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Crossing the Threshold: What is a home without windows or doors?

On a quiet Saturday evening on the first day of June of 2013, my husband Hewson and I visited our friends Bhoke, a development worker for the Anglican Diocese of Mara Region, and her husband Marwa, a local politician, at their home on the outskirts of Musoma town in north-western Tanzania. At Bhoke's insistence Hewson and I relaxed in the sitting room drinking tea with Marwa and his elderly uncle, while Bhoke, in the company of her mother-in-law and a few close neighbors, prepared a dinner of ugali (a thick porridge made from maize flour), chicken, and stewed goat meat in the courtyard outside. Godwin, their youngest son, then 7-years-old, wandered in and out of the house. He alternated between displays of bashfulness and excitement over the presence of visitors, at one moment playfully peeking out from behind the curtain hanging over the doorway, the next plopping down beside me on the sofa and resting his head on my arm, then running outside and soon back in again. Inside, we had been discussing Swahili proverbs to pass the time. As Marwa's young son Godwin drifted in once again, his father switched from proverbs to riddles. This allowed an opening for Godwin to participate and cheerfully exposed a certain lack of sophistication on the part of their guests. Marwa presented us with a riddle: He said, "Nyumba yangu haina madarisha au milango," which means, "My house has no windows or doors." Hewson and I were tasked with guessing what type of house this might depict—who could possibly live in such a house? Godwin giggled and leaned forward. He seemed to know the answer--as perhaps many a Tanzanian schoolchild might. Yet when his father prodded him, he looked down and said he forgot, shyly suppressing more giggles. Hewson and I were stumped: *What house has no windows and no doors?*

Certainly not this one, with its front door open save for a curtain, its exposed courtyard and the welcoming space it allowed for neighbors, extended family and guests. Finally, Marwa interceded. “Yai,” he said. “An egg! An egg is a house that has no windows, and it has no doors.”

Just two weeks after learning of this riddle, I was unexpectedly reminded of it by an encounter with my friend Wambura when I ran into him at a stakeholder’s meeting at the Serengeti District government office in Mugumu. Wambura had traveled there to represent his home village of Robanda, one of five villages in a Wildlife Management Area on the north-western border of Serengeti National Park. I was pleasantly surprised to find him in attendance at the meeting as an “influential citizen,” as he was later described in the meeting minutes, serving in the stead of Robanda’s Village Chairman. Wambura’s village, along with the other four villages in the Wildlife Management Area, had been the subject of a feasibility study for a proposed tourism college and cultural center, the idea being that if such initiatives proved feasible, they might help village residents to secure jobs or at the very least acquire the skills necessary to become desirable candidates to employers at nearby campsites and lodges. The study was conducted by the small Tanzanian development organization for which I volunteered part-time. We were ostensibly at the meeting that day to share the results of this feasibility study and to discuss the next steps of the project. In reality, there were very few results to report as it quickly became obvious that “feasibility” would depend less on technical matters than on funding, political will, and settling discord over who the project beneficiaries should actually be. Going into the meeting, these issues remained unresolved and very much at stake.

Following a presentation concerning the importance of improving relationships through stakeholder communication, the meeting chair raised the thorny question of where a proposed tourism college

should be located. At this, Wambura stood up from his seat at the conference room table. A looming figure with a booming yet characteristically nasal voice, he declared forcefully, “The college must be built in Robanda village, not in Mugumu and not in another village.” Further, he maintained, “Robanda *deserves* to receive the college because we have surrendered so much of our land to conservation.” Holding up his right hand and cupping his fingers into the shape of an oval, he went on, “Robanda is like an egg. We are an egg that is surrounded on all sides. See?” He picked up a map of the Wildlife Management Area given to him that morning, and pointed to the egg-shaped village, enveloped on nearly all sides by protected areas. Echoing the sentiments of a number of other Robanda residents I had spoken with over the course of the previous few months, Wambura argued that because Robanda is in such close proximity to wildlife—surrounded by private game reserves to its east and west and Serengeti National Park to the South, it would be an ideal place to host a college concerned with wildlife tourism. Through the figure of the egg, Wambura thus simultaneously decried, and sought to make the most of, the village’s forced enclosure and cultivated remoteness. Capitalizing on the village’s marginalization allowed him to claim a paradoxical sort of belonging in a landscape considered by many outsiders as a home principally for migratory wildlife.

As Wambura noted, officials had surrendered a tremendous amount of village land to the wildlife management area in recent years, amounting to a full 72% of the village. The term, “surrendered,” is the English-language term tellingly used by conservation practitioners and government officials alike to describe land that has been allocated to Wildlife Management Areas in Tanzania, belying troubling contradictions of ownership and authority with regard to land that technically remains registered to villages but is put under multiple and overlapping designations. Land allocated to conservation and tourism investment implies restrictions on livelihoods through zoning and other

means of regulation. In this case, restrictions included a comprehensive hunting ban and grazing limits. There were also indirect livelihood impacts, including increased water scarcity associated not only with drought impacts exacerbated by restrictions on mobility but also with water distribution mechanisms which favored nearby investors. Villagers also regularly complain of an influx of elephants and other large mammals which frequently trample crops and sometimes even injure or kill village residents, causing many villagers to refrain from farming altogether.¹ Reliable wage labor is also difficult to come by. Despite agreements with investors that residents would “benefit” from employment in nearby campsites and lodges, in practice employment opportunities proved highly limited, temporary, and often at low or irregular wages. More secure and skilled employment often went to South African or Maasai workers brought in from Arusha or further afield. Such issues point to tangible battles over land and livelihoods as well as more intangible battles over belonging.

