CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

IN THE SHADE OF HAILSTONES: Life-Forming Realities among the Luo of Kano, Kenya

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In the humid morning after the weeding period, we met Landa to collect information on what was called "digging medicines" (*chwoyo yath*) in the rice field—a practice conducted by the Luo rice farmers of Kano in western Kenya to "avert hailstones" (*geng'o pee*).[1] The light, scraggy, but incessant rains slicing the area at the time had made weeding an easy affair. But, at the same time, the weather had proven unkind to the glum road and paths leading to Landa's homestead. The ritual practice of arresting hailstones is associated with forming life. *Geng'o*, in ordinary Luo terms, denotes warding off or preventing the occurrence of something. In the context of hailstones, it designates "arresting" or "averting" to impute a form of capture: in this case, the capture of hailstones (*pee*), realized by material forces or potencies generated by the medicine buried in the soil. We had come to know Landa from rice farmers, who relied on his expertise to protect their crops. On that day, we went to seek answers about a ritual practice that had piqued our interest: Why had the rice farmers conceived of the practice of digging traditional charms to arrest hailstones as something that forms life?

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 39, Issue 3, pp. 323–347, ISSN 0886-7356, online ISSN 1548-1360. Cultural Anthropology *is the journal of the Society of Cultural Anthropology, a section of the American Anthropological Association.* Cultural Anthropology *journal content published since 2014 is freely available to download, save, reproduce, and transmit for noncommercial, scholarly, and educational purposes under the Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0 license. Reproduction and transmission of journal content for the above purposes should credit the author and original source. DOI: 10.14506/ca39.3.01*

This article draws on our encounters with Landa (a traditional medicine man who specializes in arresting hailstones in the rice fields) and other informants (rice farmers) to explore the ritual practice of arresting hailstones associated with life-forming among smallholder Luo rice farmers in Kano, Kisumu, in Kenya. The ritual is undertaken to cleanse newborn twins and their parents, in addition to purifying other human bodily impurities that can cause hailstones. Life formation in this context concerns the way the material essence of rice and hailstones propagate life. We draw on the experiences of our informants to make a connection between people's lives and the potency released by the hailstone medicine, human bodies, and rice crops to form and shape life. Their experiences account for the way that digging medicine releases a material force that deactivates hailstones while also forming life.

We further examine how the spiritual forces that bear potency and share it with humans, rice crops, and hailstones connect through that potency to accomplish life formation. We then compare the performance of that force with the perceivable actions of spirits to shape those interconnections (cf. Descola 1996; 2013). The cultural practice undergirding hailstone arresting stems from the action of ritual provision and the practice of making or breaking life. As Malcolm Ruel (1997, 7) observes among the Kuria people, "ritual creates and manages the actual circumstances of biological reproduction and physical life." This calls us to assess the perceivable reciprocal creativity of nonhumans to foster collaboration with people, for instance (Chao 2018; 2019). In our study, the interactions occur at the interface of four actors: rice crops, humans, spirits, and hailstones, providing a conflation of forces that influence life processes such as birth, growth, and development, as well as natural phenomena such as hailstones. This resonates with a distributed, more-than-bios kind of animacy, one that transcends bios-geos distinctions (Povinelli 2016).

Understanding the mechanism of forming life requires evaluating the political motivations and sometimes the hidden juridical actions of the cosmic agents that emerge in the course of life. Communication between humans and nonhumans and their unique actions bring forth a co-negotiation among those multiple agents that shape vital life processes (Pitrou 2017a). This co-negotiation reveals the level and juridical dimensions of agency that lie within the agent's force. From this, we can also decipher how cosmo-juridical estimations and instigations of human and nonhuman agents prove important in determining who counts as a person.

At birth and death, much as in agricultural rituals, the motive(s) of an agent involved in perpetuating life emerge(s) as it makes demands for offerings

and sacrifices from humans (Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo 1989). We are interested in the way in which digging medicines to arrest hailstones illustrates cosmic authority and justice-seeking by different agents, that is, humans, rice, and hailstones, as well as in how they apply and exert their materiality to form life. We introduce the concept of *cosmo-juridical agency* to explain this phenomenon. Jane Bennett (2010) and Cymene Howe (2019) provide a basis for the concept of cosmo-juridical agency, which we associate with the Luo connection between hailstone medicines and rituals for newly born twins undertaken to protect and propagate both rice and human life. In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett (2010, 34) explores the material agency or affectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things. She pursues this idea through a theory of distributed agency that views humans, animals, artifacts, technologies, and elemental forces as sharing power and operating in dissonant conjunction with each other. Howe (2019) explores the materiality of wind and power, arguing that these elements have unique lifeworlds that make them act as creatures. Their lifeworld affords them a force that can shape the potential of inanimate things.

In cosmo-juridical agency, we argue that spiritual agents integrating rice, humans, and hailstones engage in sometimes not-so-ordered co-negotiations to attain a balance for their lives. This act is contemplative of the individual force of each element to exert their authority. Bennett (2010, 98) argues that "various materialities do not exercise exactly the same kind of agency, but neither is it easy to arrange them into a hierarchy." Therefore, we are not so much concerned about which materiality proves more powerful in comparison to another as we are about the reliability of each agent to participate equally in the formation of life. This article contributes to the existing scholarship on new materialisms (Bennett 2010; Howe 2019; Livingston 2019; Povinelli 2016) by revealing the juridical domains and estimations of diverse material forms that exist across nonlife entities that become active actors in life.

LIFE-FORMING: On the Nexus of Human Lives, Rituals, Plants, and Natural Phenomena

The connection between human life and natural phenomena has received substantial commentary. For instance, it has been argued that weather phenomena can shape human affairs (Sanders 2008). Other studies document lives connected with celestial bodies (Mbiti 1969); beliefs that animals can cause storms (Leck 2017); the aspect of spirituality in life- and thing-making (Smith, Murrey, and Leck 2017; Smith 2020); as well as human acts of ritual prestation to solicit for

rain (Myhre 2018; 2019). Joost Fontein (2015) explored the politics of rainmaking, showing how human actions may interfere with the spaces and places that can cause rain. This foregrounds the configuration of hailstone arresting to materially perpetuate or inhibit life.

