
In perusing Lisa Cliggett’s *Grains from Grass*, it is brought home to readers that in well-developed and economically stable societies, people seldom think about the dynamics of survival within households and communities. Also, there is often not a very strong conscious emphasis on the mechanisms by which different individuals go about ensuring their survival within social networks. From the pages of *Grains from Grass*, it is apparent that the importance of forming and maintaining relationships to ensure one’s survival, in old age, are imperative in communities in which resources are extremely limited.

Furthermore, although people of all socio-economic levels are required to make choices, these decisions become more difficult when the resources necessary to satisfy everyone’s needs are not available. The author also asserts that vulnerability to scarcity not only varies among groups, but also varies among individuals according to their age and gender. When considering these factors, one quickly realizes that the generalizations and assumptions often applied to families in rural African societies are largely simplified. It is instead, the relationships that take place within these families, that can be studied to understand how kinship, gender, environmental changes, politics and ecology influence the type of relationships that people form with others, and how these factors effect their options of income, as well as encourage creativity in a difficult landscape.

In Chapter 1 of the 168-page book, which discusses the Non-Western World, it opens with a story of a sixty-five-year-old mother of five in rural Africa, who has died from starvation. This chapter sets the stage for the complexity of social networks and family interactions among the Gwembe Tonga people of Zambia’s Southern Province. Cliggett, in turn, sheds light on the misconceptions held by many people in Western societies, asserting that “When North Americans and Europeans think of family in places such as Africa – places where people “live close to their environment” and where life is more “simple” – we invoke notions of altruistic social groups whose members live by a higher moral code than we do in the West” (p. 1). Yet, in societies such as that of the Gwembe people, extreme poverty and ecological degradation result in families having to make difficult decisions on how limited resources are shared and used.

Chapter 2 of the publication, which is about “Getting Down in the Valley”, deals with Cliggett’s eventful journey to the field site for the Gwembe Tonga Research Project in the Gwembe Valley. It also discusses the theories that drive an anthropologist to delve into research by not just “doing participant observation,” but paying attention to particular issues, like conflict, individual action, gaining access to resources, and the like” (p. 45). Within the Zambian Southern Province, anthropological work had been continuous since the 1950s, and had since compiled updated census materials that provided names of villages, people who had participated in the research project in the past, and a fifty-year infrastructure on which to build her research.

Among the Gwembe people, Cliggett focuses on personal agency and household economy, having many conversations with elders “centered on how the elderly obtained food and basic necessities, how they perceived themselves in relation to the aging process, and how they interacted with their relatives and other generations within their communities” (p. 44). The chapter concludes by speaking highly of the complexity of long-term, field-based research. In the midst of her intense research, Cliggett recognizes that initial theories that drive research are only foundations that are built upon and modified as the research persists.
Chapter 3, sub-titled "The Space and Time of Vulnerability", examines the framework of vulnerability that must be employed to debunk many of the generalizations applied to daily life in Third World countries. Watts and Bohle (1993, 54) "identify three factors that structure a group's or a region's likelihood of experiencing vulnerability: entitlement, empowerment, and political economy relations" (p. 50). Though a community or household consists of a group of people, each person has differing needs, abilities, and power relative to the position they hold within that community.

In this light, Cliggett proceeds to look at the unique vulnerability of the elderly in rural Africa, by "exploring the context, at both a national-global level and at the regional level, in order to see how global and regional history can converge to create a space and time of vulnerability for the old who live their day-to-day lives in rural villages" (p. 52). The influence of European cultures, national economic policies that favor urban industrial areas, and climatic as well as geographic fluctuations, have greatly changed the cultural norms and resources available to the Gwembe people. The author further asserts that "In discussing old people's experience of vulnerability in southern Zambia, we need to recognize differences in women's and men's resource base, styles of interaction, and repertoire of coping strategies, all of which influence their well being" (p. 65) Cliggett focuses the remainder of the text on how senior men and women negotiate their relationships, ensuring their survival in a poverty stricken region.

"Making a Village-Style Living" is Chapter 4, which provides excellent background of the hardships, realities, and range of livelihoods available to those living in the Gwembe Valley. Having a poor infrastructure of roads, unpredictable climates, and insufficient wage employment, the Gwembe Valley is viewed as a challenging and undesirable region by many in other areas of Zambia. Yet, Cliggett has observed that "Gwembe women and men faced with the fact of regularly occurring insufficient harvests, have a wide-ranging repertoire of complimentary income-generating activities from which to choose when needed" (p. 83).

Options of trading and selling in illusive markets, brewing beer, working for relief wages, migrating to frontier farm areas, and obtaining resources through intergenerational relationships, are common activities in which Gwembe people participate. A key point is that as people age and become more dependent on the economic activities of others, the resources obtained through the social networks of family and neighbors become more important. However, within the social networks used to gain access to various resources, one will find that Gwembe men have significantly more ways to generate income than women.

In Chapter 5 has the sub-title of “Mother’s Keepers, Father’s Wives, and Residential Arrangements of the Old”. It examines intergenerational relationships of the elderly within the domestic unit. According to the author, “The domestic setting, or homestead, becomes the primary stage for elderly people to assert their identity as elders and to call upon obligations that are inherent to their position” (p. 98). These relationships are further influenced by matrilineal clans of the Gwembe Tonga, and village social environments. Just as the spaces of vulnerability for elderly men and women are vastly different, so are their options for residential arrangements, which are an important variable in ensuring one's survival.

In describing the dynamics of relationships within homestead, Cliggett underscored, among other details: “These residential arrangements represent the best options for the village elderly. For men of any age, marriage is the only good option for acquiring necessary labor and wealth; for aging women, marriage also offers benefits, particularly when a husband adheres to the Tonga norms of support” (p. 107). However, women must make further choices related to the kinship that flows through them within the matrilineal system, allowing them to solicit resources from their children as sacrificing mothers and elders.