Erin K. Nourse. 2025. *Water into Bones: Birth Rituals, Ancestors, and Religious Pluralism in Northern Madagascar*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 288 pp.

In *Water into Bones: Birth Rituals, Ancestors, and Religious Pluralism in Northern Madagascar,* Erin Nourse carefully describes how Malagasy mothers agentively enact ritual to forge ancestral and religious affinities for their infant children. Nourse's ethnography goes far beyond the classic birth rituals that most Malgachisants are familiar with, such as ceremonies associated with naming, hair cutting, and circumcision to ritualized hot/cold water bathing practices for new mothers. Instead, this holistic account reaches past the particularities of those rituals to also include, for example, the role of gift-giving in midwife-mother relations, ancestral and religious food taboos maintained during pregnancy, and the general challenges facing young mothers in the polyethnic and economically challenged port city of Antsiranana.

As in all good ethnography, readers of *Water into Bones* are provided with a sense of everyday life in the place where the researcher conducted participant-observation. Nourse outlines the contradictory nature of the city, from its stunning natural beauty and fascinating religious and ethnic pluralism to the crime, poverty, and youth violence that haunts its streets. That the city has been relatively understudied within the ethnography of Madagascar only adds to the value of this self-critical and reflexive ethnography.

Water Into Bones convincingly argues that childbirth, childrearing, and their associated rituals provide a unique opportunity for mothers to, firstly, reimagine and re-remember their ancestors and their religious commitments and, secondly, to initiate claims of belonging for their progeny. Nourse's argument about the practical function of birth rituals is well argued and supported by ethnographic insights and detailed interviews with several key interlocutors, including those who refuse ancestral ritual practice. In addition, *Water into Bones* illustrates the gendered burden that befalls Malagasy mothers who are often held responsible for upholding the ritual commitments associated with their child's father's ancestral lineage.

As Nourse rightly observes, existing literature on childbearing, birthing, and mothering in Madagascar has often prioritized myth and symbolism over the lived, material realities of Malagasy women. This ethnography builds upon earlier studies of young Malagasy women's experiences of motherhood, including work by Lesley Sharp, Bodo Ravololomanga, and Karen Middleton. Ultimately *Water into Bones* offers valuable insights that illuminate opportunities for future areas of research on motherhood and health in Madagascar. One wonders, for example, how these rituals and mothering decisions would play out in rural regions where pregnant women confronting their "spear battle"—as childbirth is referred to—are more likely to lack disposable income and access to modern medical facilities.

The most compelling and unique insights from the book emerge in Chapters Three and Four. Here the ethnography is at its strongest, particularly when Nourse brings her research in conversation with existent scholarship on mortuary rituals in Madagascar. Most of the literature on ritualized claims to ancestral and religious belonging have focused on entombment and burial placement, which anthropologist Maurice Bloch has referred to as the "acquiring of bones" (p. 142). Nourse gently critiques the preferential treatment that this scholarship has received over birth rituals. As Nourse recounts, the slight paternal bias in Malagasy kinship and burial practices has influenced how scholars generally conceptualize the Malagasy life course:

as a journey from mother's womb to father's tomb. That much of the research focus on tombs and burial practices was produced by male scholars of Madagascar only adds to her point and highlights the dearth of scholarship on women-initiated childrearing rituals and their role in Malagasy notions of belonging.

Birth rituals, oriented as they are towards the future, provide an avenue through which the next generation will relate to those who came before. In that sense Nourse thus adds to the formidable body of anthropological scholarship on the role that ancestors play in the everyday lives of Malagasy speakers. *Water Into Bones* will be of interest to scholars of African studies researching and teaching at the intersection of childbirth and ritual, and the ethnography is a fantastic addition to the scholarship on gender and religion in Madagascar.

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