How social security becomes social insecurity: fluid households, crisis talk and the value of grants in a KwaZulu-Natal village

Bernard Dubbeld, Stellenbosch University
dubbeld@sun.ac.za

Abstract: Social grants have become increasingly important income for many in South Africa. Grants are not welcomed by all however: in the village where I completed fieldwork as many as seventy per cent of its inhabitants rely on grants, people regard such transfers with suspicion. In many iterations of this doubt social upheavals — including the decline of marriage – are regarded as resulting from grants disruptively "empowering" women and the youth in such a way that enables the rejection of "tradition". Yet such crisis talk hides as much it reveals: insofar as social grants are provided unevenly, such grants give some people — and especially young mothers — relatively more economic capacity in poorer households than others, specifically adult men and changes do not also follow the patterns that crises talk suggests. Ultimately I argue that the stark contradiction between the need for waged work and the lack of waged work in certain areas, especially in rural villages, gives decisive shape to the grants and its effects, and ultimately leads to a new kind of uneven geography in which those without access to grants can seldom sustain themselves. Under these conditions, young men in particular often become temporary residents in villages like Glendale. In addition to exploring these patterns of movement, and the kinds of crisis talk that arise from grants, I suggest in this presentation that even those who receive grants do not regard them as offering a stable future, and question the security of the social assistance that sustains them.

There is no respect in these times, because young people say they have rights, so they do whatever they like. The boys of today have no honour, they get girls pregnant and leave them. (Mandla)

I think its criminal behaviour, you should not take somebody's child and cohabit with her when you have not paid *lobola*. Our children now go out with a girl and take her to their homes, and she agrees. In the end she has children and there are fights, and he doesn't want to pay anymore, because we women are paid with a grant. (Hlengiwe)

INTRODUCTION

Social grants provided by the government have become critical as a source of income for many in South Africa over the last decade. In Glendale, a village in KwaZulu-Natal where I conducted fieldwork between 2007 and 2012, my informants estimated that as many as 70 per cent of villagers relied on these government grants as a primary source of income, whether by qualifying directly or by association to someone receiving a grant.[1] However, such grants are not universally welcomed by villagers, who attribute major moral upheavals to them, especially of gender—with grants understood to absolve men of the responsibility of fatherhood—and of generation, with grants being regarded as aiding youth in breaking with elders and marriage.   Indeed, as I will show, some villagers view grants, housing, and rights as an assemblage of 'government things' they take to be socially corrosive, foreclosing the futures such government interventions intend to foster.

Certainly the number of grants has increased dramatically, and become a significant portion of government expenditure.[2] With some 16 million recipients estimated in 2012, the Institute of Race Relations suggests that "more people are now on welfare than working".[3] A recent study of the Child Support Grant, the grant with by far the most recipients, found that multiple indicators of poverty had been reduced by the grant.[4] An economic study, quoted in a national newspaper, has additionally shown that grants have aided not only in the alleviation of the most extreme forms of poverty, but have contributed to some reduction of inequality.[5]

If these accounts suggest that grants have made a broad and significant impact, I consider the effects of the grant both in a specific context and in relation to the requirements

---

[1] This paper is based on five years of ethnographic research, including 9 months of intensive fieldwork in 2009-2010, with 20 informants. Research involved observation, spending time in people's houses and a number of gatherings, and several interviews with each informant. In the dissertation upon which the research is based, I introduce each of the informants quoted in this paper. Msizi, Siphokazi, Dodokazi, Nomathemba, Hlengiwe, Thokozani, Nokwazi, Jabu, Themba, Mphumi, Angelina, and Makosi were all interviewed on many occasions between August 2009 and April 2010 and material quoted here is drawn from my fieldnotes. Most of the research was conducted in isiZulu, with some assistance from Mphumi Zungu. See B Dubbeld *Without work: paradoxes of the postapartheid project in the countryside* (2013) PhD thesis, University of Chicago. especially p. 34-38

[2] T Holmes 'Gordhan ups his social spending' *Mail & Guardian* 1 March 2013.

[3] M Jones 'More people on welfare than working' *Cape Times* 28 June 2013. I am cautious to accept the statement that there are 'more people on welfare than working', as it is seems likely that some receive grants and hold unregistered and/or irregular employment, as was the case on the rare occasions that people found some kind of work in Glendale. Nevertheless, the statement does capture how central grants have become.

[4] Department of Social Development, SASSA and UNICEF *The Child Support Grant Impact Assessment: evidence from a survey of children, adolescents, and their households.* 2012.

[5] L Donnelly 'Welfare could be the gini in the bottle' *Mail & Guardian* 10 May 2013.

necessary to qualify for the grant to enable a richer picture of changes accompanying grants. The fact that particular groups have been designated as vulnerable and especially deserving of government aid may improve certain indicators of poverty (for instance, of school assistance) and at the same time catalyse tensions in households by giving money to certain people and not others. In Glendale, as I will describe, not only are grants regarded as reversing traditions, but also seem to shape movement to and from households, and the very possibility of permanent rural residence.

In short, then, I will analyse the social effects of grants in Glendale. Beginning with a brief account of the makings of social grant policy in South Africa, I will show that grants seem to be shaping a longer process of fracturing of rural households in decisive ways. I will then discuss the kinds of crisis talk that has appeared in these households, where government policy is entirely blamed for destroying local family values, as if rural African families had long been stable units. I will then conclude with a discussion of the value of grants, in which I speculate about their relation to anxieties about the future. Ultimately, therefore, I will argue that, while grants have achieved important benefits, and local rejections of them might be somewhat misguided, the ambivalence grants conjure captures a social situation of scarce waged work which the design of grants does not address.

