Vulnerability to impoverishment in South African rural areas: The erosion of kinship and neighbourhood as social resources

by

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1. Introduction

It is important to recognize that the social characteristics of the rural periphery of South Africa are, at one level, the result of a central dynamic within South African society. As more ethnographic studies become available, however, it is also necessary to take cognisance of the fact that people experience significantly different social conditions in different parts of the periphery (Cooper, 1982; Gay, 1980; Murray, 1981a; Quinlan, 1983; Spiegel, 1980a). This opens up

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important possibilities, particularly for anthropologists, for regional
analysis within the macro-framework of ongoing developments in South
African capitalism: such analysis could also be sensitive to the effects
of particular histories of conflict and class struggle for local
conditions of contemporary existence. In what respects do conditions
experienced in various areas differ at present, and why should such
differences exist?

Population relocation into the rural periphery is one of the major
themes of recent change in South Africa. Discussions of the process to
date have tended to be descriptive (Surplus People Project, 1983). In
addition the notion of marginalisation has been used only in macro-terms
to indicate a by-product of capitalist development. It will also however
be profitable to examine marginalisation in terms of the events
surrounding people's experience of relocation. Processes of relocation
have differed markedly over time and from one region to another, and
these differences affect the degree of marginalisation people undergo
(Sharp, 1982; Bank, 1984). The effects of ongoing population relocation
on people's lives are mediated by the environmental and social
characteristics of the areas into which they are moved. There is also
relocation within peripheral areas to consider: these include the effects
of betterment. These issues have been partly obscured in discussions of
relocation processes to date, because these have tended to classify
'types' of relocation by reference to the areas from which people have
come (Mare, 1980; 1981; Surplus People Project, 1983; Spiegel, 1983).

We are interested here in the broad question of 'social reproduction'
under conditions of relocation and betterment. There is controversy
surrounding the precise definition of this concept (see Harris and Young,
1981), but we use it here in a very straightforward way, looking at the
process from the point of view of people on the ground. How, under these
conditions in the rural periphery, do members of the working class
attempt to sustain physical existence and social life over both short and
long terms? What mechanisms to secure these ends are available to such
people, and what factors constrain the use that can be made of them?
What, at the micro-level, are the main factors which render some people
in this class acutely vulnerable to impoverishment, constituting, in
other words, a threat to levels of social living established by people's
own past experience and, in the extreme, to physical survival itself?

The structural context of these questions is, at the very widest level,
relatively clear. The logic of that context can be explained
persuasively in theoretical terms, as many have done. The general
argument is that in underdeveloped countries the logic of capitalist
accumulation makes increasingly capital-intensive industrial production
entirely consistent with a large and growing pool of structurally
unemployed people (eg see Kay, 1975). This argument fits the South
African situation reasonably well, particularly over the last twenty or
thirty years, and helps to explain the political and ideological
adaptations to the Bantustan system witnessed in the period (Maree, 1978;
Molteno, 1978; Southall, 1982a & b). These adaptations are designed to
deal with the growing numbers whom the South African system of production
renders redundant and to provide a means of controlling them politically
in their decline into impoverishment.

But at any level other than the very widest this kind of argument
explains both too much and too little. It explains too much because it
does not allow either for the kind of variation which is empirically
observable in different parts of the rural periphery or for local-level historical processes which have produced that variation; too little because it does not allow us to understand why survival and the maintenance of expected levels of living and patterns of social relationships should be possible under these conditions for some but not others. This paper seeks to explore two dimensions of variation within the periphery with respect to micro-level factors which render people more or less vulnerable to impoverishment. First it examines variation along these lines between two different regions within the periphery; secondly it examines some of the causes and results of variation within given regions.

2. The research areas

This paper examines certain aspects of the conditions of life which people experience in two widely-different parts of the rural periphery. There are two areas in which fieldwork was done in 1982/83: the Matatiele district which spans the Transkei/East Griqualand border and the Qwaqwa district of the North-East Free State. The ethnography reported below was, moreover, drawn from one 'betterment' village in the Matatiele district and from a particular relocation or 'closer settlement' village in Qwaqwa. In no sense do these target areas typify, in all respects, the larger named areas in which they are situated. This is particularly

2. For recent definitions of these terms see Yawitch, 1981; De Wet and McAllister, 1983; Mare, 1980:77.
true of Matatiele, where a large variety of land-tenure systems and settlement-patterns occurs in a relatively small area (Spiegel, 1982). But it is also true of the generally more homogeneous Qwaqwa, where the social conditions people experience, even in the closer settlements outside of town, are affected significantly by such issues as the relative proximity of different villages to the area's main labour bureau, to the town of Phuthaditjhaba and to what little agricultural land is available (Sharp, 1982; Martiny and Sharp, 1984).

We use pseudonyms to describe the two areas in which fieldwork was done. The name Polelo refers to the sub-location in Matatiele where a betterment scheme was implemented in 1977. Kgano is the name we give to the closer settlement studied in Qwaqwa. It was created in 1974, on the site of a previously existing rural village. In each case ethnographic material collected derives from a sample of the respective populations.