Rituals have formed a significant topic of inquiry in anthropology since the inception of the discipline (Chao 2019). Ethnographies have examined what rituals do (Geissler and Prince 2010; Ruel 1997; Leck 2017); their consequence in human lives (Smith 2020); or the diversification and negotiation achieved by rituals (Chao 2019). This work demonstrates how ritual performances likely influence the occurrence of natural phenomena. Rather than recasting what rituals do (Ruel 1965, 1997; Geissler and Prince 2010), we here focus on the specific ways in which ritual gives form to life through life potency, or what Knut Christian Myhre (2018; 2019) calls "life force" or "body power," and also institute terms of determining a given position for one as a human being, for instance.

There have been previous studies in the African context on the effect of natural phenomena on lives, which focused on rituals' functional and religio-cultural purposes (Akong'a 1987; Fontein 2015; Krige and Krige 1943; Sanders 2008). The Kriges' work among the Lovedu people of South Africa dealt with how a ritual regulated the rains required for agriculture, living, and settlement. Joshua Akong'a (1987) comparatively analyzed the rainmaking rituals among the Abanyore and Akamba—both Bantu-speaking peoples of Kenya. Outlining the limitation of the Kriges' functional focus, Todd Sanders (2008, 7) instead explored the gendered and sexualized conceptualizations of rains and rainmaking among the Ihunza of Tanzania. He theorized about ideas of embodiment, gender, and sexuality that lay beyond rituals as determinants of rains. In the Ihunza context, there existed both male and female rains, which collaborated to form good rains: male rains appeared first to pave the way for female rains in cooperation—leading to reliable rainfall.

Contemporary phenomenological studies emphasize people's responses to natural phenomena through different cultural lenses and frames (Leck 2017); cultural frameworks (Heyd 2010). Cultural lenses and frames are built on the idea of "culture as a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems" (Swidler 1986, 273). Meteorological problems such as floods make people connect their lives with things such as clouds, rivers, and mountains. Moreover, their dependency on animals, plants, and weather patterns makes them attribute human properties to things, expressing the "thing forces" that shape human lives, life cycles, and the human condition (Bennett 2010). The fact that things and phenomena

shape life does not reveal the specific negotiations that occur across people and those things. Until we understand the embodied forces of humans and things, and their mechanisms of exerting them, we may not know how those force(s) get to work. Hayley Leck (2017) has shown that for the Zulu and Xhosa of South Africa, a spirit-embodied serpent causes destructive storms, tornadoes, and landslides. To capture this co-negotiation, we situate our work in studies that focus on ritual cosmologies and vegetal perspectives.

Ruel (1997) observes that ritual orders and secures life processes—including the growth of people in society, of crops, and of domestic animals. In his earlier work, he showed the various categories of rituals, including restorative (Ruel 1965, 298). Paul Wenzel Geissler and Ruth Jane Prince (2010, 104) observe that the correct performance of rites shape "the growth of human life and sociality"; that ritual has the potential to "create and sustain life and to kill." This means that the manner of conducting rituals can lead to various life outcomes. Sophie Chao (2019) has made a similar observation among the Merauke of West Papua, where ritual failure was said to cause devastating consequences in human life. For his part, Myhre (2018; 2019) has shown how the pouring of sacrificial substances and blood forms part of the transfers and transformations of life force, or *horu*, between generations among the Horombo of Tanzania to afford dwelling and life.

Vegetal ethnography has revealed deep-seated, perceptible interconnections between plants and persons. In Amazonia and Melanesia, in particular, plants are perceived as persons, as well as species with intentions and emotions (Angé 2018; Chao 2018). For Chao (2018, 623), the agentive self of palm oil, for instance, reveals itself in conceptualizations of personhood, which is a product of a "multispecies rather than specific human trait." She shows that plants "share common descent, are endowed with sentient minds that are expressed through their actions or behavior—for instance, the way they move, reproduce, grow, and sustain themselves."

Hannah Pitt (2017) argues that different plants bear different modes of agency, which render them capable of making inferences about people. She compares plants and humans as sharing such features as communication occurring through the movement of chemicals. This connection reveals a disposition that views "all lives as interdependent," adding that "no being lives discrete from others" (Pitt 2017, 102). In her later work, Pitt (2021, 470) explores the metaphor of roots to "convey belonging—human connections to place." She likens the diverse movement and growth of plant roots to the multiple kinds of connections exhibited by humans. If plants are connected and deeply related to human beings,

this means that they can share lives, affection, emotions through their common histories (Pitt 2021). The supposition holds true, therefore, that any untoward act against one can affect the other. This has seen individuals institute rituals such as rainmaking as necessary to ameliorate the situation (Chao 2019; Myhre 2019). For the Luo rice farmers of Kano, the ritual of digging hailstone medicines is held to protect rice crops and, by extension, to propagate human life. Across their region, the other Luo people undertake different ritual practices to preserve life (Mboya 1938 [1997]).

It is critical to analyze the dynamism of rituals, which makes them conditional practices by anxious humans and demanding, distressed nonhuman agents, hence creating a connection between rituals, crops, human lives, and natural phenomena. The same condition enables the evaluation of the outcomes caused by rituals for humans and nonhuman actors involved in the ritual. Chao (2019) has shown that proper and orderly ritual performance positively reflects on the outcome of the natural phenomenon, and we show that the reciprocal appeasement of the natural phenomenon assuages its reaction and saves life.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT AND METHODS

The Luo of Kano reckon kinship first through their common eponym *No*, whom they regard as their clan's progenitor. Therefore, they regard themselves as *Jo-Kano*—meaning people of Kano. They socially organize themselves through clans and subclans, much like other Luo people of Kenya (Ogot 1967; 2009) such as the Siaya (Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo 1989; Geissler and Prince 2010; Nyambedha 2004; Onyango-Ouma 2006), the Central Nyanza (Parkin 1978), or the Southern Nyanza (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976; Schmidt 2022; Shipton 1989, 2009). They are consanguineal and have a patrilocal system of residence. A majority of the households are polygynous; hence they evoke the name of their grandmother (*jokamiyo*) to form their matrifocal unit. The matrifocal units are then instituted as representatives of "houses" (*dhoudi*, singular, *dhoot*).

