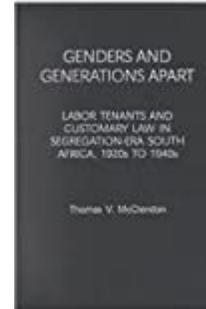


Thomas V. McClendon. *Genders and Generations Apart: Labor Tenants and Customary Law in Segregation-Era South Africa, 1920s to 1940s.* Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002. xxii + 234 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-325-07110-7; \$67.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-325-07088-9.



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Thom McClendon's *Genders and Generations Apart* provides an insightful look at social and economic relations within African farm-tenant families in segregation-era Natal. Although the book is set in the context of a now-familiar story of rural African impoverishment and social dislocation in South Africa, McClendon brings a fresh perspective to our understanding of the ways in which rural patriarchy were constructed and contested in South Africa. He argues that the South African state, in conjunction with African patriarchs, sought to further subordinate African minors (unmarried male youth and women) to the labor needs of elder males and white farmers through the use of an increasingly rigid system of "customary" and contract law. The author, who is a trained lawyer as well as historian, has included the themes of generation and the law alongside the important analytical tools of race, class, and gender that he uses for gaining new insights into social relations in African families. He uncovers the complex relationships among fathers, sons, wives, and white landlords. He moreover sheds new light on the nature of segregation and the various identities at play during this period. McClendon has rightly complicated the picture we have of individuals and their relations with broader social structures and historical forces. In doing so, he has rendered more vivid the lived experiences of Africans in the South African colonial context.

McClendon opens *Genders and Generations* with a useful overview of his methodology. He situates his study in the wider literature on segregation-era rural South Africa and effectively engages the latest literature on gender and labor tenancy. He then turns to a thoughtful consideration of customary law as the lens through which he views contestations of power in African households. He reminds us that the manipulation and codification of African laws were a central part of the colonial project throughout Africa. They were, moreover, the lynchpin of an accommodation between thinly spread colonial officers and the still-powerful African patriarchs who they relied on to carry out their work. By considering these laws and the ways in which they were interpreted and challenged, McClendon provides us with a more complicated and convincing story of the limits of indirect rule. Although he argues that the increasingly ossified Natal code of "customary law" was used as an effective tool by the state and African patriarchy, he also shows how youth and women contested the very "traditions" and customs upon which it was based. This is important for our understanding of the ways in which customary law was reconfigured during the segregation era in Natal. He explains how he used the very rich sources of colonial Natal court records, in conjunction with a series of in-depth oral interviews, to uncover the tensions within labor tenant households. He notes the difficulties

inherent in using court records but makes a convincing argument about their value and the rest of the book confirms his skill at using them.

In chapters 2 and 3, McClendon chronicles the struggles of labor tenants during a prolonged period of drought and depression, and the increasing movement of women and youth from the rural areas to the urban areas. Much has been written about this period of economic hardship and social dislocation, and, in this regard, McClendon tends to cover well-traversed ground. Nevertheless, he does place an important new emphasis on the cleavages of generation and gender. He shows how the crucial economic questions for African tenants surrounded their access to land, especially grazing land for cattle. Cattle remained the essential form of productive and reproductive wealth for Africans in the rural areas. The ability, therefore, of fathers and sons to secure, and more importantly, to find a place to maintain cattle (or even allow the herd to increase in size) was what separated the economically viable peasant from the destitute. The state and patriarchs were able, in part, to force the young men to return to their fathers' land in the rural areas precisely because of the persistence of the cattle economy. McClendon then seeks to show that it was the youth, women, and rural activists who drew the lines along which colonial administrators and African patriarchs alike struggled to maintain control. Here we get the author's insights into the local experience of the much broader phenomenon of urbanization in Africa.

McClendon links the tensions borne of these social and economic dislocations to the rising tide of rural opposition politics embodied in the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (of Natal). As Ben Carton argued for the case of the Bambatha Rebellion in his *Blood from Your Children*, McClendon, too, points to a definite generational dimension in the struggle from below.[1] In this regard, McClendon provides us with a vivid picture of familial relations through his compelling analysis of court records. Although he rightly cautions readers about the limits of these records, they are in many respects the closest we can get to the actual voice—albeit filtered through the colonial context, and the processes of translation and transcription of Africans from the past. Used in conjunction, as the author has done, with current oral interviews and written records, these sources allow us a glimpse into the intimate world of people's personal lives at moments of tension and crisis.

