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Amy Stambach

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin, USA

amy.stambach@wisc.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-0693-3966

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by Amy Stambach



About the Author

Amy Stambach is Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Visiting Professor of Comparative and International Teacher Education (CITE) at Cape Peninsula University of Technology in South Africa. Her most recent work appears in *HAU: The Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *the Oxford Bibliographies in African Studies* and with Kevin Wamalwa, *Signs & Society*.

Kilimanjaro Below the Glaciers

Amy Stambach

There are few experiences as magnificent as seeing a massive snowcapped mountain at the African equator. From an airplane window, the 19,341-foot-high Kilimanjaro hovers around the wing tip, and its volcanic basin that once housed six but now only two glaciers appears empty in its center, seemingly bottomless crater. Standing at the base of the mountain, staring up, the massif seems to rise like a breached whale from the plain. Kilimanjaro, many say, is revered not only because it is a mountain where Iruwa, God, hovers overhead, but because the dormant volcano channels tons of water in its underground springs through a pipeline of rivers and streams.

It would be difficult to design a better hydro-delivery system than the waterworks of Kilimanjaro. Fog and rain clouds gather in the montane region and saturate the ground, keeping trees rooted in the forest and preventing soil erosion. Trade winds travel from the Indian Ocean, carrying moisture toward Kilimanjaro, where they form clouds and create thunderstorms. Heavy rains fall between March and May, and snowfall blankets the summit. In recent years, southeastern trade winds have warmed, resulting in less precipitation and hotter temperatures that turn glaciers directly from ice to vapor. Finally, by November, monsoons from the northeast once again bring light precipitation.

The world's tallest equatorial mountain has captured people's attention for centuries. Egyptian-Roman astronomer Claudius Ptolemy wrote circa A.D. 150 about a "great snow mountain" in the interior of Africa, and before him, the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, dated around A.D. 90, described a trade route running from India to mountainous inland East Africa. In the early 1800s, a local chief named Renguo sent some of his men to collect snow from Kibo, the local name for the mountaintop. Nearly a century later, German explorer Hans Meyer staked his flag at the summit, signaling himself to be the first person to climb the mountain. Of course, the Kilimanjaro Chagga man who showed him the way was there with, if not before, him.

It is understandable that climbing Kilimanjaro is exhilarating for so many people. People like to conquer iconic places that are dangerous but rarely deadly. Simply search “climb Kilimanjaro,” and you will find a yarn of stories about achievement and boding. Look at the photos, and you can see how the mountain’s height and vantage points inspire awe and reflection. Yes, Kilimanjaro is an exceptional mountain, even if it is not the world’s tallest. Base to summit, Mauna Kea on the island of Hawaii is the highest at approximately 33,480 feet, and Mount Everest located partly in China and partly in Nepal is technically the highest above sea level. But Kilimanjaro is the only freestanding mountain that reasonably fit hikers can somewhat easily climb, and it is the only mountain in the world that rises from the equator to snow, enabling a hiker to pass through summer to winter and back again in just a little under one week.

Certainly Kilimanjaro is not a typical mountain to summit, not in the usual sense of mountaineering. A mountaineer’s mountain is out in the middle of nowhere. Kilimanjaro is thickly settled. A mountaineer’s mountain requires setting up ropes and belay stations. Tourists can easily walk Kilimanjaro with little equipment. A mountaineer’s mountain does not change. Its profile does not disappear. Yet four of Kilimanjaro’s six equatorial glaciers have vanished in the past dozen years, changing its pattern and contours. Still, seeing Kilimanjaro as a mountain to conquer and to “check off” as having visited is understandable. With only seven or eight deaths on average annually, many from malaria and not the climb at all, the rate of success is almost 50 percent. The challenge is real and exhilarating.

But there is a different way to see Kilimanjaro, another way to experience it.

From the perspectives of those who live on the mountain, Kilimanjaro is always there, more sensed than seen, and more felt than studied. And because it’s there, every day, in and out, the mountain is rarely discussed or remarked upon. Yes, it’s the backdrop of what goes on in daily life, and people living there say they love to see it, but as a fixture, the mountain is not an opportunity for self-challenge. There are more important things to do than climbing it. Like finding work, tending to one’s farm, taking care of children or grandchildren. Like giving birth to one’s first-born child or marrying the man who helped conceive her. Or like making sure your old grandfather is receiving the medicines he should.