Within the *Jo-Kano* cosmology, rice crop bears an "equal materiality" (Bennett 2010, 10) with humans, in which it exerts its force to life. This materiality is sometimes activated by the practice of "digging charms" (*chwoyo yath*) when they are applied to protect the crops as well as human life, especially those who come into contact with this materiality. People show their connection with the rice by revealing the terms of being, existence, and survival, which become perceivably visible in the engagement and the reading of different life processes.

The Ahero and West Kano Irrigation Schemes, which form part of the Kano area, are home to some 1,727 households. The people derive their livelihood from agropastoralism—rice farming, as well as subsistence and small-scale livestock rearing. Rice farming is undertaken for commercial and subsistence purposes. At stake is the sustenance of rice cultivation which, like other farming and settlement activities, are affected by the consequences of climate change such as floods, droughts, hail, and the like. The irrigation schemes are also heavily affected by flash floods during rainy season (Opande 2017).

We collected data for this article during twelve months as part of an ethnography on the life and land configurations of the Luo people. The ethnographic methods used in data gathering included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations. The first author lived in the study area for most of the study period and took part in everyday practices around rice cultivation, including visiting homes, rice farms, and rice mills. During the visits, he observed the practices and engaged the hosts in informal conversations around rice cultivation. As a native speaker of the local language (Dholuo), he did not experience any difficulties interacting with the study population. Yet although he spoke the local language, the ethnographic context was new to him and in essence structured him as an outsider who hailed from a non–rice cultivating area.

Data regarding rice planting and the significance of the hailstone-arresting ritual were mainly collected through participant observation and informal conversations. Formal in-depth interviews were conducted with ten villagers and twenty rice farmers on the cosmology of life and its connection with hailstones; as well as the kinds of disruptions brought about by the birth of twins and other forms of impurity exerted by such persons and things. These informants were knowledgeable about the processes of farming, birth, and natural phenomena. We also conducted interviews with an expert in hailstones whom we call the hailstone arrester; he provided data on the rituals of digging charms in the rice field and also for twins. He was selected because the informants considered his charms more potent and effective than those of another practitioner from the nearby Sidho village. Discussions were also held with two agricultural extension officers on the people's practice of *chwoyo yath*. All interviews were undertaken in the local language, recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Analysis of the data took the form of organizing them around common themes and identifying vignettes significant to these themes.

HAILSTONE RITUAL AND LIFE-FORMING IN THE LUO OF KANO RICE ECOLOGY

Across the Kano plains, there are not many experts for arresting hailstones, as not everybody with knowledge of charms undertakes the specialized practice whose application requires adeptness. Like divination or other healing practices that rely on exegetical endowments and capabilities to correctly use indigenous medicine, hailstone arresting makes for a highly complex activity. It integrates the unique capabilities of the medicine man, which include knowledge of the hailstone charms, and the possession of a "spirit" (*juogi*), which proves instrumental in the act of capture.

Landa, an elderly man of eight-three years according to his own account, was a well-known hailstone arrester (*ja-pee*). He has remained a central figure in the area of Kano for his vast knowledge of charms to control hailstorms, as well as curing human health complications. In our interactions, he told us that he also cured snake bites, female infertility, and stomach problems using traditional medicine. This illustrates a predisposition among traditional healers in the area who report knowledge of more than one medicine—something that allows them to resolve multiple health problems. In the course of our interactions, we learned that our study area boasted no women hailstone arresters.[2]

When we met him, Landa at first proved unwilling to talk about the practice—understandably so, since he was unsure of our intentions. We informed him that the rice farmers with whom we had interacted during our study on Luo life and land configurations had depicted the practice as one that could make or break life—something that had prompted our desire to understand that connection. We assured him that we did not seek to prove the truth of the practice. Rather, we wanted to establish the mechanism by which hailstone arresting was accomplished by digging charms that formed human life. These explanations convinced him to talk about the ritual.

Before engaging him on his work, we first inquired how he had acquired the skill. He claimed that he had become a hailstone arrester sometime in 1995 after the death of his father who had been acting as one. Stating that he was the fifth grandchild in his father's lineage to serve as a hailstone arrester, he said, "When my father was near his death, he informed me of his wish for me to become his successor. He told me the medicine was our family specialty that could not be left to die. At that point I had to follow his wish."

From the interviews with Landa, other villagers, and rice farmers we learned that when hailstones strike the rice farms, the Luo believe that these have been

caused by humans. Human actions said to cause hailstones include a new mother of twins venturing into rice farms before cleansing; medicine men "mixing charms" (*riwo yath*) in the rice fields; or bereaved people transporting corpses across the rice fields at daytime, among others. To prevent the occurrence of the hailstones, other than controlling these actions, individuals perform ritual practices of cleansing or digging medicine in the rice landscape.

Landa went to "dig the charms" (*chwoyo yath*) in the dead of night when nobody could see him. His journey began in the early hours of the night, following the careful preparation of the charms. When he arrived at the rice fields, he mapped the land parcels set for protection. There he earmarked a central point for digging, since the act was not supposed to be held on each rice field. Then he dug a hole in which he buried the contents. Before he sank the contents, he drowned in a solemn chant—beseeching the medicine to protect the farms. Afterward, he covered the hole with soil. He did all this in strict secrecy. The act of preserving hailstone charms in secret resonates with the practice among the Sukuma of Tanzania, where kings charged with administering the medicine hid it from the public eye (Stroeken 2018).