POST-APARTHEID SOCIAL GRANTS

Post-apartheid social policy has emphasized development rather than a more radically redistributive agenda as the basis for a more equitable and racially transformed future South African society. In respect of welfare policy, the post-apartheid administration inherited a welfare apparatus that was not only established principally for white people—although other races gradually gained access to its various components over the course of the twentieth century – but it was also organized around the norm of nuclear families, where husbands worked and women made a home. That is to say, it assumed individuals were deserving of welfare when they were physically unable to achieve such an arrangement, whether because of age, disability or the absence of a male wage-earner. Seekings has argued that this logic of deserving and undeserving poor shapes post-apartheid social assistance policy, disadvantaging able-bodied, working age adults, and, despite government claims to be aiding historically disadvantaged groups, ultimately creates distinctions among poor, black

South Africans.[6]   Seekings' critique is important precisely because it identifies a form of differentiation among poorer South Africans, which in Glendale is felt as a line of fracture between those who receives grants and those who do not. I will argue that this fracture is in a part consequence of the shape of social grants, the effects of which are amplified by broader social conditions.

The post-apartheid administration did make one critical revision to the welfare policies inherited from apartheid. This was the introduction of the Child Support Grant, a grant designed to give a monthly amount for the support of a child and by far the grant with most recipients today. Different to the State Maintenance Grant it replaced, the Child Support Grant asks no questions about kinship or family structure. Its only requirement is a financial means test: to qualify, the caregiver, if an individual, must earn less than R33 600 annually, and if a couple, less than R67 200. When the grant was introduced in 1998, it covered children until the age of seven. Since 2010, the carers of children up to and including the age of 18 qualify to receive the grant.

The Child Support Grant emerged from a process that began with the newly-elected ANC government tasking the Lund Commission with addressing issues of child support in 1995. The State Maintenance Grant was designed to aid women and children who had lost the male breadwinner, and its goal was to prop up poor white families *qua* families.[7] Lund's commission instead proposed to give money to whoever looked after the child, and made no documentary demands to prove paternity or loss thereof. In its initial formulation, it was to be given to all who applied for it, regardless of income. While a means test was introduced when the grant became policy, the Child Support Grant bypasses or even works against normative conceptions of family by deliberately disregarding the kinship situation of a grantee.

---

[6] J Seekings 'Deserving Individuals and Groups' (2008) 68 *Transformation* 28-52. Barchiesi's (2007) reading of post-apartheid social policy and the Basic Income Grant stresses the state's commitment to the dignity of work confronted by the growth of unemployment, and shows how this tension between asserting the value of work and the impossibility of accessing employment shaped the Congress of South African Trade Union's (COSATU) position on a universal income grant between 1997 and 2003. COSATU does seem to recognize the extent of unemployment and supports the Basic Income Grant, but does not pose it as an alternative to wage income, but rather as a passage towards wage employment in a manner that does not radically challenge government's 'normative fixation' on wage work.

[7] F Lund 'Children, Citizenship, and Child Support: The Child Support Grant in South Africa' in K Breckenridge and S Szreter (eds) *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History* (2012) 475-494.

This conception of the reformulated grant was no doubt informed by the sensitivity to the well documented existence of multiple configurations of kinship in South Africa, and therefore also to a history of colonialism that had prescribed the nuclear family and its attendant gendered configurations as a moral good and normative standard.[8] It may also have been informed by analyses of welfare in Western Europe and North America, and especially by a feminist critique of the normative origins and gendered implications of many welfare regimes.[9] Certainly the grant recognises that the work of care of children—frequently undertaken by women, and even more frequently unremunerated— should receive state social assistance, and that such assistance should require minimal bureaucratic difficulty to acquire.[10]

The South African Social Security Agency lists a little over 11 million beneficiaries of the Child Support Grant, with KwaZulu-Natal province alone responsible for almost 2 million 800 000 recipients of the Child Support Grant (see Table 1 below). Nationally, the three other major grants – the Old Age Grant, the Disability Grant and the Foster Care Grant – together account for less than half of the number of recipients of the Child Support Grant, and so the latter's reach is significantly wider, even if the R280 paid out is less than a quarter of what the other grants provide.

---

[8] See J Comaroff and JL Comaroff *Of Revelation and Revolution: Volume 2, The Dialectics of Modernity on the South African Frontier* (1997) ch 3; J Ferguson *Expectations of Modernity* (1999) ch 5; Lund (2012) 482-3. Barchiesi's reading of the Lund Commission, from whose proposals the Child Support Grant eventually emerged, emphasizes the commission's stress on citizens and communities, which he interprets as pathologising dependency and confining state expenditure to those with special needs. This is quite different from my reading, at least insofar as the Child Support Grant seems explicitly not to reinforce the ideal of male- headed households or a model of citizenship built on the western nuclear family; see F Barchiesi 'South African debates on the basic income grant: Wage labour and the post-Apartheid social policy' (2007) 33(3) *Journal of Southern African Studies* 561-575 at 567-8. I agree with Barchiesi, however, on the point that the Child Support Grant does not challenge the centrality of wage work, and show below that, in the absence of that work, ends up radically altering the configuration of the countryside.

[9] N Fraser 'After the family wage: What do women want in social welfare' (1994) 21(1) *Social Justice* 80-86; A Orloff 'Gender in the Welfare State' (1996) 22 *Annual Review of Sociology* 51-78.

[10] One important difference with Scandanavian models of social democracy lies in the fact that, following Fakier's research on care work (see K Fakier 'Mobile Care: Subverting Traditional Notions of Motherhood in a Precarious Society'(2012) Unpublished paper presented at the Colloquium on the Politics of Precarious Society, University of Witwatersrand, September 4- 6), institutions designed to alleviate care work—such as public crèches-- have become significantly weaker as more money has been spent on grants and other government concerns; also see Orloff (1996) at 65-68. Thus the government may be understood as providing some compensation for the carers of children, but not offering much in the way of possible avenues out of such care work. Certainly, as will be discussed below, care of children is distributed among kin, although this is significantly different from public institutions.

