

BOOK REVIEWS

Guillaume Blanc.

L'Invention du colonialisme vert: Pour en finir avec le mythe de l'Éden africain.

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In his newest book, whose title translates as *The Invention of Green Colonialism: Putting an End to the Myth of an African Eden*, historian Guillaume Blanc provides a superb contribution to the fields of Environmental History, Political Ecology (Geography), African Studies, Environmental Studies and many other disciplines. Triangulating archival research with field work, including interviews, on two continents and in four languages, Blanc has created a masterpiece in contrasts that has much to teach us about nature conservation, 'sustainable development', power and equity on a global scale.

Written in an engaging style that is not overly academic, this book is easy to read but also well-documented, as the notes demonstrate. The bulk of the book treats Ethiopia, nature conservation and the development of national parks there in chronological order dating from the era of European colonialism. But this extended case study in seven chapters (2–8) is book-ended by a first chapter and a conclusion that powerfully contrast Cevennes, a national park in France, with Ethiopian national parks analysed in the book to demonstrate the absurdity and grave inequality of the ways the Ethiopian parks are created and managed. By weaving in relevant information on many other African national parks with his case study, Blanc persuasively argues that the colonial myth of an African Eden, a splendid, primal nature that does not include humans, is nothing but an artificial construct that has legitimated the violent dehumanisation of parks in much of the continent, and concomitantly, the criminalisation of local peoples and their ways of life.

Chapter one is important for framing the primary argument of the book and it provides a short historical overview of Ethiopia's history – a history that does not include being colonised by European powers. Despite this fact, Ethiopia has been subjected to the same forces of 'green (neo)colonialism' (also termed 'green grabbing' in some of the related literature) as much of the rest of Africa, in large part due to 'experts' who were previously colonial operatives. The chapter also showcases the problematic functioning of national parks in Ethiopia, particularly Simien national park in the north, by contrasting them with how the French national park of the Cevennes works today.

This is especially effective given that populations in both the French and

Ethiopian parks are agro-pastoralists who grow crops and graze livestock in various combinations. In France, these local populations are lauded as 'authentic' and valuable for being part of a lived tradition that has shaped the landscape of the park 'for three millennia' (p. 37). Humans and their livestock are viewed as part of nature in this European national park, and essential for its maintenance, as they are in several protected areas in parts of Europe and North America. In the case of Cevennes national park, this is a vital part of the park being classed by UNESCO as a world heritage site.

In Ethiopia, however, as in much of Africa, the local agro-pastoralists are perceived and portrayed as destroyers of nature who must be removed from the protected areas in order to 'save nature' and thus biodiversity, ecosystem services, etc. In the case of the Ethiopian national parks, UNESCO has argued for over fifty years that, due to their 'destructive' actions, humans needed to be removed from the parks before they could be classed as world heritage sites. How this has played out on the ground in Ethiopia, primarily in Simien national park, since the 1960s forms the majority of the rest of the book in disturbing detail.

The second chapter, though, first provides a sweeping overview of the historical development of western, colonial attitudes towards and assumptions about Africa and its wildlife from the mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century. Demonstrating a deep knowledge of the existing literature, Blanc traces the development of the colonial idea of a resplendent, wild African nature ruined over centuries by indigenous practices, how this narrative served colonial interests in a variety of ways, and how much actual environmental damage was inflicted by the colonial project itself. How this discursive construction served to assuage westerners' feelings of loss of 'wild nature' at home while diverting attention from rapacious mining and other damaging extractive industries is also analysed.

Blanc explains the development of national parks from earlier incarnations as hunting reserves, including a discussion of the earliest park in sub-Saharan Africa, Park Albert (now Virunga) in the Belgian Congo, created in 1925. The reasons for its elevation from a hunting reserve to a national park parallel those for the first parks in North Africa, including the Cedars of Teniet el-Haad national park, created in 1923 in Algeria, the first on the continent of Africa. Although the protection of nature and scientific research were cited as the primary reasons in the early years, the lure of tourism revenue for local governments as well as the surveillance and control of 'difficult' local populations played a large role in these and subsequent national parks on the continent.

