Making a Living in Contemporary Rural South Africa

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Livelihoods and Landscapes:
The People of Guquka and Koloni and their Resources
by Paul Hebinck and Peter Lent (eds)
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Researchers and commentators have variously been intrigued by the connection between people and landscapes, especially in rural environments, where such connections have remained intact despite the huge impact of industrialisation and modernisation on society. Accounts for the people-landscape nexus reveal that humans contributed to shaping existing landscapes and adapted their livelihood strategies to changing landscapes.[1] The interconnectedness of people and their rural landscapes has largely been projected as a sign of backwardness. Such projections are clear from images of Africa and its people, which have historically been linked to the livelihoods of rural inhabitants as if all people in the continent live in rural areas and under similar conditions. Mudimbe clearly articulated those images and their link to rural environments in the following words: 'from … the insistent image of the African continent as a "refused place" arise: a hot piece of land on which pathetic beings live on roots, herbs and carmel's milk; a monstrous place and, therefore … a place where madness and melancholia reign supreme'.[2]

In the 21st century, those images are recycled by the tourism industry. The industry perpetuates stereotypes of rural landscapes as remnants of 'Eden', static and untouched by humans, and some groups of people as exotic as their landscape.[3] I refer to these examples to emphasise the point that rural environments have continuously been used to characterise both the bio-physical qualities of rural areas and the people who live in those areas. Rural landscapes in South Africa embodied these characterisations in different historical moments. Before the implementation of apartheid rule in South Africa, the majority of blacks who lived in rural areas were seen as ignorant and unable to care for the land on which they survived. Equally, their methods of cultivation were seen as uninformed and destructive, despite the existence of a successful African peasantry.[4]

During apartheid, rural areas not only acquired their political significance as 'the home of black people' through the bantustan policy, but also continued to represent the failure of black people to survive on their own without the assistance of the white minority. That is to say that bantustans were politically and materially dependent on the apartheid state, despite their projections as either independent or on the road to independence. They also became symbols of backwardness, and their demise in 1993 did not significantly change the stereotypes about people who lived in those areas. For example, Limpopo Province in the north of the country is portrayed in the media as a haven for witchcraft.[5] It could be suggested that the post-apartheid provinces that incorporated most of the areas of the former bantustans are still read through the lens of those bantustans. Hebinck and Lent's edited volume seeks to unpack the complex ways in which people living in the rural areas of the former bantustans, particularly the bantustan of Ciskei, make a living. Those complex ways cannot be understood within the narrow view of the rural as a fixed place.

Reconceptualising the Rural

Rural studies in the South African context have largely been preoccupied with land issues and the migrant labour. This is understandable because land policies always aimed at maintaining the spatial separation of blacks and whites. The authors appreciate this historical process, but go further to suggest that it is too simplistic to ascribe the transience of black people in urban areas to apartheid policies alone, as some migrant labourers remained attached to the rural areas of their origin out of choice. Their view is that the ways in which migrants maintained ties with their rural communities can be differentiated according to those who resisted westernization (the Red) and those who were accommodative (the School). A 'School' migrant opts for an urban-based livelihood and is less oriented to transfer money to rural areas, as opposed to 'the Red' migrant, who sends money to the rural homestead and visits the rural home as often as possible to protect his interests. In this way, rural livelihoods are intrinsically connected with urban-based livelihoods. This connection is clear in post-apartheid South Africa where a significant number of migrant labourers remain connected to their rural communities despite the abolition of racial segregation. The rural, therefore, is no longer a fixed geographical area but is lived through connecting different places that are supportive of life in rural areas. The authors correctly argue that livelihood encompasses more than portfolios of resources and income-generating activities and should include lifestyle and value choices, status, sense of identity and local forms of organisation. This begs the question of the relevance of the notion of livelihood in rural development.

Understanding Livelihood and Landscapes

The book attempts to counteract the emphasis on livelihood as constitutive of employment and cash income. It does this by bringing in life histories to highlight how actors value resources and interpret their world. The authors prefer the notion of resources above that of capital, because capital, as critics have argued, conceals the multiple ways in which people make a living outside the sphere of economics. It argues that, 'livelihoods should be understood as co-production; that is, an outcome of a continuous encounter and interaction between the natural and political, the social and the cultural'. The book therefore endorses the view that people and their environment are inseparable. The recognition of the mutual influences between the two (i.e. people and environment) is expressed through the links between livelihoods and landscapes. Landscapes, defined in their social, institutional, political, economic and biological contexts, set the scene and provide the natural resources for people to construct their livelihoods. The ongoing interactions between the 'natural' and the 'social' transform each other through conscious human action and agency. The assumption of the book is that 'livelihood transformations can be read from the transformations that occur at the level of landscape and also vice versa, that the landscape tells us something about the nature and dynamics of rural livelihoods'. This conception of livelihoods and landscapes is opposed to the idea of co-evolution, where the human-environmental relationship is less consciously managed. The book questions a common feature of the theses of deagrarianisation, diversification and modernisation, 'which all appear to assume that the shift from agricultural land-based livelihoods to more diversified livelihoods is an inevitable and structural process'. It validates the deagrarianisation hypothesis but suggests the existence of the peasantry in South Africa.

