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Introduction

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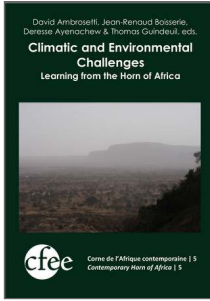
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Climatic and Environmental Challenges: Learning from the Horn of Africa

Centre français des études éthiopiennes

Introduction

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Introduction

David Ambrosetti, Jean-Renaud Boisserie and Thomas Guindeuil

- 1 In the prospect of the COP21 held in Paris in December 2015, the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (CFEE) organised a scientific conference on environmental and climatic changes in the horn of Africa, with a decisive financial support of the *Institut français* (Fonds d'Alembert), Paris. The conference was part of a larger event, called “the Road to Paris” and organised by the French Embassy to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa Regional Environment Centre and Network (HoA-REC&N), Addis Ababa University, in HoA-REC&N headquarters at Gullele Botanic Gardens, Addis Ababa, from 7 to 9 April 2015.
- 2 In this event, our first purpose was to set aside from the pressure of short-term and policy-oriented concerns raised by the international bureaucracies and bilateral donors, as to try to explore diverse, cross-disciplinary dimensions related to environmental change in the region in a wider way, wider in time and also wider in the elements observed. In a way, the Road to Paris event has also showed, with the various stakeholders and speakers it has gathered, that the issue of climate change has “solidified” automatic discourses, supporting wishful intentions and thinking, and clearly embedded in the building of professional opportunities and international careers. These discourses, indeed, are everything but close to the reality observed on the ground.
- 3 In this new, competitive, social field, priority may not be easily given to scientific exploration that is not directly policy-oriented and that requires a longer time to produce strong data than what the political and bureaucratic agendas allow. One could not state, though, that interest for science is totally absent in these arenas on climate change. But, invariably, public expectations appear to be much too high in scope and in time, compared to what intellectual curiosity and scientific processes and protocols can produce on a day-to-day basis. Improving awareness on environmental changes should start here: to give a better understanding on the complexity and multiplicity of factors involved in the relation between human evolution, societal choices and developments, and natural environments.
- 4 The French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (CFEE) in Addis Ababa was quite well equipped to initiate, with its partners, such a cross-disciplinary exploration. In its 25-year long history (not mentioning here its own “prehistory” bringing back to the permanent

presence of French archaeologists in Ethiopia from the 1950s till 1974), it has been leading and supporting research in the Horn of Africa in various topics of direct or indirect interest for the matter of environmental changes, notably:

- 5 - the “deep past” of the humankind and its environments, thanks to the paleo-anthropological mission Jean-Renaud Boisserie has been leading on the Shungura Formation (Southern Omo) since 2006, in direct collaboration with the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia;
- 6 - the medieval and modern history of Ethiopia, thanks to our long-lasting collaboration with Deresse Ayenachew and the department of history and management of cultural heritage he is leading at Debre Berhan University, also with Margaux Herman through her historical investigation on women and gender in the Ethiopian history;
- 7 - as well as more contemporary and socio-political issues, such as the administration of land and the effects of the current constitution of the cadastre on the management of the Ethiopian natural parks, studied by Mehdi Labzae, the making of the Ethiopian heritage as a tool of national conscience awareness supported by foreign experts, explored here by Thomas Guindeuil, or the intervention of international organisations and their relations with the states in the region, studied by David Ambrosetti.
- 8 The conference has also allowed expanding CFEE’s network to new researches on environmental changes with meaningful implications for the region. Wilfran Moufouma-Okia has shared with us his experience, as both a scientific and a practitioner, on the organisation of the COP21 and the way the African states engage today with the scientific debates on climate changes. Pierre Sepulchre reveals the rich lessons specialists of paleoclimatology have raised on the relations between climate change and biodiversity and the factors that may favour the conservation of biodiversity. Maxi Domke and Jürgen Pretzsch’s paper raises more policy-oriented questions about the social structures involved in the local diffusion of relevant information on environmental challenges in rural areas. Were these locally-specific social structures to be neglected in any government-driven program, results would inescapably be suboptimal, at best, or even counter-productive. Julia Blocher explores the promises and limits of the forest governance through a review of the United Nations collaborative initiative on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation in developing countries (UN-REDD). She particularly notes some weaknesses of the program, in terms of sensitivity to the local contexts and accountability to local institutions. And Joachim G. Persoon suggests that the religious cosmologies in Ethiopia, and particularly within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, may provide with useful tools as to promote an ecological ethics and subsequent behavioural changes. He offers, in so doing, an original, and quite personal, insight on these cosmologies.
- 9 At the end, the conference has brought to some general conclusions that seem important to keep in mind in every debate and scientific enterprise related to environmental and climatic change:
- 10 - The long history of life, including humankind and its societies, represents a fantastic reserve of experience and lessons for who observes carefully, and locally, the diverse combinations adopted in reaction to environmental and climatic changes. The fossil record offers a better understanding of what are mass extinctions of biodiversity (an ecological situation that human actions are probably now creating), what strategies of