The final section of chapter two provides a crucial transition to the rest of the book by highlighting how a great many colonial officials transformed themselves into international 'experts' on nature conservation during the early years of the post-colonial period. By the 1960s, the ranks of organisations like

UNESCO, UNFAO, the WWF and the IUCN, among many others, were filled with men formerly employed as colonial officials for Anglo-European countries including the UK, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the United States. Travelling with these men were their imaginations filled with the colonial myth of an endangered African Eden that needed to be restored and protected.

Chapters three to eight provide a chronological analysis of the creation and management of national parks in Ethiopia with a focus on Simien national park, created in the 1960s to protect a rare ibex (*walia ibex*), with details from archival letters and reports that are troubling and often shocking. From the 'special project for Africa' to 'sustainable' and participatory community development, Blanc lays out the stories told to justify the parks and their policies and then lays bare the falsehoods with documentation from the archives and interviews.

Allegations of locals hunting the ibex to the point of depopulation (the principal justification for Simien national park) are demonstrated to be false, for example, as ibex are only rarely eaten in times of famine and the ibex population numbers have actually been steadily increasing despite the presence of the indigenous populations living in the park until recently. Accusations of massive deforestation are revealed to be exaggerated to a great extent and primarily due to a misunderstanding of a rotation system long sustainably used by the local agro-pastoralists (pp. 218–222). Blanc places the vilification of such local subsistence systems in sharp critical focus by reminding his readers that similar practices used by agro-pastoralists in Cevennes national park in France are praised for maintaining open spaces in the park otherwise 'threatened by the progression of the forest' (p. 295).

The book succeeds in exposing how the opinions (often incorrect or greatly exaggerated) and plans of a small handful of white men had surprisingly great power over nature conservation in a country like Ethiopia. From the first few envoys from UNESCO, the WWF, the IUCN and the UNFAO who visited in the 1960s and wrote reports on the environment and potential for the creation of protected areas to different envoys from the same suite of organisations in the early twenty-first century, these men have perpetuated the myth of a threatened African Eden and promoted racist and violent policies of exclusion based on profound misunderstandings of the environment and of centuries of local land use practices. They influenced not only policies but also laws, with grim results.

Blanc further reveals the shifting desires of the state in Ethiopia, including the several changes of government since the 1960s, to profit from the creation of national parks. The state has profited from tourism revenue, from international recognition and acceptance, from garnering global funding and from the militarisation of park surveillance and operations. To fulfil UNESCO's various

mandates for what Simien national park ‘should be’, for example, they have criminalised local land-use practices like farming and grazing, and reconfigured the boundaries of the park in 2006 so that fewer villages and thus humans are officially in the park (p. 238–239). They went even further in the early twenty-first century, finally accepting UNESCO’s fifty-year-old command to depopulate the park in order to retain its status as a world heritage site. In 2016, residents of one of the largest villages left in Simien national park, Gich, were removed. As Blanc learned from talking to many people in the region, these inhabitants have only encountered increasing poverty and a life of despair in their new location. The effects on local peoples living just outside the park boundaries has been mixed, with some finding employment as guides but others unable to support their families whose children leave school early to try to help. For too many life has become a ‘downward spiral of impoverishment’ (p. 254).

The final, and very important, contrast provided by Blanc is that of a nearly empty park now visited by several thousand foreign, mostly Anglo-European, tourists every year. Inculcated by seductive but false images from sources like *National Geographic* and Disney’s film *The Lion King*, these tourists arrive expecting to see exotic wildlife and the magnificent landscape – which is now mostly devoid of humans. But the pathetic irony is that the pollution created by their visits and the carbon emitted by their flights does so much more environmental damage to our planet than the low-impact, largely sustainable livelihoods of Simien’s original human occupants.

Blanc does not end his book with a laundry list of new actions or policies to try to ameliorate this complex situation. But by exposing and dismantling false discursive constructions of the environment as this book has done he has performed a necessary act of resistance. This will help lead to new modes of seeing and understanding the socio-natural world and of acting in more equitable, socially just and ecologically successful ways *if* we can lift the veil of ‘green (neo)colonialism’ from our eyes.

L’Invention du colonialisme vert deserves a spot on the shelves of every major library, a large number of policymakers’ desks and the bedside tables of many ordinary folks interested in Africa, nature conservation, social justice or the sustainable development of our planet. Anglophone readers can look forward to reading the English translation when it appears with Polity Books next year. It provides an essential and unique analysis that will influence scholarship for many years to come. One can only hope that it may also influence policy making.

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