Matatiele

Matatiele district comprises about 214 000 ha along the southern slopes of the Drakensberg. Its population, according to the preliminary results of the 1980 census, was 100 625, of which 30 935 were recorded as South Sotho-speaking. Most land in the district is held under communal tenure, administered by Transkeian chiefs and headmen who preside over Tribal Authorities and Administrative Areas (locations) respectively. About 5% of the land is held under freehold tenure, while a number of previously freehold farms along the upper slopes of the Drakensberg ridge are now in Transkei government control and are used as range land by nearby location residents.
Recently a further block of farms in the Ongeluksnek enclave has been incorporated into the Transkei; the nature of the tenure to be instituted on these is not yet clear however. A number of these farms, in the eastern section of the enclave, have not yet been handed over to the Transkei; they are allegedly being held back by Pretoria in order to make space for the removal of people from some freehold 'black spots' near Kokstad.

The village of Polelo is a ward of a Sotho-dominated location falling under the George Moshesh Tribal Authority. It is situated about 75 km from both Matatiele town and Maluti, the new Transkeian administrative centre. These two centres lie 10 km apart, separated by the Transkei/Natal boundary. A TEBA mine labour recruiting office, situated in Matatiele town, administers a depot in Maluti so that contracts can be attested before Transkeian labour officers based there. All other migrant labour contracts must also be attested at the labour office in Maluti.

A betterment plan was implemented in Polelo and its surrounding location in 1977. Many people were moved to new residential sites within the location in order to rationalise the division between residential, arable and pasture land. This resulted in an increase in the number of residential sites allocated in Polelo itself and a concomitant increase in population density in the residential area. Further population growth in the village since that date has been the result of natural increase rather than relocations. Polelo village contained 175 sites in July, 1982; a sample of 30 of these was chosen for the purposes of a census survey as well as for more detailed examination. Further case material was collected from outside of this formal sample.
Qwaqwa is the so-called 'homeland' of South African South Sotho-speakers. It comprises 48 000 ha of the north-east Orange Free State, situated at the junction of the Natal, Lesotho and OFS borders. A number of farms to the east have recently been incorporated into Qwaqwa, but these are not being used for residential purposes at present. Various estimates of its total population are available: these range between the 1980 census figure of 155 000 and estimates by local officials of 400 000 to 500 000 in the period 1982/3 (Sharp, 1982). It is important to note, however, that the census figure for the total population in 1970 was 24 000. This indicates the immense rate of population growth after 1970 which is the result of massive population relocations, mainly from towns and farms in the Free State.

There is one town in Qwaqwa (Phuthaditjhaba); the 'countryside' is under the control of two Tribal Authorities which administer their areas through a system of chiefs and headmen. The dominant KwenKa Tribal Authority covers the larger area, and contains most of the relocated population. Kgano is a village falling under this Tribal Authority. It is 20 km from Phuthaditjhaba which is the site of the district labour bureau as well as the Qwaqwa TEBA office. There is a Tribal Labour Bureau in Kgano, but the system of Tribal Labour Bureaux is generally ineffective (Greenberg and Giliomee, 1983). Closer settlement began along with mass relocation in 1974; settlement took place on the fields of the pre-existing village. A population of over 20 000 was relocated by 1978, when further mass in-migration was directed elsewhere in Qwaqwa.
Kgano village contained between 2,600 and 2,700 residential sites in July, 1983; a sample of 38 of these was chosen for purposes of both a preliminary census survey and for further detailed examination.

We begin to examine the variety of conditions which pertain within each target area as well as the differences between the two regions by reference to a set of case studies. These indicate the consequences of the differences through the medium of our ethnographic data. There are, however, some methodological problems which need to be raised prior to presenting these data.

3. Methods

The units upon which the samples were based comprised the demarcated residential sites in these areas and the people who resided on them. Calculations were based upon both de jure and de facto populations of the sites, depending upon whether we were dealing with all the recognised members of the site population or with those actually resident there at the time of the survey. In most cases the residents of a site comprised the members of a single household, functionally defined in terms of the concentration of flows of income and expenditure (Murray, 1981a; Spiegel, 1980b:8). But this was not necessarily the case. In neither area were there any restrictions on how people on particular sites should organise their private domestic arrangements. On some sites a number of households was co-resident; in other cases, the de facto resident members of one household were living on more than one site. Because of this
initial indeterminacy in the delimitation of the 'household', our sample had to be drawn on the basis of physical sites. For the reasons set out above, this tactic was essential and remains so in any contemporary study in South Africa's rural areas. Any attempts to begin the analysis using the concept of household would have posed unending problems in the selection of units for sampling purposes.

The sample of residential sites was chosen in each case so as to be random. Randomness here implies that each site in the survey areas had an equal chance of being selected for examination; we do not suggest that these samples meet the criteria necessary for statistical comparison. The two populations from which the samples were drawn differed enormously in size. The population of Kgano resides on between 2,600 and 2,700 residential sites, that in Polelo on 175 sites. The fact that the samples from each area are approximately equivalent (38 in Kgano and 30 in Polelo) is an artifact of anthropological research techniques and the similar amounts of time spent in each area; but the margin for bias through sample error is very much larger in Kgano than in Polelo.

