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TRENDS OF WRITING ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY IN ETHIOPIAN
HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this manuscript is deals with the history of writing environmental history in Ethiopia Studies. It has shown that particularly after the 1960s, as a new discipline, scholastic works and publications are produced on environmental history in Ethiopia. Various authors repeatedly made their researches on the history of environmental thought, forest history, drought history, famine history, agricultural history and etc. Among others drought and famine history received a considerable attention of scholars and researchers; famine history, especially after the 1984/85 famine has attracted a growing number of practitioners on the field. In the other side, the study of the natural environment in the past has not gain enough consideration. Furthermore, most of those research works and publications on environmental issues like drought, famine, deforestation, land degradation, soil erosion, and are focused on northern and central Ethiopia through ignoring the rest parts of the country. In general, while it is not adequate, the last century shows the production of numerous researches on different thematic areas of environmental history in Ethiopia. Then, it suggests the need for more research works in the area to fill the above-mentioned gaps.

1. Introduction

Although it is very difficult to give the exact time for the phrase of the term or expression of environmental history to be used for the first time, most practitioners of the field have recognized the American Historian Roderick Nash to mention a new course with the title “American environmental history” before other scholars at Santa Barbara around 1970. Nash developed the general philosophy of the field what he was thought in America. He defines environmental history as, the totality of past interaction of human beings with their environment. Furthermore he acknowledges the holistic nature of the field and insights the necessity of multi-disciplinary approach while working on environmental study.

However the term environmental history has not a common/agreed definition, especially due to the development of numerous excellent regional bibliographies. Donald Worster’s widely quoted 1988 definition states: “environmental history is the interaction between human cultures and the environment in the past.” Another scholar define it as “...the history of the role and place of nature in human life, the history of all the interactions that societies have had with the non-human past, in their environs.” In 2006, Donald Hughes, expressed environmental history as “... a kind of history that seeks understanding of human beings as they have lived, worked and thought in relationship to the rest of nature through the changes brought by time.” Therefore, frankly, the field is the interdisciplinary examination of the inter relationship between humans and former environment. Thus the major concern of environmental historians would be analyzed the influence of human forces on environment and people’s reaction for various environmental changes or for different particular ecological conditions. There by environmental history further broadens the subject matter of conventional history.

The range of topics in environmental history can be classified in to three crude categories. The first is the study of the natural environment in the past including human beings from agro-economic and environmental perspectives. This variety of environmental history is mostly dealing about the changing behavior of cultivated plants and domesticated animals, climate and land features as well as examines the changes in past environments. Therefore the primary concern of this category is about the natural environment itself. Although historians are not completely ignorant to this category, scientists are more effective and well-mannered in this sub topic. To study the natural environment of the past the practitioners of the field examine tree rings and ice cores to decide on the climatic changes of the past and also employed pollen analysis for the purpose of describing plant species spatial variation and dynamics.

Likewise, when ‘historical ecology’ is interrelated to dynamism in human accumulated experiences and traditions, it has become a good environmental history.” Environmental historians of France and the Annals School are well known by this kind of history rather than the Americans.

Emmanuel Ladurie's well-articulated that published in 1971, is a good example of this intellectual culture of the Annals School. A good number of environmental historians intensively used the scientific studies of change and continuity in past environments for doing environmental history. For instance, William Cronon, used pollen analysis to study the changes of forest covers in New England after colonization in *Changes in the Land*.

The second major topic of environmental history deals with, the different methods and activities of people that would shift any environment towards a spot that suits to them; which that provides various resources for their livelihood. This environmental history sub division is mainly "the province of historians." In this topic the practitioners of the field largely discuss about the contribution of the natural environment in people's life styles of the people, and the influence of environmental change in the social, economic, political and ecological interactions. The primary concern of environmental historians under this topic is not the environment; rather their major point of discussion is about the development of new modes of production by different groups of humans. The impact of these modes of production on the environment, the relation of the ways of production to the particular local environment, and power circulation due to the changed modes of production are other major concerns under this sub topic.

The third category of the field is examined the mental responses of humans to nature. Thus this category deals more about the intangible ideological or perceptual, or cultural interactions with nature. These interactions are demonstrated by legends, representations of iconographic, un written bodies of law and regulations and also others. This group includes the study of ideas of nature. And more than the earlier practitioners of the field the more recent ones are considered idea formation and cultural construction as very complicated and influential process. In regard to this category Alexander Wilson's (1992), works on traits of natural environment is very important reconstruction. Nonetheless only few works of environmental history are attempted to stick together those above mentioned group divisions in a single compiled study or inquiry.

