnsen's set of detailed maps, which he created from what he calls 'detailed participatory landscape mapping'. The technique requires the use of an electronic theodolite to produce a detailed survey of the land's morphological features, and much supplemental discussion with farmers and herders as they work their land. What emerges from the fieldwork is a focused landscape history complete with arguments for a century of ecological, technological, and demographic change. Björnsen's maps argue for decades of asset accumulation derived from farmers' incremental labour investments in the land. These enduring landscape features, such as enhanced soil fertility, terraces, run-off ditches and irrigation canals are known in the scholarship on land degradation as 'landesque capital'. The creation of landesque capital and intensification go hand in hand, and in the Iraqw case it led land users to tip the agropastoral balance in favour of agriculture. Settlement patterns changed as a result of the reduction in herding and people moved from ridgetop dwellings down to the valley pastures, which required more labour to work but produced more under the hoe. According to Björnsen, farmers transformed their farming system incrementally, not because of a clear Boserupian or Malthusian path, or a nineteenth-century siege, but because of a historical trajectory driven by contingency.

Placed in the larger context of Iraqw'ar Da/wa, the maps undermine the siege story. According to Björnsen, the persistent idea of an original Iraqw homeland, which developed during the twentieth century as an explanatory device, has now coalesced into a convenient myth of ethnic origins. His data interpretation argues for an alternative regional historical geography in which nineteenth-century Iraqw settlement nodes were broadly dispersed both inside and outside the putative homeland area. He suggests further that this decentralized Iraqw society developed from an amalgam of ethnically diverse immigrants already tied to the area through exchange networks. Iraqw ethnicity developed through social, economic and cultural exchanges rather than in isolation.

Aside from this foray into ethno-history, Björnsen's unrelenting focus remains on processes of agricultural intensification. His thesis demonstrates convincingly that the process is open-ended and that it occurred under the supervision of very skilled and knowledgeable men and women who developed a resilient and sustainable agricultural system. Success has limits, of course, and in the Iraqw case sustainability depends upon peoples' continued ability to tie into economic networks far beyond the Mbulu highlands.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates the value of geography as an integrative discipline. As an exercise methodology, Björnsen has produced a map set that integrates a great deal of empirical and qualitative data, including aerial photos,

spatial surveys, local knowledge, explorer observation and colonial records. Moreover, his devotion to scale, in this case a micro-scale, provides lessons for development experts and farmers who can use such fine-grained and diachronic analyses as a starting point for debate about what sustainable agriculture means as well as how its implementation should proceed. Björnson's work argues for an approach to highland conservation that draws upon local knowledge and works methodically to explore the agricultural potential for each hill and valley in East Africa's highlands.

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ANDREW BURTON, *African Underclass: urbanization, crime and colonial order in Dar es Salaam 1919–61*. Oxford: James Currey (pb £16.95 – 0 85255 975 7; hb £50.00 – 0 85255 975 5). 2005. 338 pp.

The urban lives of Africans have been on the minds of historians and anthropologists since the early 1960s. The work of Peter Gutkind, Aidan Southall and J. Clyde Mitchell represents a fraction of this early scholarship that focused on African strategies for urban living. Later scholarship, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, examined the failures of urban control and planning, seeking explanations for post-colonial poor standards of living in the past. In recent years a great deal of research has focused on marginal communities living in Africa's cities: beer brewers, gangs, street children and vagrants. Andrew Burton and his work on Dar es Salaam have added much to this recent historiography. His book represents his most elaborate and adept investigation of the urban lives of Dar es Salaam's most marginalized inhabitants.

This is a study of urban migration and colonial urban administration and how the two converge over the issue of law and order. Burton organizes his book chronologically, allowing the reader to see clearly the changes that take place over time and in the minds and actions of colonial officials. Burton recounts the colonial distaste for the urban, African migrant as a sign of detribalization, as a threat to chiefly indirect rule and as recruits for Dar es Salaam's growing criminal underworld. In response, the authorities sought to redirect African migration back to the rural areas through mechanisms like repatriation and vagrancy laws. However, Burton is careful to illustrate that colonial policy was often different from practice. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the colonial administration's ability to remove 'undesirable' persons was limited at best. Financial and logistical considerations often deterred officials from enforcing their own laws. This parsimony of colonial administration continued well after the Second World War. However, ideas about urban Africans began to change. Burton examines the moves made to increase African housing, education for urban youth and wage increases. Yet, he makes it clear that these attempts at social provision were limited to educated Africans, those colonial officials believed were productive members of Dar es Salaam. For the rest, still feared for their presumed contribution to urban disorder, vigorous attempts were made to remove them from the city.

Crime, Burton explains, was the core concern of the urban administration. It is on this subject that Burton offers his most striking material. His description of *wahuni* and their Dar es Salaam underworld is particularly vivid, and he uses his archival source material to its fullest. Burton is able to reconstruct what he describes as the development of a professional class of criminals and a network of exchange for stolen property. The success of these informal