The data presented here also come from research done at two different times: in Polelo in June/July, 1982 and in Kgano in the corresponding period in 1983. The issues with which we are dealing in this paper are sensitive to changes over time, particularly in a period of increasing economic recession.
4. Case studies

The case studies presented in this section provide illustrations of the effects of the general process of marginalisation in the periphery. They begin to show, in addition, the regional and local differences in the ways in which this process is experienced and responded to. They are ordered so as to highlight both the similarities and the differences between Matatiele and Qwaqwa as regards the differential access people have to local productive resources.

The case studies indicate the major income-generating resources open to members of the working class in each area, and point to the crucial importance of a reliable source of cash income to domestic groups as the main shield against impoverishment. Other material resources, such as agriculture and other forms of petty production and retailing, are not alternatives to access to a reliable source of cash income for specific domestic groups.

There is still a wide range of local resources available to people living in Polelo. The most important of these is agriculture - arable and livestock - but we are also interested in the range of other petty production and retailing activities open to people as a result of the availability of agricultural resources.

Both here and in Qwaqwa a reliable cash income for an individual is one obtained primarily from contract employment - either as a migrant or a commuter - or from a pension. Excluded from this is what people refer to as 'piece-jobs', because wages earned in these jobs are very low and/or
because there is no job security. There are however certain forms of
wage employment which fall uncomfortably between these two categories.
For instance, recruitment for employment in commercial enterprises in
Matatiele town (or in local factories and the Public Works Department in
Qwaqwa) does not necessarily require the attestation of a formal
contract. But in the view of many people in these areas employment of
this kind provides an individual with as reliable an income as does
contract employment.

The fact, however, that individuals may be in receipt of reliable cash
incomes does not necessarily mean that their households of origin will be
going an income sufficient to support all the household members.
Depending on its size and composition, a household may need a combination
of reliable individual cash incomes. In addition individual members may
be in receipt of reliable cash incomes, but fail to transfer these to
others in the domestic group. We refer here to the problem of the
unreliability of remittances from migrant labourers who are employed far
away from dependants. We discuss the notion of a reliable cash income
again in the conclusion to this paper.

Case 1: Polelo

AB and his wife occupied a site alongside the road which
passes through Polelo. They lived there in one household with a
married son and his wife, a daughter, 16 grandchildren, a
grandson's wife and her two children. The total site
population was 23. Four of the adult members of the household
were in reliable wage employment: one on the mines in the
Transvaal, the others in the district. AB himself was the
local dip tank supervisor. AB had rights to a field, which he
worked in 1982 using household labour, and possessed at least
seven livestock units(*). The cattle were used with a sled to
transport firewood from a nearby forest for sale in the
village. Members of the household, particularly the females,
regularly engaged in making home-brew and selling beer and spirits. Their site next to the road was advantageous for this activity, and the weekly clinic run by Matatiele doctors was held on their site for this reason. The clinic, in fact, served to bring a regular clientele to their shebeen, the largest in the village.

* One livestock unit means one head of cattle, one horse, one donkey or five sheep or goats. Pigs and poultry are excluded.

Case 2: Polelo

JT and his wife were both of pensionable age, but were not receiving pensions because they failed to qualify according to the means test. JT was a local sub-headman in the location. They occupied a site alongside the road and next to another site which was in their son’s name. The household spanned both sites and comprised 11 people, including their son, his wife and their five children as well as a young distant kin person. The domestic unit also included and a hired herder, a child from a nearby site which lacked a wage earning resident. He tended JT’s own livestock, which totalled 16 units, plus 25 more goats which had been left in their care. JT and his son each had a field from which the household harvested sufficient grain and beans to be able to sell some irregularly in the village. They used their draught power to collect and sell firewood, and JT, as sub-headman, was entitled to place a tax in kind upon thatching grass collected by villagers. He sold the grass obtained in this way. JT’s daughter-in-law sold home-brew and a small amount of spirits and beer.

The following case from Kgano is comparable to the above in that the de facto residents of the site had access to several sources of reliable cash income. Since the site was situated in a closer settlement, however, there was relatively little opportunity for de facto residents of the site to engage in further income generating activities.
Case 3: Kgano

KP was a widow who shared a site with some of her children and grandchildren. There were two households on the site. One she occupied with three sons, one of whom was married, and seven grandchildren by two further sons who lived permanently in Bloemfontein. The other was occupied by a married son, his wife and their child. All four sons resident on the site were in reliable wage employment in 1983 and all were remitting regularly. The parents of the grandchildren living with KP also remitted monthly to support their children; they preferred not to have their children in Bloemfontein with them because the wives in both cases were working. KP was receiving a considerable amount of money each month — of the order of R500. KP and her daughters-in-law worked their very small garden intensively, but there were no other local opportunities to employ the incoming funds. KP was involved in a network of small loans in cash and kind to neighbours but she said that they were often unable to make repayments.

