

# BOOK REVIEW

**Guillaume Blanc.** *The Invention of Green Colonialism.* (Translated by Hellen Morrison.) Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022. 180 pp. Maps. Notes. Index. £15.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1509550890.

*The Invention of Green Colonialism* is the English translation of Guillaume Blanc's book *L'invention du colonialisme vert. Pour en finir avec le mythe d'Eden africaine* (Paris: Flammarion, 2020). Blanc makes an impassioned argument against the overbearing control of international organizations (an alphabet soup of NGOs and agencies such as UNESCO, WWF, IUCN, FAO, and countless others) and their leverage in imposing prescriptions for environmental management of African landscapes. He argues that these international voices have drowned out the lived experience and knowledge of local farmers and land managers. The book's main focus is not the overall landscapes and changes therein, but the specific historical terms for Africa's national parks that either excluded or removed local people from the lands as the "Invention of Green Colonialism." The major thesis here is that national parks are a legacy of colonialism, an invented "Eden," which serves an eco-tourism economy that has created a false narrative of a "Merrie Africa" that James Gibling, Gregory Maddox, and Isaria Kimambo have pointed to in their *Custodians of the Land* (Ohio University Press, 1996). Blanc is on a mission; he makes reference to African cases overall, but his specific example and field-level observations derive from a non-colonial case, Ethiopia's Simien National Park, the site of Africa's second highest peak at Ras Dashen.

In a way, the critical perspective here mirrors James Fairhead and Melissa Leach's *Misreading the African Landscape* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), which challenged the degradation thesis for the Upper Guinea forest and posited, with strong field evidence, the role of local people's practices in sustaining and building human ecological landscapes. Blanc offers less ground-level data than he does an invocation of the term "Green Colonialism" as the product of external policy interventions.

*The Invention of Green Colonialism* draws on secondary literature for the argument for Africa as a whole. But its core and nuanced evidence comes from a study of northwest Ethiopia's Simien National Park, ironically a site that had to endure less than a decade of laconic—but sometimes brutal

—Italian colonial rule (1936–41), examining the role of international actor agencies and advisors in the post-war period post-1970. Most chapters begin with an anecdotal critical incident of foreign misperception of landscape that reminds the reader of Fairhead and Leach and adds a poignant human element to the larger story.

Part of the “Green Colonialism” argument is to offer a severe challenge to the once dominant degradation thesis offered in the Ethiopia/Simien case by Swiss time-series studies, which argued that human populations were degrading the alpine forest on Ethiopia’s Simien mountain landscapes, and that afforestation actions by development agencies would, or could, reestablish once-forested places. From my own observations over three decades on the northern highlands as a whole, those attempts to reforest highland areas resulted in expanses of withered planted saplings and poorly planned plantings of inappropriate tree species. Where forested areas have recovered in recent years, it is where local action by farmers has seen the most effective action. In keeping with that view, historical evidence and studies of landscape cover cited by Blanc indicate that forested areas or intensive field management of the northern highlands appear most often in areas under the control of local farmers. *Invention of Green Colonialism* does not offer empirical evidence, but it does make a clear case for the folly of external interventions.

The book consists of eight chapters, a Conclusion, Index, Notes, and an “Afterward: Looking Ahead.” While the book cites many secondary and even primary sources, it does not include a bibliography. This lacuna, unfortunately, forces the reader to toggle from the text to the footnotes and search in vain for a full set of references.

*Invention of Green Colonialism* is a good read which offers a challenging critique of environmental management policy.

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