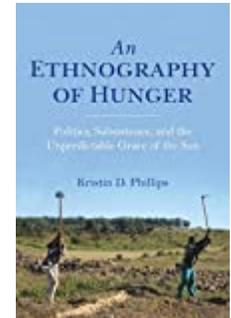


Kristin D. Phillips. *An Ethnography of Hunger: Politics, Subsistence, and the Unpredictable Grace of the Sun.* Framing the Global Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 207 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-03836-4.



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In *An Ethnography of Hunger*, anthropologist Kristin D. Phillips demonstrates that hunger in Tanzania is related to numerous political, social, and environmental forces. Phillips gives a detailed, qualitative study of how an impoverished community navigates scarcity that originates in environmental conditions (brought about by drought) and is complicated by political relationships. Phillips offers a valuable theoretical framework for understanding famine in the concept of “subsistence citizenship,” which reveals “how the everyday project of subsistence shapes rural people’s engagement with the state, with contemporary democratic structures, and processes, and with each other” (p. xii). Rather than focus on the salacious elements of famine that fill news reports and appeals for humanitarian donations, Phillips studies how a small community of two thousand people responded to drought in 2005-6, crop failure, the paltry and slow government aid, the sudden absence of international aid, and the internal crisis of the most impoverished needing help when everyone else was suffering. In rural Singida, the

people understand their circumstances in historical terms and make their appeals for aid through local relationships and in deeper obligatory concepts of citizenship. Phillips’s deep, multiyear study of this small hamlet in the Singida region from 2004 to 2015, contributes important theoretical and historical evidence for how chronic, even anticipated, hunger and open inequality shape community relationships with the state.

After the introduction, the book is broken into three subsections with two chapters each, and closes with a brief conclusion. In the first section, chapter 1 provides helpful ethnographic details. Phillips helps the reader to settle into the space by introducing the Langilanga village, the Nyaturu ethnic group, and some elements of their language, and notes that Nyaturu have converted to various sects of Christianity and Islam, with some durable pre-Abrahamic practices. The reader meets NyaConstantino, whose widowhood and dependency on her sons and daughters-in-law introduce the agricultural and social cycles that underpin life in rural Singida. Like their neighbors, NyaCon-

stantino and her family's lives are tied directly to forms of labor and social obligation. Between planting seasons, rural men also contribute to "building the nation," which demands physical labor to advance local and state-mandated projects (p. 43). With late and failed rains, the reader learns in chapter 2, this "unpredictable grace of the sun" is one way that Nyaturu understand their precarious circumstances and "*obligated* Nyaturu to their colonial masters" whom the sun had favored (pp. 48, 49). Phillips builds a solid historical chapter by studying earlier ethnographic research and archival sources, which includes the "Prayer to the Sun" (p. 51). The prayer acknowledges that the "sun's power must be seen and fed. Well-being must be lifted up. Grace must be reciprocated" (p. 52). Village life depends on obligatory relationships, even if those relationships are uneven as is the case between farmers and the sun or citizen and state.

Section 2 begins with chapter 3, where Phillips takes the reader deep into village life and the complexities of social entanglements, object meanings, and the value placed on food. In an already theory-rich book, Phillips takes the reader on a tour-de-force discussion of several key works that scholars rely on to analyze food insecurity and meaning.[1] She notes that food is "central to grasping the significance of its uneven distribution, its meaning as it travels from hand to hand, its ability to be contested and diverted in unanticipated ways, and the experience of its dearth at certain times for certain people" (p. 84). Food is commodity, social good, and resource; for instance, "grains are stored out of sight in adult women's sleeping quarters. Women are charged with budgeting grain consumption through the year ... to discharge social obligations through feeding and brewing," with an eye to seed saving for the next agricultural cycle (p. 91). Only once the reader understands these multiple meanings behind food does Phillips take the reader into chapter 4 and the realities of rural hunger. This is nuanced work and artfully developed because the idea of hunger is

both a physiological experience that has dire consequences and a significant social crisis that fatigues familial and community support systems. Moreover, hunger exposes the limitations of state assistance, which is slow and inadequate. Hunger gives the Nyaturu power also to claim their citizenship and the state's responsibility to care for its people if the state is the "father" and therefore a provider for the family of Tanzania (p. 110).

The political meanings behind hunger are further developed by Phillips in chapter 5, where the question of development work and hunger intersect. At the beginning of the new millennium, Tanzania pushed to achieve multiple UN Millennium Development Goals, which Phillips observed first hand as villagers and government officials struggled with what this meant in a food-insecure region. As government officials demanded more "development contributions" from Singidans already "pushed to the threshold of subsistence during this period, the terms of the political contract between rural Singidans and their government ... were set askew" (p. 131). The crisis between community and state exacerbated an already acute agricultural crisis as hungry Nyaturu strained under demands for labor and monetary contributions. "Subsistence citizenship" creates spaces for new political discourses, particularly around concepts of development and contributions from the community. Through these negotiations, chapter 6 introduces the 2010 newly elected local member of Parliament, Tundu Lissu, who overturned decades of one-party dominance in the community and effectively rescinded the forced labor and extractive taxation practices that exhausted farmers physically and economically. These changes opened up further dialogue about corruption within the state, also couched in terms of hunger and eating.

Phillips concludes by reminding the reader that the "banality of hunger and the everyday project of meeting basic needs" is a complex puzzle that cannot be oversimplified by blaming those

who are hungry (p. 179). To that end, “subsistence citizenship” offers new modalities to understand rural practice, governmental inefficiencies, and the notion that “the rightful share is not an equal share” (p. 180).

An Ethnography of Hunger offers new insights and perspectives about rural hunger, agricultural practice, community relationships, and political entanglements that are suggestive for a future where climate change will create more frequent cycles of dearth. This is truly a humane work, where the author’s experience is visible and she is self-aware of her limitations. It is the rare book on hunger in Africa that offers something new, but Phillips has achieved that through her meticulous attention to the details of her interlocutors’ lives and thoughtful theoretical analysis to understand the extant literature while building her own theory.

Note

[1]. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Alexander de Waal, *Famine That Kills: Darfur, Sudan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Brad Weiss, *The Making and Unmaking of the Haya Lived World: Consumption, Commoditization, and Everyday Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Stephen Devereux, “Sen’s Entitlement Approach: Critiques and Counter-critiques,” *Oxford Development Studies* 29, no. 3 (2010): 245-63.

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