

A West Indian in Africa

Philip Nanton

I am a small island, sea-level Caribbean person, accustomed to stand in my swimsuit and look for the green flash as the sun sinks below the horizon. From May to October I scan weather reports for indications of tropical hurricanes, not mountain blizzards. Last year, one month after my seventy-second birthday, I found myself in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, staying at a hotel where all the talk was about climbing the mountain. I was there because it was a trip of reconnection for my partner who lived much of her early life in the locality. I was a tourist along for the ride. In the hothouse atmosphere of talk focussed on the mountain, an offer of equipment was made, and so I agreed to join a small party, one of many, going to take on the climb. This was a somewhat foolhardy decision.

Climbers often plan for months ahead, taking on lower altitude climbs near their homes and getting their bodies and equipment ready. I decided to climb about three days after arriving at the hotel with little or no knowledge of mountain climbing or altitude sickness. But, from our hotel, the peak of Kilimanjaro was often in sight with its snowy dome and frilly skirt of lower shifting cloud. I had come so far and might not come this way again, why not give it a shot? Well, as we say in the Caribbean, 'who tell me say dat!'

Tanzania was new to me, and is too complex for me to attempt a brief guide to its colonial – Western and Arab – or post-colonial history. From the mountains to the sea a tourist visitor like me deals only in impressions, brief personal connections and intense bursts of experience. The different languages, the size of the country and the challenge of climbing the highest mountain in Africa were all way out of my comfort zone.

Marangu Hotel, where I started the climb, is owned and run by the Brice-Bennett family (a sister and two brothers with their respective partners), local white Tanzanian folk with Irish/British connections. The hotel has been family-run since the 1930s; the present owners' mother came into it in the 1950s. The Brice-Bennetts might be called 'old Africa hands'. They speak fluent Swahili and are deeply connected to the surrounding village of Marangu, where the hotel and the climbs it organises are one of the main sources of employment. Generations of local Chagga people have served as hotel staff, from cooks to mechanics to vehicle drivers; as well as the porters and guides who help get climbers up the mountain, at a ratio of one porter for each climber and a guide for two or three climbers. The hotel exists primarily for these climbers, sometimes sending off as many as three groups of between eight and fifteen climbers on different routes on any given day.

In the hotel dining room the night before we set off, my group met together for the first time and shared a meal. After introductions by first names I forgot most of them till we were well up the mountain. At dinner all but one of us ate what was put in front of us: a succession of courses reminiscent of hearty English fare of fifty years earlier. One American, who as it happened was the most experienced in climbing mountains, brought his own food for the whole trip. It consisted of a concentrated mass of dried vegetables and what looked like brown rice. Each concoction fitted into two separate water glasses. The waiters at the hotel (and those of us who did not know him) watched in amazement as he demanded only hot water to make his special macrobiotic mush. Each time the waiters put hotel food in front of him he would firmly send it back saying, 'Just hot water, thanks.' For the next five days, at every meal time, supplied with just hot water, he happily worked his way through this private menu.

On the morning that we set out, we were given an hour's briefing about

what to expect on the climb. Seamus, our tutor, is one of the hotel owners and an experienced climber who has tackled the mountain many times. Two things he said stood out. The first was: 'The mountain is essentially a high-altitude desert which you have to respect'. And the second: 'You don't conquer the mountain, it allows you to get to the summit.' He then showed us how we would be walking on the last two days; one tiny step after the other, very slowly, sometimes counting and resting after 50 to 100 or so steps. At all this I swallowed very hard.

Outside, after the briefing, the hotel courtyard was buzzing with activity. Loads of equipment were strewn around the yard in sacks and in large rectangular tins. Around a large tropical almond tree stood 15 or 20 African men in two or three layers of rough clothing, a few in climbing boots but most in trainers, some with heads swathed as if in turbans. They talked animatedly to each other. They had got work for the week ahead and so were very pleased with themselves. A cluster of another ten or so men stood around the hotel's outer gate, hoping to be chosen at the last minute. Unemployment is rife and those in the yard were the lucky ones. So for the next few days they were the porters and guides who accompanied the *wazungu*, the (mostly) white people, who came to climb their mountain with them.