As we see in the above paragraphs environmental change is a centre of discussion in studying environmental history. Therefore I could write something on the issue. Environmental change is a change in various variables of the environment. This change may be the result of natural or human activities. The major human causes of environmental change are population growth, technological advancement, politico – economic institution, attitudes and beliefs, etc. These factors have been enough to increase environmental stress. And a higher environmental stress in response led to the increments of atmospheric carbon dioxide, global warming, Salinization of agricultural lands etc. At the end all of the above factors combined results changes in agricultural activities and productivity, human's life style, attitude and beliefs, socio-economic and political institutions and so forth.

2. The Foundation and Development of Environmental History

United States of America played an irreplaceable role to the foundation of environmental history as an accredited and self-standing field of study for the first time. U.S writers have long traditions in studying human relations with their environment. This tradition has first started by Frederick Jackson Turner when he produced a famous and ice breaker book in 1893. During the first half of the twentieth century other publications also contributed to the development of this conscious subset of knowledge. The two major works were Walter Prescott Webb's (1931), and James Malins (1947). In the third quarter of the twentieth century historians of science, arts and historians of ideas produced different publications in environmental history. A few major works from this group were Clarence Glacken's (1967); and Keith Thomas's (1983). This development was also supported by some medical historians in their analysis of human's attitude and reaction against significant disease. For instance Charles Rosenberg (1962) he tried to reconstruct the encounter of American population to frequent cholera epidemics around 1850s.

Samuel Hays and Roderick Nash works in the 1960s laid a base to the rise of a more concentrated environmental history studies. Samuel Hays's (1959) elaborated origins of the management and controlling activities in the late nineteenth-century America. Nash's (1967) on the other hand largely deal about the American intellectual perception regarding wilderness. Both authors of the above publications "achieved a wider and more generic and imaginative view of their topics than any had before." During this period some biographers who have written the biography of the land escape designer and park maker Frederick Law Olmstead, the "nature-loving transcendentalist" Henry David Thoreau, the wilderness Seer John Muir, and the ecologist and "land ethic progenitor". Aldo Leopold were insert environmental explanation within the traditional writing of biography and the history of ideas. The other significant contribution to the development of environmental history comes from historical geographers.

Since the early 1980s, environmental historians developed a relatively more inclusive and accepted definition of the discipline. In 1980, Bilisky's works became a good "programmatic statement" on the structure of the field. This work efficiently broadened the discipline to include organizational responses in societies with in history for resource scarcities and environmental problem or change. Bilisky clearly analyzed the relation and interaction between human beings and the surrounding environment in the past was not "unidirectional but 'mutual' unlike the current understanding of society and nature interaction.

Environmental history becomes a more complicated field particularly after the production of Donald Worster's, (1979) and William Cronon's, (1983) books. These works and other publications of the 1980s contributed to the dramatic expansion of the field. The publications of the above works were followed by a considerable debate among the scholars of environmental

history regarding its goals, purposes and also about variation in translation methods of main points. And this widespread discussion among the practitioners of the field was/is considered as a manifestation of the disciplines maturity and self-sufficiency in American academic life.

The United States of America was also the home of the early teaching programs and the large majority of environmental historians and institutions. In addition the most influential works in the discipline are also made in America. Although some prolific writers of the field were based in other parts of the world, they were not much the American scholars in writing a self-conscious works in environmental history. Even though, Europe and America have an equivalent number of major universities, the U.S have a far higher numbers of practitioners and publications with a good institutional profile of the discipline. This dominance of the American environmental historians was demonstrated when the specialists of the field published a continual essays works on the discipline journals concerning the destiny of the subject to future. In those journals mainly all of the contributors were American. The only person who represents Europe was Petra Van Dam through her essay in 2004, which discuss about the difficulties of the English language as a medium of the discipline. The major factors behind the foundation and development of environmental history in north America were the physical feature of sparsely populated area, large stretches of wilderness, a mobile 'frontier', and a well-established culture of the 'out doors'. These factors were also played a pivotal role for the rise of environmental history in other regions: Australasia, with in Europe Scandinavia and the Alpine countries. .

