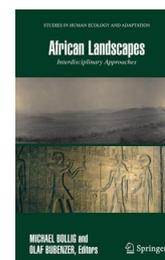

BOOK REVIEW



African Landscapes: Interdisciplinary Approaches. By Michael Bollig & Olaf Bubenzer (eds.). Studies in Human Ecology and Adaptation, Volume 4, Springer Science & Business Media, New York, 2009, xxiii + 515 pp. ISBN 978-0-387-78681-0. £ 72.00 (Hardcover).

Even a cursory glance at the academic literature will reveal that the deceptively simple term ‘landscape’ in fact is a complex and contested concept imbued with multiple meanings. For researchers like myself, working mainly in the geosciences, ‘landscape’ is generally taken to mean an objectified, material, ‘mappable’ reality that can be seen. From this perspective, Africa’s landscapes are globally important, occupying ~21 % of the Earth’s continental surface area, and increasingly are regarded as likely to play critical roles in global climate change; for instance, through acting as sources of atmospheric dust and through their ability to release or sequester carbon. For many researchers in the social sciences, however, ‘landscape’ can take on more nuanced meanings. There is recognition that what is ‘seen’ by eye can be historically and culturally contingent, and that in any case there is a range of non-visual embodied aspects of human interactions with the land, whereby ‘seeing’ can be influenced by other faculties such as smell, touch, and memory. Hence, rather than just being something over which we gaze, by these more imaginative representations, landscapes are regarded more as something within which we live. From these perspectives too, Africa’s landscapes are of global importance, having played a key role in the development of modern human physiology and behaviours, and also harbouring a rich diversity of cultures with various relationships to the land. There are also suggestions that Africa’s peoples will bear disproportionately the brunt of negative global climate change impacts, as many are directly dependent for their livelihoods, through agriculture or grazing, on physical landscape and associated ecosystem functioning in marginal environments.

Archaeology deals with both scientific and more humanistic traditions, and therefore potentially has much to learn from these different perspectives in its disciplinary quest to unravel past interactions between

humans and the environment. So how does the edited volume by Bollig and Bubenzer position itself against these perspectives, and what are its main contributions? Produced as part of the collaborative research project entitled ACACIA (Arid Climate, Adaptation and Cultural Innovation in Africa), with contributors mainly based in Germany but also the Netherlands, Belgium, South Africa and Namibia, the volume forms part of Springer’s ‘Studies in Human Ecology and Adaptation’ series, which has a strong African flavour.

The volume appears to be marketed primarily at researchers interested in African landscapes, rather than undergraduate audiences, with the blurb on the back cover stating that the volume intends to bridge the gap evident in most previous studies of landscape that have “selectively focused on either the natural sciences or the social sciences” and — rather boldly — that the research presented “is unique in its interdisciplinary scope”. The preface (p. v–vi) succinctly addresses the uncertainties and debates over the ‘landscape’ concept in the first paragraph and outlines three justifications for the volume: 1) despite analytical shortcomings, the use of landscape as a key concept to analyse and interpret human-environment interactions is increasing rather than decreasing; 2) the widespread use of the landscape concept corresponds with the era of global environmental change, which has changed most natural landscapes into heavily-used environments and ones that are prone to future transformation with global warming; 3) there is a need for interdisciplinary approaches to landscape research that bridge the gap between the natural sciences and humanities, as recognised by the initiation of the ACACIA programme over a decade ago. In this programme, the concept of ‘landscape’ is said to have been “crucial in all projects, be they Egyptological, Africanist, anthropological, geographical, botanical, historical, or archaeological” (p. vi).