Repeasantisation in the Post-apartheid Era

Studies on the decline of African agriculture reveal that the process was set in motion by a number of factors ranging from adverse agro-ecological conditions to population dynamics and state intervention. The question of the prospects of repeasantisation has resurfaced in post-apartheid South Africa in academic and policy circles. Drawing from Bundy's seminal work on the African peasantry, Hebinck and Lent's volume observes that 'the persistence of a peasantry does not only raise the question of why peasants have not totally dis-

appeared but also of what the prospects are for a process of peasantisation'. Defining peasantisation as a process by which rural people continue to make a living from utilising land-based resources, the book not only suggests the existence of the peasantry in South Africa, but also links it with migrant labour. Migrant labour contributed to peasantisation through investment in rural areas. For example, migrant labourers, particularly the 'Red' invest in the rural homestead (*umzi*), which functioned as a productive unit in pre-colonial Nguni society. That productive unit was disrupted by the combined processes of land dispossession and migrant labour. Land dispossession in Guquka and Koloni can be traced back to the clash over land specifically between the trekboers and Xhosa. Using the Magisterial District of Victoria East as an example, the book argues that 'the decline in African homestead production is partly explained by the increase in landlessness … and partly by the reduction in the area of land per person brought about by the increase in the number of people with access to land'.[7]

Access to land was not only determined by the Natives Land Act of 1913 and Natives Trust Land Act of 1936, but was also fundamentally shaped by planning policies. For example, betterment planning rearranged settlement and land use patterns under the guise of development imperative while promoting the political goal of the development of bantustans.[8] Betterment planning perpetuated the allocation and arrangement of access to natural resources that was implemented in Guquka and Koloni after the Frontier Wars. This is so because betterment planning is based on the distinction of land categories for settlement, arable purposes and livestock grazing, which contrasted sharply with previously existing settlement patterns and use of the landscape. The Tomlinson Commission[9] sought to refine these categories by abolishing communal land. It recommended that communal land tenure should be replaced by private tenure and that the rural population should be divided into a landless group and a group of 'progressive farmers'. The landless group was to make a living in urban centres and industries in native areas. According to the Commission's report, 50% of black people in the reserves were to be removed. Conceptually, betterment planning and the loss of land reconfigured resources, which in turn constrained existing livelihood patterns. It also changed the pattern of migrant labour.

As the authors have observed, the bantustan system provided jobs closer to the village. The question that arises from this historical condition is whether current policies change the configuration of resources. It could also be asked whether, given the complex nature of livelihood, it is even necessary to focus on the configuration of resources in rural areas. Hebinck and Lent's volume argues that the current policy-makers pursue the same logic of modern production that underpinned betterment planning in the 1930s. There is some merit in this observation. For example, the shift in land reform policy from access to land by the masses to a small group of black commercial farmers in 1999 suggests that South Africa's land reform promotes commercial farming above the peasantry. Despite these policy shifts the authors claim that repeasantisation in rural villages should take place through full or partial commercialisation of smallholder agriculture, and that the state should support that endeavour.

The authors' call for repeasantisation is challenged by case studies that demonstrate that there has been a declining role of agriculture in the rural livelihoods of the inhabitants. It is unfortunate that the authors have not used land reform projects to demonstrate the viability of repeasantisation and the form that it should take in the country. Clearly, South Africa's market-driven land reform continues to determine access to land for housing, production and other developmental projects. The question arising from Hebinck and Lent's edited volume is whether land reform in its current form has negative or positive impact on repeasantisation. Does the shift towards black commercial farmers advance black agriculture in the same way that white agriculture benefited from the apartheid state? To be sure, the apartheid state supported white-dominated agriculture and promoted policies and provided infrastructure that favoured white farmers. As the authors noted, 'contrary to their white counterparts whose access to markets improved the development of South Africa's railway system, African producers continued to rely on wagons and sledges to transport their goods from farm to trader, and from trader to market'. Against this backdrop, what is required of the democratic state to support black farmers in post-1994 South Africa? Any form of state intervention in contemporary black agriculture should recognise the population dynamics and changes in the social and physical characteristics of rural areas.

