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Through the ‘Thick and Thin’ of farming on the Wild Coast, South Africa

Sheona E. Shackleton^{a,*}, Paul Hebinck^{b,c}

^a Department of Environmental Science, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

^b Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa

^c Department of Sociology of Development and Change, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This contribution critically engages with the academic debate on de-agrarianisation which has gained common ground in political economy perspectives of agrarian change in South Africa. De-agrarianisation represents long-term processes of occupational adjustment, income-earning reorientation, social identification and the spatial relocation of rural dwellers away from strictly agricultural modes of livelihood. In contrast, we do not treat the decline in agriculture as a necessarily linear structural process and phenomenon. The substantial variation of de-agrarianisation that exists amongst and between regions and homesteads, and in time and space, means that general patterns cannot be easily established. De-agrarianisation may very well be a temporal phenomenon and processes of re-agrarianisation or re-activation of cultivation may be more common than expected in some areas. We draw on original material from a study on the Wild Coast, South Africa to underline that agriculture currently may be in a stage of de-activation in scale, but certainly not in terms of scope, intensity, agrarian identity and contribution to wellbeing. We encountered two distinct styles of farming, reflecting, in turn, a certain order of the agrarian landscape of the Wild Coast: one which builds on notions like ‘keen farming’ which is very much supported by lifestyle ideas that “farming is our life” and “we like farming” and a second one that suggests it “saves money to continue farming”. These styles are not static, but adjust with time and are often inter-related with and shaped by particular historical circumstances. These styles, we argue, reflect and safeguard continuities of farming in places like the study area for current and future generations. The continuity of farming is specifically maintained through family farming by drawing on family labour, including the youth, combined with low degrees of commoditisation and a fair degree of investment in equipment and time.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the continuities of crop farming in Mbhashe Local Municipality on the Wild Coast, which forms part of the southern portion of the coastal belt of the former Transkei homeland of the Eastern Cape, South Africa (Fig. 1). Set against the background of the de-agrarianisation debate (see ‘Introduction’ to this special issue) and observations of a general decline in field cropping in this region (e.g. Andrew and Fox, 2004; Hebinck and Monde, 2007; Hebinck and van Averbek, 2013; Shackleton et al., 2013; Shackleton and Luckert, 2015; de la Hey and Beinart, 2016; Masterson, 2016; Connor and Mtwana, 2017), we noted, however, that certain lands or fields, distant from so called ‘gardens’,¹ continue to be ploughed and planted, albeit by a minority of homesteads. While the general decline in field cultivation has been fairly well covered in the literature, few publications examine

the motivations and activities of those who continue to crop fields. We therefore (re)traced after a period of two years, between 2011 and 2013, homesteads that continue to crop fields, following up on a study by Shackleton et al. (2013), which purposely sought out farmers who are still cultivating fields. Our objective was to analyse the farming styles and strategies of families that cultivate fields, so as to better understand why and how they continue to do so. Apart from mainly continuous farming of these lands, it is noteworthy that some farmers had disengaged from cropping over the period considered, while we also found newly cultivated fields opened up since 2011. Furthermore, a concurrent survey of home garden cultivators showed that cultivation of gardens continues as an important form of production in the study area, and in some cases may replace field farming (Connor and Mtwana, 2017; Fay, 2013; Hebinck and Monde, 2007). There is, thus, variation over time amongst farming families and their use of fields. We find this

* Corresponding author. African Climate and Development Initiative, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

E-mail addresses: sheona.shackleton@uct.ac.za (S.E. Shackleton), Paul.Hebinck@wur.nl (P. Hebinck).

¹ Culturally, socially and historically it is important to make a distinction between fields (*intsimi*) and gardens (*igadi* and *isitiya*) on the Wild Coast. The difference between them is not size *per se*. Fields, in contrast to gardens, are often distant from the homestead, and mostly in valley bottoms. Gardens are seen as part of the homestead and are fenced along with the house, and have become the main food producing sites for many families, saving money that otherwise would be spent on purchasing food (Fay, 2013; Connor and Mtwana, 2017).