Case 4: Kgano

Prior to 1981, PR shared a household with one of her sons, his wife and two children. An older son lived with his wife and five children on the next-door site. In that year the younger son’s wife deserted him while she was away working as a domestic in Johannesburg, and the older son died in a car accident while working at Sasol II. By 1983, the remaining residents of the two sites had merged into one household in the sense that the younger son was using his migrant wages to support them all. One of his children had remained on the site and was being cared for by his mother and sister-in-law. His support came to them almost solely in kind; he made purchases for them during visits home and only occasionally left them a small sum in cash. PR explained that her son supported them in this way because he was unwilling to give his sister-in-law any discretion over the way his money might be used. To provide for cash needs, PR’s daughter-in-law attempted to hawk vegetables in the village. This necessitated her walking 30 km to and from the town, where White farmers unloaded their produce for sale to hawkers. Securing a single sack of cabbages required a full day’s work and the expenditure of R5 — R6 before any sales could be made. She estimated that her profits on this undertaking were 50c to 60c per bag.

Security for domestic groups in both Polelo and Kgano depends on their receipt of a sufficient cash income put together from reliable sources.
But as case 1 suggests, in Kgano opportunities for petty production and retailing are very limited, so that a reliable household income has little scope to be used for further income generation.

We now look at cases in each area where the reliability of a household's cash income had been undermined through changes in the employment situation of individual wage-earning members of a site's de jure population.

Case 5: Polelo - update of case 2 (above) in 1983

By 1983 JT's household was being squeezed by both the deepening recession and the drought. His son had been placed on short time. This had not, as yet, resulted in a diminution in their additional income-generating activities, but it had affected the conspicuous consumption which they had earlier financed from all their sources of income together. In 1983 they were struggling to make the hire-purchase payments on furniture purchased in 1982. One foresees that any further reduction in their wage income must inevitably bite into their local income-generating resources.

Case 6: Polelo

KM, his wife and eight children comprised a household living on a single site. They had rights to a field and owned 18 goats. Until July 1981, KM worked on the mines in the Transvaal. At that time he returned home, having sustained an injury underground. Although declared medically fit by the time of interview, he was loathe to return to the mines. This decision was possible because his household had other resources, at least in the short term. KM looked after his own animals and sent his oldest son, aged 14 years, to herd for the local café-owner. The son was given board by the latter, who also paid R10 per month to the boy's father. In the longer term KM anticipates being able to rely on wages remitted by this son once he becomes of an age to be recruited for contract labour. This would enable him to continue with his local income-generating activities.
Case 7: Kgano

MS, his wife and seven children comprised a household living on a closer settlement site. Since 1974, when they arrived in Qwaqwa from a Free State farm, MS has had intermittent labour contracts. In 1981 he secured a contract at Sasol II which he, in common with many others in Qwaqwa, did not realize was not renewable. He also became ill at this time, which made it difficult to find another job. In mid-1982 he secured work in Bethlehem, but after four months was so ill that he returned home. Diagnosed then as having TB he had not worked since then. During 1982 MS’s oldest son secured a contract in Welkom. Since then this son has become seriously ill but has clung to this job because it is the only source of income to the site. The second son was removed from school in mid-1982 because his fees could not be met. He was still too young to be issued with a reference book and has been unable to find a piece-job within Qwaqwa. By 1983 the household was in a deep crisis: MS’s wife and oldest daughter had been diagnosed as suffering from pellagra, and the wife had suspected TB as well. A younger child had been sent home from school because she was passing out in class as a result of hunger. A combination of drought, and illness and hunger in the household had meant that even the small site-garden was no longer in use. MS and his wife said that they had exhausted the possibilities for begging or borrowing in the neighbourhood. Owing to the vagaries of relocation, neither MS nor his wife had any kin in Qwaqwa.

The cases above show the consequences which can follow when access to a reliable cash income is terminated for residents of sites in the two areas. There are also a few sites in Polelo on which households persist over the long term even though their sources of cash income are unreliable; this is because the resources are available for a cash windfall to be used to generate further income. This is not possible in Kgano. It is in this context that we begin to examine the significance of social relationships beyond a given site. The most important here are the relationships of reciprocity and clientage which include kinship and neighbourhood.
Case 8: Polelo

MKM was a widow living on a site with three children of a very distant affine. Her only son was an absconder, living on the Reef. Her husband, who had been ill for five years, died early in 1982. MKM was too young to qualify for a pension, but the mother of the three children sent money to her for their support. She had a field but no animals other than two pigs and some fowls, having sold their cattle during her husband's illness. She entered a share-cropping relationship with her brother to work the field, and she was able to use some of the money sent to her to brew beer for sale. She also earned a local income by working in a range of activities for others.