Table 1: Total number of social grants by grant type and region as at 31 December 2012

Region	Grant type							
	OAG	WVG	DG	GIA	CDG	FCG	CSG	Total
EC	503,810	78	185,913	9,064	18,359	109,034	1,852,147	2,678,405
FS	169,336	9	88,040	1,132	5,765	38,050	631,210	933,542
GP	416,222	151	123,915	1,548	15,615	56,736	1,559,585	2,173,772
KZN	585,986	88	319,171	28,897	35,913	132,916	2,766,951	3,869,922
LP	391,019	49	88,859	10,629	11,657	53,686	1,570,065	2,125,964
MP	224,968	28	82,200	2,749	8,517	33,598	1,049,136	1,401,196
NW	215,140	18	87,216	3,970	8,291	39,727	746,299	1,100,661
NC	74,023	18	49,795	4,203	4,445	13,408	274,073	419,965
WC	258,117	167	154,954	9,437	10,654	27,738	854,473	1,315,540
Total	2,838,621	606	1,180,063	71,629	119,216	504,893	11,303,939	16,018,967

Source: SOCPEN system   *NB: The total include grant in aid*

Source: Table 1 taken from http://www.sassa.gov.za/Portals/1/Documents/b17619a9-eeac-40d8-8167-a27b5afc573a.pdf, accessed June 2013.

In a wide ranging study of the political economy of post-apartheid South Africa, Marais[11] has concluded that the grants have become the 'main poverty alleviating tool' in the country. What this conclusion admits, however, is that, as much as grants help people who cannot find employment, we cannot assume that they will find employment in future, and thus to imply that certain categories of the poor should be working is deeply flawed. Many in government are reluctant to commit to a more general social welfare programme, or a basic income grant, instead committing themselves to job creation and emphasizing the dignity of waged work, while making reforms to particular parts of the grant administration—such as extending the age of eligibility for the Child Support Grant— a strategy which Seekings and Mattisonn have recently called 'parametric reform'.[12]

So while government assistance to women has grown over the last decade,[12] and this has specifically taken a form that does not reinforce nuclear families, it is less clear - in a context where waged work is generally scarce - what the effects are of putting money in the hands of some and not others.

---

[11] H Marais *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Political Economy of Change* (2011) at 205

[12] J Seekings and H Matisonn 'South Africa: The continuing politics of basic income' in M Murray and C Pateman (eds) *Basic Income Worldwide: Horizons of Reform* (2012).

[13] S Hassim 'Social Justice, Care and Developmental Welfare in South Africa: A Capabilities Perspective' (2008) 34(2) *Social Dynamics* 104-118.

Glendale is a small village on the banks of the Mvoti River, inland from KwaDukuza (previously Stanger). The settlement developed around a sugar mill, which, especially from the 1920s onwards, employed predominately people of Indian descent. Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, Africans from surrounding areas were employed casually and seasonally to work on cane fields close to the mill. In 1997, the mill was closed down, shortly after being purchased by the sugar company, Illovo. Despite the closure, plans for a housing project in the area went ahead. Construction on approximately 400 houses was completed in 2002, with the new settlement built alongside the decaying and considerably fewer houses once used by sugar mill workers.

This post-apartheid development has given people houses without easy access to waged work: while there is still limited seasonal work available on the cane fields, and a few manage to travel the 30 km to the nearest town, KwaDukuza, most people living in Glendale do not have regular waged work.

One expression of this became clear during my fieldwork. Generally houses in Glendale are home to one or two elderly folks, often with a grandchild or two, or a woman on her own with between one and three children. Sometimes single men inhabit the houses, and every now and again you might encounter three generations, but in those cases, the man of the middle generation is seldom present. Indeed, the number of people living in the village is not constant. The most dramatic shift happens around Christmas time, when there are suddenly many more people in the village. It is especially young men who seem to return then, marking their presence by standing on streets, talking loudly, or drinking merrily. Even though the absent kin of Glendale's homes, especially men in their 20s, 30s and40s, do return to the village much more often than at Christmas time, they do not all return at the same time or exhibit the same revelry.

In his 2003 reading of migrant labour, Ngwane[13] analysed Christmas time as a time of struggle over the homestead, when men returned from urban, waged work and attempted to assert control over rural domestic spaces; a time of elaborate rituals of gifting, where men claimed authority despite their absence, but where their authority could not be achieved with any certainty or duration beyond Christmas.

---

[13] Z Ngwane "'Christmas Time" and the Struggles for the Household in the Countryside: rethinking the cultural geography of migrant labour' (2003) 29(3) *Journal of Southern African Studies* 681-699.

Yet when men return to Glendale today, at Christmas or at other times of the year, it is seldom with much to offer as gifts. Several informants emphasized that younger men are viewed with suspicion, both for having little to offer financially and for absconding from their domestic and especially paternal responsibilities. Msizi, for instance, laments that men fear supporting their children, and literally disappear. Siphokazi tells of how her son has been gone for a year 'as if he did not know who gave birth to him'. She 'reprimands him for not acknowledging her and taking care of her'. But if young men are conspicuous by their absence, women, like Dodakazi, tell me that 'anyway, men are unreliable as fathers and may only contribute R50 here and there, but what can you do with R50 if you have a child?'

That men are recognised as absentees from rural households is certainly as old as migrant labour, and those that do not return regularly or at all—absconders, have received considerable scholarly attention. Drawing on fieldwork in KwaZulu-Natal in the mid-1990s, White[14] developed Mayer's[15] earlier discussion of absconders by distinguishing between those men who received wages from regular work and those who did not find waged work, who became locally identified as 'thugs'. In his analysis of the 1920s and 1930s, Beinart[16] stressed considerable differentiation among rural households in the Transkei, with younger men from poorer households and fewer local political connections becoming involved in more extensive spells of migrant labour, and in turn establishing the basis to set up rural homes independently from their fathers. In asserting their independence from their father's house, these men also risked being regarded as absconders.

In an extensive review of research on black households in South Africa, Margo Russell[17] suggests that the category of the absconder was common across all African language groups, and was largely used to describe the absence of younger men, a marking not necessarily applied to the absence of women. Russell emphasizes a long history of household fluidity, of connections between rural and urban that confound a unidirectional process of 'urbanization'. She points out that while a rural homestead should always be occupied by one's kin, membership of a household is not determined by the consistent presence of all of its members.