Therefore unlike the experience of America the impact of environmental history in Europe has been very limited. Furthermore, with in Europe most works of the discipline are often connected to regional peculiarities, such as "the history of water management in the Nether Lands, struggles over nuclear power in Germany, forestry in the Nordic countries" or pollution due to the nineteenth-century rapid industrialization. Furthermore, both the dominance of the English language in the discipline and the Anglophone origin of the field did not enable the scholars and institutions of England and Wales to develop environmental history, yet it appears very weak in their universities. In addition, except very few notable practitioners of the field, most of the influential writers of environmental history are not well known outside their disciplines including the specialists of agrarian history, while which have a well-developed tradition and numerous researchers. The people of Europe are not familiar with reading literature related to environmental history. Even Journals of this new discipline were not popular in the continent. These facts concerning the under development of environmental history in Europe also strengthened by the recent foundation of European Society for Environmental History in 2000.

The introduction of environmental history renewed historical studies in Africa in the 1980s. The field attracts some well-known and prominent global historians, such as William Beinart, James Mc Cann and others. Like

the experience of other continents environmental history studies in Africa also dominated by regional bibliographies. The contents of environmental history in the continent are submerged in to the colonial and post-colonial themes. The basic points of the discussions became fundamental to the resounding discourses of the global south.

3. The Place of Environmental History in Ethiopian Historiography

Although it is known that this new emerging discipline and study is not began as an autonomous subject at the land of Lucy or Dikinesh called Ethiopia; different foreign and local intellectuals make their researches on various topics of the discipline. Simply to start my discussion, I examined Dessalegn Rahmeto's "Environmentalism and Conservation in Wällo before the Revolution." The rationale behind to begin the analysis by this work is its concern for the history of environmental thought in Ethiopia. According to Dessalegn, various expressions on the need of environmental protection began during the reign of Emperor Menilek.

As Emperor Menilek and his contemporary officials were recognized the far reaching negative consequences of environmental degradation they include conservation and protection activities with the major duties of the state. Fitawrary Tekle Hawariat's *Tinish Mastawasha Sile Irsha Timihrt* (Some Notes Regarding Agricultural Education) (1930) considered as "the next important source for early environmentalism." The same source also indicates that different articles of *Berhanena Selam* (newspaper) given a concern for the environment before the Italian occupation, while the topic was not thought in the western education both in Europe and in Ethiopia.

From the practitioners of the natural science, Lain Derbyshire and Kathryn Bard and others, attempted to reconstruct the environmental history of northern Ethiopia by using scientific methods. Lain Derbyshire's (2003), discuss about the process of deforestation and regrowth of secondary forests and its relation with human activities and climatic change in the northern high lands of Ethiopia. This work primarily depends on the examination of pollen, charcoal sediment, rainfall/temperature changes and other residues of past left cores and materials from different direction of Ethiopian studies like forest, ecological changes, agricultural practices and to some extent ancient human settlement areas and others, use traveler's accounts and readymade materials. The work of Kathryn Bard, also presents the major episodes in the environmental history of the Tigrean plateau depend up on the existing geomorphologic, archaeological and historical sources.

In Ethiopia, the most worked topic of environmental history which attracted numerous researchers could be the history of drought and famine particularly due to the devastating effects of natural disasters that occurred from 1950s to 1900. Under this topic Richard Pankhurst produced different articles in the early 1960s and 1970s. In these articles, Pankhurst reconstructs the history of famine in Ethiopia from the ninth to the last quarter of the nineteenth century based on traveler accounts and other local

sources. Furthermore, in his articles, he gave a bird's eye view about the history of Ethiopian famine history.

In the 1980s, particularly after the 1984/85 famine, different writers contributed a lot for the bibliographic enrichment of famine history of Ethiopia. In 1986, Mesfin Wolde Mariam also published a historical and theoretical framework kept work. Primarily, he based on archival sources and his own experience and secondary materials, Mesfin Wolde Mariam, in this monograph, discusses "the socio economic situation of rural life in Ethiopia, the causes and consequences of famine and the responses of Addis Ababa University, different government organs and the international community during the respective period". In the next year or 1987, Abdu samed H. Ahmed's, efforts in his work, clearly trace the sufferings and survival strategies of Gojjam peasant during the Great Famine by examining oral sources, manuscripts, and secondary materials.

Dessalegn Rahmeto also produced a well-organized work in 1987; this work of Dessalegn Rahmeto analyzed the economic back ground of his study area, the intensity and frequency of famine and its consequences, as well as the responses of the people, the state, and non-governmental organizations to avert the impact of famine based on different archival materials, oral interviews, and secondary materials. In 1988, Adhana Haile Adhane and Girma Kebede, produced two articles concerning the history of famine in Ethiopia. The former works (Adhana Haile) traces the survival strategies of the people against famine, the impact of famine on the expansion of illegal activities or lawlessness as well as the relation between the people and government during a state of famine. To write this article the author examined archival sources, oral interviews and secondary materials. Girma Kebede's (1988), on the other hand clearly identified and analyzed the most vulnerable parts of the country for environmental degradation, drought and famine. In addition they also give a brief synthesis about the causes of those environmental hazards.