Case 9: Kgano

ST was a widow who lived on the site her husband had established in Kgano in 1974. He died in 1980, and she began to receive a pension in 1981 when she was already 66 years old. In 1980 her oldest son, who had long before acquired Section 10(1)b rights on the Reef, sent one of his own sons to live with ST because her husband had died and so that he could attend the Kgano high school. He regularly sent money to ST to provide for the support of his son. ST's daughter and son-in-law lived on a neighbouring site and ST cared for their young children daily while her daughter went to work in a Phuthaditjhaba factory. The daughter occasionally gave her money for doing this. ST also had a son living in Phuthaditjhaba, and working as a commuter in Harrismith. He did not give her any regular support but bought her things whenever she went to visit him. During the interview she said that she needed a new pair of shoes and planned to visit her son soon.

In the above cases, the differences between villages such as Polelo and Kgano become evident. ST, in Kgano, was well supported by kin and had a pension but could not use these for anything other than consumption. The case demonstrates also the importance of establishing and maintaining links with people who have permanent rights outside the closer settlement situation. By contrast, MKM, in Polelo, was able to utilise infrequent remittances from outside the village to generate further income and, for
this reason, she did not need to lean so heavily on her kin—hence she could afford a sharecropping relationship with her brother.

In the final set of cases we discuss further aspects of social relationships, particularly with kin, stretching across the boundaries of given localities.

Case 10: Polelo

TK was a widow living on a site with her only surviving son, who was attending school. She had borne 14 children, of whom a daughter also survived. She had neither field nor livestock, and her site was unfenced. She had been relocated in 1977 in the course of the betterment programme. Although eligible by age for a pension, she had been unable to get one from the local administration. Her sole sources of income were occasional gifts of money from her two brothers who were migrants with sites in a neighbouring location. When these failed to be adequate she was sometimes able to request help from her daughter, who was married and living nearby in the village in modest circumstances. Despite her age she was able still to perform certain domestic jobs for others for payment, and she was unwilling, for a variety of reasons, to encumber any of her nearby kin with her permanent presence on their sites. One of those reasons was that she hoped soon to be able to rely on remittances sent by her son once he had gone out to work.

Case 11: Kgado

GB and his father had established two separate households on one site. GB lived with his wife and seven children, all of whom were still at school. The other household comprised GB's father and mother. They had all arrived in 1974 from a farm in the OFS. GB's father had not undertaken contract work since 1975. GB had worked as a contract worker since 1974 with one break of a year. In April 1983 he had had a disagreement with his employer in Bethlehem for whom he had worked as a lorry driver, with a good salary. Although he owned a small truck, he had spent most days since losing his job at the Labour Bureau evidently he was prepared to forego opportunities for using his truck to make money for the (slim) chance of securing
a contract. Like everyone else in the village they had no
arable resources, but GB's father owned one cow. The people on
this site were simply using up past savings at the time of
interview: it was desperately important for GB to find a
further reliable source of cash income. This was particularly
because GB's father had been unable to get a pension after
retiring because he was not old enough to qualify. Secondly,
it was also important because the residents of the site were
totally isolated from all their kin: their forebears had come
up to the OFS from Natal several generations back to work on
farms. All the residents of this site were thus classified
Zulu. When GB and his father were evicted from the farm,
however, they made for the nearest 'homeland'. Their
predicament was exacerbated by the fact that their kin, being
mainly in Natal, were even further away than those of most
other residents of Dwaqwa.

5. Vulnerability to impoverishment

The cases presented above have been selected to illustrate two themes.
Firstly they point to the variation amongst sites within each of these
areas: the residents of different sites were vulnerable in varying
degrees to the general process of impoverishment. Secondly they indicate
a major contrast between the present availability of local resources in
Matatiele and Dwaqwa.

Variation within each area

The cases above, particularly case 7, indicate the crucial importance
of a reliable source of cash income to domestic groups in each area as
the main shield against impoverishment. This confirms the results of
other research - particularly in Lesotho (Murray, 1981a; Spiegel, 1980a).
We find however that, as in the Lesotho cases, access to reliable cash
incomes is by no means evenly distributed within our sample populations.

There are two sets of factors which affect the likelihood of access by domestic groups to reliable cash incomes. The first relates to the size and composition of given households; the second concerns the degree of experience of members of domestic groups in the wage-labour market.

The size of a given household is of itself of indeterminate importance with regard to the likelihood of having members with reliable sources of cash income. What is important however is the relationship between size and the particular composition of a given group. Our own material confirms Murray's finding (1981a:55) that small households can be at a severe disadvantage if they lack members of an age suitable to be in wage employment. Murray also showed that small female-headed households were at a particular disadvantage, given the difficulties women have in finding reliable jobs. On the other hand, large households with several adult members who are potential wage-earners are likely to be relatively well-off, provided the adults can find employment. Cases 1 and 3 above provide illustrations of this point.

We found one important variation from the situation in Lesotho. Civil pensions are available to the aged in the Bantustans (even though many have difficulty in getting them), but not in Lesotho. This means that old people need not depend to the same extent on younger kin; indeed we find that isolated households comprising old people with pensions are amongst the least insecure in both areas. In Qwaqwa particularly, the isolation of such people can be a positive advantage by limiting the number of people who can make a claim on the pension (Robins, 1982).

