

Book Review

Getnet Bekele.*Ploughing new ground: Food, farming and environmental change in Ethiopia.* Woodbridge: James Currey, 2017.pp.207

Kebede Alamir

**Department of History and Heritage Management, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia¹
and Department of History and Heritage Management, Debre Markos University²**

Correspondent email: menkebe2012@gmail.com

Book Review History: Received 10 April, 2026; Accepted 25 May.2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20372/ejss.v12i1.3708>

The author of this book, Getnet Bekele is an associate professor of history at Oakland University. His works expedite a better understanding of the effects of colonialism and environmental change on Africa. In his continuous efforts, Getnet tried to show how power structures are constructed and maintained in African societies and politics. *Ploughing New Ground: Food, Farming, and Environmental Change in Ethiopia* is one of his literary contributions that illustrates agricultural economy of Ethiopia in the 20th Century.

This book is focused on the agricultural history of the Lakes Region in Ethiopia and organized by eight interdependent chapters. In the first chapter, Getnet examines the transformation of the region from a predominantly pastoral community in to agricultural area during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The increased state control in the region Under Menelik II marked the transformation of communal land grazing in to privately hold agricultural plots to maximize food production and state revenue incurred from the region. The introduction of *Qalad* system as a mechanism of auditing land ownership and facilitating taxation was resisted by pastorals no to lost communal land rights. The Lake Region from 1917 to 1941, a period which nationally witnessed the institutionalization of agricultural reforms like *qalad*, the food problem in the capital and the Italian occupation thoroughly discussed in chapter two. Here, Getnet argued that institutionalizing the qalad system was aimed to expand farming plots and securing food supplies in Addis Ababa was resisted by pastoral communities. The system gradually disrupted the traditional land tenure system. Nevertheless, all the agricultural reforms introduced by the imperial regime were interrupted by the Italian occupation which worsened food shortage in the capital. In chapter three, Getnet explores

that the regions shift from pastoralism into crop production was after 1941 with tactical factors employed by the pastoralist community themselves to secure their land rights and adjust themselves for the newly introduced socio-economic and political patterns. Furthermore, the chapter examines the local community's use of new agricultural technologies in combination with their traditional practices and improvement of crop production which led to socio-economic and environmental changes in the region. In chapter four, Getnet discusses the steps like introduction of land reforms, agricultural research institution and improved farming techniques in the lake region by the imperial government in the post-World War period to agricultural productivity. Some farmers combined new technologies with traditional methods, but others resisted considering the reform a threat to their traditional way of life. The reform witnessed changes in land use and resource management. In chapter five, Getnet analyses agricultural modernizations in the Lakes Region from 1966 to 1974 as a result of introducing modern technologies such as chemical fertilizers and improved seeds. He continued his discussion on the gradual acceptance of these new technologies and their environmental, social, and political impacts, especially the erosion of peasant autonomy. In the sixth chapter, Getnet explores the growing hostility between smallholder farmers and commercial farms in the Lake Region during the late 1960s and early 1970s. He shows how the production of new cash crops and commercial agriculture intensified competition for land and resources and limited forms of cooperation. In chapter seven, the author looks at the farming changes of the region during *Derg* by centering on how the government controlled the land by taking land reforms and the feudal system farming vanished. The author indicates that in 1975 the government made land reform and redistributed to the peasants even though it did not happen everywhere and small farms were still dominant. The author also highlights the environmental damage caused by big farms and how the political and economic problems that stopped real transformation in the Lakes Region. In the eighth chapter, Getnet discusses agriculture in the post-1991 period and shows the main agricultural problems predominantly prevailed despite political change. He argues that state led policies and support for commercial farming continued to marginalize smallholder farmers in the Lake Region and worsening environmental problems such as deforestation, soil erosion, and shortage of water. The author finally concludes by calling for major reforms in land policy, resource allocation, and environmental protection.

Overall, Getnet's *Ploughing New Ground: Food, Farming and Environmental Change in Ethiopia* explores about the history of farming and the environment in the Lakes Regions of Ethiopia. This history starts from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty first century. The book looks at how food

production and environmental changes connected to land policies and what the government does. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach, the book is very helpful for people who study Ethiopia, make policies and work on development projects even though its regional focus limits broader national comparison.