

Mine, Mine, Mine
By
Daniel E. White March 10, 2025

We were on safari with our friends staying in a tented camp on the Masai Mara. As we were falling asleep, we heard the lions talking. Not the roar of the MGM lion but ominous grunts. Locals told us that the lions were engaged in a Q and A session.

“Whose land is this?” “Mine, mine, mine.”

The nurse practitioner had grown up in Southern California. She knew well the areas devastated by fires and worried that the land now stripped of vegetation would fall victim to mudslides and erosion. “Who owns what,” she asked, “if your lot slides down to the street below?”

Several years ago, the lava flow from an eruption of Kilauea Volcano found its way to the sea, wiping out a housing area built around a scenic small bay. A high school classmate of ours owned one of the houses destroyed by the lava. When lava covers property one has bought, what does one own anymore? The lava? The “lot” defined by latitude and longitude?

Prompted by hearing the theme music from *Out of Africa* at a recent concert, Judy and I watched the movie again on Netflix. The opening line is famous in film history: “I had a farm in Africa.”

We first saw the movie in 1984, before our safari experience. The words “I had a farm in Africa” probably had little effect on us, then in our late 30s. I like to think that our time in Kenya, limited though it was, provided us with a little more appreciation of Africa as the place Karen Blixen had her farm.

Perhaps, if we had watched the movie again shortly after our time on safari and after the period when we read about colonial British Kenya in both fiction and non-fiction, we would have thought more about the complexity involved in a Danish woman joining a British social group that was largely dismissive of the Africans and their cultures.

This time, the words in the opening line that struck home were “I had.” Not “I owned.”

Denys Finch-Hatton, Blixen’s love interest, was a free spirit. He had few possessions, mostly books. He made his living by adapting to what the land had to offer him as a way to sustain himself. Even though his love for Blixen was clear to her, he came and went as he felt the need to come and go.

At a key dramatic moment, Blixen complains to Finch-Hatton that he must not love her because he is always going away and leaving her lonely. He chided her with muted anger for talking about “my farm” or “my Kikuyu.” He challenged her assertion that she owned anything, including the farm, but especially the indigenous people, the Kikuyu, the farm had displaced. Blixen had built a school for Kikuyu children and was generally concerned for their well-being, including their health care. But she referred to the people as “her Kikuyu.” He protested that he would not be owned by anyone or anything.

In the movie, this is the gist of one of the last conversations Blixen had with Finch-Hatton before, when on one of his times to go away on his own, his plane crashed.

Isak Dinesen wrote the book some time after these events. It is possible to think that she penned the words “I had” to indicate that she had come to understand that Finch-Hatton was right: she did not own, she had.

A Canadian mining company is trying to dig a copper mine in the nearby Santa Rita Mountains, one of over twenty geological wonders called “sky islands” in southern Arizona. There are many reasons people oppose the mine, grouped around environmental, health, and quality of life issues, and the idea of, once again, despoiling nature. The mining company counters with the usual arguments about jobs and money flowing into the local economy and meeting the needs created by modern technology.

Little mentioned is the fact that the mine would desecrate or destroy lands the local indigenous people, the Tohono O’odham, regard as sacred. The O’odham make no claim to own the land as individuals but regard it as common space in their traditional lands and culture.

Indeed, it is noteworthy that, around the world, few indigenous people regard the land as something to be segmented, divided into parcels and sold in that piecemeal fashion to individuals or families.

More than once, I have joked with friends that, though we hold a deed and title, we don’t own the property or house. They own us. Just look at how we spend our time and money!

People of a Certain Age, we live in a society where deeds, titles, and ownership are the norms with respect to our relationship to the land. The same legal structure that supports this system has probably sorted out issues like land that has slipped away or been covered by lava. I doubt any of us has plans to abandon the homes we acquired in this system.

But the lions, the Kikuyu, the Tohono O’odham, Denys Finch-Hatton and Isak Dinesen all challenge us to consider what any of us actually own.

The nurse practitioner, as she left the exam room, sighed, “I guess it pays to think of ourselves as stewards, caretakers for a time.”

Maybe so.

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