

The Edible Gardens of Ethiopia: An Ethnographic Journey Into Beauty and Hunger. By Valentina Peveri. 2020. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson. 264 pp.

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The Edible Gardens of Ethiopia: An Ethnographic Journey in to Beauty and Hunger is an ode to the ensete plant, which the writer calls the hero of her work. The book is about the ensete plant *Ensete ventricosum* (Ethiopian banana or false banana), and its interactions with the Haddiya community, an ethnic group in Central–Southern Ethiopia. The book allows the reader to delve into plant sociality: ensete is described as being a collaborator in crafting the social, cultural, and traditional living of the Haddiya community. Valentina Peveri recounts a sudden meeting with a majestic deer in the year 2018, which sharpened her ethnographic gaze and reinforced her belief in a multispecies perspective to life. This informs her writing, layered as it is with empathy and understanding of the Haddiya community, the ensete plant, and the geopolitical undercurrents that have shaped their unique relationship (p. 3).

Peveri marvels at the global and regional ignorance and invisibility surrounding this magnificent plant, despite it being cultivated for ten thousand years not only outside Ethiopia but also within it (p. 4). She justifies her choice of the plant as an ethnographic subject as ‘there is no other life form that translates what is local in all of its physical nuances better than a plant does’ (p. 5). Her multispecies approach rejects the anthropocentric ignorance of all that is not deemed to be of ‘utility’ to humans. The writer questions the human insensitivity to plants by asking if we have “ever stopped to consider if plants feel too?” (p. 6).

The book is organized into three parts framed by a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue introduces ensete and establishes the ethnographic voice. “Politics of the plants” situates the ensete gardens in a larger political and ecological context with a focus on the dimensions of aesthetics. “Vegetal love” recounts everyday life in the ensete garden. “Appetite and Aversion” shows the changing dynamics in food, culture and identity. The epilogue closes with a focus on how gardens can lead to a sustainable future. The book caters to a wide range of audiences. It specifically lends itself to ethnographers, or those trying to understand the intersection of food and culture while offering great insights to those interested in plant studies.

The writer documents her stay, observations and learnings with respect to Haddiya community, and her vulnerabilities as an ethnographer. She was in despair as she was not addressed by her name for a long time in accordance with the local custom. She was informed later that she will be called ‘Fitaame’, meaning flowers, making her feel more welcome. Eating dishes made of ensete helped her in bonding with the Haddiya community. A village elder once mentioned that she belonged to them as she had eaten their food.

While ensete is a staple food in southern Ethiopia, it is used for landscaping, marking boundaries, and a symbol of beauty in northern Ethiopia. This points to a rift in the way the plant is perceived in the country itself. The book documents



the changing fortunes of the plant from veneration to a time of alienation among its people (Chapters 1, 3, and 6). Peveri's observations on how the Ethiopian elite have chosen to distance themselves from the strong smelling ensete points to the 'othering' of ensete in the search for a more acceptable and presentable national staple like tef. According to the writer, this desire to have a more globally acceptable cuisine deliberately ignores the non-grain food like ensete consumed by Haddiya community for thousands of years (Chapter 2). Peveri also observes an urban rural divide where ensete is often presented as 'poorman's food'. Observing the selective 'othering' of food made of ensete, the writer adds that not all foods are of equal in terms of 'Ethiopian-ness'. Ensete is the 'the unloved other' despite its resilience and utility (Chapter 3).

Peveri learns during field work that African farmers are far more utilitarian in their approach to flowers. Their aesthetics is about domesticating the landscape, and they do so through utilitarian, goal-oriented practices. The landscape must be edible to exist. Remarking on the aesthetics of utilitarianism, she notes that some plants are beautiful even without flowering—the glory of an ensete garden resides in the many shades of its green foliage (Chapters 1–2). She observes that the vegetation across the country was luxuriant and the food was available as needed unlike the global portrayal of Ethiopian farming after the harsh famines in 1974 and 1984. Colors are significant among the Haddiya community, such as red being more special. The herbal medicines are

generally red and the redder, the more effective it is to overcome daily health issues like influenza or sore throat. The new Haddiya mother is given healing (white) foods like butter, yogurt, and cheese (Chapter 1).

Peveri recommends practice-oriented cultural approaches for environmental conservation. Her study of ensete shows how the ensete garden is a microspace for women to interact while maintaining and harvesting it (Chapter 1). The gardens of ensete, or 'that place behind the homes' (p. 7), are heterotopic spaces—a world within worlds—which have a life of its own and follow its own norms of existence (Boyer 2008).

Valentina Peveri's book can be read as a study of affective ecologies as she positions the ensete garden as being a place of emotion, pride, playful interaction among women, maybe even a secret hangout for lovers, and a primary source of meeting basic needs for the women (Chapter 1). While mentioning that every Haddiya home has a *duobbo* or a backyard garden dominated by the ensete, the writer presents a call to 'return to the gardens'. Peveri hopes the book will inspire a socio-political analysis of people and the plants they live with (p. 8).

References Cited

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