

Nancy Jacobs
African Environmental History
Brown University, Spring 2003

Required Course Readings

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*

Robert Harms, *Games Against Nature: An Eco-Cultural History of the Nunu of Equatorial Africa.*

Roderick Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa*

Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, *Lie of the Land: Challenging the Received Wisdom on the African Environment*

Tamara Giles-Vernick, *Cutting the Vines of the Past: Environmental Histories of the Central African Rain Forest*

Meeting Format

This seminar will be structured around student participation. You will be giving “minutes,” and leading discussions. I hope these presentations will be informative and help foster spontaneous discussion. Should you have any suggestions on how to improve the meeting format, please speak with me.

Minutes - At the beginning of every meeting, I will call on students to give a minute-long commentary on the assigned readings. Your minute should identify points for later discussion. You may compare, critique or put readings in the context of previous discussions.

Discussion leading – Working in a group, you must plan and lead the discussion of one week’s assigned readings. You must meet with me earlier in the week to plan your discussion. The group will be graded as a unit. On the day of class, you must turn in a one-page plan for the discussion. Your grade will be largely based on how your discussion plan enhances understanding of the assigned book and how well you solicit contributions from your classmates.

Map quiz

You must demonstrate familiarity with the contemporary political and environmental map of Africa to pass the class. You must pass a map quiz but it will not be graded. If you fail this quiz, you must make arrangements with me to re-take it.

Written Assignments

This class has three written assignments. They build upon each other to give you an experience of writing environmental history. You should view these assignments as part of one larger project. Therefore, it is essential that you identify a feasible research topic early in the semester and develop the same topic in subsequent assignments. Your topic must be historical, and I have found that the most successful papers concentrate on the colonial and post-colonial periods. If you are concerned with a contemporary issue, you must be to put it in the context of its development. Also, the most successful topics are defined by environmental issues and environmental zones rather than politically. Since your

topic will be based heavily on non-environmental historiography, choose a well-covered region or topic that can sustain an environmental consideration.

Report on biophysical environment. 6-8 pages. Rather than an argumentative essay, this is a report on your research into biophysical conditions. You will identify the biophysical forces in the historical dynamic you are researching. You need to choose a case that you will work with throughout the semester. Because national boundaries do not correspond to environmental zones or zones of environmental activities, it usually works better to choose an area that is either smaller or larger than any given country. Most students will research the natural environment in an area -- climate, soil, topography, water, disease, vegetation types. You must include a hand-drawn map of environmental features. The paper must also include consideration of the biological characteristics of human life – demography, disease resistance, the relative importance of different types of production, growing conditions of crops, stock disease and diet. The key to writing this essay is to think creatively about biophysical forces. This report may be written less formally, with headings and bullet points. However, you must conform to standards of written English and cite your sources thoroughly.

Essay on social/economic or political history. 8-10 pages. In this paper you will discuss the non-environmental historical factors in your research topic. This should be a traditional historical research paper, with a review of literature, identification of an interesting problem and a consideration of evidence to support an argument. You should write this paper on a non-environmental subject that can sustain an environmental treatment in your final project. (For example, write this paper on the decline of the peasantry in South Africa, and write your proposal on environmental aspects of the decline of the peasantry.) In this paper, you should show that you are familiar with the history of your research area, and that you can write an historical paper. It is usually best to concentrate on a period in the 19th and/or 20th centuries.

Research proposal. 10-15 pages. The assignment is for a research proposal rather than a conclusive research paper. This paper serves as your final exam and is your opportunity to consolidate what you learned in the semester. Your assignment is to use environmental historiography to generate questions about the specific case you have been developing in the first two papers. The paper is to design, propose and justify a project in environmental history. Make sure your questions are historical, involving change over time, and not an inquiry into static contemporary conditions. Because environmental history usually requires fieldwork and you won't be able to do it for this paper, you must do extensive library research to ask interesting questions that you cannot answer in a library. Although this paper will leave questions open, the intellectual challenge of this assignment is in the identification of the questions, and the discussion of hypotheses. I suggest you begin by discussing the research problem as informed by particular works in environmental history, and as you understand it in this case, then move to sources and methods. For further suggestions on writing research proposals, see "On the Art of Writing Proposals" by Adam Przeworski and Frank Salomon, published by the Social Science Research Council at: http://www.ssrc.org/programs/publications_editors/publications/art_of_writing_proposals.page

Course Schedule

Week 1, 1/27

Introductions

Week 2, 2/3

Environmental Issues in the Rise of Civilizations: A Global Perspective

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: How do you react to Diamond's argument? What parts do you find strongest and weakest?

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, 1-214, 239-264, 293-375, 403-427.

Week 3, 2/10 Environmental Issues in the Rise of Civilizations: African Considerations

Map Quiz

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: How does Diamond's explanation for early African environmental history compare with those of Iliffe and the theory of Boserup? Consider the following issues: race, the problem of environmental hospitality, disease, population and development, migration, culture.

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, 109-113, 284-288, 376-402

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 1-17, 18, 33-36, 62-147

Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*, 11-34 (on reserve).