If you’re lucky, you, like the tourists, will drive up and down the mountain and have health insurance in case of a crash, but most likely not, and so you’ll pray to Iruwa before you walk or borrow a lift to town to sell your coffee to buy meat and sundries. Yet one thing you will have that you’ll always be grateful for is the beautiful setting in which you live, and the freshwater that runs year-round a few steps from your door.

What many locals benefit from, but few tourists see, is the massive amount of water that flows from Kilimanjaro’s springs to rivers. The Kikafu River starts far up in the

montane zone, about six thousand feet above sea level, then joins the Pangani River south of Moshi to power the national electricity grid. To call the Kikafu River impressive is too simple. It percolates through rocks and grasses then forms a visible channel. It tumbles over massive boulders as it descends through a volcanic valley that today is still partly covered with vines and trees. The Weruweru and Makoa Rivers join the Kikafu River at the bottom of the mountain and as a trio make up the Kikafu River Basin.

From the rivers' headwaters, hand-dug waterways, called *mifongo*, irrigate people's farms and are stopped up and redirected to different households on different days. Sometimes mid-sized channels are so carefully dug that they appear to flow parallel to the horizon or even uphill. One theory holds that the original excavators followed the lines of army ants to figure out how best to carve the furrows. Many were dug more than a hundred years ago, and each is named after the male elder who surveyed it. For instance, Usseri waterway is named after the Usseri lineage elder.¹



Figure 1. Banana-stalk trough pouring from one furrow into another. Photo by author.

In western Kilimanjaro, tourist vans drive right over one of the oldest of these waterways and past the huge water tank managed by a septuagenarian with more than twenty grandchildren. His name is Michael Shumi. The tank holds water that flows through a pipe connected to a spring high above where people live. His house stands on

a slope behind a hedge at the end of a grassy plot where his wife's cattle graze. In the middle of this plot is a narrow trench no more than one shoe-width wide. It flows into his backyard, through the fence. You can smell the fresh water rippling. Michael Shumi is a bard, a poet. For him, life on the mountain is best seen not only in how people organize themselves in relation to water but in the sensory experiences people associate with it. "Where death was a blessing" is about a brother who inherits his dead brother's farm and wife but the levirate brother dies before marrying. Both brothers' graves are located in a cool shaded area near where water flows across and then down a banana-stalk trough (Fig. 1). Water, for Shumi, is a fluid metaphor for life and death, humanity and cruelty, for capturing the mixed human sentiments that variously nurture and drown relationships with family and friends.

But to say that water is imbued with life is not to say that it takes on a life of its own. So much of the naturalist and conservation research today talks about water as itself an agent, as having "its own" history and a "natural life course." Instead, aqua-tropes reveal that people give meaning to water. People imbue water with signs and associations of prosperity and greed. They use it to connect and disconnect people from one another, to flood lowlands and dry out other areas.

Uphill from Michael Shumi's house is a lightly used footpath, circling around his shed. Turn farther uphill and you will see a waterway disappearing underground, flowing to a neighbor's farm. Michael Shumi has managed his *mifongo* all his life. For Shumi, everywhere you turn, every furrow you pass, waterways and footpaths channel stories of power and marginality.

Warumi, for instance, is the name of a place where a nineteenth-century Arab trader named Rumi lived. He bought slaves and ivory. A secondary school stands there now. But some of the oldest people in the village remind their neighbors that Rumi took and stored the slaves at a nearby place, called Place of Crying, where water trickles from the rocks. Another place, called *hatari*, means danger. Water spirits stole children there, but these days people say these children drowned. A tourist van will pass right by the location, though the bridge is a bit downstream. The same big boulders served then as slippery stepping stones across fast waters.

In recent years, however, many of these fast-flowing waters have gone from open source to being closed off with steel gates. Communal furrows have been lined with cement, and "division channels" redirect the water. In 2005, an international development agency introduced a project to educate up-mountain water managers. The program schooled traditional managers in conservation and leadership, ironic given that these farmers had managed waters sustainably for centuries. Yet climate change and illegal logging had contributed to less water in some rivers and at some sources. Rau

River, for instance, used to flow year round, but not anymore. One agency official said that those farmers who joined the water development project were already seeing the benefits. He also noted that it was a problem that some people chose not to be a part of the program. Some farmers moved and planned to farm in places where the water did not go. By the end of the year, their crops were dry. “We tried to warn them,” the official remarked, as though the agency knew where drought would be engineered.

