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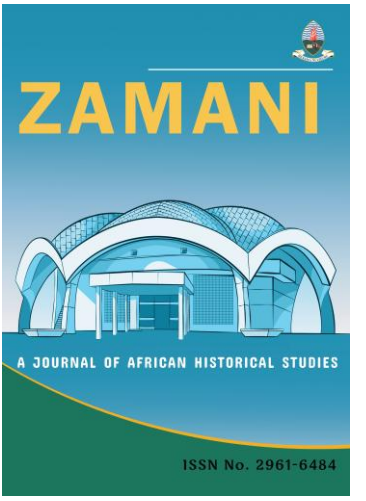

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Book Review: Matthew V Bender, *Water Brings No Harm: Management Knowledge and the Struggle for Waters of Kilimanjaro.*

Author: Maxmillian J Chuhila

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Book Review

Matthew V Bender. *Water Brings No Harm: Management Knowledge and the Struggle for Waters of Kilimanjaro.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019.

Water Brings No Harm is a key text that enables readers to understand the competing claims to resource control between government authorities and local communities on the ground. Scholarship on the relationship between local knowledge and expert knowledge in resource management and control suggests an asymmetrical relationship in which expert opinion assumes the primary responsibility.[1] Bender contrasts traditional and imposed systems of resource ownership and management, arguing that there has been a struggle from both sides, as each side believes it has a rightful claim to ownership and management of water sources (p3).

The book is an innovation in the historiography of Tanzania. While previous scholarship has treated water as an afterthought, Bender places it at the centre of his discourse. This is not to say that there are no such studies, but innovatively Bender has given it the attention it deserves by using historical and anthropological approaches. In recent decades, almost all scholars of African environmental history or agrarian transformation have tended to consider water as one of the determinants of progress or failure, albeit in a narrow sense.[2] In doing so, Bender has provided a timely response to an otherwise fragmented historiography of water use, management and governance in the African context. More importantly, this book departs from earlier works that considered water in terms of its

[1] Nigel Chalmers and Christo Fabricius, "Expert and generalist local knowledge about land-cover change on South Africa's Wild Coast: can local ecological knowledge add value to science?" in *Ecology and Society* 12, no. 1 (2007).

[2] See for example, Paul Lane, "Environmental narratives and the history of soil erosion in Kondoa District, Tanzania: An archaeological perspective," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 42, no. 3 (2009): 457-483; Michael J Sheridan, "The environmental consequences of independence and socialism in North Pare, Tanzania, 1961–88." *The Journal of African History* 45, no. 1 (2004): 81-102; Martin Walsh, "The not-so-Great Ruaha and hidden histories of an environmental panic in Tanzania," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 6, no. 2 (2012): 303-335.

hydrology by focusing on the political, social, cultural and spiritual components that shape water governance and use.

Early European visitors to Kilimanjaro saw it as a special area and compared it to an area of abundant water. The management of water and resources in the colonies was shaped by European perceptions of the environment. Bender points out that 'European explorers developed highly idealised, romanticized, unrealistic impressions of the mountain. In their eyes, Kilimanjaro was other worldly—if not an Eden, then at the very least a little Switzerland or Devonshire' (p90). This is a very powerful conclusion that went on to influence colonial water management interventions. Prior to Bender's work, James McCann's *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land* critiqued colonial views of African landscapes as imposing what did not exist or misinterpreting adaptive anthropogenic activities in relation to the surrounding environment.[3] European explorers' travelogues informed later colonial governments, who arrived with similar imaginations, believing that there were some pristine environments and abundant water sources on the slopes of the mountain. This imagination also informed their failure to introduce water management regulations in the early colonial period (p96-97).