---

[14] H White 'Ritual Haunts: The Timing of Estrangement in the South African Countryside' (2003) Unpublished paper delivered to the African Studies Workshop, University of Chicago. 18 November 2003.

[15] P Mayer *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanization in a South African City* (1961) at 6-7.

[16] W Beinart *The Political Economy of Pondoland, 1860-1930* (1982).

[17] M Russell 'Understanding Black Households: the problem' (2003) 29(2) *Social Dynamics* 5-47.

In contemporary Glendale, absence from the household seems to take on a particular shape that is more than just contingent on individual circumstances. It is certainly the case in Glendale that few men can obtain permanent, or even regular, work that would either fortify their position in the village or allow them to resettle with their families closer to workplaces. People in Glendale say that when you try and find work in the city, you have to be prepared to move around, concurring with Martin Murray's[18] characterisation of living on the urban fringe as a 'permanent condition of nomadic being'. As Hunter has suggested,[19] after the decline of apartheid influx control both men and women started to move frequently, but irregularly and over shorter distances, in stark contrast to the organised (coerced) migration to workplaces that men had undertaken for much of the twentieth century.[20]

In Glendale what seems to define movement is access to the social grant. Those able to access two grants, commonly for looking after children and a pension, are likely to be elderly women. They stay in Glendale most of the time, especially if they have managed to obtain a government-built house. Older men who receive pensions also remain in Glendale most of the time. Younger women with children may also stay in Glendale, although if they have parents on whom they can rely to look after their children, they might use part of their child grant to look for work. They may also work casually in agriculture part of the year, when planting or harvesting work is available, and travel about looking for work at other times of the year. Men under 60 years old, who do not receive grants, are in a particularly precarious position. They spend most of their time outside of Glendale—unless they are willing to accept the authority of their female partners or mothers at home. When these men manage to make (or obtain) some money – and around holidays – they sometimes appear at a partner's home in Glendale. But many men are absent much of the time, a fact that does not endear them to their relatives, and to the mothers of their children in particular.

---

[18] M Murray *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid* (2008) at p.123

[19] M Hunter *Love in a Time of Aids: Inequality, Gender, and Rights in South Africa* (2010).

[20] In an extensive account, Hunter (2010 at 108, 111 and 97-8) develops careful distinctions between informal settlements and townships and shows generation stratifications between older men that have regular wage work and younger men that do not. He also points to the changing composition of households, suggesting a significant reduction in the size of households as the numbers of households become greater. He also suggests that in 'rural KwaZulu-Natal' the absence of male-headed households is striking. While he emphasizes the growing movement of women, viewed from the village of Glendale the irregular movement of youth in general, and young men in particular, is especially striking, and it is difficult to ascertain the size of the household merely by the numbers of people within a physical structure on any given day. In Glendale, there are also almost no older men with any employment who might parallel the 'sugar daddies' described in Hunter's study.

Sharp and Spiegel's[21] account of QwaQwa in the 1980s tells of men claiming priority over meager household resources in order to search for waged work. They suggest that 'bitter clashes' arose over expenditures, when children went hungry while men purchased bus fares to reach labour bureaux. What seems to have changed with the child grant is that men have less capacity to claim household resources and are absent for longer. Women may use grant money to look for work themselves. Hence, in a recent intervention that corresponds to what I found in Glendale, Dori Posel et al suggested that the social grant was enabling a new configuration of the household: where unmarried women with children live with their parents, and often leave the child in the care of their parents as they look for greater sources of income.[22] Twenty-one-year-old Nomathemba was one typical case: she and her father receive grants, she for her child and her father a pension, and this enables them all to live together. While she does not regard this as ideal, she believes it to be necessary for the moment.

Perhaps the frequency of these living arrangements leads many in Glendale to reinforce ideas of women as the pivotal part of the household. Siphokazi tells me that women are heading households, doing 'nothing' jobs because they have no choice, and 'going up and down, holding and leaving so that their children can go on with life'. In this context, 'holding and leaving' (in isiZulu, *uyabamba uyayeka*) describes someone who does a tremendous amount at once, carrying a burden for themselves and others; something like 'always hustling to get by, for oneself and for others'. My informants recognised that women in Glendale do move around, but emphasize that women move in a manner that sees them return to their household regularly, and it is they who are regarded as responsible for social reproduction.

But this is not read by all women with the same intractable tone of Siphokazi's statement. Consider the example Dodokazi offers. I quoted her above, emphasizing the limits of male partners being tied to their limited capacity to find waged work. Dodokazi also told me how she made her mother angry by falling in love with a person of whom her family did not approve. So angry, indeed, that she was thrown out of the house. After initially moving in with her boyfriend in an area outside Glendale, she moved back to the village into a house that the government had given her late father. She continues to date her boyfriend, claiming to love him but also insisting that she will not marry him because she feels it will give him access to her money. She absolutely refuses to return to her mother's house, claiming that

---

[21] J Sharp and A Spiegel 'Women and Wages: Gender and the control of income in farm and Bantustan households' (1990) 16(3) *Journal of Southern African Studies* 527-549 at 544-545.

[22] D Posel, J Fairburn and F Lund 'Labour Migration and Households: A Reconsideration of the Effects of the Social Pension on Labour Supply in South Africa' (2006) 23(4) *Journal of Economic Modelling* 836-853.

she would rather 'be poor' then surrender to her insults about disgracing the family and have to accept partners based on her mother's blessing. If the tension between Dodokazi and her mother is familiar, the particular social conditions that give Dodokazi a grant allows her to sustain her defiance against her mother's authority and to refuse marrying or even living with a man, which she believes will compromise her autonomy.