Week 4, 2/17 No class - we will make up this meeting during Reading Period

Week 5, 2/24 Environmental History of People without History

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: What is Harms's method to retrieve the history of non-literate people and fish? How do social and environmental evidence complement each other in this book?

Robert Harms, *Games Against Nature*

Week 6, 3/3 Colonial Annexation, Environmental Trauma and Trypanosomiasis

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: Compare Kjekshus, Vail and Giblin on the ways African coped with trypanosomiasis before colonial annexation. All your readings postulate an environmental crisis in the late 19th century. How did the crisis influence the process of colonial annexation? In the longer term, what are the specific ways that colonial takeover affected relations with the environment in general and the incidence of trypanosomiasis in particular? What does this exercise tell you about the use of biological evidence in historical arguments?

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 147-161, 168- 211 (esp. 208-211). Note that Iliffe doesn't refer to rinderpest by name, but calls it "cattle plague."

Abstract and critiques of Kjekshus, Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History (available via email).

Helge Kjekshus, "Break-down of the Man-Controlled Ecological System: The Causes," *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History*, 126-143, 160 (on reserve).

Leroy Vail, "Ecology and History: The Example of Eastern Zambia" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 3(1977): 129-155.

James Giblin, "Trypanosomiasis Control in African History: An Evaded Issue?" *Journal of African History* 31(1990): 59-80

Donald G. McNeil, "Drug Makers and the Third World: A Case Study in Neglect" *The New York Times* May 21, 2000.

Discussion leaders:

Friday 3/7 Report on biophysical environment due

Week 7, 3/10 The Politics of Conservation, 1

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: How is the history of conservation a history of the larger colonial encounter? What evidence is there of post-colonial change in conservation policy?

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 212-242, 271-284

David Anderson, "Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s," *African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African Society* 83(1984): 321-43.

Jane Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History*, 89-117 (on reserve).

Stephen Ellis, "Of Elephants and Men: Politics and Nature Conservation in South Africa" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20(1994): 53-69.

Discussion leaders:

Week 8, 3/17 The Politics of Conservation, 2

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 243-270.

Roderick Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness*

Discussion leaders:

SPRING BREAK American Society for Environmental History conference at the Providence Biltmore Hotel. March 26-30. See <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~environ/ASEH/conferences.html>

Week 9, 3/31 Challenging the Received Wisdom in Colonial Environmental Thought

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: What are the lessons and pitfalls of characterizing colonial environmental thought as “received wisdom?”

Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, eds., *Lie of the Land*, 1-53; 73-121; 140-154; 168-209.

Presentation by Professor Jacobs on Africa in Crisis: The Causes, The Cures of Environmental Bankruptcy by Lloyd Timberlake.

Discussion leaders:

Week 10 4/7 The State, Environmental Knowledge and Environmental Intervention

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: In these extreme circumstances, what factors sustain and limit colonial intervention into the environmental relations?

Karen Middleton, "Who Killed "Malagasy Cactus"? Science, Environment and Colonialism in Southern Madagascar (1924-1930)" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25(1999): 215-248.

Nancy Jacobs, "The Great Bophuthatswana Donkey Massacre: Discourse on the Ass, Politics of Class and Grass" *The American Historical Review*, 108(2001): 485-507.

Allison Shutt, "The Settlers' Cattle Complex: The Etiquette of Culling Cattle in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1938" *The Journal of African History* 43(2002): 263-86.

Jacob Tropp, "Dogs, Poison and the Meaning of Colonial Intervention in the Transkei, South Africa" *Journal of African History* 43(2002): 451-472.

Discussion leaders:

Friday 4/11 Paper on non-environmental history due.

Week 11, 4/14 Indigenous Knowledge and Environment

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: Indigenous environmental knowledge is recognized as a resource for environmental history and policy. What are some difficulties in relating to it, understanding it and using it?

John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, 212-242

Mwelma Musambachime, "The Fate of the Nile Crocodile in African Waterways," *African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African Society* 86(1987): 197-207.

Jan-Bart Gewald, "El Negro, El Niño, Witchcraft and the Absence of Rain in Botswana," *African Affairs: Journal of the Royal African Society* 100(2001): 555-580.

Luise White, "Blood, Bugs, and Archives: Debates over Sleeping-Sickness Control in Colonial Northern Rhodesia, 1931-1939," *Speaking with Vampires*, 208-241.

<http://escholarship.cdlib.org:8088/dynaxml/servlet/BookView?source=eschol/8354/8354.xml&style=eschol/xsl/dynaxml/dynaxml.xsl&chunk.id=ch7>

Discussion leaders:

Week 12, 4/21 Multiple Histories of the Environment

Reading Assignment and Class Discussion: How do indigenous concepts of history relate to the enterprise of environmental history? Compare this approach to central African environmental history to that in Robert Harms's *Games against Nature*

Tamara Giles-Vernick, *Cutting the Vines of the Past*

Discussion leaders:

Monday 5/5 Research proposals due in History Department Office.

Reading Period Presentations of Research