adaptation were deployed successfully or not, with certain species clearly grasping better opportunities than other and thus modifying the structure of the biosphere. Another example is given by the accounts inherited from explorers in Ethiopia, who have depicted the ecological situation of the country: we clearly see that indicators of environmental crises are social constructions, deeply rooted in cultural features, specific historical contexts and personal trajectories. The very processes of indicator construction are part of the scientific analysis of the overall phenomenon.

- 11 - It is nonsense to set climate apart from environment. Climate is one component of the environmental dynamics, and current human ways of life heavily impact other components as well (e.g., biodiversity). Considering climate alone narrows the spectre of the dimensions to be considered, the current situation being much better depicted as a “global environmental crisis” than as just a “climate change.” The view on the sole climate seems to support the view that “the planet” needs to be saved, whereas a more systematic view on interdependent environments brings to the conclusion that the real issue at stake is the survival of human societies as we know them today, or, in the worst-case scenario, the interrelations between biodiversity and the survival of humankind as such.
- 12 - Nature conservation, built in direct relation with the realm of culture conservation, is an inescapable political process, mingling local competitions for resources, national impetus aimed at building territories and nations, and geopolitical affiliations framing international epistemic communities. One example is provided by the current framing of environmental issues in terms of gender policy.
- 13 - And for the states, the ability to hold a firm position on the scientific debates about climate change depends on multiple “technical” factors lying in the negotiation process itself. If indicators of environmental crises are socially determined and constructed, the same must be said about the construction of measurable objectives.
- 14 All in all, social, political, economic and professional interests have largely seized and covered the contemporary debates on the issue, so one can have doubt about the chances to see these debates trigger out deep transformations. This social world turning around the environmental issues (i.e., including climate) has added a new layer of interest and complexity one has to consider in order to look for positive reforms and social transformations for tomorrow in this regard. We hope that the texts that follow will contribute to inspire promising questioning and guidance for change.
- 15 The CFEE organisers would like to thank the partners of the conference, the French Embassy to Ethiopia, the *Institut français*, and HoA-REC&N, as well as the following colleagues who have accepted to participate to this event: Zewdu Eshete, Doris Barboni, Berhane Asfaw, Edwin Kumfa, Dong Gill-Kim, Facil Tesfaye, Tesfaye Tafesse, Fesseha Berhe, Guillaume Blanc and Peggy Frey, as well as the Climate Science Centre of Addis Ababa University, and, last but not least, the CFEE team in charge of the editorial work: Orin Gensler and Alexandre Girard-Muscagorry.
- 16 **To learn more about research engaged by the CFEE’s teams in the various fields of environmental and social sciences in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, please visit our website (<http://cfec.cnrs.fr>) and our research blog (<http://cfec.hypotheses.org>).**

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