

BOOK REVIEW

Joy Stephens. *In and Out of the Maasai Steppe*. Cape Town: BestRed, 2016. x + 266pp. Bibliography. Index. R295,00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-928246-12-1.

Joy Stephens' *In and Out of the Maasai Steppe* is an enjoyable memoir that carries the voices of the women of the Mama Masai beading groups to the reader. The book is based on the author's experiences of establishing and working with women's groups throughout the Maasai Steppe and the development challenges this presented. From 1999 to 2006, the author lived and worked in Tanzania and visited the various women's groups, often staying with them in their *engags* (houses), learning about their culture and observing their way of life. The author also visited the groups annually from 2007 to 2013, which allows for her prolonged relationships, observation, and reflection.

The Mama Masai beading groups were established in the Maasai Steppe, a grassland region of northern Tanzania. The region is home to migratory wildlife and Maasai communities who are economically and culturally dependent on livestock. In the period between 1984 and 2000, the area under agriculture increased fivefold, reducing the migratory pathways for wildlife, while livestock diseases, droughts, and government land use policies have hampered the livestock economy in the region (Fortunata U. Msoffe, Shem C. Kifugo, Mohammed Y. Said, Mohammed. Y., Moses O. Neselle, Paul Van Gardingen, Robin S. Reid, Joseph O. Ogutu, Mario Herero, and Jan de Leeuw, "Drivers and impacts of land-use change in the Maasai Steppe of northern Tanzania: an ecological, social and political analysis" [*Journal of Land Use Science*, 6(4), 261–81]).

In 1998, women's beading groups were established as part of the Simanjiro Rehabilitation Project, supported by the Lutheran World Federation through the Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service. The project brought Stephens and the women together, aiming to provide an economic outlet for the women through beadwork. Stephens worked with the women to develop beaded handicrafts and markets for them, in the hope of providing a sustainable source of income for the women and their families, independent of their husbands and beyond livestock herding.

Without explicit direction from the author, we are left unsure of who the audience of the book is intended to be, and we tend to assume a general rather than scholarly audience. The twenty-four chapters mostly follow a chronological timeline, alternating between memoir and storytelling of life, culture, and tradition in the Maasai Steppe. While not analyzing themes explicitly, the book describes issues of gender, development practice, environment, rural development, and rural-urban migration. Through the case of the Mama Masai women's groups, the author's observations provide insight into these women's lives, as she questions notions of change and the longevity of Maasai culture.

There is scope for the author to take the work further analytically. The book is largely descriptive and lacks a connection to contemporary literature, which leaves the text short of fully exploring the main themes of the book. This also creates issues of generalization of the observed women's groups to discussions of "the Maasai," who seem to be considered a hegemonic group. Stephens takes a rather romanticized view of the Maasai, defending them against others' critiques, but not exploring the nuances of these critiques and the social institutions they represent. While the book uses women as a lens into culture, we miss opportunities to deeply explore gender relations. For example, we are told, "Nowadays, we've even stopped female circumcision" (236) and "He [husband] only beats us when we deserve it..." (195), but no further exploration or unpacking is provided. We know from the academic literature and media that these practices (i.e., female genital cutting) are complex, and indeed, part of that complexity is their relationship with culture. While these practices may be declining, we are not provided critical insight into their links with culture and the gendered power relations through which that decline has taken place.

Stephens provides valuable descriptions of the lived experiences of both men and women within a snapshot of time. The format and tone of the book allow the content to be readily accessible to the reader, exploring cultural beliefs and religion, while painting a colorful picture not just of the women and their relationships, but also of the environment within which these protagonists live. In parallel with the stories of the women, we follow Stephens as her understanding of Tanzania, pastoralism, and Maasai culture and heritage develops. We also gain an appreciation for the investment of time, energy, and effort Stephens contributed to the women's project, and the difficulties from which development projects can suffer. The purpose of the beading groups was to provide women an income source that was independent of their husbands. Like most development projects, distance, transport, resources, literacy and numeracy barriers, and leadership resulted in the women's groups being slow to get off the ground and then wavering. However, the Mama Masai groups are still operating, and further analysis of the key elements that contributed to this longevity would make a useful case study in the development literature. Reading about what the women were able to do with their own income, which they had never had before, rounded off the story well.

In and Out of the Maasai Steppe acts as a gateway for a general audience to consider pastoralism, Maasai culture and tradition, colonialism, and development practice. Indeed, this book will be of particular relevance to those embarking on a career or opportunity in the development sector, as well as those who have worked in difficult conditions and can see their own experiences reflected in Stephens' stories and humor. The book gives space to the voices of the women and men associated with the Mama Masai groups, and the readers will find themselves connected to these characters and invested in their stories. The historical context provided will be new to many readers and may provoke their further exploration of African studies and perspectives.

Jen Bond 

Institute for Land, Water & Society

Charles Sturt University

New South Wales, Australia

jebond@csu.edu.au

doi:10.1017/asr.2021.7

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Hodgson, Dorothy L. 2009. "Becoming Indigenous in Africa." *African Studies Review* 52 (3): 1–32. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0302.

Winterbottom, Anna, Jonneke Koomen, and Gemma Burford. 2009. "Female Genital Cutting: Cultural Rights and Rites of Defiance in Northern Tanzania." *African Studies Review* 52 (1): 47–71. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0142.