Many people in Polelo have had considerable experience of participation
in migrant wage labour. This extends back over three or four generations, even though the experience may not all have been acquired in Matatiele itself. Despite the variation within Polelo in this respect, people in the village generally know ways of entering the market - either through formal recruitment procedures or through the use of personal contacts in various centres of employment. The *de jure* population of Polelo in fact includes several people who have permanent residence rights in prescribed urban areas; these are people who choose to maintain a rural home.

Kgano's population, on the other hand, has a highly varied migrant wage labour experience. Most people moved into the village between 1974 and 1978, having been relocated from white-owned OFS farms. People were not necessarily isolated on these farms, and many men had intermittent experiences of migrant labour from the farms. But the constraints on finding employment in Qwaqwa differed from those with which they had been familiar, and late arrivals in particular had not been in the Bantustan long enough to find out how to work the system.

In addition the scale of Qwaqwa is such that most people are socially and physically removed from sources of information regarding job opportunities. People often expressed the view to us that, given these circumstances, getting a job seemed to them similar to winning in a game of dice. This high degree of impersonality was not observed in Polelo, where people had the opportunity for face-to-face and regular contact with influential people such as government officials living in the village. The latter passed on information about contracts on offer and where to get them.
Differences between Matatiele and Qwaqwa

The contrast between Matatiele and Qwaqwa with regard to the issue of impoverishment must not be overestimated. It would not be true to say that there is no impoverishment occurring in Matatiele, precisely because of the argument with which we opened the paper: namely that conditions in the rural periphery generally are a direct consequence of accumulation processes in South Africa. These processes result in an overall tendency towards growing impoverishment which can be demonstrated empirically. Historical material on this issue is abundant (Bundy, 1979; Webster, 1981; Beinart, 1982 among others). Our own observation shows this to be a continuing process; in Matatiele, for instance, we have witnessed the most recent stages in the transformation of a freehold farm into a squatter camp providing residential sites and limited pastureage to several thousand people in the space of the last ten years. These are people who have been forced to leave overcrowded locations in the district.

This case suggests that the present limited availability of agricultural resources in an area such as Matatiele must be seen as a factor which can do no more than arrest the process of impoverishment temporarily, certainly as far as most of the inhabitants are concerned. Furthermore, access to these particular resources has become unevenly distributed over time, so that many are now highly vulnerable (Segar, 1982).

It has been estimated that one-third of the total population of the South African Bantustans lived in closer settlements by 1980, whereas "the great majority of rural people in the homelands had land rights of
some kind in 1960" (Simkins, 1981: 25). More and more people have, therefore, come in the relatively recent past to experience the kind of conditions described for Kgano in Qwaqwa.

The dependence of Kgano residents on access to a reliable cash income is acute, as the cases above suggest. This is not simply because agricultural land is unavailable to them, but also because the scope for other income-generating activities is severely limited by the overall local situation. People in Kgano cannot 'compensate' in some way for their lack of agricultural resources by increasing the scope of other petty production or retailing activities. The presence of more people in a given area does not of itself create a larger market for local goods and services. The various local income-generating possibilities in the rural periphery are not alternatives: each depends on the possibility of others being practised and all depend together on access to reliable cash incomes.

One informant in Kgano, by no means exceptional, had been without reliable wage employment for four of the five years since his arrival from an OFS farm. He had, he said, spent a very significant proportion of the four 'wasted years' (as he called them) queueing fruitlessly at one or other of the Labour Bureaus in Qwaqwa. A couple of 'piecejobs' had come his way: he had cleared the grounds of the university for three months in 1981 and had worked for a major South African construction company engaged in a project for the local authorities for four months in 1982. In no sense, he emphasised, could this latter job be construed as 'real work': he had had no contract, had been paid a starvation wage (R30 per month) and had been made redundant, with many others, at one day's notice. He had tried his hand at local retailing by hawking vegetables
(using the system described in case 4 above). But (like GB in case 11) he found it necessary to spend most of his time waiting at the Labour Bureaus. There were, he said explicitly, two reasons for this decision. Hawking required a cash input, which he often lacked, before selling could begin; and, as he put it: "All of us can’t sell things all the time - someone’s got to buy vegetables rather than sell them, and there are just too many of us trying to sell and not enough able to buy".

Kgano residents are made even more vulnerable by the fact that the processes of long distance relocation and arbitrary assignment to residential sites destroy a range of pre-existing relationships between people. Taken together, relocation, arbitrary site allocation and acute dependence on access to scarce secure wage employment make it difficult for people to establish viable alternatives to the relationships which have been destroyed.

Cases 7 and 11 above provide illustrations of the way in which these several factors hang together. In each case the residents of the site had lost all access to reliable cash income. Their vulnerability was compounded, moreover, by the fact that they were socially isolated from people beyond their respective site boundaries. Two limiting factors were in operation here. In each case the site residents had lost all contact with kin as a result of relocation. In addition, however, most other people in their respective vicinities within the village were themselves entirely dependent on access to wage earnings.