The other major point of discussion is forest history. From the writers of this topic Stanislaw Chojancki published an article in 1963, about challenges of forest in Ethiopia and its history through utilizing traveler account sources. Predominantly based on travelers' accounts, Chojancki has written the history of deforestation and afforestation since the mid-nineteenth centuries. Richard Pankhurst's (1995) work is another contribution to the topic. The assessment of this article roughly covers the time between medieval Ethiopia and the years from 1910 to 1920. This work of Pankhurst attempted to analyze the major causes and trends of deforestation during the respective period.

In addition, various afforestation measures, particularly the attempts of emperor Zärä Ya' qob and Emperor Menilek are identified in his paper. James Mc Cann's (1997) published material is also a good contribution for the historiography of environmental history of Ethiopia. Although it lacks comprehensiveness, Mc cann attempt to make the history of land use and vegetative cover of Ethiopia by examining traveler accounts, oral sources,

and secondary materials. In 1998 the special issue publication of the Journal of Ethiopian Studies includes two important papers concerning the history of forests. The first is Donald Crummey's "Deforestation in Wällo Process or Illusion?" This article examined the situation of the Ethiopian forests in the twentieth century based on historical photographs, direct observations, oral sources and earlier reconstructions.

The second is Bahru Zewde's (1998), discussion on Northern Ethiopia forest conservation and controlling mechanisms in the past human cultures. In this paper, Bahru Zewde based on archival materials, oral sources, direct observations and other secondary materials, reconstruct the history of different management systems and trends applied on prominent forests of Northern Ethiopia in the twentieth century. In more recently Demel Teketay and Badege Bishaw published two articles in 2001, the focuses of both writers in this publication is on deforestation and its effects particularly in the highland regions of the country.

Agricultural history of Abyssinia/Ethiopia has also invited different scholars. In 1983, Donald Crummy, after the examination of different scholarly works and traveller accounts published an article in the Journal of Ethiopian Studies by the title of "Ethiopian Plow Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century." Crummey's paper gives more emphasis for the socio-economic base of agriculture, for the types of crops and technologies, for the amount of yields, for the organizational system of agricultural labour and for the peasant lord relations.

Mared Wolde Aragay was the other scholar who wrote on the agricultural history of Ethiopia. Mared's two articles of 1984 and 1985, are very important works on the issue. In these papers Mared's analysis about "the indigenous origins of agriculture in Ethiopia is very important. In addition he identified the major kinds of crops, vegetables and other domesticated plants in the country. The physical environment of the country during the study period is also another concern of the author".

However, the major point of discussion in these papers is the impact of agricultural technology and land tenure system on productivity. The top prominent practitioner of Ethiopian environmental history, James Mc Cann also produced his qualified works under the issue of agricultural history. Mc Cann's (1995) works on subsistence agrarian people, is a well-known material at least among the researchers of Ethiopian history. This work of Mc Cann give a detailed reconstruction about the different agricultural practices and other key themes like demography and urbanization etc. since the early nineteenth centuries by examining traveler accounts, agricultural surveys, photographs, and modern farming systems. His article of 1990, also provides a historical evidence for the growing decline of Ethiopia's agricultural productivity in the twentieth century. This work of Mc Cann is largely based on archival records, field observations of contemporary trends, oral testimony, and farming practices.

4. Conclusion

As already discussed above, the environmental history of Ethiopia has numerous practitioners who produced a number of materials on different subjects of the field. However it lacks comprehensiveness. For example, researchers of the field give more consideration for famine history. Furthermore most research works on environmental history focus on northern part of the country. Even, the more written topic (famine history) is not including the desert and semi-desert areas of Ethiopia, yet they are very vulnerable lands for frequent drought and famine. Thus broadening the geographical focus and thematic areas of writing environmental history of Ethiopia is the responsibility of both the present and future researchers and scholars

In addition the institutional development of the discipline is not appreciable. It is not thought even in the largest and the oldest university of the country; Addis Ababa University, while the university has a well-established history department with prolific writers. The only university in the country that designed the course “Environmental History of the Horn and the Nile River Basin” for graduate students in 2010 is Bahir Dar University. Other universities (i.e. Jimma and Debre Birhan) began to deliver the course for their undergraduate students in recent years. Therefore a concern could be given for the institutional development of this young and progressive discipline in order to produce more researchers on the area as well as to fill main research gaps in the area

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