For his work, Landa used charms derived from a special plant (which also remained a secret); white wooden ash that he collected from a cooking hearth; white sand harvested from the river; small sandy pebbles also gathered from a riverbed; cow dung harvested from a spotless white cow; and a reed plant. He figuratively referred to the charms as the "chief" who arrests hailstones, and the sand, sandy pebbles, and wooden ash as the "chief's guards." Together they disarm hail's power to destroy the crops. Later that evening, after sunset, we set off to Kigoche and Obiayo villages for the digging exercise. We arrived at the site at night. He drew the reed stick whose nodes and internodes he had emptied and separated. Then he mixed the sandy pebbles, the wooden ash, the fresh cow dung, and the pulpy charms. He finely kneaded the mixture and then stuffed it into the reed stick. Afterward, he covered the top of the stick with a lump of fresh cow dung. Finally, he buried the stick in the ground, with the tip covered with cow dung facing upward. At the end, he muttered some words before indicating that he had accomplished the task.

As people interact with rice farms, they refer to the reactiveness of the rice crop that follows from the people's relation with it. Questions of dishonor to the crop are revealed through deformities manifested on the biological features of those deemed to have violated them. Rice crop is perceivably a life-and-death-bearing crop. During planting, weeding, and harvesting, a connection of life is

exerted through a relation established across the soil, people, and water points. Water points—streams, irrigation canals, and the river—together form a special unit where crops and other organisms that depend on them for nourishment express their integrated survival.

Competition for resources like water, which support rice survival, is considered a threat to the crop's stability and sustenance. Reliable water provision is considered key to rice cultivation. When in the 2000s the government of Kenya introduced a levy to maintain water canals, people felt convinced that such an action would lessen the strain on the main river known for water supply. Describing the issue as he unclogged the water way around his rice paddy, Ojungo, a man in his seventies, revealed how strain on the main river had resulted in competition for and conflict between people, animals, and other organisms for the scarce resource.

The rice's sometimes impulsive reaction is succeeded by an incomparable load of loss. While guarding the rice crop against bird pests, seventy-five-year-old Jakobo, Ojungo's neighbor, reinforced human-crop relationality in respect of the cultural provisions of the fields, saying that "rice fears commotion." Grasping plant perspective "means learning how they live, think and communicate" (Pitt 2017, 97), which here translates into the rice being evaluated on mild, low, or high agitation. A discussion about the anger of the rice crop and its immediate reactivity informs people's good-mannered mechanisms of engaging them—and even modelling a given structure of "guardianship" (Descola 2013, 5).

The Luo of Kano work toward limiting what they call rice *reaction*. At this time, rice crop's potency is said to have been violated; this happens when unclean individuals venture into the plantations in search of water or other food plants. This could include women who have birthed twins or those individuals (both males and females) who are yet to accomplish rituals associated with cleansing twins. This action causes the crop to project life-threatening features such as stunted growth, turning yellow, or failing to yield. In the aftermath of such experiences, the farmers have learned from agricultural extension officers to apply eco-friendly farming practices that do not threaten the rice crop's life and survival. They maintain a good balance of their crop farming by only exploring fast-maturing recommended crops such as vegetables, watermelons, legumes, and tomatoes. Yet they also engage medicine men to protect the crops against bodily powers that might unleash hailstones.[3] As we worked on gapping some rice paddies, Jolito, a seventy-one-year-old retired agricultural officer, said: "We don't only rely on modern ways of farming. We have our local ways of keeping our farms healthy."

THE MANAGEMENT OF HAILSTONE MEDICINE (*YADH PEE*) AND THE CREATION OF LIFE

In the quest to maintain a balance of hailstone medicines, Landa says that the traditional medicine has instituted a salient constancy of rules for which it is supposed to be organized and managed. Hailstone medicine creates its own special system of encounter, he claims, by which sense it is able to generate and maintain its own language. That is reflected in the command of the instituted rules, which exist to shape human behavior and any engagement with such medicine, and the rules that pertain to its preparation and application. There are rules that can affect people in general, and those that can only affect the "spirit-bearing person" (*ja-juogi*).

Rules pertaining to the broader community hold that once charms have been dug in the rice fields, farmers must suspend their farming activities the following day. This Landa enforces to prevent supposedly impure persons from causing the charms' erosion. But the most restrictive rules concern the hailstone arrester himself—both regarding his conduct and his encounters with the farming community. First, he cannot keep the charms inside the house or any other space occupied by his family members. Doing so would ruin the lives of his household members. Here we encounter an embodied formulation of the charm's diabolical attributes that emerge to harm life. On harvesting it, he preserves it at a place out of his family members' reach or habitation, and it is from there that he takes it for digging. The distant preservation, he reveals, "affords to limit the flow of its potency to the people other than the hailstorm, which is the target." Another aspect relates to his personal behavior. On the eve of the digging, Landa must exercise chastity or self-control (*ritruok*) by avoiding sexual contact; sexual intercourse at such a crucial time designates an impurity that would destroy the charm's power.

Then there are rules that guide dealing with dangers posed by other external entities such as persons with "hidden abilities." Those persons' "hidden abilities" are considered "harsh" (*makech*), with the potential to trigger hailstones. These include "a person who has sired or delivered twins" (*ja-rude*). Such people, both men and women, Landa and villagers emphasize, cannot venture into the rice fields until they have been cleansed in a ritual of twins. Other crucial elements in the interaction with *yadh pee* comprise cultural rules associated with the funeral practice of transporting a corpse. In the Luo context, the transportation of a corpse has been and remains a dramatic affair; it incorporates large crowds of mourners and the dead person's material wealth on exhibit along the procession. It is expected that a person who has died away from their homestead will not be transported

back home across the rice fields at daytime. Doing so would diminish the potency of the charms to capture the hailstones.