CRISIS TALK 1: MARRIAGE AND THE YOUTH

Sharp and Spiegel[23] identify QwaQwa of the 1980s as a place with few agricultural resources and recent patterns of settlement. In addition to the need to spend money in order to find waged work, and the conflicts over such spending, they also suggest that women regarded marriage as a trap and were more enthusiastic about finding employment themselves than on relying on a husband. Recent studies of KwaZulu-Natal and East London, by Hunter[24] and Bank[25] respectively, have noted the relative independence of women in contemporary South Africa. Hunter emphasizes the changing character of sexual relations and the growing (relative) independence of women. Bank notes how women 'jokingly called [the government] their new husband' and no longer argue with their husbands as 'they have nothing to give us'.[26]

Posel, Rudwick and Casale[27] have recently shown that marriage rates have disproportionately dropped for poor Black South Africans, compared to middle class South Africans across race. They suggest that the cost of elaborate 'traditional' brideprice (*lobolo*) might explain this change. As substantial as bridewealth payments may be, my informants suggest, however, that it is not only the absence of waged work, but also social grants that are responsible for the decline in marriage rates. Hlengiwe, for instance complained to me that the root of problem with families today lies in the state 'paying', thus allowing women to 'follow whichever man they can get with money', and accusing them of 'not settling', and 'with dumping their children on grandparents when it suited them'. The complaint that people are

---

[23] Sharp and Spiegel (1990)

[24] Hunter (2010)

[25] L Bank *Home Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City* (2011).

[26] Ibid at 186.

[27] D Posel, S Rudwick and D Casale   'Is Marriage a Dying Institution in South Africa? Exploring Changes in Marriage in the Context of iLobolo Payments'. (2011) 25(1) *Agenda*,102-111

cohabiting and not getting married is common: many middle-aged people blame women for 'allowing themselves' to have children outside wedlock. Even though 56-year-old Msizi is himself cohabiting with his partner, he regards younger women as irresponsible for having children that they cannot care for alone, instead leaving their children in the hands of their grandparents.

That my informants link government grants so closely with a kind of moral crisis, of the breakdown in marriage and with the youth's disregard for elders, provokes some disquiet. The idea that social security can be destructive of family values and 'traditional'' morality is hardly new: after all, a famous Reaganite election image was that of the 'welfare queen' – who bypassed the family and waged work in order to become 'wealthy' through welfare – against whom Reagan posed values of labour, fairness and family, and justified cuts in welfare, intensified policing of the poor, and the notion that any waged work must be the basis of dignity.[28] Certainly, it is clear that families in Southern Africa have been 'divided' for far longer than the existence of the grant. It is also well documented that generational tension has been a feature of this society for a longer time.[29]

At the same time, grants have significantly shaped movement and security in rural villages in South Africa, with their lines of allocation points to lines of gender and generational fracturing. Along with housing in Glendale, grants are the most visible expression of change, and become the locus for all kinds of discourses of moral crisis, many of which seem to conflate particular recent changes with much longer tensions in households. To put this slightly differently, many of my informants at once recognised and misrecognised the importance of grants in interpreting the changes they were experiencing.

Unsurprising, many of the charges thrown in the direction of youth have to do with sexuality. Thokozani tells of young men who change partners from one day to the next, who don't 'sit and watch the girls and then court the one he loves.' Nokwazi says her generation waited until 'they were sure but that the young no longer know how to wait.' To wait, to be patient, therefore becomes a moral virtue against which to judge the impropriety of young men and women.

---

[28] J Kohler-Hausmann ' "The crime of survival": fraud prosecutions, community surveillance, and the original "Welfare Queen" ' (2007) Winter *Journal of Social History* 329-354.

[29] For example, B Carton 'Locusts Fall from the Sky: Manhood and Migrancy in KwaZulu' in R Morrell (ed) *Changing Men in South Africa* (2001).

Nokwazi's notion of proper waiting, of a waiting as a condition to achieve marriage and hence secure proper social reproduction is, at one level, an exercise in nostalgia. She herself has never formally married Msizi, although they have cohabited for many years. It is akin to Jane Hill's[30] discussion of those in Mexico who nostalgically demand that the youth speak a language in order to be respectful and culturally proper, a language that they themselves do not (and frequently cannot) speak. Yet the idea of waiting properly has a critical contemporary dimension, as the impatience of the youth now is neither wholly fabrication nor eternal. Rather, it needs to be read in relation to conditions in South Africa.

For instance, in Martin Murray's analysis, the liberal, anti-apartheid virtue of the freedom of movement has become, for the poor and unemployed around Johannesburg, 'perpetual motion, the necessity of moving from here to there,' possibly as a condition of survival.[31] Read from the vantage point of Glendale, it is predominately the youth who suffer this kind of fate. Indeed, Rosalind Morris[32] has written powerfully of the 'adaption' of the youth in Khutsong to an apocalyptic future without work, where death is inevitable and life becomes accelerated in a high-stakes, libidinal economy where - rather than sexual drives being displaced onto the consumption of commodities (as in the United States of America) - the very possibility of accessing commodities depends on sex 'in excess'.[33] For youth who inhabit a subjectivity of 'rush' and 'panic', patience appears like religion does to Freud: an infantile subservience that does nothing to avert inevitable human suffering or death, but concedes the possibility of pleasure or intelligence.

At the same time, the experience of time for young men in Glendale cannot completely be characterised as the frantic pace of the life of the urban poor that seek to gain as much as possible now because death is inevitable. Another element of their experience is the passing of time, boredom, a feeling of limbo that Adeline Masquelier[34] has described in her research in Niger. Jabu, Themba, and many other young men and women in Glendale whom I spoke with regularly were waiting in a particular kind of way. Jabu was waiting for a

---

[30] J Hill ' "Today There is No Respect": Nostalgia, "Respect" and Oppositional Discourse in Mexicano (Nahuatl) Language Ideology' in BB Schieffelin, KA Woolard and PV Kroskrity (eds) *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory* (1998) 68-86.

[31] Murray (2008) at 122.

[32] R Morris 'Rush/Panic/Rush: Speculations on the Value of Life and Death in South Africa's Age of Aids' (2008) 20(2) *Public Culture* 199-231.

[33] Morris (2008), especially at 213-214.