I am introduced to my porter, Matthew, who will carry up to 15 kilos of my equipment on his head or back each day of the climb. Seamus, our tutor, said: 'You won't see him till you reach your camp at the end of the day. He walks too fast for you.' Puny climbers like me carry a knapsack weighing less than one quarter of this load – the heaviest things we carry are water bottles weighing three kilos. These you have to sip constantly for hydration to reduce altitude sickness. The water bottles are refilled each day before setting off again. It takes a minimum of five days and four nights to climb to the summit and back.

The climb is not easy. You need special equipment – boots, thick mountain clothing, walking stick, sleeping bag, raincoat, etc. (All of this I was loaned by the hotel.) The people I climbed with were really two separate groups. Three working class guys from England who had made it good, all in their 30s or early 40s: Ollie was a lift engineer, Daniel was in construction and Deane a scaffolder. Then there were the five Americans: two doctors, John and Mike; a nurse, Laura; an insurance broker; Richard, our macrobiotic specialist; and finally Leah, a data analyst employed by a large international corporation. All the Americans were similar in age to the Brits. I was by far the oldest, and the only elderly West Indian. The class and ideological differences between us could have been disastrous, but in fact we got on well. We each knew when to shut up about Brexit, President Trump and other potentially disruptive topics.

There are three encampments of huts on the way to the summit. The first one, Mandara, took about four to five hours walking from the base. I had never been so cold in my life as I was that night and every night after – although I was in my sleeping bag in most of my clothes each night. At the first stop I had to clamber out of my sleeping bag to squat over a stinking pit latrine around 3 a.m. Walking back to my bunk I saw shooting stars. Already, a small walk of 100 yards could leave you breathless. Higher up the mountain, at the second encampment, Horombo Huts (12,201 ft), the diarrhoea started. It continued to the third encampment called Kibo Huts (15,463 ft), and for the next few days. The condition was caused by altitude sickness, as was a feeling of nausea the higher I climbed. And sometimes I was caught short during the day while trekking between huts. At the second and third encampment of huts I was up and down out of my sleeping bag three or four times each night, dog-tired, and required to aim to hit the beckoning

hole of the pit latrine. Not everyone's aim is accurate, and these locations are in constant use. Most people get various forms of altitude sickness along the route, some worse than others.

I climbed for six to eight hours, working higher and higher each day, with only a couple of hours sleep each night for four nights. I climbed through three different kinds of vegetation – forest, then heath and moorland, then alpine desert (and, finally, the fourth, for those who get there, the ice cap). And in the morning, when you look out below you, you are standing with the clouds beneath instead of above you, a breathtaking sight. The world as I knew it was now inverted. Nothing seemed out of place any more. A young porter climbed past me in three-quarter khaki shorts, puffy jacket and headband. He listened to reggae on his radio pumped out by a DJ called 'Simple Simon'. As we climbed, we passed porters coming back down the mountain with their loads. Swahili or Chagga speakers, they had little or no English. Dean, the British scaffolder from Liverpool, would, nevertheless, greet them with a cheerful, 'Wha' g'wan, man!'

There are three or four different routes up the mountain. About a quarter of the climbers each year never reach the very top, I among them. The group I was in took the shortest, the five-day route. The topmost point, Uhuru Peak, is 5,895 metres above sea level (or 19,341 ft). I got as high as the last group of huts below the summit, that is Kibo Huts, at 4,713 metres or (15,463 ft). I was too weak from altitude sickness to climb any further.

Here are a few other things that struck me from the climb in no special order:

A sense of my insignificance as I walked along 'The Saddle' between the towering peaks of Kilimanjaro's Kibo and Mawenzi volcanic cones, one either side of me.

I watched five porters carry a man down the mountain to Horombo Huts on a trolley with a single wheel at its centre. The summit proved too much for him. At times they lifted man and trolley over rough ground where the descent was stony. Back at the base it would be his achievements that would be celebrated, with less regard to their efforts.

The dry extreme cold at Kibo Huts, and having to go outside regularly in the night to pee as quickly as possible.