Wambura’s reference to the village-as-egg as both a problematic space with a history and a potentially useful one in the present sits uncomfortably next to the Swahili riddle with which this paper began. What is a house with no windows and no doors? The riddle would seem to point to a paradox of being at home, if not a paradox of being itself—pointing to the value of an integrated ideal as well as its necessary impossibility—that is, the need for windows and doors. Yet Wambura’s use of the figure of the egg points to how his village has been shaped over time largely by outside forces, constricting not only the movement and life possibilities of Ikoma and neighboring peoples but also precluding the possibility of drawing on a sense of continuity or belonging. While Ikoma origin stories point to a history of migration and forced displacement, Ikoma and neighboring peoples such as the Nata, are tied to the land largely through ancestral and clan spirits which, as Jan

¹ An unpublished 2006 household survey conducted by a Japanese research team called Ecommunity-Tanzania (or EcoTan) from Waseda University found that 33 of 38 households (that is 87% of village households) had fields that were extensively damaged by elephants in the previous cultivating season.

Shetler (2010) points out, mediate “the dangerous but fertile boundary between wilderness and culture that makes habitation possible” (111). While this boundary is not static in space or time, it is tangibly tied to the land through the maintenance of relationships with ancestors. For example, Shetler notes that:

Western Serengeti peoples buried their dead in the homestead and abandoned the graves when they left the settlement. . . . For at least two to three generations, however people were expected to remember the gravesites of their ancestors (*kusengera*, to beseech), return to the sites (which might now be in the wilderness), clean the graves, and offer gifts there at least once a year on the anniversary of their death. . . . If the family no longer used an ancestor’s name or forgot his or her grave site, the spirit passed into the more dangerous realm of ‘loose’ spirits, without community moorings. When problems occurred in the homestead, such as illness or death, the head of the homestead consulted a diviner, who often diagnosed the misfortune as the result of forgetting the ancestors (105).

She goes on to point out that “elders themselves were not clear whether *erisambwa* meant the spirit of the ancestor or the spirit of the place, as the two meanings have become synonymous” (106).

Rituals conducted at ancestral sites thus make manifest both the movement of Ikoma and neighboring peoples and the need to continually reconstitute ties to land and ancestors in the name of social reproduction. Thus land loss and restrictions on mobility not only raise questions about Ikoma belonging amidst wildlife within a wider ecology (that is species belonging) and land rights but also raise questions about being at home within a network of wider relations which include ancestors as well as clan totems. Forgetting the ancestors implies a loss of belonging as a people.

As Gaston Bachelard (1958) has maintained, “Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.” (1958,7). Drawing on Karl Jaspers, Jules Michelet, and the poetry

of Rainer Maria Rilke, among others, Bachelard's discusses "the house" as an image of being, drawing on images of birds' nests, trees, round huts, and shell-dwelling crustaceans and mollusks, he extends his discussion of the house by putting forth roundness as the very image of being at home, and by extension, as the image of "being" itself. Roundness as "being" illustrates a form of permanence for Bachelard (240-241), "life endowing itself with form" (113), he says, even in the face of contrary forces. Extending Bachelard's symbolic logic, what better crystallizes such a beginning and instantiation of life than a perfectly round and fully enclosed egg? The egg in its roundness might in this way be considered an archetypical house, representing, as houses do for Bachelard, "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (6), and further, "a 'psychic state,' . . . bespeak[ing] intimacy" (72). Yet the house in actuality, rather than as symbol, is never fully enclosed, as Bachelard also reminds us. He argues that one needs a house to "shelter daydreaming" (6), yet daydreams emerge through engagement with a wider world.

Attempts to actualize integration imply engagement and change, yet this presupposes a kind of freedom that is not necessarily readily available to Wambura and his village or to the Ikoma people at large. Freedom hinges on the ability to claim belonging—to claim a home. Yet the round form that Robanda village has taken is the result not of a process of nourishing integration but an imposition from all sides, an artificial enclosure of space, a whittling down, accompanied by attempts at cultural domestication, such as attempting to alter villager "attitudes" towards conservation, as instantiated, for example, in a resource management zone plan for the Wildlife Management Area. In this respect, the shape of Robanda is certainly not an instantiation of being but more like what Gaston Gordillo has recently referred to as a "spatial strangulation" by which the area is not only encroached upon but is also rendered into an abstraction through concerted disregard and a premium placed on its cultivated remoteness, such that overlapping land designations are *made*