Water directed to commercial farms on the lowland plains threatened to drain and dry ancestral lands.

Local groups came forward to manage the development project. Groups including the Kilimanjaro Lion’s Club and local women’s church auxiliaries—organized across extended families—knew that without independent control of water, local communities would cease to thrive. They raised funds for new water pipelines, including one to assist downstream villagers. Another project turned the savannah into a habitable municipality, with in-house plumbing. Few tourists will see the work of these local civic groups, but anyone traveling from the airport to the mountain who stops for a cup of coffee or tea will drink water channeled through their projects. From the village, water flows into the Kikafu River and, eventually, into the Pangani River Basin and to the Indian Ocean. Like the Colorado River in the U.S. and the Yellow River in China, the government dammed the Pangani River to generate electricity, financed by grants from Scandinavian countries.

The story of water in the lowlands is one of pollution and disease. Amoebic dysentery is endemic, and cholera threatens to break out. Malarial mosquitoes breed in still waters and, with rising overall annual temperatures, they have found a home farther and farther up the mountain.

The irrigation channels on the mountain tell a story of cooperation and continuity, of sharing responsibility for managing water, and of distributing it consensually.

But the story of water on the lowlands is different. The lowland story is about failing to disaggregate corporate and economic sustainability (which necessarily requires growth) from the sustainability of the environment and people’s lives. Even people who know better look away from this lowland fact. But if we can open our eyes to the cycle of rainfall and see how it is connected to people’s lives and to a commercial economy that favors investment and fuels industries that drain water and reduce rainfall, we may see that the current rhetoric of climate adaptation is not about human adaptation at all but about people being led through an itinerary that drives us past the most important sites: people.

Tragically for everyone, new tourist images of Kilimanjaro depict a largely glacier-less and less heavily snow covered mountain than photos from even twenty years ago depict; and tourist materials these days tend to stress that glaciers have been receding



Figure 2. “Water is Life” monument in Moshi, Kilimanjaro Region, Tanzania. Photo by author.

for more than a hundred years rather than pointing to their rapid recent vanishing caused by human-induced global warming. These new images lull many visitors into thinking that human-induced climate destruction and weather changes are minimal and that people can adapt. “The mountain will always stand 19,000 feet high and people will

always walk it with or without glaciers and snow,” the tourist industry messages seem to go. Yes, the mountain will always be there but that is not my point. My point is that water conveys power in its timeless constant passing and that water is passing out of the hands of farmers living on Kilimanjaro.

Water is wealth, water is life, reads a public monument in Moshi, the Kilimanjaro Region capital (Fig. 2). A brutalist statue of a soldier holding a rifle underscores that the state backs the right to access water. Access for whom is an important question that seldom comes up in tourism, but should. Water and tourism have a way of augmenting one another. Tourists stay in air-conditioned hotels, fueled by the Pangani power plant. Tourists buy bottled water branded with Kilimanjaro on the label, though this is not the water drunk by farmers. Tourists drink “sustainably sourced” coffee from Tanzania, but how many have driven right past local farmers’ trees and not stopped to ask, “sustainable for whom?” For farmers? For export industries? For consumers’ pocketbooks? Looking at life below Kilimanjaro’s glaciers juxtaposes disturbing disparities between those who have played golf or had pizza delivered to the summit (which has happened) and those living on the mountain who provide milk, bananas, coffee, and meat to climbers who never thank them. Yet appreciating the farmers living on the mountain also reveals the fluidity of connections that link people from near and distant places.



Figure 3. View of Kilimanjaro’s open volcanic crater, at Uhuru Peak. Photo courtesy of Harshil Gudka, Unsplash public domain.

Whereas tourists, who come to experience Kilimanjaro, leave to go home, Tanzanians who see the mountain everyday know better than anyone else that people and water may drain away, and the timeless sound of water passing may be all of the *mifongo* that remains.

Life on Kilimanjaro today reminds me not at all of the Kilimanjaro under which Ernest Hemingway hunted and wrote. Hemingway, while killing lions and kudu in Tanzania, mocked the grandfathers of these farmers as missionary boys and effeminate Africans. That was Hemingway. More resilient than a White Hunter to Africa are the farmers and families living on Kilimanjaro today who are fighters for sustainability and water. Not sustainability of only one kind. Not economic, or social, or cultural, or environmental, but all four.

Notes

¹ With the exception of public places and people, proper names are pseudonyms.