



Conservation Song: A History of Peasant-State Relations and the Environment in Malawi, 1860-2000

Wapulumuka Oliver Mulwafu

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A CONSERVATION HISTORY WITH LESSONS FOR TODAY Conservation Song explores ways in which colonial relations shaped meanings and conflicts over environmental control and management in Malawi. By focusing on soil conservation, which required an integrated approach to the use and management of such natural resources as land, water and forestry, it examines the origins and effects of policies and their legacies in the post-colonial era. That interrelationship has fundamental contemporary significance and is not simply a phenomenon created in the colonial period. For instance, like other countries in the region, post-colonial Malawi has been bedevilled by increasing rates of environmental degradation due, in part, to the expansion of human and animal populations, cash crop production, drought and consequent deforestation. These issues are as critical today as they were six or seven decades ago. In fact, they are part of a conservation song that has a long and complex history. The song of conservation was initially composed and performed in the colonial period, modified during the immediate postcolonial period and further refashioned in the post-dictatorship period to suit the evolving political climate; but the basic lyrics remain essentially the same. This book attempts to explain the evolution of the conservationist idea whilst demonstrating changes and continuities in peasant-state relations under different political systems. The dominant narrative posits conservation as a progressive movement aimed at re-organising natural resources and protecting them from destruction but the idea was contested and deeply embedded in colonial power relations and scientific ethos. Conservation emerged as an important tool of colonial state intervention and control concerning people and scarce resources. Conservation Song shows how the idea of conservation was rooted in and driven by a particular type of science about the organisation of space and landscapes. It offers a strategic entry point to understanding the historical roots of Africa's social and ecological problems over time, which are also intertwined with power and poverty relationships. In the postcolonial period, the conservation tempo subsided and became neglected in public discourse, only to re-emerge in the 1990s through the democratisation movement.

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