possible, with villages often altogether missing from tourist and ecological maps of the area. Ecologists depict the area not with village names or other social landmarks but instead coated in arrows pointing northeast to signify the migration of wildebeests and zebra in the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem as they move towards Mara in the dry season. Looking again at the map, the pink area between the game reserves can be neatly filled in by the eye, with the egg of what remains of Robanda, now seemingly matter-out-of-place. That the picture fills in smoothly with so little effort, speaks not only to the history of land encroachment in the area but also points towards a seemingly inevitable future. Evoking something akin to Henri Bergson's discussion of the grace of curved lines, possible "new direction[s]" here seem "indicated in the preceding one[s];" in short, the future seems foretold (Bergson 11-12). Yet for many Robanda residents the future may also seem plugged up, evoking Bergson's contrasting image of sorrow as opposed to grace (Bergson 11).

It would seem that the future is prefigured gracefully only for those who have a different project for the area, which would see the village removed from the space in the name of conservation or investment. According to many villagers, a multi-billionaire investor with a 350,000-acre land concession (which includes the two large game reserves and overlapping registered village lands) has a 50-year vision plan which would remove Robanda from the area completely. For Ikoma people, the predictability of such an outline could only be said to be ominously graceful, signaling a kind of future death of the Ikoma home place. *Such an egg with no windows and no doors thus would seem to ironically point to the very impossibility of social reproduction.* Yet Mama Pendo, an elderly woman who kindly invited me to stay in her home--even waking up sometimes in the middle of the night to escort me to the latrine to keep "the child of Obama" as she called me, safe from any wild animals that might be lurking outside in the night—told me of her own 50-year vision : " to make it as expensive as possible for them to move us" she says. She was in attendance "at a District government meeting in

2005 or 2006 when the investor told of their 50-year vision” and “so I gave my own 50-year plan,” she said. “From that time on, we started to construct iron sheet roofs, a new government office, and schools so that it would be too expensive, so that it would not be easy to move us. If they move this village, then within 30 years our sons will still know the area and they will trace back to hunt, but this time to really participate in large-scale poaching. And it will be a much bigger problem. Nowadays many in the village have come not to like animals.” Yet as she speaks a cat which she allows inside her house affectionately rubs against her heels and she doesn’t seem to mind.

Wambura also has own visions for the future, that is, his own visions of home, but they are not concentrated strictly around the figure of the village and they are not always explicit. I had become accustomed to meeting with Wambura at his homestead in Robanda regularly, where we would often discuss village history and politics in his sitting room or outside in the courtyard, while his wife Esther or teenage daughter Flora served us, depending on the time of day, tea, fresh cow’s milk and chapati (a pan-fried flat bread) or ugali and stew. His homestead provided a concentrated site of engagement with outsiders such as myself that allowed room for play with politics and with insider/outsider distinctions. Wambura chooses to live with and adorn his home in foreign objects. The walls of the sitting room and his photo albums exhibited cherished engagements with, it seemed, each and every *mzungu* (white person or other foreigner) who had come to the village as well as with Maasai people who many Ikoma still regard as longstanding enemies, given a history of violent cattle raiding between the two peoples. Yet Wambura proudly displays small gifts from such visitors prominently in his home. His sitting room walls also display certificates of various designations and accomplishments, photographs pulled from tourist magazines of snakes, gazelles and other choice wildlife of the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem, and his outdated calendar of famous world leaders (this calendar was a popular item in many village homes, along with its strange double,

the calendar of famous world dictators). Foreignness and political importance seemed one of a piece for Wambura. At the stakeholders meeting over the tourism college that day Wambura had immediately recognized the value of the map which showed Robanda and had seized one of only 5 printed copies. When he returned home, he kept it for his own use, rather than passing it along to village government officials. He had a penchant for maps and documents, which he kept with great care in his home. While we talked in his sitting room, Wambura would sometimes pull from the back room his carefully kept datebooks which documented his own attendance at important village meetings over the years and also triggered for him stories of key environmental interventions and events. At other times he went out of his way to show me carefully kept copies of meeting minutes, project descriptions, or relevant letters. Such conversations provided a space to tell stories of his own life and his contributions to conservation and development in the area, yet they were often in an idiom of village politics and thus always seemed to press forward into the future.

For Mama Pendo and for Wambura, the future is not plugged up. There are other lines of possibility. Such lines are made possible, not through a strict enclosure of house or home but by crossing thresholds of personal and political. To invoke Bachelard yet again, “Man is half-open being. . . . [and] the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open.” (222). Perhaps in the figure of the door or the threshold to the home, we may move beyond the egg either as a form of perfect integration or here as a seemingly complete strangulation. Fittingly, despite a complex history of movement and relocation, Robanda village is considered the home place of the Ikoma people. It was named after the clusters of huts (or vibanda) found in the area. There are eight Ikoma clans, which in Swahili are known as milango, meaning “doors.” Even today doors to homes of ritual significance must remain open, yet entry is highly restricted. The riddle of the egg and the door remains in tension, as some doors may be opened wider than others.