Big ravens flapping around stopping points along the route we took, looking for scraps to eat. A plague of striped mice scurrying around the Horombo Huts encampment.

Descending the mountain with my guide Elias, who told me that his wife 'went to heaven' five years ago. In 1963, his father was chosen to plant the independence flag of Tanzania on Kilimanjaro's summit. Elias had been a mountain guide for nearly 40 years. His training was tough and regimented. First as a porter for five years, then cookery school, followed by guide training for his diploma.

So what was this climb all about? After three months solitary writing in Barbados I was suddenly required to live for five days with a bunch of people I hardly knew and under difficult circumstances while my body fell apart and my limbs got weaker and weaker. Perhaps I was searching for an old man's test. Am I fit? Fit for what exactly? Yet it was, in its own way, both masochistic and adventurous fun.

But the climb was other things as well. Superficially, it was a kind of rite-of-passage experience of a group suffering discomfort together and struggling against nature over an extended period. Or, to put it another way, our attempt to conquer the wild.

All novice climbers of Kilimanjaro will have heard the constant refrain of

the African guides and experienced climbers. From base camp to summit they say in Swahili as they pass you: '*polepole*'; in other words, 'go slowly'. As outsiders we are deaf to this wisdom. For many climbers the mountain is simply a technical exercise that combines disposable income, resilience, and a tick to that item on their so called 'bucket list'. It is the liminal effect of the 'time out' of the experience that is easily missed.

Though I called this piece 'A West Indian in Africa', I discovered on the mountainside such descriptive terms are ultimately meaningless. One aspect of the liminality of the climb was the brief experience of becoming an abject animal, retching and weeping as it crawled up the mountainside of nature's indifference, struggling against both outer and inner wilderness. In this state, national origins are nothing and all that matters is survival.

At the same time, on the mountain we were also simply a bunch of well-heeled westerners dependent upon a small group of Chagga men from one of the poorest countries in Africa. They lacked – and yet carried for us – much of the so-called 'equipment' that we required to survive; while, to provide us a modicum of comfort, they strolled up and down the mountain a few times each month in tattered clothing and worn-out shoes. We depended also on their training to spot, if necessary, signs of severe altitude sickness and to send climbers back down the mountain before it worsened or death overtook them.

By the fifth evening we were all back sitting in the hotel garden, guides and porters on one side and climbers on the other. After a few beers the Chagga men began a moving song of victory that claimed we had all made it to the top of Kilimanjaro. Not completely true in my case. But the earlier mood of uncertainty and wonder with which we set out was now replaced by one of achievement and mutual respect. We shook hands, passing on

our tips with an embrace for each guide and porter in turn. Some of the climbers said that the experience would in time change them, though they were uncertain in what ways.

Afterwards I sat and talked with Elias who had guided me down the mountain. I noticed we were the two old men in old-fashioned fedoras and that the gap between Chagga and islander was closing.

Philip Nanton

Philip Nanton is Honorary Research Associate of the University of Birmingham. He was born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and studied and lived in Britain from 1960 to 2000. Since 2000, he has lived in Barbados. His career began in British local government policymaking, and after completing his D.Phil at University of Sussex (1986), he combined the world of a practicing academic and that of a creative writer. He has published reviews of contemporary Caribbean literature in journals and magazines including *Caribbean Review of Books*, *Shibboleths: a Journal of Theory and Criticism* and *Caribbean Quarterly*. He has more recently developed as a writer of humour and a spoken word performer. In 2008 he released a CD *Island Voices from St. Christopher and the Barracudas*: the book based on the CD was published in 2014 by Papillote Press. He has performed sketches from this collection across the region from Guyana to Jamaica. His second collection of sketches and poetry, *Canouan Suite and Other Pieces* (Papillote Press, 2016) was highly recommended in the 2018 Cuban Casa de las Americas Awards for Anglophone Caribbean Literature. In 2017, he published *Frontiers of the Caribbean* (Manchester University Press). He has recently published *Riff: The Shake Keane Story*, a biography of the Vincentian jazz musician and poet Shake Keane.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

©Philip Nanton