The State of Flux in Rural Areas

Rural development planning and approaches that ignore the dynamism of rural areas are most unlikely to succeed. As Hebinck and Lent's book has shown, South Africa's rural areas are not static; their biophysical and social conditions have changed over the years. Moreover, rural areas such as Guquka ad Koloni are completely different from each other despite their location in the same vicinity. It should be noted that rural areas in South Africa are divided into two main categories. The first category involves white commercial farms. These farms have undergone significant changes over the last three decades or so. Most of them have been converted into game farms.[10] The second category, which is central to the theme of the book, refers to areas of the former bantustans. Most studies confirm that areas of the former bantustans experienced large-scale degradation,[11] which has been ascribed to a vicious cycle of overpopulation, deterioration of natural resources, migration and impoverishment. Chapters 3 and 5 of the book describe the bio-physical composition of Guquka and Koloni to confirm the deterioration of the environment.

Social transformation in the rural areas of the former bantustans is manifested in institutions, changes in population and livelihoods patterns. The institution of the chieftaincy that exercised exclusive powers over people and resources has been challenged by civil society organisations (CSOs). Chiefs, especially those who supported colonialism and apartheid, lost their legitimacy at the height of the liberation struggle in the 1980s. The mushrooming of CSOs and the redrawing of local government boundaries in post-1994 South Africa facilitated either the emergence of new institutions of governance or the maintenance of old power structures. For example, the formation of Residents Association (RAs) in Makhuzeni in the early 1990s symbolised a radical break from the tribal authority system. However, in reality the RAs did not significantly change the power balance in that area. In Guquka, the RA was dominated by descendants of families who exercised tribal authority. Those families held three quarters of all land and livestock. Although the new system of local government was not intended to retain the RA structure, it did so at Guquka. The number of people living in rural areas has declined mainly because of urbanisation. The urbanisation trend in South Africa has prompted urban theorists to argue for a development policy that focuses more on cities and towns than rural areas. In terms of the theme of the book, urbanisation has impacted on livelihoods in rural areas. For example, the authors ascribe the decline in remittances to the permanent and semi-permanent migration of young families from rural to urban areas. This is a broad statement, which has some relevance to young nuclear families in urban areas. A combination of the cost of urban life and the decline in values that are supportive to extended families in rural areas have reduced young families' investment in rural areas.

One of the most resilient features in the rural areas of the former bantustans is communal land tenure. Disappointingly, the book glosses over this feature, which is crucial to any meaningful discussion of the peasantry in rural South Africa. Despite its progressive constitution, South Africa has yet to resolve land tenure in the former bantustans. The ANC-led government made belated attempts to transform land tenure in those areas when it passed the Communal Land Reform Act in 2004, ten years after the first democratic election. In many respects, the Act confirms the rural settlement patterns and their governance bequeathed by apartheid as the organisational basis of rural life.[12] In support of the authors' thesis of the interconnection between the urban and the rural, it could be argued that conceptions of rural livelihoods should encapsulate the spectrum of activities taking place at different scales and places. The book concludes that the pattern of rural life in post-apartheid South Africa is mainly affected by access to land, labour and social grants. It suggests that, as the greater proportion of households in Guquka and Koloni owns cattle, development initiatives focusing on increasing cattle production would have a better chance of improving. livelihoods. Such a one-sided approach could be costly in the long term.

Notes

1. James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape*, Cambridge MA, Cambridge University Press, 1996; James McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: An Environmental History of Africa, 1800-1990*, Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 1999.
2. Valentin Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988.
3. Robert Murray, *Mister Africa: The Story of African Car Hire and Trans Africa Safaris and the Development of Overland Touring from Cape Town to the Nile*, Cape Town, Murray, 1996.
4. Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, Oxford, James Currey, 1988.
5. Isak Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld*, London, Pluto Press, 2001.
6. Norman Levy, *The Foundations of the South African Cheap Labour System*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.
7. The consequences of the loss of land were worsened by mass killing of cattle following Nongqawuse's prophecy.
8. De Wet provides a useful definition of betterment planning as 'attempts by successive South African Governments to combat erosion, conserve the environment and develop agriculture in the "homelands", and so also cut down on urbanisation, and in some phases even migrant labour, thereby keeping more black people in the homelands' (Chris de Wet, 'Betterment Planning in a Rural Village in Keiskammahoek, Ciskei', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15 (1989), pp. 326-345.
9. The purpose of the Tomlinson Commission was to advise government on the socio-economic development of black areas. The Commission's Report of 1955 suggested plans for the consolidation of scattered reserves, because the existing areas had no foundation for community development and growth (see Anthony Christopher, *The Atlas of Apartheid*, London, Routledge, 1994).
10. In 1990, private enterprise managed 8.6 million hectares and, by 2003, game ranching covered some 17 million hectares.
11. Timm Hoffman and Ally Ashwell, *Nature Divided: Land Degradation in South Africa*, Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press, 2001.
12. Maano Ramutsindela, 'Resilient geographies: land, boundaries and the consolidation of the former bantustans in post-1994 South Africa', *Geographical Journal* 173(2007), pp. 43-55.