Investigating rural livelihoods and landscapes in Guquka and Koloni: An introduction

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Setting the scene

From under a tree on an April morning in 2004 I watch the arrival of a taxi in Guquka. People return from a trip to nearby Alice. The reason for the taxi ride becomes clear as people disembark. The taxi not only unloads Mrs. Tibani and others but also her groceries including two big bags of maize meal and sugar, cooking oil and other smaller items. The children that are waiting alongside the road with the wheelbarrow are there for a purpose, helping mother to carry the groceries home. I in turn assist the children to carry the heavy bags of maize and sugar. Her husband earns a living in Knysna as a petrol attendant. The remittances he sends home pay for the groceries she has just bought.

At the other side of the road a radio plays Kwaito music – the music of the townships. It is so loud that the whole village must hear it. Outside the house, next to the huge speaker from which the music blasts forth, sits John. He is a young man. He tells me after a while that he returned to the village two months

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ago after having unsuccessfully sought employment in Port Elizabeth. He had to return to the village when he had run out of money. Here, he depends on the pensions of his grandparents with whom he shares the house. Asked whether he will try to gain some kind of local income he shakes his head wearily; “Some time soon I will go back to Port Elizabeth again to try to find a job, so I can’t start something here”. Despite previous failures in securing urban employment, seeking an uncertain living in such an urban area seems preferable to initiating a local activity, especially when the activity is agriculture.

A few days earlier, an armoured truck had parked in the centre of the village, close to the school. It was a busy day as many older people were queuing to collect their social grants, pensions and other welfare payments. The officials looked on with some suspicion as I intended to park a car close by. I did not blame them as ‘pension cars’ have been robbed.

In Koloni – some 60 km further to the East as the crow flies – I met Mr. Kama on a windy day in April 2004. He is in his late thirties and used to work in a hotel in Cape Town as a waiter. Some time ago he had to come home to bury his father. He told me he wanted to go back but did not have the money to travel to Cape Town where his previous job is still waiting for him. I asked him how he manages to make ends meet and was told that he takes care of other people’s homes while they are away for periods of time. Sometimes, he said, we do not see them for years. He also herds cattle for a family member in return for some food and does odd jobs here and there. A year later, he was still in the village.

These are not isolated events but rather recurrent and, above all, interlocking phenomena. Almost every day, a taxi arrives to bring people back to their homes after a trip to town to visit friends or buy groceries. The same taxi also brings a labour migrant home during his or her annual visit ‘home’. Some of them, like John, would not be returning to work because of retrenchments or their failing to secure a job. Social grants, pensions and remittances continue to play a key role in the way rural people make a living. The dual spatial realities linking the urban and the rural and the related forms of mobility are important characteristics of contemporary rural life.

Plenty of similar situations and stories have been told to us over the years, since 1996 when we started to study people’s livelihoods in Guquka and Koloni and how their relationships with their immediate natural environment have evolved over time. Over the years these stories became backed up by interviews during which questions were raised about almost everything related to the history of settlement; production and consumption patterns; spatial mobility and social relations. These were combined with numerous observations of ongoing activities; counting cattle and small stock; digging in archives and interpreting aerial photographs. Taken together the data collected illuminate the background to the situations sketched out here.

If we were to generalise from the events described earlier, we could, for example, conclude that the villagers buy their food rather than produce it them-