When the charms have lost potency, as is sometimes reported, the effect emerged in the gravity of hailstones. But it is the range of activities and agents that can cause hailstones that reveal the intersection of natural phenomena and human lives. To understand that connection, we attended a cleansing ritual (*hoso*) where a mother of twins who had been accused of venturing into the rice fields without having undergone a prior ritual for her twins (*rude*) was being purified. Although unknown to her, her action was believed to have caused hailstones, which later destroyed the crops. The ritual was therefore deemed necessary to pacify the spirit that triggers *pee*.

Interviews with Landa and rice farmers on the moral connection of chastity and the ethics of human–rice crop interaction revealed that digging charms (*chwoyo yath*) leads to an activeness of the materiality or potency that organizes life. This can also illustrate the agency distilled in divination, which employs the technical aspects of the diagnosis of a human problem by the diviner (Jackson 1978). Digging charms, like prestation of sacrifice among the Chagga of Tanzania (Myhre 2019), is a highly integrative ritual that requires the cooperation of the larger farming or affected community. In the case of digging medicines (*chwoyo yath*), the observance of the ritual rules helps bring out the honor reserved for the potency, which then enables it to maintain its power in readiness for a hailstorm should it threaten.

CONNECTING HAILSTONES WITH HUMAN LIVES, PRACTICES, AND PROCESSES

Opito, seventy-eight years old, a male farm holder, and rice farmer with whom we first explored the connection of hailstones and human lives, categorized persons that could cause hailstones as high and low risk. He said that the force that causes hailstones resides in both men and women. But women retained a greater threat largely because of their perceived "bodily impurities" that interfere with the birth, growth, and development of a child. He recounted: "When my wife gave birth to twins, we were advised not to venture into the rice farm because she could bewitch farms and cause hailstones." The act of a new mother of twins bewitching farms is feared, Landa explains, because it leads to the death of crops and people; farms and crops destroyed mean no food.

To the Luo people, twins are imbued with evil spirits that, if left unappeased, can cause misfortunes. Therefore, the mother's and children's sustenance of life lies

in the "enactment [of], rather than their faith" in the ritual activity (Geissler and Prince 2010, 105). In particular, community members restrict new mothers from contact with rice farms, as that can bring about hailstones. It is held that getting into rice fields also results in the "burning" (*wang'*) or "death" (*tho*) of rice. The Luo institute ritual performances within their households geared toward cleansing the couple to cast off the shadow of the twin-causing evil spirit. The ritual is called "releasing twins" (*yawo rude*).

Four weeks after our meeting with Opito, a hailstorm struck some Ahero rice farms in Wang'aya village. It was blamed on Achieng', a new mother of twins in her thirties. Community members claimed she had ventured into the rice field, causing the storm. As a result, they organized a "cleansing ritual" (*hoso*) lest she unleash further misfortune. On that day, she and her husband Malo were being cleansed to cast off the "evil spirit" that had brought about the twins. Whereas the delivery of twins alone was not said to cause hailstones, the mother's act of going into the rice fields before a cleansing ritual was seen to have brought about the phenomenon. The Luo continue to consider twins a bad omen, because they believe them to be caused by evil spirits that bear life-changing potency. Twins' appearance is characterized as an "evil birth," which must be cleansed to avert untold misfortunes. Contemporary twin rituals are selective and much less rigorous than those in the past.

Modh, a seventy-five-year-old female informant and cleansing expert arrived in the compound carrying a calabash containing charms (*manyasi*) in one hand and a leafy twig in the other hand, which she continuously dipped into the calabash, sprinkling the contents all over as she muttered some words. She pulled at the gate and sprinkled one more time before she headed toward the couple's hut. Inside the house, she mixed the charms with animal waste (*weno*) harvested from a slaughtered sheep's offal.

The focus on the kind of relationship instituted between hailstones and a woman who has delivered twins accounts for the nature of ritual to order life (Ruel 1997). Observing the practice affirms the dependence of humans on nonhuman elements. Like other life-sustaining rituals, whether of death or birth, the ordering and articulation of the process is enhanced by considering the state and correct order of the performance (Geissler and Prince 2010; Chao 2019). Not honoring ritual activities exposes human lives and diminishes their potential for propagation. The threat supposedly caused by twins is recast in the image of a curse, which the new pair of children is seen to have the potential to unleash. Ripala, a fifty-year-old female informant, asserts, "Twins are harsh and they can destroy

lives." That harshness does not impute an abnormality; rather, it illustrates an embodied reaction to how their force reveals its performance. The twins' bodies perceived to cause hailstones are marked by unfavorable potencies inimical to other lives. The same holds true with a twins' mother who ventures into the rice fields uncleansed, as illustrated by the case of Achieng'.

COSMO-JURIDICAL AGENCY IN LIFE-FORMING

Cosmo-juridical agency contemplates a jural co-negotiation which establishes a sense of order and justice among the elements that are considered to form life. The commands and demands of humans and nonhumans are couched in certain forms of debts, demands, rights and obligations that require balancing.[4] Here we see the materiality of charms as a force which mediates between the unit of human, hailstones and rice crop forces of life. These materialities exist at definable, shareable spaces and operate within a standard language where none is considered superior to the other but are interdependent and accommodative of each other. In their capacities, the rice crop through their unseen spirits make demands for protection against hailstones. This command is decoded by the people who then invite the ritual expert for the practice. On the part of cleansing rituals, the spirits of twins lay their demands which are interpreted by the people as a call to ameliorate anger and restore calmness.

The Luo peoples' relation with natural phenomena such as rain, drought, hailstorms, among others, is complex. When these phenomena occur, the people sometimes say that they have been caused by humans or spirits. They are also said to be felt in human bodies. Physical bodies provide an interpretation of local seasons and then relay that information to the people on their farming preparations. When the rainy season is about to set in, it is signaled in the movement and reaction of certain body parts. In particular, persons with formerly fractured or dislocated but now healed hands, legs, or shoulders can experience a reaction in those body parts. When they feel movement in the same part of the body, then they say that they *feel* rains in their body. Therefore, natural phenomena bear connection with human life and crops through the material potency of spirits that they connect with. To attend to those connections, the people institute and perform ritual activities that account for their intersections. The rituals utilize charms which perceivably discharge protective medicinal force that flows across the crops and humans.

