Book Review

Rice, Kathleen. *Rights and Responsibilities in Rural South Africa: Gender, Personhood, and the Crisis of Meaning*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2023. 198 pages.

Zoë E. Berman
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

A rich and sensitive ethnography, Kathleen Rice's *Rights and Responsibilities in Rural South Africa: Gender, Personhood, and the Crisis of Meaning* explores the question of how people may live well together amidst the social and moral contradictions which emerge in a changing world. Rice's book begins with the established yet still urgent observation that, although South Africa has been praised for its exceptionally liberal Constitution, one which forcefully enshrines the values of human rights and equality, gross economic inequality persists thirty years after Apartheid. In a context in which individual autonomy remains precarious, Rice interrogates the enduring importance of systems of patriarchal and gerontocratic hierarchy within Xhosa communities. Set in the remote rural village of Mhlambini in the Eastern Cape, and building on over a decade of research, including sixteen months of fieldwork in 2012, *Rights* investigates the ways in which men and women of different ages navigate and mobilize ideas about rights and responsibility in their efforts to build a good life for themselves.

The Introduction of *Rights* sets the tone for the chapters which follow by establishing the stakes of the text empirically, relying less on abstract theories and more on historical and ethnographic evidence to explore what Rice describes as competing "moral frames" entailed by "tradition" and "modernity" in contemporary Mhlambini. The book opens with the example of a young man who complains that children and women can mobilize the language of "rights" in order to evade their "responsibilities." In the pages that follow, we are exposed to other typical conflicts that arise between men and women, young and old, all of which begin to illuminate how gendered, gerontocratic, and economic power dynamics intersect to shape relationships between different social actors. Such conflicts, it becomes clear, are not necessarily about tension

between "old" and "new," but rather between competing idioms of liberal independence and hierarchal dependence and the different forms of obligation they entail. In particular, Rice highlights the ways in which post-Apartheid reforms have given young women greater autonomy in a context in which they have been historically disempowered vis-à-vis men and elders.

The first chapters of *Rights* build a contextual base on which Rice is able to set in motion a strong argumentative arc that begins in the second, titular chapter, "Rights and Responsibilities." Drawing on transnational studies of neoliberalism, Rice emphasizes how the forceful imposition of democratic human rights frameworks in previously non-democratic contexts can disrupt established moral sensibilities and hierarchies. In Mhlambini, understandings of the Xhosazition of the term "rights" (*irhatyi),* which speaks to individual rights, often challenge the longstanding notion of "responsibilities" (*amalulengo),* which speaks to "moral rightness." This is particularly the case when it comes to issues surrounding the moral personhood of young women. Returning to the claim which opens the book—that children and young women can mobilize the language of "rights" in order to evade their "responsibilities"—Rice systematically debunks the assertion that women mobilize legal rights in order to evade obligations to boyfriends and husbands. Rather, she asserts, women might discursively invoke the idea of equal rights as a way of complaining about or commenting on the widespread inability of men to fulfill *their* responsibilities to others, particularly in an era of widespread poverty and unemployment.

In Chapter 2, Rice raises a key problem which animates many of the debates on which her work centres: the fact that most men in Mhlambini are unable to fulfill traditional obligations under conditions of economic scarcity. As we see in the following chapters—which discuss social grants, female labour, and marriage—this problem has not only created a crisis in masculinity, but also introduced new forms of moral ambiguity into debates about social value and moral personhood. Against this backdrop, not only men, but also elder women who stood to benefit from an earned hierarchal position, often sought to reinforce their socioeconomic power by making moral claims about young women's (inappropriate) behaviour, particularly as a way of controlling their labour. Chapter 4, which compares and contrasts the life paths of six different young working women in Mhlambini, illustrates how, despite assertions to the contrary, most daughters and wives respected hierarchical ideals and assiduously strove to fulfill obligations to their families and husbands. However, it was their unwillingness to marry—which, young women claimed, would force them cede

their labour to an unemployed man who might discipline them with violence—which troubled both men and elders. These tensions around marital decision-making are acutely realized in Chapter 5, which explores why elder women elected to offer their daughters up to often brutal capture marriages (*ukuthwala)* and why the violence expressed by young men in these arrangements is so extreme compared to other global contexts.

The great strength of *Rights and Responsibilities* is the balanced and thoughtful ethnographic eye Rice brings to issues of gendered inequality and gender-based violence. Recognizing the limitations of both a universal rights framework and a hierarchal system of dependence, Rice helps the reader to see how different individuals in Mhlambini understand and evaluate questions of dignity and moral personhood in a world under strain. We see this particularly in Rice's concerted effort to illustrate the historical and structural dynamics, which, she argues, explain why some men in Mhlambini have become committed to techniques of violent discipline in this particular post-Apartheid moment, and why others have begun to shy away from them. Rice also gives significant attention to the ways in which women of all standings exploit the household labour of other young women, and the ambivalence that young women feel about their "rights." Across these contexts, *Rights* offers a nuanced portrait of patriarchal gerontocracy that highlights the ambiguous ways in which both men and women respond to economic and political shifts affecting the local social order.

Rights is also instructive for those interested in engaged ethnography, both in its exposition of method and in its attention to policy questions in the Conclusion. In Chapter 1, "The Lodge and the NGO," Rice describes her research process in Mhlambini, reflexively detailing her work as a volunteer for a local NGO. It is clear that her efforts in working with the NGO to understand the basic needs of individuals in Mhlambini and neighbouring villages shaped the tone and intent of the text. As Rice makes explicit in the Introduction, at stake in her research is not what is morally right from any given perspective, but rather the central question is what it might take for people to "live well." In centring this question, *Rights* provides ideas about how to improve life in Mhlambini by re-centring the importance of social relationships in conversations about rights and improving economic conditions. These ideas might serve as inspiration not only to policy makers and Rice's interlocutors, but also to other anthropologists who might be struggling with how to interpret or respond to similar problems in their own research contexts.

An engaging ethnography that moves quickly through concepts like tradition, morality, and personhood, as well as Xhosa history, *Rights* allows readers to feel as though they are swept up into Mhlambini and to gain a complex and nuanced understanding of the conflicts on which the book centres. This immersive quality of *Rights* will undoubtedly make the text pleasurable for readers within both African Studies and Anthropology (who will see its achievement as an ethnography that makes fresh familiar moral issues), as well as more general readers who are seeking to learn more about rights discourse in the post-Apartheid context. An insightful, well-written text, suitable for advanced undergraduates and senior scholars, *Rights* offers a solid contribution to studies of gender, tradition, and rights discourse in Africa and beyond.