This particular dependence meant that the neighbours around the sites in question had no resources upon which to base any long-term offer of material assistance to the affected site residents. For the latter this double isolation - from direct access to secure wage earnings and from
other people - led also to the rapid disintegration of the fundamental links of kinship amongst the population of the sites. In Case 7 this process of disintegration was already far advanced by July, 1983. The parents on this site expressed to us their anxiety for and guilt about their children. They had, they said repeatedly, failed as parents. "I cannot sleep at night any longer", said MS's wife, "because my son was so ill when he last came home [at Easter]. But I sent him back to work [in Welkom] because his is the only income we have. I am being forced to kill one child in order to feed the others".

Our observations suggest that neighbourliness is an important relationship in people's lives in Kgano. Residents of nearby sites do attempt to construct networks of neighbourliness and to express these relationships in the idiom of kinship. But such networks are based on short-term reciprocity rather than on any long-term commitment (Bloch, 1973). Loss of access to reliable sources of cash income condemns most households to dropping out of the networks of reciprocity at precisely the point when these networks are needed most urgently. This is what happened to the residents of MS's site (Case 7). Neighbours to whom we spoke conceded MS's claim that he had exhausted the possibility of begging or borrowing from them; but they also explained that they were appalled and ashamed by the sight of this household literally starving to death in front of them while they were unable to do anything more to help.

Social life in Kgano is forced into a Hobbesian mould. As one of the areas of closest settlement in Qwaqwa it is notorious for an appalling rate of serious and petty crime. Residents recognize that this results from the density of habitation, the high rate of un- and under-employment
and the lack of other income-generating resources. Migrants returning home with wages know that the walk from the bus-stop home is a risky business; people keep to their own sites after dark to avoid roaming gangs of tsotsis, and they know that the tsotsis are, in fact, their own children and those of their neighbours. Attempts to build networks of neighbourliness are in part a direct response to this menace: people who can be persuaded to address one as 'father' or 'brother' by day are less likely, perhaps, to harrass by night.

But people recognize that use of the idiom of kinship in these circumstances creates no more than an 'as if' relationship. People cannot expect too much of their relationships with neighbours because the long-term commitment of generalised reciprocity cannot exist under the conditions experienced in Kgano.

It is clear that people in the areas studied in both Matatiele and Qwaqwa appeared to attach primacy to relationships with kin as resources for social reproduction. Where kin were nearby, people did turn to them first for assistance if this was needed. Where kin were not present, people explicitly lamented their absence. People were prepared and anxious to define kinship as widely as possible, for the purpose of giving and receiving, because the vagaries of relocation and betterment often brought only the most distant kin together.

People were also forced to recognise the 'as if' nature of relationships with neighbours: despite use of the idiom of kinship here, long term commitment to these relationships was rendered impossible by circumstances. It follows from this that people were making an implicit distinction between kinship and the 'as if' relationship with neighbours. The fact that this distinction was being made is
significant, and this significance is not diminished by the fact that the
distinction was ambiguous (which it must be in a situation where people
use clanship as a means of social identification). The interesting
question is why people bother to make the distinction at all in the
circumstances of closer settlement villages in the rural periphery.

The question arises not simply because of the inherent ambiguity of the
distinction. It arises because the structural conditions referred to
above (relocation, arbitrary site allocation, dependence on remittances,
the absence of other income generating resources) would seem set to turn
all relationships of kinship into the 'as if' variety over time. This
tendency results, in other words, from the impossibility of long-term
commitments in relationships both across and, most devastatingly, within
site boundaries in areas such as Kgano.

Even if one’s father, brother or sister lives on the very next site
there can be no assurance, given the conditions people face, that
long-term material assistance will be forthcoming from them if it is
needed. The question of whether they want to help or not becomes largely
irrelevant. In Matatiele it is still possible for kin or neighbours who
have a reliable source of cash income and access to agricultural land,
for instance, to offer to employ one or more residents of a vulnerable
site to work on the land or to herd animals in return for board, lodging
and even a small cash wage (see case 2 where a youngster was a hired
herder). But given the absence, for most, of any local income-generating
activity in Kgano, help extended to others simply adds to the pool of
consumers for particular cash incomes: any offer of labour by the others
cannot be utilised, and they cannot repay in kind. The social and
material base of even close relationships of kinship is being eroded.
An answer to the question of why people in areas such as Kgano still appear to find kinship significant as an idiom of relationship and a basis for social reproduction, must lie in their own past experience rather than in some quality inherent in kinship itself. In the case of Kgano people all the adults have experienced conditions on White-owned farms in the Free State and Transvaal. On these farms the standard unit of employment was the extended family. This meant that members of that unit both co-operated in activities to generate a joint income and were frequently co-resident in homesteads on the farms where they were employed. Ideas derived from this experience are very likely to have been carried over by the first generation of people relocated to Qwaqwa (cf. Sharp, 1982).