Interestingly, although ACACIA styles itself as an interdisciplinary programme, the last paragraph of the preface states that: “The attempt to work along a unified definition of the landscape concept was given up early on. Rather it was deemed to be more rewarding to have each discipline explore its own access to the topic and from there explore bridges between different disciplinary approaches” (p. vi). So, just how interdisciplinary is the ACACIA programme? By this admission, the programme and the chapters in this volume would seem to focus as much (if not more) on multidisciplinary approaches, whereby landscape research is undertaken in parallel but not necessarily connected ways from different perspectives, rather than on true interdisciplinary approaches whereby integrative collaborative research transgresses traditional disciplinary boundaries by adopting or developing common language and concepts (*e.g.* see BALSIGER 2004; BRACKEN & OUGHTON 2006). In this instance, definitions and semantics matter, partly because the exclusive use of the word ‘interdisciplinary’ in the subtitle may mislead readers’ expectations of what the volume is aiming to deliver, but also because of the bold claim regarding the ‘unique’ interdisciplinary approach on the volume’s back cover. Furthermore, the main title of the book is also slightly misleading, as rather than being about landscapes across dryland, temperate, and tropical Africa, the case studies presented come mainly from just two relatively arid regions, namely parts of northeastern and southwestern Africa. It is not clear whether this restricted geographical coverage reflects the scope of the ACACIA project, because it is never made entirely clear just what the aims of the ACACIA project actually are (in fact, the index contains only one page reference for ‘ACACIA project’), and in particular, just why these regions were selected for special study.

Following an introductory chapter, the volume is organised into four parts as dictated by different disciplinary concerns: 1) ‘Arid Landscapes: Detection and Reconstruction — Perspectives from Earth Sciences and Archaeology’ (six chapters); 2) ‘Resources, Use Potential, and Basic Needs: A Methodological Framework for Landscape Archaeology’ (four chapters); 3) ‘Identity, Memory, and Power in Africa’s Arid Landscapes: Perspectives From Social and Cultural Anthropology’ (five chapters); 4) ‘Language and the Conceptualisation and Epistemics of African Arid Landscapes: Perspectives From Linguistics and Oral History’ (three chapters). Inevitably, the style of chapters is somewhat variable, with varying subsectioning and different levels of illustration and referencing, as perhaps reflect different disciplinary norms. None of the chapters have abstracts, and although most have brief introductory sections explaining the background and approaches

to their study topics, only in a few cases is their relation to the ACACIA programme clearly articulated. Within each part, there is evidence of interdisciplinary collaborations (some of the contributions in Part 1, for instance, integrate perspectives from archaeology, geomorphology, and ecology), but broader attempts at interdisciplinary collaborations between natural and social science disciplines are harder to discern.

There is no concluding chapter or commentary to link these four parts or the chapters together, so the coherence of the volume hinges around the introductory Chapter 0 provided by one of the editors (Bollig), although the odd numbering gives the impression (rightly or wrongly) that this chapter was added only as an afterthought. In this brief review, I restrict specific comments to this wide-ranging but slightly disjointed chapter, which is entitled “Visions of Landscapes: An Introduction”. The chapter traces the history of the landscape concept, particularly in German thought, where it seems to have been less stable than in the English or French tradition, yet nonetheless has influenced thinking about landscape across diverse academic disciplines and various political/ideological movements. A review of the etymology of the landscape concept, including its use in pre-Mediaeval and Mediaeval Europe to its revival in the humanities in the late 1980s, leads to the conclusion that the increasingly loose use of the concept makes it necessary to reassess its value for specific scientific debates. Scientific perspectives are addressed by outlining three trajectories of enquiry that are thought to represent the most promising avenues for future disciplinary and interdisciplinary landscape research: 1) landscape, time and memory; 2) landscapes, power, and identity; 3) landscapes after nature. The chapter draws on global case studies but tries to place emphasis on Africa; for instance, in the ‘landscapes, power, and identity’ section, reference is made to the numerous studies of colonial attempts at projecting and inscribing meaning onto unfamiliar African landscapes, while also noting the limited research into local (African) discourses on landscapes. The chapter concludes by outlining the contributions of the 18 chapters in the volume, some of which map onto the three trajectories of enquiry highlighted above.

In general, the volume’s production quality is good. The typeface and layout is attractive and the quality of English is sound overall (minor grammatical and stylistic errors are somewhat understandable given that many authors are writing in a second language). Close inspection, however, will reveal some typographical errors, as well as a lack of clarity and some inconsistencies in figure numbering and cross-referencing within and between chapters. For instance, the introductory