In the remaining two chapters, McClendon provides fresh insights into family and labor tenant relations as

he traces the tensions between African fathers and their families. These tensions clearly revolved around the effort of the youth to struggle to find niches in the urban areas while simultaneously trying to maintain a stake in the rural areas. As McClendon shows, access to these rural footholds was probably even more tightly controlled by the combined efforts of the native commissioners and fathers than were the urban areas. In chapter 4, he makes the critical point that young men were growing increasingly disenchanted with their fathers over the latter's demands for contributions to *lobola* (bridewealth). He further points out that the Native Administration Act of 1927 sought to ensure the continuation of *lobola* as a means of shoring up patriarchal control. These findings point to important questions about the nature of tradition as it relates to the rural political economy. As I have argued elsewhere for the case of Zululand, the persistence of the cattle economy was absolutely central to the material base of chiefly authority.[2] McClendon has demonstrated here that this also extended to the patriarchy in Natal. It was, then, in these ways that the state managed to rework the existing material base of rural African production to serve the interests of segregation. For McClendon and others there remains the difficult question of why the youth at this time did not seek to abandon these rural "traditional" forms of economic security altogether. Could it have been that the male youth at least aspired to eventually replicate the same forms of patriarchal authority and accumulation that their fathers had achieved?

Finally, in chapter 5, McClendon addresses the issue of gender as it relates to patriarchy and the law. He highlights the paradoxes of the colonial project in Natal which at once afforded women a broader range of opportunities and yet sought to bind them over ever more tightly to their fathers, husbands, and white employers. Here he shows how it was the social and legal construction of gender that colonial authorities and African patriarchs used to control women at a time when their apparently increased independence threatened male authority and state control. He argues that in the face of new challenges by women, the state hardened its stance in regard to further empowering African men over wives and daughters. The enhanced controls over these social categories, which were apparently well-defined and understood by the patriarchs, raises questions about women who escaped these otherwise circumscribed identities. Here McClendon does not address the challenges that women who headed their own households or found independent niches in the urban areas posed to the system,

although these cases may not have made their way into the court records he covered.

There remain a few shortcomings with the book. As with some other works in the field that consider generation as a central theme shaping the construction of people's identity, there is actually little in the way of a definition or exploration of what a "generation" is, and, for that matter, how long a person sustains a generational identity. While other aspects of an individual's social status, such as race or gender, may be less mutable, all people grow old. As Norman Etherington observed, in a review on a similar work, youth shades into middle age and middle age into old age.[3] It is difficult, therefore, to draw the lines, as the author tries to, between being a "youth" and becoming an elder, although clearly marriage is a critical juncture. It is also surprising, given that the book is concerned with changing patterns of tenancy and labor in Natal, that there are no references to or engagements with Keletso Atkins's important work on the shaping of an African work ethic in Natal in the early colonial period.[4] There are, moreover, insufficient statistics provided for the reader to get a clear sense of the local economy of the study area and how it compares to the rest of the country. In some places, the book is repetitive, especially where the author reminds readers about the nature of labor service contracts and the economy. It would be more interesting if McClendon elaborated on the more lively material. He offers a number of tantalizing pieces of evidence about the ways in which labor and family relations operated on tenant farms which could be further explored. It would be interesting, for example, if we could learn more about the fascinating surrogate patriarchy of the white landlord-farmers he refers to, and how this intersected with the colonial discourses on segregation. Similarly, a more thorough discussion of women's experiences on farms that can be gleaned from the deeply textured court records would prove to be equally illuminating. The book could also benefit from some revisions and additions. His focus remains on the white-owned farms. He notes that the exodus of people from the farming areas often entailed their engaging in oscillating mi-

grant labor, or long-term, though legally tenuous, settlement in the urban areas. Clearly, though, the movement of disenfranchised youth and women from the farms entailed not just a movement to the urban centers of Natal. Many displaced rural Africans made their way onto the reserves, and thereby came under the jurisdiction of chiefs who had, arguably, even greater authority over the residents of their wards than fathers and chiefs on farm-lands. A more detailed consideration of what role the reserves play in his story would enhance our understanding of the range of options and opportunities that women and youth had during this period.

Overall, *Genders and Generations* is a well-researched book that provides a keen analysis of the rich details to be found in the court records. McClendon has brought new generational and gender dimensions to his cogent arguments about the rural political economy of segregation-era Natal. His work will provide a sound foundation for new research on the nature of labor tenant families and the ways in which customary law, the lynchpin of so many colonial regimes, was reconfigured and applied in South Africa.

Notes

[1]. Benedict Carton, *Blood from Your Children: The Colonial Origins of Generational Conflict in South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

[2]. Aran MacKinnon, "The Persistence of the Cattle Economy in Zululand South Africa, 1900-50" *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 33:1 (1999), pp. 98-136.

[3]. Norman Etherington, Review of *Blood from Your Children: The Colonial Origins of Generational Conflict in South Africa*, by Benedict Carton, H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews (October 2000), URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=8861979941637>.

[4]. Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993).

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