



Lisa Cliggett. *Grains from Grass: Aging, Gender, and Famine in Rural Africa.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. xvii + 224 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4366-4; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7283-1.



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The Vulnerability of Space and Time

This ethnography of gender and aging among the Gwembe Valley Tonga people in southern Zambia, who were relocated as a result of the creation of the Kariba Dam in the 1950s, brings to our attention a people currently caught in a cycle of drought, severe food shortages, and compromised social institutions. These contemporary difficulties are largely a result of the disruption of forced relocation, which necessitated major shifts in agricultural practices, as well as the effects of climate change over the past few decades, and the overall declines in the Zambian economy.

Gwembe Tonga could be characterized as the stereotypically "African rural poor," often unable to adequately feed themselves, dependent on low-tech dryland farming and cattle herding in a deteriorating environment, and subject to low life expectancy, high rates of morbidity, and many other ills usually taken to measure poor quality of life by development institutions. Author Lisa Cliggett focuses her energy on disrupting this generalized stereotype, by providing detailed descriptions of the various livelihood strategies, opportunities, and constraints that differentiate people, particularly along gender and age

lines. She also emphasizes people's agency through her theoretical choices, as outlined in chapter 2, rather than the extremely difficult context, in an attempt to humanize and bring dignity to people's perseverance and ingenuity. I would argue that she is mostly successful in this endeavor, with some qualifications outlined below.

The book is organized into eight chapters. The first three lay out central concepts and methodologies that drive the work, including a discussion of aging in non-western contexts, key concepts such as households, kinship, conflict, agency, gender, generation, and vulnerability, and the ethnographic approach employed. This latter discussion frankly admits to the apparent ludicrousness of a white western researcher arriving in poor rural African villages to do "fieldwork," a feeling so many of us have experienced. These chapters also provide clear and accessible introductions to important theoretical and methodological debates in anthropology and development studies more broadly, and should be easily understood by undergraduate students and non-academic audiences alike. This is one of Cliggett's stated aims, and while this can be applauded, for me there is also

the worry of “dumbing down” the scholarship and hence the field more generally. This is a constant challenge in African studies, as students and the general public in the west are usually so poorly informed about the continent, that a great deal of background is required before audiences can engage with the complexities of cutting-edge scholarship. The one glaring omission in this section is a discussion of research ethics. Cliggett does state in several places throughout the text that her main aim is to disrupt western stereotypes and put the spotlight on the mostly ignored rural elderly in Africa in the hope of informing social-policy outcomes. However, the micro-dynamics of ethics in the field are barely touched on. How were expectations of her as an outsider negotiated? What immediate and long-term responsibility does she have for her participants, etc.?

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 go into details of village livelihoods, with particular attention to the strategies, options, entitlements, and assets available to older women and men. Included are both material aspects of survival such as food, shelter, farming implements, agricultural fields, gardens, and cattle, and non-material aspects of survival such as social and cultural power to build and manipulate the social networks of kin and community. Of particular interest is that although the Gwembe Tonga are matrilineal, and “proper family” and inheritance patterns are traced through matrilineal lines, men are able to control most of the most profitable material assets, such as cattle and agricultural produce, as well as manipulate social networks much more successfully than women to extract labor and wealth from others. Taking advantage of the extensive longitudinal data available from the Gwembe Tonga Research Project initiated by Elizabeth Colson and Thayer Scudder, Cliggett is able to historicize these dynamics, and show how they have changed over time as a result of relocation, changing social institutions, and the economic context, in ways that have marginalized women from earlier opportunities. Also of academic interest is the section on ancestral worship, wherein Cliggett indicates that people view the ancestors as forgiving and patient if the people fail to perform rain-calling or other traditional ceremonies of ancestor

appeasement. This contrasts with the next-door Shona people in my own study of the effects of resettlement in the 1980s and 1990s, where people viewed the ancestors as angry with communities for failing to perform traditional ceremonies, and in fact, were said to be punishing people with drought as a result. This section is hindered, however, by a somewhat cursory glance at the rich literature on the interface of Christianity and traditional religions in the region, which could have helped deepen the analysis.

Chapter 7 moves out of the village to follow migrants, especially grown children, who leave for towns and cities, for the farming frontier in order to look for better livelihoods. This chapter is repetitive, but does offer some important insights, especially the point that unlike elsewhere in the southern African region, migrants do not provide significant and steady remittances to rural homesteads. They do, however, tend to nurture the social networks at home through infrequent gifts and visits, in a strategy to ensure themselves a place for their old age. The final chapter provides a summary for the book, especially the points relevant to gender and aging. For women, a life-long process of maintaining social networks is required to ensure a home and support in old age, but these are in no way guaranteed. For men, a lifetime of acquiring material assets, and maintaining good social standing is critical, although even then all may be lost if jealousy leads to an accusation of witchcraft, and a witch-finder demands heavy payment for the cleansing required to restore social acceptability.

Overall, this is an interesting and readable book, and certainly succeeds in disrupting generalizations about an undifferentiated “rural poor.” However, in my view, the people remain distanced by Cliggett’s narrative choice of the first person. We always see people through her lens and her voice. I kept hoping for lengthy quotes and life stories told in the voices of her informants. The choice not to do this beyond very short and infrequent quotations seems odd given the author’s emphasis on agency and the strong tradition of life history approaches in feminist anthropology.

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