[34] A Masquelier 'Boredom, Tea Rituals, and the Temporalities of Youth in Niger' (2013) 83 *Africa* 3.

time when he might find the means to pay for marriage, but he had no income, had not saved any money nor could he imagine any way that this would happen soon. Themba was hoping somehow that the government would help him, but had no idea how to make this happen. Many of my younger informants told me that they waited in Glendale because they did not have anywhere else to go, but claimed that Glendale offered no future for them as young men, even if they managed to get a house. So this waiting of the youth was not a waiting that was constitutive of a future, in the sense that elders wanted; a waiting that would generate secure social reproduction through the careful choosing of a mate, proper marriage and offspring in a way that might satisfy ancestors. It was a waiting that was almost inevitably impotent; a pause that might seek in vain to reconnect with a homestead; a punctuation of the experience of becoming part of a rootless casualised workforce on the margin of the city.

In a certain sense, the government grants received by elders and mothers match the temporal cycles of wage labour, insofar as they are paid monthly. For some, the timing of grant payments means that they can imagine a waiting that corresponds to earlier times in which younger men earned wages and saved up for building homes and marriages. But the encounter of young men with the (neoliberal) capitalist market is one of a different experience of time. Indeed, many of these youth live erratically, a frantic search for work punctuated by moments when they cannot find any work or income, which becomes a kind of dead time, a time in which they go back to Glendale. Yet, precisely because capitalist social value structures their existence,[35] this dead time is in no sense liberation from the socially structuring dimensions of capital. They must find ways of accumulating value and since this is impossible for them in Glendale, their presence in the village is at best irregular. Morris aptly notes that the only project that is able to speak to youth 'is not that which seeks an escape from wage labour but that which will secure access to it'.[36]

The temporality that elders require of youth and berate them for flaunting is of course not understood as corresponding to an earlier moment of regular wage labour. Rather, as Thokozani makes clear, the actions of both young and women violate a tradition that aligns the social and the natural in securing reproduction:

---

[35] M Postone *Time, Labour, and Social Domination* (1993).

[36] See Morris (2008) at 231. In a recently completed dissertation on urban youth in Zimbabwe, Jeremy Jones has, in a context of hyperinflation, provided an analysis of various improvised activities aimed at generating value from the waiting induced by the economic crisis; see JL Jones *Dealing with Disintegration: Urban Youth, Historical Narrative and 'Making Do' in Hyperinflationary Zimbabwe* (2012) PhD thesis, University of Chicago. A useful distinction arises from this between a waiting that is cumulative and one that offers no capacity to generate a future.

[What] makes it hard for young people to get married is… that they are not able to save money like we do. They don't know what they need... The other thing is that a young person goes out with this one and the next day he is with that one, he does not have a girlfriend that he loves with all his heart…. He can't just sit and watch the girls and then court the one he loves. How is that person ever going to get married?… One is advised and advised again. Long ago girls only ate beef and chicken, they did not eat eggs, they did not eat chicken, they didn't eat [just] anything.… They say [these] make a young girl's blood boil then [she] will start going through puberty and her breasts develop while she is still young. They used to say they [the girls] should not eat chicken until they have grown up…, [but] when you have a child now, they are given eggs. That's why people don't get married today, they don't follow tradition.

If at the start of Thokozani's reading of the youth in Glendale, lack of money (or ability to save enough to cover expensive bridewealth payments) is regarded as the source of their difficulty; by the end of his statement financial incapacity aligns with the refusal of tradition: impatient girls manage to accelerate the development of their bodies in order to be sexually attractive and meet impatient boys who are promiscuous and cannot save money. The very real insecurity of the youth is thus understood ultimately as a product of the refusal of tradition, in which, as we shall see, government policies are also implicated by villagers.[37]

CRISIS TALK 2: GIRLS, GRANDMOTHERS, AND GOVERNMENT

For some villagers, the very houses provided by government provoke a moral crisis, because they say that such houses will not allow people to die properly and become ancestors.[38] Grants seem to facilitate youth's capacity to reject their elders, with Mphumi declaring to me that 'these days, the young people want to govern themselves, rather than sit with parents', 'get married' or 'perform culture'. Instead of being interested in building their

---

[37] Mchunu examines three generations of rural isiZulu-speaking men and their accounts of pre-marital sexuality and of observance of respect for their father's homesteads; Although taking each generation at its word about sexual practices and respectability risks a kind of 'biographical illusion' (see P Bourdieu 'The biographical illusion' (1987) 14 *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Center for Psychosocial Studies* 1-7) in which testimonies reflect a social position in the present rather than a truth about past practices, Mchunu does show that among contemporary elders, misfortune (including untimely deaths from HIV/AIDS) is explained in terms of offending or refusing tradition. Mchunu also shows that, even with its infrequency, marriage is an important aspiration for many youth; see M Mchunu 'Zulu Fathers and Their Sons: Sexual Taboos, Respect, and their Relationship to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic' (2005) 2 *passages*, available at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/passages/4761530.0010.013?rgn=main;view=fulltext, accessed 22 July 2013.

[38] B Dubbeld *Without work: paradoxes of the postapartheid project in the countryside* (2013) PhD thesis, University of Chicago.

parent's house, they 'want their own houses', she lamented, even if such attempts at autonomy by the youth are part of much longer historical processes, certainly facilitated and perhaps inaugurated by migrant labour.

Yet the scarcity of waged work means that men cannot invest in their father's homesteads even if they wished to, although some do receive government housing in Glendale, separate from their parents. Mphumi blames government for this 'independence' of the youth, linking into a more general discourse of youth criminality. These youth, she regards as 'morally backward', who 'cheat their elders' and 'cheat one another', and indeed 'survive on cheating.' Others, like Angelina, use the language of criminality to directly blame the government. In a remarkable interview, I asked her about the disappearance of her daughter, to which she replied—

> There is one problem today…. as a parent you hit the child because you see that she is wrong and she is your child. What does this government say? That we should not hit our children and if we do they must … get us arrested. Children don't know what we are; as I'm talking to you one from this house is gone for a whole two weeks... She is staying at the hostel because she knows … I will not hit her because she will get me arrested. The reason they are not getting married is because of democracy.… The reason why they are not getting married is because they have rights.… The reason why everything is so messed up is because of these rights. We grew up with no rights and we grew up listening to our parents and we respect them. The children today don't even know their parents. A child lives whenever they want, as I'm talking to you my child is not here.… She is sitting in a dirty place, a hostel at kwaMashu, you hear me? That is not the place for a sixteen year old.... I don't even have the money to … fetch her.... Our children will not get married, they will not have their own homes because there are many places where things are rotting. The fact that children don't get a hiding at school is.… one of the things. The children do whatever they want because they know they will get their teachers arrested. Those are all mistakes. Children have no respect ... they swear at us, their parents, and they do everything that is abusive to the point … that now, I'm really abused.