Cosmo-juridical agency is exercised across the multiple agentive forces of rice, humans and ancestors or spiritual forces. It is realized at the ritual practice

such as cleansing rituals, "digging charms" and other forms of rituals where the people and ancestors or spirits get integrated in the ritual process. The juridical scene that is manifested in the ritual pact where hailstones, rice crop, twins and the people are placed together is interdependent as to allow each entity to propagate their respective authority. The movement of agentive power of charms circulates across the human and nonhuman species in order to secure life of the crop and that of a person. In this case, both the rice farmers and the villagers are wittingly flexible in their participation in the ritual practice(s) where relations, connections and networks are (re)formulated. Landa (the hailstone arrester) in an incantation observed: "medicine I ask you to safeguard the rice crop so that hailstones do not strike and kill rice, farmers and their children; remember you were passed to me, I did not know anything." The image of death is symbolic, as it elevates the experience of protection amidst evil practices whose consequences can be transmittable to both crops and humans. Sacrifices, being acts of mitigating such life discontinuities, thread a linkage between what rituals do and how they do it to show the farmers' interaction with the medicine. We emphasize the embodied units of human and vegetal spiritualities because they structure the conceptualization and understanding of life.

The ritual of hailstones and twins among the Luo are activities of cultivating the exchange of forces that make actors more active. The flow of forces that make life reveals that life in the Luo context is the product of the transmittance and sharing of agentive potencies through bodily units and practices (Opande, Onyango-Ouma, and Subbo 2022). This finding resonates with what Myhre (2018; 2019) reported among a Bantu-speaking group in Tanzania.[5] Rituals are activities through which spiritual forces become active and travel across humans, rice crop and hailstones. As Ruel (1997) shows among the Kuria people, rituals create and manage the actual circumstances of biological reproduction and physical life. Accordingly, the ritual orders and secures life processes including the social growth of people, crops, and domestic animals. It is through similar figurations that the Luo construct the rituals they undertake in respect of human birth and growth, hailstones control, and rice crop development. The interactions about life forming which occur across four actors: rice crops, humans, spirits, and hailstones provide a conflation of forces that influence birth, growth, and development. These do not only influence those life processes but also elemental ones such as weather conditions and climatic phenomena as hailstones. Through these interactions, the Luo are able to make conceptualizations regarding the way agencies residing across

diverse species are able to co-negotiate through a system of ritual practices to form life.

LUO LIFE-FORMING REALITIES THROUGH RITUALS

Ritual practices among the *Jo-Kano* are powerful elements that participate in the forming of life. As interpreted through the ritual of twins, a failure to conduct it will trigger the human body to generate a negative force with potentially negative life outcomes. Through contact with the rice crop, the woman's body generates a negative force that then triggers hailstones. It is believed that the evil spirits that caused twins react with spiritual forces tied to the rice crops, thereby initiating hailstones. The ritual thus comes in to free up the foreboding spirit, and also to convert the negative force into a positive one. Unlike other human activities such as mixing traditional medicine or individuals transporting a corpse across the rice fields during the day, the continuum of human purity is entwined with human endowments. Relating ritual experiences with birth, growth, and development makes for a deeply constructive, integrative, and collaborative affair, because it aims to show how the people take those experiences and make them concrete manifestations of their well-being. That process includes agents/actors considered to have special techniques, powers, and skills beyond those of the ordinary humans affected by the natural phenomenon.

The ritual practices of digging charms and cleansing twins speak to how life comes into action with different forces, and even how it functions within those connections. Humans, rice, and hailstones together create demands and responses that institute their individual formation. The reliability of materiality that causes twin parents or twins or charms to balance hailstones can be seen in how those demands and responses are integrated. It is notable that breaching the morals of charms proves dangerous, just as much as impure people getting close to the rice field. The digging of charms in the rice fields does not only seek to protect the rice crop against hailstones. Rather, it also allows the exchange of potencies between humans and nonhumans. Indeed, it amplifies the sphere of relations and exchanges between humans, plants, and crops. That connection situates the unit of agentive selves distilled from vegetal organisms—in this case, the rice crop. The unit of forming is negotiated at the rice crop, which, when well preserved and tendered for, begets human formation. The interface of human potential and crop performance is instituted at the convex of spiritual action. A phenomenon's potential can be exacerbated by the loss or erosion of a charm's potency—lowering its effectiveness against hailstones.

The prospect of failure by the charms' expert constitutes such a devastating and feared incident because it means that the charms relied on to provide protection need another force to work. Failure has a direct impact on the people and the rice crop's growth and development. Such is an aspect of life reality showing that life generation follows from a combination of diverse species' forces. That reality emerged in multiple conversations, showing the limits of the medicine person: that in spite of their knowledge of the medicine, they cannot guarantee protection on their own without the input of the spiritual force.[6] As earlier explained, the constancy of rules governing the proper application of medicines helps to situate the reliability of spiritual entities to secure a stable ecology. Without observing charm rules, the medicine cannot return the desired outcome—being to control the hailstones. Even the cultural rules controlling cleansing of twins and their parents are navigated in the same way. The central focus of the formation that oversees the affect across human and rice crop is reciprocal in nature. Landa pointed out that reciprocal affect, "twins and rice crop are mysteries/wonders; they have spiritual forces that's why if they clash, they bring hailstones; twins cause hails and rice can ruin twins."

