

Panel 1: Rural Assemblies and Possibility

Leslie Bank --- Gifts to the Ancestors: Public Housing and Rebuilding of Rural Homesteads in South Africa

The paper focuses on the “spirit of the gift” and the moral economy of public housing to the poor in South Africa. It shows how the provision of public housing and the extension of basic services in cities through the RDP programme was the primary a “gift of liberation: from the new democratic state in South Africa to the people of South Africa. These gifts promised to lay the foundation for a better life for all and create a platform for an end to migrant labour apartheid, poverty, and usher in a new era of urban permanence for Africans in cities. As the gifts that “should not be sold”, the public housing programme delivered millions of starter homes for the poor, mainly on the edges of cities, in the first two decades of democracy. But as policies shifted and the state’s commitment to RDP delivery waned, access to the city was increasingly restricted. This, together with growing urban insecurity and pandemic induced lockdowns, has resulted in a renewed interest in rural homebuilding where houses are often conceived as gifts for the ancestors. The paper investigates the moral economy of public housing delivery and gifting and hope to demonstrate how a perspective from the anthropology of gifting can reveal hidden dimensions of the failure of state public housing policy in South Africa.

Analisa Ndamase -- Gardens of Joy: Landscape, belonging and community in rural Mount Frere, Eastern Cape.

Covid-19 has harmed friendships and a sense of community in various ways. Some could not attend their neighbours’ funerals due to fears of contracting Covid-19 and the government restrictions stating that only a maximum of 50 people were allowed to attend the funeral. The sense of community and the friendships built through communal structures were close to collapse. While collecting life histories in Mtshazi village, I observed that some friendships and a sense of community were maintained through gardening. The women I encountered had their gardens. However, they could not tend to their garden independently due to their ages, as one of them is a social grant beneficiary while the other is in her late 50s. Their children work outside the province; some are married, so they cannot ask them for help as they rarely visit them. Nonetheless, despite being in her early 80s, their neighbour willingly offered her help with gardening, including cultivating their land. The neighbour never asked for any form of payment. Therefore, this family reciprocated their neighbour’s kindness by sharing the fruits of their harvest. Their garden had a great harvest, so they gave it to some church members. Despite the strain caused by Covid-19 on communal relations, the bonds forged through gardening remained intact. The women supported one another by sharing vegetables, exchanging knowledge, and offering labour. The woman vowed to assist her neighbour, even if the neighbour could no longer work. The gardens in these two households played a significant role in sustaining the relationships threatened by Covid-19 and government restrictions. Therefore, this paper will explore the importance of gardening and agriculture in fostering social cohesion, maintaining friendships, and ensuring collaboration among rural women.

Anelitha Tukela – The Violence of Hope: Women and the New Vigilantism in Kwelerha, Eastern Cape.

This paper focuses on the rise of new forms of vigilantism led by women in the rural areas of the former Ciskei, in the current context of the post-pandemic crisis. There has been a rise of Gender-based violence and criminality unfolding in the rural areas, where women during the covid-19 pandemic became targets of crime in the areas of former Ciskei. Even in the post- covid-19 pandemic violence against women has become one of the leading topics in the former Ciskei. However, due to the failure and corruption of the South African police in these communities, women had to stand up and find ways to deal with the violence. In Kwelerha during the covid-19 pandemic, there was a rise of "creche crime" where women's businesses were targeted by the criminals around the community, women had to find new ways of protecting themselves from such crimes and that resulted in the virtue of rising new forms of vigilantism that would offer protection where South African police had failed.

Women became the leaders of these new structures of vigilantism to bring hope to the community and also remove the stigma that women are easy targets of crime in the area. This brought hope in the community, imposed fear on perpetrators and showed the capabilities of women. This paper will investigate the nature of their beliefs in and support of what we call new violence of hope and investigate whether the new structures will ultimately offer women the protection and freedom they seek. The paper also wonders whether rural women have any reason to be optimistic about this hopeful violence against the backdrop of the history of rural violence and women.

Zipho Xego – *The Calling of Bees: The Power of the Small Assemblies of Women in Cwebe, Eastern Cape*

In the wake of the Covid pandemic in rural South Africa, women are faced with the challenge of rebuilding their lives against the backdrop of devastation and death. In these landscapes families look for signs of hope and opportunities that will trigger the possibility of renewal and rebuilding. In rural homesteads in Cwebe hopeful signs are often associated with movements around cattle byre or kraal (*ebuthlanti*) where the ancestors visit. Today, most kraals stand empty today, but they are retained by families as places to engage with family ancestors in times of need. After Covid many rural families have been watching these spaces carefully where the presence of bees can be meaningful. In Bosnia in Europe, the anthropologist, Larisa Jasarevic, claims that bees are believed to be divinely inspired with knowledge. They do not just assist with pollination and produce honey to eat. They are a species that, like humans, imparts knowledge and sustains human life. Bees are associated with well-being and are seen as life sustaining force. This is also true in Bomvanaland on the former Transkei coast. The assembly of bees ignites excitement and encourages families to meet and to consider change that often results in collective rituals. The aim of this paper is to explore various forms of informal assembly amongst women in post-pandemic Cwebe and to assess how these assemblies contribute to their health and livelihoods, while also reflecting on how other developments (such as the digital payment of grants) undermines the capacity for assembly and debate. The paper sees women joining all sorts of assemblies, including frequent gatherings at local shebeens, and discusses what that might mean.

Nombulelo Shintsa -- *Qina Mhlolokazi ('be a strong widow woman')*: A Movement for Widows by Widows.

At the height of the HIV-Aids pandemic in the 2000s considerable public and academic attention focused on the issue of Aids orphans, the young children of sexually active parents who were orphaned after their parents contracted Aids and died. Many of these children were left destitute, forming child households, or were absorbed by the families of kin. Death during the Covid pandemic in rural areas targeted the old who died in significant number in the Eastern Cape in rural areas where death rates reached over 700 per 100 000. The impact family structures is not entirely clear to researchers yet, although evidence does show that the average size of rural households increased from around 4 to 6 members with youthful, reverse migration at the same time as older family members died of Covid infection. In the Kwelerha location near East London, many older men with jobs, and grants or income died during the pandemic, leaving their widows with responsibility for household management and maintenance. In 2023, widows in Kwelerha responded by forming *Qina Mhlolokazi*, a movement by widows for widows, to help them collectively manage the aftermath of the pandemic. This paper explores the nature of widowhood in Xhosa society and the challenges and dilemmas of widows in rural areas in the Eastern Cape, including increased vulnerability to witchcraft accusation. It explains how the new movement works and how it aims to “build back better” for widows in Kwelerha.