Although many in Glendale felt that government had abandoned them by not meeting their expectations of transformation and as having failed to improve their lives[39], this is not to say that they regarded post-Apartheid state policy as having no effects. Angelina was my most

---

[39] B Dubbeld 'Envisioning governance: expectations and estrangements of transformed rule in Glendale, South Africa' (2013) 83(3) *Africa* 492-512.

outspoken informant, holding post-apartheid social transformation most directly responsible for the overturning of her social world. Another place such an attribution of blame to the state appeared, albeit in a less direct way, was in respect of the positions grandmothers occupy in Glendale today.

Grandparents themselves may feel ambivalent towards the government policy, even if they put their sentiments in quite implicit ways. Makosi asserts that while in the past only the elderly received pensions, now grants are more widespread. She connects what she regards as the positive extension of government aid through the Child Support Grants to the spread of illnesses (such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, neither of which she names), implying to me that there is a link between the two that is more than coincidence. Grandparents such as Hlengiwe and Msizi, who I mentioned above, are of course not so poetic in their lament that grants have led to them having to take on greater caring roles of their grandchildren.

That social grants shape the relation between grandparents and grandchildren is ultimately important for how the government is read in Glendale. Canonical anthropological work took this relation as important and free of difficult obligations imposed by other kin relations. For instance, Radcliffe-Brown[40] described this relation of alternate generations as one in which 'persons can be on free and easy terms'. Elsewhere in Africa, Meyer Fortes[41] suggested that 'grandparents lavish affection on their grandchildren' but are also felt to be the 'living links to the past' who are 'looked upon with reverence.' The maternal grandmother occupies a special place, for Fortes, because 'she is the guardian of morals and harmony in the household.' The importance of grandparents extends beyond the grave. In recalling her relationship with her maternal ancestors, Nokwazi told me that 'if somebody gets sick, we go to spiritual healers who identify a grandmother who is hungry or wants tea, and we do that, and there is no more sickness.'

Whether it is a matter of gaining favour from male or from female ancestors, Hlengiwe argues that the youth have forgotten this bond entirely, and this forgetting divides families:

> We believe in ancestors and the youth now … say a dead person is a demon.… We used
> to be happy for the dead person. You see, children [today] don't want an ancestor, or
> they mix [things] up and they don't want to rely on them alone, they mix it with religion.

---

[40] A Radcliffe-Brown 'The Study of Kinship Systems' in (ed) *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952) 49-89 at 79.

[41] M Fortes 'Kinship and Marriage Among the Ashanti' in A Radcliffe-Brown and D Forde (eds) *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (1950) 252-284 at 276.

[T]here is no harmony.... You see … when families have separated things don't work well. You need to be one, from bottom to top, [but] that won't happen because the children don't know that.

The lack of morality of the youth ultimately undermines the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, and reverses tradition, which according to Thokozani is achieved with social grants as an accomplice.

People in Glendale live on pensions. There are no jobs. The Child Support Grant and the Pension grant … you have a child you get this pension, and the grannies…. If you are a granny they will take you, and register you, they take you and eat your money. Then you die and they carry on eating you … long after you died. It's what I see here.

Rather than the youth feeding their grandmothers and thereby drawing strength from their well-being, symbolic duties are reversed: the youth rely on their grandparents' income (they 'eat' their grandparents), and attempt to claim their pension monies from the state by concealing their death (they continue to 'eat' them after death).[42] Such acts that seem to reverse tradition, express for Thokozani a new social upheaval, based on the irresponsible actions of youth who don't listen to their elders and indeed consume their grandparents. This change is enabled by a government whose progressive social security practice gives little to working age men and is understood by many in Glendale as the cause of fracturing families and the overturning of tradition. Thus, for him, government welfare policy is transformed into a source of social insecurity.

THE VALUE OF GRANTS IN GLENDALE: WAGED WORK AND THE PROBLEM OF THE FUTURE

Most immediately, the problem with grants in a village like Glendale is that there is never a surplus, and frequently a deficit—Angelina, Siphokazi and Nomathemba all receive grants and complain about never quite having enough even for food for their (grand)child— and thus that grants cannot be the basis for an investment in the future of the household. Unlike in major cities, there are very few opportunities to earn additional income that might supplement the grant – micro-enterprises selling cold drinks and cigarettes yield little profit – and, as one

---

[42] Devereux cites two studies of the Eastern Cape about 'ghost pensioners' claiming welfare in that province, in response to which a wonderfully named state project, 'Ghost Busters', was established in 1998; see S Devereux 'Social Pensions in Southern Africa in the twentieth century' (2007) 33(3) *Journal of Southern African Studies* 539-560.

informant remarked - 'people don't have the means to buy much and lots of people are trying to sell something, and nobody can make anything here.'

In addition to the quantity of the grant never being quite enough where other sources of income are scarce, it is useful to compare the grant to wage work. Both Ferguson[43] and White[44] have analysed investments of migrant men's wages in the household—the former in cattle and the latter in a proper passing to gain a place among the ancestors— as well as argued that such investments in the household were rendered inaccessible to women. Without access to grants other than pensions, men in particular have little financial capacity to claim influence over the household. During times of migrant labour, so Ferguson and White's differing argument imply, men could influence the future of the house from afar through wages. With households now maintained by grants gained by women who are entitled to them as carers of children, men may be close to the household but have little bearing on its future.