By connecting human lives with hailstones, the people are exercising a given form of probity and creativity in the formation of the rationalities they share with other entities, organisms, and objects. Of significance, it is not just the life and creativity that they exercise, but the forms of authorities that they exhibit and how they exert them. In the *Jo-Kano* cultural cosmology of hailstones, their interface with rice crops is a phenomenon of navigating multiple rationalities; the striking hailstones are seen as more than natural occurrences—since they do not only follow from a single natural causality; rather, they can also be occasioned by human activity. The foreboding attributes of rice and the associated spiritual domains that accomplish their connection illustrate the complex life materiality exhibited by vegetal organisms as natural phenomena. Therefore, the engagement with such a natural phenomenon is an illustration that the people and rice and hailstones have expanded possibilities by which to exert their materiality in each other's lives through flexible human and nonhuman activities.

Interaction with a natural phenomenon provides crucial behavioral and linguistic models of assessing the trends of those interactions. And, emphasizing functional underpinnings of those occurrences would be repeating mistakes earlier proponents of the approach (Krige and Krige 1943; Akong'a 1987) committed by not exposing how such experiences impose their intentions. Our informant Landa prefigured the coming together of humans, rice crop, and hailstones as inseparable

elements and also imbued with rational goals. And that consistency was an interconnected reality that was intelligibly performative by the complete authorities and agencies of each unit as they co-negotiated for their institution in life.

The *Jo-Kano* rice farmers conceptualize "digging medicines" (*chwoyo yath*) as a residual sociocultural enterprise of interconnecting human and nonhuman worlds. The practice does not involve offering any form of animal or poultry sacrifice but it utilizes traditional medicine that causes the manipulation of hailstones and its life course. The traditional medicine accomplishes this by "arresting" the phenomenon's movement and controlling it from reaching the farms under protection. It does so by exegetically deactivating the force of the hailstones; once the "hailstone arrester" (*ja-pee*) has "dug" it in the soil, it generates a more potent force which redirects the phenomenon's course or completely captures it. This cultural framing is a robust figuration of the versatility of nonhuman entities whose performance follows from those of humans and vice versa (Pitrou 2017b; Chao 2018; Howe 2019).

Applying human activities to structure the pattern of vegetal organisms and also natural phenomena provides a sense of evaluating the sort of perceivable creative activities by which the people and nonhumans can intervene to make life safe and secure. Hence since the 1960s when rice cultivation was implemented in Kano area, the rice farmers have established a recognizable dependency on traditional medicine men for protection against hailstone strikes, and beyond that the action has provided an interpretation into the connection of the natural phenomenon and life.

To the rice farmers, therefore, "digging charms" (*chwoyo yath*) represents not only a unique way of seeing how life in the area is conceived of, but also the versatility of the other agents and forces that the people rely on to see how their life changes and progresses. The Luo life as a formable process, like Perig Pitrou (2017a) making, reveals a system of co-negotiation where creativities by potencies of human bodies as they maintain their states intersect with objects, things, images, animals, and plants among others. Reflecting on the creativities of the Achuar (Descola 2013) where the manner of tending to crops reveals the relations between the people and those crops, among the *Jo-Kano* rice is characterized in such terms that personify its potential to react towards certain human practices which can negatively affect their growth. That is depicted in such expressions by the farmers as "rice fears noise or chaos" (*ochele oluoro koko*). That is emphasized in order to avert any form of untoward human act against the rice crops that can interfere with its peace and ultimately human life.

Hailstones are the embodiment of that chaotic potency that disrupts life of rice crops, people and other organisms within the rice ecology. Other human activities that may impute chaos and destabilize the peace of rice include double "digging" or "mixing of traditional medicine" (*riwo yath*) in the rice fields; transporting a corpse across the rice fields at daytime; and a woman who has not completed rituals of her twin children venturing into the rice fields. Those profane activities bear impurities, which when carried and perceivably transmitted to rice crops cause calamities.

The aspect of connecting the people's lives with hailstones is a creative sociocultural undertaking that unveils the constructions and meanings that humans make about forces that form life. The forerunner to such an enterprise is the manner in which, to cite Rappaport (1993, 153; quoted in Hornborg 1996, 52), "meanings and understandings do not only reflect or approximate an independently existing world but participate in its construction." That kind of cultural framing is a creative inter-exchange between entities that make life. The interplay of human and nonhuman activities, demands, potencies, recompenses in this case expresses the cosmo-juridical negotiation that takes place across species as they form life. The *Jo-Kano* who interlink hailstones to their lives engage in a reflection of the unique scheme by which natural phenomena transmit potencies of causing their life courses as they interact.

CONCLUSION

Since the field of anthropology's epistemic shift away from the static structuralist approaches of the 1970s to the domain of agency (Jackson and Karp 1990, 16), the concept has gained traction, leading to debates about the materialities and life force or body power of both human and nonhuman species. Scholars continue to explore agency across multiple elements and objects (Bennett 2010; Howe 2019). Agency (or materiality or life force) reveals how different peoples conceptualize and understand their lives. Andrew B. Kipnis (2015) affirms the distinctions in agencies, further justifying the exploration of the diverse forms of agency and potency, as well as the question of where agency is preserved or of which reasons might trigger it. We argue that life potency could be a response toward the recompense for some unfulfilled ritual, retribution, retaliation, or punishment. Aggregating materiality can create the false impression that these potencies are uniform and act at the same level—meaning that agencies, even if they lead to similar outcomes, are not the same.

We recognize this episteme and, especially the theories of Bennett (2010) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2019), who emphasize the materiality and elemental forces that exist across humans and nonhumans. In our case, we see cosmo-juridical agency as the materiality that illustrates how tangible and intangible entities together attain recompense for demands and commands through their unique life potencies distributable across humans, medicines, natural phenomena, vegetal organisms, animals, and spiritual entities. Hailstones experienced in the rice landscape, although they constitute natural phenomena, are regarded as elements of human and nonhuman forces. Human bodies—much like hailstone medicine, rice crops, or hailstones—generate and release a potency capable of altering other lives. This kind of potency mirrors what Bennett (2010, 4) calls "thing power," or what Myhre (2018; 2019) terms the "life force" that enables the transfers and transformations of life. To Bennett, thing power equates to materiality, which arises from both inorganic and organic bodies. In the case of the Luo, that power is preserved in the medicine applied to the rice crops and human bodies, entwining to arrest hailstones. Their explanations echo Howe's (2019) views of the cosmology of wind power, whose lifeworld resembles that of creatures and which can shape the potential of inanimate things. The Luo ontological orientation visualizes how such a materiality/agency connects with those of humans and rice crops to affect animate life. Hence cosmo-juridical agency is not concerned with the distribution of agencies across human and nonhuman species; rather, it concerns itself with how "nonlife has power, self-organized or not" (Povinelli, 2016, 72) and, above all self-regulated.