In the case of people in Polelo, the ongoing experience of the efficacy of kinship links provides for a continuity of commitment to the idiom of kinship in structuring social relationships. Betterment in Polelo did not disrupt pre-existing forms of relationships. But the more disruptive effects of betterment are apparent on nearby freehold farms to which surplus people have relocated (cf Spiegel, 1983).

6. Conclusion: the problem of 'reliable cash income'

A key concept in this analysis has been the notion of a 'reliable cash income' to a domestic group. We maintain that access to such an income is crucial, given conditions in South African rural areas, for the survival and maintenance of any domestic group. Nonetheless the term is,
in many respects, vague in its definition. We argue, however, that this does not detract from its usefulness.

We have asserted that certain sources of cash income are reliable without specifying either the size or the regularity of such sources. In part, there is a practical difficulty here: even working at the micro-level, attempts to obtain accurate figures about earnings and remittances did not yield satisfactory results. De facto residents do not necessarily know what absent migrants are earning, and amounts remitted may vary enormously from one receipt to the next (Spiegel, 1979:79-83).

We believe in any event that attempts to determine reliability absolutely, in terms of minimum sizes and frequencies of remittance, address the wrong question. To ask how much and how regular incomes must be in order for them to be reliable is misleading, given the variability in the size and composition of households. Moreover, a reliable cash income for an individual is not necessarily sufficient for the maintenance of a whole domestic group.

The definition of reliability which we favour takes close account of people's own perceptions of the characteristics of a viable income. In both research areas we found that the focus of each concern was with the reliability of incomes to domestic groups rather than simply to individuals. Given that incomes in general were low in the absolute, reliability was assessed in terms of the capacity of a household's income to enable the domestic group to plan its maintenance on more than a hand-to-mouth basis.

An important aspect of this was the household's ability to borrow from
and lend to kin and neighbours on the basis of the surety offered by such an income (cf Hill, 1982: 284-296). Reliability of income does not imply financial independence and self-sufficiency for given domestic groups: given the low level of incomes most households experience frequent cash-flow problems. But a reliable income provides a socially acceptable means of transferring resources between domestic groups at different times.

We seek a tool to illuminate some of the fine variation between households at the micro-level. Few of the concepts available in the literature provide a means to do this because their primary focus is at the macro-level. The ideas of class, of the dual labour market and of formal/informal sectors have all been used to discuss the predicament of people in the rural periphery. Each presents problems for an analysis which seeks to examine different degrees of vulnerability to impoverishment and the way in which this vulnerability shapes forms of rural consciousness.

All the people in both research areas with whom we have been concerned are members of the regional working class. This is true given our use of a definition of working class to include not only workers but also their immediate dependants and those who are temporarily or permanently excluded from wage labour (Wilkinson and Webster, 1982: 5-6). While it is important at one level not to forget this common class situation, the aims set out above demand that one find the means to disaggregate the members of this class in a way which takes account of the differences amongst workers and of the complex links between workers and non-workers.

The situation in Natalele and Gwaqa is also partially illuminated by
dual labour theory. This proposes a distinction between primary and secondary labour markets. In the primary labour market jobs are well-paid and workers have prospects of career advancement; the secondary market is defined as the reverse (Giddens, 1981:219; Littler, 1982:15ff). Burawoy (1975) has applied the argument to South Africa, suggesting that migrant labourers from the Bantustans were restricted to the secondary market. Again, identification of people in this way may be true but it is not very illuminating for our purposes.

There is moreover evidence to suggest that Burawoy's categorisation may no longer be true of the 1980s. Some migrants have been unionised (Webster, 1983); and the Chamber of Mines has taken steps to 'stabilise' its labour force by the use of re-engagement guarantee certificates (Murray, 1980; Spiegel, 1980b). There is by now, therefore, a stratum of wage-earners from the Bantustans (and from countries such as Lesotho) which should be classified as having access to the primary labour market.

The important task is to disaggregate participants in the secondary labour market and to account for the different degrees of security experienced by people who are not securely employed. The formal/informal sector dichotomy provides one crude way of doing this, because people can be wage-earners as well as entrepreneurs in the informal sector. But it will not help to search mechanically for gradations within the secondary labour market. We are not dealing with the opposite of the primary market; nor are we dealing with markets at all. We are adopting instead a micro level perspective on a residual category of people who are not in secure employment (as defined) and only some of whom have access to a reliable source of cash income. Furthermore, we have to see these
individuals as members of domestic groups and of wider structures which contribute to social reproduction.

Some people in this residual category are employed as contract workers without any long-term security, others are in 'piece-work', some are directly dependent on these workers and others are temporarily or permanently unemployed. The factor which complicates an understanding of the vulnerability of all these people is that their situations are influenced not simply by their individual places within a market but rather by the nature of the various relationships amongst them.

The notion of a reliable source of cash income provides a tool which can be used at the micro-level without generating inflexible and static categories. Given the circumstances found in the periphery, it enables one to grasp the facts that people move rapidly between different ways of gaining cash income and that these activities are embedded in the social networks which surround them.
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