

# BOOK REVIEW

**Kristin D. Phillips. *An Ethnography of Hunger: Politics, Subsistence, and the Unpredictable Grace of the Sun*.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. 207 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$28.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-253-03840-1.

Conducting long-term ethnographic fieldwork in rural Africa often forces the researcher to face the stark reality of hunger. In this groundbreaking book, *An Ethnography of Hunger: Politics, Subsistence, and the Unpredictable Grace of the Sun*, Kristin Phillips vividly captures the everyday, crushing, social and physiological experience of hunger among subsistence farmers in the Singida district of central Tanzania and highlights the ways hunger impacts their political participation. Phillips's nuanced analysis of the lived experience of hunger, its embeddedness in social relationships, and its impact on political subjectivity are truly original and set this book apart from other anthropological studies of hunger, subsistence farming, or political subjectivity. These other studies have tended to focus either on the microlevel of subsistence strategies or on the macrolevel of national and international policies. Phillips, on the other hand, connects the cyclical and seasonal nature of hunger in Singida with the circulation of food through kin and community networks via food sharing, market relations, and patronage. She then demonstrates the ways patronage interacts with local, regional, and national politics to produce particular forms of political subjectivity among rural Tanzanians.

Phillips asks how generations of food insecurity have shaped political participation in rural Tanzania. She answers this question by weaving together observations from ethnographic research conducted over a decade, oral history, and archival sources to trace the history of famine and food politics in rural Singida district. Invoking the Nyaturu cultural idiom of "the sun's unpredictable grace," she explains the effects of taxation, labor mandates, and food aid (and its political manipulation) on citizens' political engagement. The book provides a unique viewpoint to understand contemporary Tanzanian politics as it traces the emergence of Tundu Lissu, the country's most controversial opposition politician, in a relatively obscure pro-ruling party constituency in central Tanzania.

The book consists of an introduction, conclusion, and six chapters divided into three sections. Part I examines the daily lived experience of


hunger in the local cultural, social, and historical context of village life, subsistence, and politics in Singida. Part II portrays the everyday sociality centered around food, reciprocity and distribution networks for food, and the ways rural Tanzanians navigate the difficult terrain of chronic hunger and periodic famine. Part III tackles the ways that patronage has hijacked development to serve political elites' own ends and then examines ordinary Singidans' use of human rights discourses to oppose patronage and reclaim their rights to food.

This lively ethnography combines sophisticated theoretical analysis with vivid depictions of life in rural Tanzania. In particular, "Chapter 3: We Shall Meet at the Pot of Ugali" exemplifies the best of ethnographic writing as it illuminates the many social lives, moral meanings, and economic realities of food and its social and biological productive capacity. In this chapter, Phillips examines "the life cycle of grain in Singida" as it flows through the region shifting its shape between gift and commodity while it enacts and reinforces social relationships (84). Phillips' deft ethnographic writing makes an African understanding of food as a form of sociality come alive. Phillips writes, "As people produce, eat, gift, exchange, and ritually engage with food, they affirm negotiate, reconstitute, and contest their place in the world and the social categories that mark them and others" (85). Her analysis upends Amartya Sen's theory of famine as a problem of food distribution, where people's legal or moral entitlements to food are insufficient for subsistence (81). She integrates Arjun Appadurai's concept of a commodity as "a particular phase in the life of a thing" (82) with Sen's analysis and pushes this novel theoretical framework further by demonstrating that food can "hold many contiguous meanings" simultaneously (84). Thus, food bypasses the fixed paths of distribution assumed in most economic analyses. This chapter relates the social vibrancy and day-to-day challenges of life in rural Africa and humanizes poverty as a systemic condition rather than a personal, individual, or familial failing.

In this book, Phillips revisits "subsistence," a widely-studied concept central to agrarian studies, economics, anthropology, and popular ideas about Africa. She shows how subsistence—and the discourses and policies surrounding it—is an unparalleled opportunity to wield power, enforce dependencies, and implement large-scale state schemes. Her chief innovation here is in explaining how subsistence has been and continues to be embedded in local systems of reciprocity and the hierarchical relationships of patronage. She theorizes "rights" and "patronage" as two discourses through which rural Tanzanians make claims. From this analysis, Phillips develops the concept of "subsistence citizenship," defined as the creative energy required by both citizens and state to prompt, resist, or redirect food aid. She shows that "subsistence citizenship" consists of tacking back and forth between making claims based on rights or on patronage. Importantly, the book shows that rural Tanzanians' use of patronage-based claims should not be understood as conservatism (a charge often thrown at rural African populations),

but rather it should be understood as rural people's wise cynicism about the potential of the state to address economic rights for its citizens.

*An Ethnography of Hunger* is among the best books I have read in Africanist anthropology, so it is no surprise that it won the 2020 Society for Economic Anthropology Book Prize and was a finalist for the 2019 African Studies Association Book Award (formerly known as the Herskovits Prize). The book should be widely read by anthropologists, development practitioners, economists studying agrarian systems, and anyone interested in understanding the links between subsistence farming, food insecurity, international development, political subjectivity, and the state.

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**For more reading on this subject, see:**

Hodgson, Dorothy L. 2017. "Africa from the Margins." *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 37–49. doi:[10.1017/asr.2017.47](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.47).

Phillips, Kristin D. 2009. "Hunger, Healing, and Citizenship in Central Tanzania." *African Studies Review* 52 (1): 23–45. doi:[10.1353/arw.0.0135](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0135).