

BOOK REVIEW

Knut Christian Myhre. *Returning Life: Language, Life Force and History in Kilimanjaro*. Oxford: Bergahn, 2023. xvii + 319 pp. Map. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. £27.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-80073-947-5.

In *Returning Life: Language, Life Force and History in Kilimanjaro*, Knut Christian Myhre offers a sophisticated account of the cosmological forces at work on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. The main focus of the book is dwelling and how the nebulous concept of *horu* (“life force”) permeates among humans, livestock, and crops and, in turn, imbricates the semantic, social, and material realms.

Myhre’s self-styled “language-orientated ethnography” (1) draws on seasons of fieldwork completed between 1998 and 2012 in Kilimanjaro’s Rombo District, a peripheral area in terms of the mountain, Bantu-Nilotic interface, and previous anthropological engagement. Earlier ethnographies have focused on other aspects, for example, more densely populated Chagga areas, such as Marangu and Machame.

The book’s main contribution is to render dwelling within a context of Wittgensteinian linguistic theory, where the meaning of a word “is not its reference, but the use to which it is put” (217) as well as historically, using the archival materials of missionaries and colonial officers, such as Charles Dundas, Bruno Gutmann, Otto Friedrich, Harry Johnston, Charles New, and Johannes Raum. The ethnography draws inspiration, but is distinct, from comparators such as Sally Falk Moore, Philip Setel, and Päivi Hasu in Kilimanjaro as well as the broader disciplinary elucidations of Tim Ingold, Marilyn Strathern, and David Parkin on dwelling, personhood, and divination.

The book is composed of six chapters, along with an introduction, conclusion, and bibliography. Also included is a useful glossary of Kichagga (Kiroambo dialect) terms. Chapter One explores temporal shifts in settlement patterns and the layout of homesteads; Chapter Two examines practices of attachment and detachment through bridewealth prestations; and Chapter Three investigates sex, reproduction, and naming. Relations between the living and the dead are described in Chapter Four, cursing in Chapter Five, and, illuminating the transformational character of *horu*, a rain-calling ceremony in the plains involving a group of Kamba and Chagga elders in Chapter Six. The only map included is one representing districts and former chiefdoms; further maps and plans would have helped orientate the reader.

In addition to maintaining emphasis on the circulation of *horu*, each of the chapters speaks to diverse ontological and posthuman concerns and situates

these within historical, socio-political, and economic processes, such as cultural contact, trade, missionization, (post)colonialism, and subsistence fluctuations. The result is a meticulous and engaging text which lends itself to both research and teaching.

Of the many highlights of the book, this reviewer will mention four. The first is the thick description relating to shifting mortuary routines in Rombo from the precolonial period to the present. Time has seen practices of deposition, exhumation, and rearticulation replaced by ritual movements of *mfano* (“substitute stones”), a contested syncretistic practice drawing from both traditional and Christian religious worldviews. The second is the book’s discussion of the ritual dispatch and butchery of livestock. Descriptions of nuanced differences inherent in such episodes—undertaken in a variety of contexts—add precious complication to wider disciplinary discourse on sacrifice.

The third is the attention Myhre affords to the material dimensions of cursing. The appreciation of certain properties of stones, ceramic pots, and metal items, such as hoes and cattle-bells, in the inflection and invocation of lexical force adds much to the existing literature. The fourth is the articulation of the transformational character of reproduction, digestion, cooking, and fermentation and the power of connected substances, such as semen, milk, chyme, and beer. *Horu* permeates bodies as well as materials, and the book explicates usefully some of the potencies, agencies, and biographies of the associated material culture.

Relating to dwelling, this reviewer would have liked to have seen more emphasis on the sacred potency of the environment (emergence and channeling of *horu*) and entanglements with ancestors (antecedent reproduction enabling a future). To expand on the first of these, the mountain has been somewhat overlooked at times. There is an irony here, given how the mountain (and its features) is often personified and, as such, is considered to be sentient.

The mountain is understood locally as fertile and reproductive. It provisions life not only through water, soil, and harvests but also through moral and physical protection. Here the immanent relationship between *Ruwa*, the traditional sacred, and the mountain remains present and complex. For example, the need for humans to be orientated toward the mountain in ritual acts such as facing (154), spitting (243), and pouring (229) has been evident for many generations. Simply put, this incorporation affords directionality to dwelling and configures the circulation of *horu*.

Geophagy is conspicuously absent in the analysis but, often practiced by pregnant women, it is widespread on certain parts of Kilimanjaro. With implications for attachment, such practices fit with Myhre’s frameworks of reproduction and consumption. The potency of the *isale* plant also merits further emphasis. Although the ritual centrality of the plant is made clear, for example, in its use as boundary marker (50), instrument to anoint brides (115), tool for divination (149), and ritual device for mediation with the dead (166), how this entangles the environment in dwelling is not examined.

This is not to suggest that the environment is absent. Myhre’s ethnography captures skillfully, for example, the multifaceted symbolism of the banana tree, including its elements (roots, bark, leaves, flowers, and fruit) and reproduction

through parthenogenesis. The tree's replacement and multiplicative expansion—temporal and topographical—resonate meaningfully with aspects of Chagga social complexity and rootedness.

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[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.15](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.15)