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BOOK REVIEW

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An Ethnography of Hunger:

Politics, Subsistence, and the Unpredictable Grace of the Sun

Kristin D. Phillips (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019)

In the last few decades, there has been an explosion of scholarly works that challenge assumptions about development and how it relates with democratic practices. In Africa, Tanzania provides a strong example of the intersections between international development practices and local ideas of what constitutes development—particularly in practices of sustainable development. *An Ethnography of Hunger* offers a clearer understanding of the relationships between hunger, food production, power, politics and subsistence in rural Tanzania, and provides new insights as anthropologists further engage with development and democratic practices. Across six chapters, Phillips shows how Tanzanians recall what it meant to live under the country's socialist development regime (Ujamaa) in the 1970s, explores the distinction between notions of subsistence and development, and provokes debate, in a

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good way, about environmental sustainability, its interconnectedness with developmental practices, and how both shape rural life and livelihood.

Phillips first details the particular history of Tanzania, showing how the country shaped (and continues to shape) its own development agenda (within the context of an international development milieu) in its attempt to make development accessible to all citizens. Central to the reshaping of development agenda in Tanzania, Phillips argues convincingly, is the important place of subsistence, sustainability and their interrelatedness to citizenship, hunger and belonging. Phillips points out that scholarship about hunger in Africa often rehearses a single story that paints Africa as the victim and Western donors as the savior. This single story ignores local agency and how people engage with questions of development practices in their own way. Thus, Phillips cautions that in examining the story of hunger through an ethnographic lens, we must pay attention to the concepts of "food, power, and sociality with which hunger is in relation and opposition" (x), while resisting any attempt to erase the agency of communities by simply repeating Western narratives of hunger.

Any analysis that constructs a narrative of victimhood and savior ignores the larger paradigm shift in international development practices in the 1990s, when many African states embraced neoliberal economics. The rise of neoliberal economic and political practices further complicated the already complex development journey embarked upon by the state of Tanzania—a state that had embraced a form of socialistic development named Ujamaa after independence—because, as Phillips argues, neoliberalism and its forms of development create enormous challenges for food gathering, community engagement, environmental sustainability, and the attainment of a full form of citizenship.

An Ethnography of Hunger offers a fascinating account of how politics interacts and interrelates with sustainability, food security and the complicated meaning of hunger in Tanzania. For example, Phillips shows how rural Singidans constantly debate the contradictions inherent in how the state frames development through official narratives. (Singida is a region in Tanzania, home to over a million people where three of the six districts that made up the region are populated by Urimi ethnic group). However, they also see that the burden of development has shifted from the state to development practitioners—international NGOS and local NGOs—and ultimately that the cost and labor of producing development now falls squarely on the shoulders of individual citizens. As Phillips says: "These participatory politics distributed rights and obligations according to people's spatial relation to existing development infrastructures, the market value of their labor, and their fulfillment of responsibilities in return for rights" (20). All of these are appurtenances of neoliberal economic regimes that have swept across the continent, with Tanzania being no exception.

The complexity of identity, belonging and claim-making produces a form of politics engraved in environmental and economic precarity, which results in what Phillips calls subsistence citizenship. This is a fascinating and refreshing argument that shifts our attention away from the notion of development as a practice that turns communities into sites of experimentation, and instead pays attention to how hunger as a construct interacts with power, food, and sociality in an agrarian community. Thus, the idea of food and its production processes can shape people's perceptions of the

meanings and notions of citizenship in rural communities. Hunger and its uses have political undertones because "hunger is a mnemonic structuring time, marking memory, and periodizing the past." Hunger and famine in Tanzania have their own history ingrained in "a colonial technology of conquest" (56) that reorganized structures of power and produced new meanings of political membership, authority, development, entitlement, and obligation. Colonialism provoked changes in the meaning of political authority that shifted emphasis from charisma to a bureaucratized, depersonalized, and extractive authority laced with violence and mystified by orders and technologies from elsewhere—in this case the Germans and the British. Phillips illuminates how the Singidans responded to this shift in meaning and in the ethics of service to community "through an idiom of the sun's powerful but unpredictable grace—that governs the interconnection of the cosmological order, the natural world, and human action (48-49). The grace of the sun was not just seen as a natural occurrence that brings light during the day, but rather provides for the community's food and subsistence needs.

More importantly, the way the grace of the sun is integrated into food as a commodity that humans depend on for sustenance and wellbeing makes the idea of subsistence citizenship even more compelling. Citizenship, as Phillips demonstrates, is not just a claim made in relation to the state but also a claim from nature and its affordances. Phillips use of citizenship follows in the footsteps of many scholars who have variously invoked the idiom of citizenship as a way to contest the state's monopoly and its prerogatives. Phillips' notions of subsistence citizenship, rights, and their relationship to power and politics, show how a form of division between those who decide how and when development happens—in this instance the state—and those who bear the costs and labor of development (rural citizens—some more than the others) (147) gets inserted into power and politics. Subsistence citizenship is also marked by the character and condition of government agents' own authority and practice: political opportunism in the face of disaster, the high stakes of rural dependency on food aid, and the invisibility of rural governance and rural suffering that permits coercion without repercussions and, at times, "neglect without shame" (180). The book is ethnographically rich and presents us with new ways of thinking about development practices and environmental politics broadly defined. More importantly, An *Ethnography of Hunger* makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the relationship between power, politics and the environment. The book, for many years to come, will provoke intellectual debate about the place of politics and the environment in Tanzania, Africa, and beyond.

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