



Grains from Grass: Aging, Gender, and Famine in Rural Africa

Lisa Cliggett

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In her ethnography of the Gwembe Tonga people of rural Zambia, Lisa Cliggett explores what happens to kinship ties in times of famine. The Tonga, a matrilineal Bantu-speaking society, had long lived and farmed along the banks of the Zambezi River, but when the Kariba Dam was completed and the river valley was flooded in 1958, approximately 57,000 people were forcibly relocated. All of southern Africa has suffered from severe droughts in the last three decades, and the Gwembe Valley has proved particularly susceptible to failed harvests and sociopolitically and ecologically triggered crises. The work of survival for the Gwembe Tonga includes difficult decisions about how to distribute inadequate resources among family members. Physically limited elderly Tonga who rely on their kin for food and assistance are particularly vulnerable. Cliggett examines Tonga household economies and support systems for the elderly. Old men and women, she finds, use deeply gendered approaches to encourage aid from their children and fend off starvation. In extreme circumstances, often the only resources at people's disposal are social support networks. Cliggett's book tells a story about how people living in environmentally and economically dire circumstances manage their social and material worlds to the best of their ability, sometimes at the cost of maintaining kinship bonds—a finding that challenges Western notions of family among indigenous people, especially in rural Africa.

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