

REVIEW

Daria Trentini, *At Ansha's: Life in the Spirit Mosque of a Healer in Mozambique* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 246 pp., ISBN: 9781978806696

At Ansha's is a world that speaks for itself, a place-based ethnography that travels in and out of binaries of extension – spatial and idiomatic antonyms that converge in the making of history and the human. Trentini locates her main protagonist, Ansha, as a migrant from Mueda, Cabo Delgado in Nampula, and offers a rich descriptive landscape that tells many stories; notably, Ansha's passage from being under the control of *majini* (spirits) to becoming a healer – a transition from illness to healing. The ethnography, through Ansha's memory, is situated at the conjuncture of Mozambique's socialist era, FRELIMO and RENAMO's confrontation, and the anti-colonial war. It recognises the aftermath of dispossession and state violence as an open wound.

Trentini adopts 'theory as illumination',¹ making of Ansha's body an archival repository that extends life, death and theory, as Ansha narrates how memory becomes social. She is a body of knowledge that is not bound to theoretical paradigms, and Trentini doesn't overwhelm her nor us with alternative explanations about her life-worlds. Trentini moves our attention in understanding historical and eventful lives through what she terms 'border-events',² attributing and allocating to Ansha the agency to situate her practice in movements, and in shifting socio-political landscapes within resource-scarce state healthcare. Illumination, as an intentional approach, following a feminist induced praxis, elevates the border-event prior to any theoretical interpretation. Just like ghosts, Ansha is disobedient to borders, transgressing normality due to her remarkable mastery at speaking in tongues. Working with Muslim, Christian, Makonde, Makhuwa and Amaka spirits could be equated to a linguistic fluidity and mobility that cannot not be fixed in time nor space.

1 Kirin Narayan cited in D. Trentini, *At Ansha's: Life in the Spirit Mosque of a Healer in Mozambique* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 19.

2 Ibid., 8.

Trained as part of the Association of Traditional Doctors of Mozambique (AMETRAMO), she displays what it means to be loyal, not only to spirits but to care, as one's life vocation. This loyalty both to spirits and to the patients who knock on her door anchors her to live with a sense of responsibility as she breathes life back into being for those who have shaken by loss and dispossession.

Never abandoned by her anti-colonial revolutionary past, Ansha emerges as the antithesis of obedience. *At Ansha's* is also the space Ansha built for herself in the midst of rejection for being an outsider – an outsider to Nampula, the Muslim communities, the healers' community and, sometimes, to herself. *At Ansha's* goes beyond the predicament of failing hospitals, and medical malpractice and misdiagnosis in post-war Mozambique. The ethnography elevates moments of radical care between Ansha and her husband Tiago, spells of (mis)fortune and of healing performances. Ansha's mosque is ambulant in its metaphysical dimensions. Constructed as a hut, and known for what it can do, the mosque offers responses to what biomedicine cannot see: ailments of the heart, suffering from absence, and uprootedness from one's people. It captures Ansha's Islamic praxis rooted in welcoming religious pluralism and radical difference as a fundamental Sufi practice. Ansha brings forward the relevance of anticolonial struggle before the sixteen years civil war as a material colonial legacy. By leaning on silence as ideology, Trentini offers accounts of how spirits are activated through violence, although they are initially introduced as dormant. Many of her interlocutors reported that 'it was not until the war that spirits came out through dreams and illness.'³

What is also remarkable is Trentini's concept of an 'ontology of stuckedness'⁴ as a trope to explain human's capacity to lean towards metaphysical directions. In transcending moments in which the impossibility of becoming is a common trope *of* and *for* being, impotent social landscapes become generative for transformation. *At Ansha's* highlights the processes of a healer-becoming, and in her lifeworld, apprenticeship is primarily acquired through divinatory powers rather than from conventional master disciple relationships.

As an attentive listener and ethnographer, Trentini's (inner-and outer) body is the vehicle through which we are invited to witness Ansha's led ceremonies – moments in which patients build frontiers of intimacy with the spirits that transform them. In a realm of rationality and disjunctures, *At Ansha's* synthesises how spirits can scream for attention, interrupting processes of social belonging, and that bodies are not empty of history. The ethnography is an embrace of spirits' centrality to memory-work, to silenced pasts and disturbed presents: as legitimate inhibitors of space and part of the narratives of grief and forgetting.

The labour of attending to uncertainty is not taken as a burden. Ansha is ever changing, stretching her practices, despite their lack of efficiency at times, to encompass prayers, herbal medicine and conversing with the seas she can no longer see,

3 Ibid., 33.

4 Ibid., 32.

never accepting defeat. Inevitably, Mozambique joins the discourses brought forward by 'modern' nation-states that regard spirit possession as part of traditional discourses on superstitions and cultural backwardness. While the book illustrates, empirically, issues surrounding traditional healers' political marginalisation, it profoundly brings into view moments of humanisation, or how effectively patients turn to Ansha for a digestible language for their pain or 'what is happening in the body'.⁵

Many lifetimes and ethnographies are needed to encapsulate lifeworlds that are heavily mediated by dreams and ancestors. Although shared with us, that of Ansha, remains hers – inviting us to an everlasting curiosity, or an 'unfinished becoming'⁶ of a mastery of secrets and silence. Both the key and sub themes addressed in this book are relevant beyond those whose interest lie in medical anthropology, Islam in the Indian Ocean, and the anthropology of ritual. It tells the story of Mozambique as it is lived in so-called peripheries, the ones which make up majority realities. At the heart of existential anthropology, perhaps the questions Trentini invites us to think about are: what can bodies do and undo? How does a body recognise the extension of other worlds in metaphysical realms? What vocabularies emerge when language does not extend to the rescue of medical malpractice and inner turmoils? What comes to view when we tell the story of Mozambique through the eyes, body, and life of a woman and her spirits?

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5 Ibid., 122.

6 Ibid., 19.