In Chapter Four, Bender illustrates that, contrary to early colonial beliefs, water in the mountain landscapes was actually scarce. He argues that perceptions of 'abundance' and 'scarcity' significantly influenced both local and national water management strategies. The Chagga used *mifongo*—traditional rrigation channels—that later came to be considered wasteful once the scarcity of water was acknowledged. As in his other publications, Bender demonstrates that water management impacted local authority and that government interventions in the 1920s and 1930s heightened conflicts between colonial plans and local populations (p119).[4] This period saw contested water use due to increased demands from population growth, agricultural development, industrial needs in lower Kilimanjaro following the establishment of the Tanganyika Planting

[3] James McCann, *Green land, brown land, black land: an environmental history of Africa, 1800-1990* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999).

[4] Also see other publications by the author: Matthew V Bender, "Being 'Chagga': natural resources, political activism, and identity on Kilimanjaro," *The Journal of African History* 54, no. 2 (2013): 199-220; *Idem*, "'For more and better water, choose pipes!' Building water and the nation on Kilimanjaro, 1961–1985," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34, no. 4 (2008): 841-859.

Company (TPC), and the colonial environmental philosophy enshrined in the 'degradation narrative' of the 1930s (p122-128).

Colonial governments criticized traditional irrigation 'for being harmful and wasteful' in their expatriate views that contradicted with local conceptualisations of 'water and land as akin to blood and body' (p1). It was an overarching concept that provided security and sustainability for land and water resources. Irrigation and agriculture were designed to conserve land and water resources for posterity. Even after the introduction of western religious civilisation, people did not abandon their ways of believing in and using water, as discussed in Chapter Five (p144-151). Traditional water management involved not only the physical repair of irrigation structures, but also spiritually linked norms that maintained local ecologies and cosmologies about their relationship with resources, spirits and *Ruwa*—a Chagga name for God. While local management sought to maintain their ecologies and the spiritual implications of resources, the colonial government intervened in water management to control the depletion of water on the slopes of the mountain, which by the 1920s was becoming scarce compared to the rapidly growing population.

In the 1920s and 1930s there was also an increase in coffee cultivation, which increased both the amount of land and water needed for irrigation. It is likely that economic imperatives had more to do with water use than population growth until the 1930s. The 1930s was a decade of commercial modernisation of the mountain peasantry, which posed a considerable threat to the settlers. In the 1950s, the construction of modern pipelines on the slopes began, with the aim of reducing the waste of water through *mifongo*. While other recent studies have shown that the government's assumptions were based on misinformation, Bender argues that the main challenge was the alienation of people from management practices that spiritually connected them to their ancestors and maintained social cohesion.[5]

Traditional water management was gendered and was indicative of power relations in the society. The elders had the ultimate authority to decide on needs and the technical know-how to construct them. The

[5] See Chris de Bont, "The continuous quest for control by African irrigation planners in the face of farmer-led irrigation development: The case of the lower Moshi Area, Tanzania (1935-2017)," in *Water Alternatives* 11, no. 3 (2018): 893-915; Chris de Bont, Hans C Komakech, and Gert Jan Veldwisch, "Neither modern nor traditional: Farmer-led irrigation development in Kilimanjaro Region, Tanzania," in *World Development* 116 (2019): 15-27.

construction, repair and maintenance of *mifongo* was the responsibility of a few selected men, while fetching water was entirely a women's affair (p50-56). Colonial and post-colonial state intervention through the construction of piped water not only modernised water supply but also destabilised the social and ritual functions embedded in water management. The author notes that 'the development of new *mifongo* was a highly ritualized process limited to men in the community' (p48). It was not just for water supply, but part of a kind of spiritual attachment to *Ruwa*, who was believed to make the 'body and blood' meaning of water in people's perceptions. This was a big challenge for the government authorities. They did not understand the whole process. The spiritual part of the story in this book has been limited to the power of water in cleansing and purification. One would expect to see how it influenced the selection of water sources and how it linked social and power relations in the use and management of water and water sources.

About the reviewer:
MAXMILLIAN J CHUHILA is a senior lecturer in history at University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He holds a PhD in environmental history from Warwick University. Correspondence email: chuhila.maxmillian@udsm.ac.tz | ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4807-5891.

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