Our application of potencies across hailstone medicine, human bodies, and rice crops illustrates how powers transmitted across "substances," "beings," and "processes" (Myhre 2019, 417) enhance the performance of different life-shaping agents. Although our study did not set out to describe the vernacular terms of life as explored by Myhre, we did show that *yadh pee*, hailstone medicine, provides a unit of life potency that emerges to interact with organisms, objects, things, elements, and activities which together shape existence and survival. Whether it is the Luo ritual of arresting hailstones or Myhre's (2019) pouring substances to solicit for rain, all these processes echo Pitrou's (2015) emphasis on practices as crucial interventions of multiple agents in vital processes as defined by their distinct roles in making life.

The notion of cosmo-juridical agency therefore confirms the interdependent, performative existence and competence of life potencies that reside in rice crops, hailstones, humans, and ritual practices and which bring these entities into pacts

of forming life. Each force capably decodes the other's actions and makes inferences of their rights, echoing Pitt (2017, 92), whose vegetal ethnography argues of plants' competence to make inferences about humans the same way humans do with plants. For the Luo, this kind of embodied rice-crop expertise unveils a "rice mentality" coordinated with and activated through human life processes and cultural practices. Moreover, the medicine that controls hailstones and also purifies twins is activated through vivacious spirits. Together with the spiritual forces of the rice crop and those of the twins, hailstones collaborate and co-operate in their scheme of operation. The hailstone arrester who digs the charms in the rice field works under the command of the spiritual entities. That means that all the power that manages and even dislodges the hailstones, as well as calming the spiritual forces associated with twins for a stable life, derives from spiritual entities. Similar to the Sukuma rainmakers of Tanzania (Stroeken 2018), the Luo hailstone arresters in Kano depend on spiritual direction to locate medicines, perform the arresting, and also reformulate the life of children. These are the life-forming realities.

ABSTRACT

*In the area of Kano in western Kenya, Luo rice farmers perform a ritual of "digging" indigenous medicine (*chwoyo yath*) in the rice fields to "arrest" hailstones. The practice is not only rationalized in the image of regulating the spate of climate–accelerated hailstones but also of forming life, expressed through the state of how that life is secured and propagated. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with rice farmers and an expert on hailstones, as well as on participant observation, this article explores the exegetical agency of rice medicines, which is reflected in the affective act of arresting hailstones. This is conceptualized through a cosmo–juridical agency of life-forming by creating an interconnection between human life and a natural phenomenon. The article underscores the varied domains of natural phenomena (weather conditions, calamities), rice crop, and humans as agencies that co-negotiate toward life-forming through their forces that transform states of life processes.* [cosmo-juridical agency; digging medicine; hailstone arresting; ritual; life-forming; Luo; Kenya]

NOTES

Acknowledgments We are indebted to the Institute of Anthropology, Gender, and African Studies at the University of Nairobi for the support provided to Kennedy Opande as a doctoral candidate and W. Onyango-Ouma as Associate Research Professor in the production of this article. We are immensely grateful to the rice farmers of Kano who introduced us to the concept of "arresting" hailstones and to the life course in rice ecology. We especially thank Landa Pony, the "hailstone arrester," for his insights, as well as all the rice farmers who participated in interviews and showed us hospitality and kindness. We also express our gratitude to our three peer reviewers and to the *Cultural Anthropology* editorial collective for their support.

1. All names of people in the article are pseudonyms.
2. The lack of women hailstone arresters was attributed to the fact that women would leave their natal homes on marriage. Expert knowledge is passed on to males only to guard against revealing it to outsiders. The expertise of hailstone arresting also differs from other forms of traditional knowledge that is inherited, rather than bestowed on a person.
3. The essence of body power or life force has been explored by Myhre (2019) among the Horombo of Tanzania, where he shows it to be the material force accounting for all transfers and transformations of life.
4. The subject of the living and the deceased depending on each other for survival has long seen exploration by anthropologists such as A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo (1976); William David Cohen and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo (1989; 1992); and Michael Jackson (1989) just to mention a few. And to the extent that these relationships are shaped by unfulfilled demands and debts remains a reality, influencing how these actors engage. Although it is not the main focus of his work, Myhre (2018, 229) has extensively documented how the Horombo of Tanzania depend on the dead, to whom they go for a return to life during droughts by offering sacrifices. These sacrifices meant to induce rain are seen as debt relationships between generations which have to be repaid to receive the right amount of rain.
5. Our concept of life as a product of the exchange and transfer of materials, activities, and practices mirrors what Myhre (2018, 2019) has documented in Kilimanjaro among Bantu-speaking peoples. Although they differ from the Nilotic Luo of Kenya, Myhre's description of the notion of life as an effect of material and practical transfers and transformations of life force resonates with the material flows of bodily units and organs between humans and nonhumans in Kano in western Kenya. We covered these flow-of-life potencies in an earlier publication (Opande, Onyango-Ouma, and Subbo 2022), where we showed that bodily elements such as blood or organs like the placenta afford the flow of potencies between different entities, that is, humans and nonhumans, leading to life and life-changing conditions. In his case, Myhre (2018, 8) has called these potencies "life-force" or "body power."
6. Spiritual forces are material in the sense that spirits are real, which might not always be the case with supernatural forces.

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