The growing prominence of grants in the South African countryside must therefore be related to unemployment in South Africa. Hein Marais estimates that between 1994 and 2000 more than half a million jobs were lost, in addition to a further 200 000 in agriculture. If one includes those adults who have never held a job this puts the unemployment rate in the country at almost 35 per cent.[45] De facto, Marais concludes, grants are the main source of poverty alleviation for many in the country, even if these grants are meagre.

There is no smooth transition between wages and grants in their current form, however. Even with fewer opportunities for work and the end of the formal migrant labour system some two decades ago, those that still work, such as rock drill operators working in Marikana, do nurture a dream of using the wages from urban work to purchase rural autonomy from capitalism, as Breckenridge has argued recently.[46] This desire for achieving independence through wages is threatened on two fronts, that is, both by the collapse of urban work and by the fact that grants put money into the hands of women, who are able to claim

---

[43] J Ferguson *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1990).

[44] H White 'Outside the Dwelling of Culture: Estrangement and Difference in Postcolonial Zululand' (2010) 83(3) *Anthropological Quarterly* 497-518.

[45] Marais (2011) at 118 and 178.

[46] K Breckenridge 'Revenge of the Commons: The crisis in the South African mining industry' (2012) *History Workshop Online*, available at
 http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/revenge-of-the-commons-the-crisis-in-the-south-african-mining-industry/, accessed 22 July 2013.

independence from men's labour – and thus from obligations to subservience to a household funded by that labour. At the same time, however, it appears to be not only men who feel without a future because of grants. Women regularly complain that grants and other government things offer them the present but not the future.

Indeed, alongside houses far from places of work, grants and other government-given things have a very peculiar value in Glendale. That value has to do with them being temporary and vital for the present, but not especially good for the future. Grants are never enough to save: they are less than wages and are rapidly distributed in households, not stored up in cattle or bank accounts in order to enable future social arrangements. Houses given by government, too, are almost impossible to sell, and with small plots and elementary construction, cannot be developed very much to accommodate more people or things. As much as these government things are necessary for people in Glendale, they are not understood as providing social security, but rather as markers of social insecurity, expressing people's incapacity to imagine a future through them. In this sense, the social grant has paradoxically become visible as a sign of lack: an indication of the distance between the promise of social change and its realisation, and for some, even a signal that change is going in the wrong direction, towards even greater social insecurity.

In a social condition more generally afflicted by the problem of not finding permanent work, and where the grant is the only form of continuous financial aid, people read the grant and the government as being at odds with tradition and a force in the destruction of the family. What is interesting in this context is what has been understood as the recent 'turn to tradition' by certain prominent members of the ruling ANC, whether through the embracing of traditional authorities[47] or in the speeches of prominent politicians. Rather than regard this move as something specifically caused by particular individuals gaining influence in government or as the defeat of progressives with the ruling party, I would instead understand these gestures towards 'tradition' as an outcome of a specific set of social circumstances in South Africa today. In particular it is a response by certain parts of government, within an older language of failing fathers, to the regularly expressed discontent of people—and men in particular— who experience the alienation of not being able to work in an economy that is structured around work-derived value. That the ANC has raised this rhetoric may be cause for serious concern, not because substantive participatory democracy has been abandoned,

---

[47] C Walker 'Uneasy Relations: Women, Gender Inequality, and Tradition in Post-Apartheid South Africa' (2013) 115 *Thesis Eleven* 77-94.

but because the social conditions in places like Glendale suggest to people like my informants that they have been abandoned, and that the measures to empower them have simply displaced them further from an increasingly skilled and urban labour market, where they see the only possibility of a future.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have considered the importance of social grants in a village in KwaZulu-Natal. My research reveals that grants do reach some of the poorest households in the countryside and in the absence of waged work plays an important role in sustaining them. The fact that grants target certain groups deemed especially vulnerable – rather than every individual or household without adequate means - however has more ambiguous effects. On the one hand, some young women— such as my informant Dodakazi – are able to use the grant to exercise autonomy from parents and from male partners. On the other hand, the capacity to remain in certain areas of the countryside, where small-scale farming options are limited and waged work is largely unavailable, is largely decided by whether people fall into the groups deemed especially vulnerable or not. As Seekings has pointed out,[48] this divides poorer black people into deserving and undeserving in a manner that belies the constitutional imperatives towards justice that are supposed to shape post-apartheid policy. In a context where waged work is as scarce as it is in South Africa, and in the countryside in particular, the effect of grant policy has been to disadvantage those structurally unable to find waged work. That is to say, the social grant has produced a new kind of uneven geography: it has had the effect of dividing up villages like Glendale completely, pushing those who do not qualify for grants—working-age, adult men—out of the countryside.

These effects of the grant also had important implications for discourse in the village where I conducted fieldwork. The kinds of distinctions the grant made were often interpreted as producing moral crises in the home, of disrupting the family and traditional processes, and of providing the youth with the autonomy to refuse both their elders and marriage. While marriages do seem to be declining, it is especially striking how discourses around the grant, around other government gifts like housing, and even around rights, cast post-apartheid social policy as deeply against 'tradition' and as destructive of the social fabric around which people fashioned their lives. Such sentiments, I found, are not confined to men

---

[48] Seekings (2008), op. cit.

who may feel disempowered, but women, even grant beneficiaries like Angelina, hold such views of the state.

As much as this demonstrates the contested social character and effects of government grants, what remains open is whether the problem with grants is a matter only of their quantity and their designations. The latter would be resolved by a Basic Income Grant, which Seekings and Matisonn suggest is a direction away from which the government is moving.[49] It is less clear to me, however, whether putting money in the hands of the poor would have the same result as more extensive wage labour, insofar as such labour seems to remain the basis of value and central to social ties. While Barchiesi attributes the continuing importance of work to the government discourse, which is 'normatively fixated',[50] and Ferguson asserts the centrality of surplus populations who will never be permanently employed,[51] at least in Glendale, waged work is deeply felt as an absence, of the future and of value, that are not addressed by grants.

---

[49] Seekings and Matisonn (2012).

[50] Barchiesi (2007).

[51] J Ferguson 'What Comes After the African Social?' in K Breckenridge and S Szreter (eds) *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History* (2012) 495-516.