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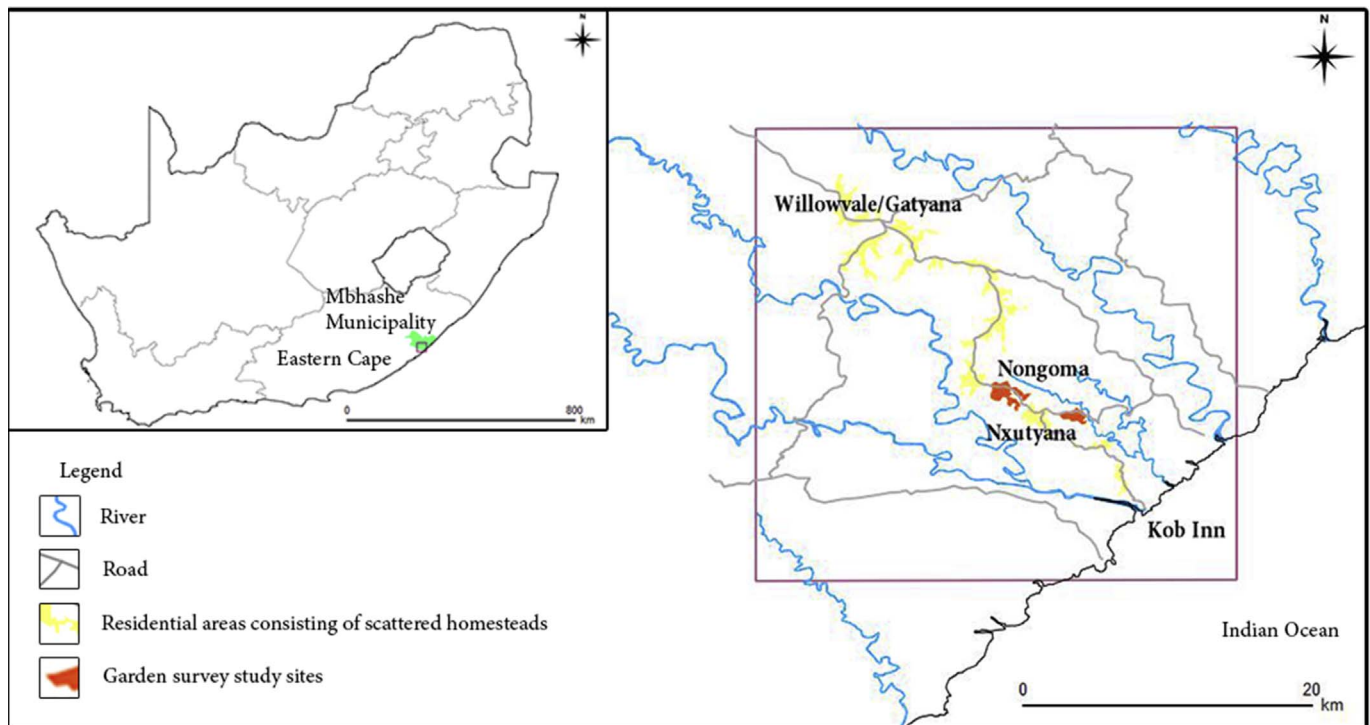


Fig. 1. Area between Willowvale/Gatyana and the coast covered for the field farmer survey (yellow) and sample villages for the garden survey (orange). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

variation theoretically and empirically significant; it is, however, not well covered by either the notion of de-agrarianisation or the debate around it.

Instead, the de-agrarianisation literature tends to treat the process of field abandonment as a permanent shift away from the use of land and labour for agricultural purposes. Moreover, the commentary for South Africa often depicts rural livelihoods as being dependent on and revolving around social grants, pensions, remittances and outside forms of income (see Rogan, 2017). The occupational shifts away from agriculture have, thus, often been misunderstood as the completion of a process of proletarianisation, which has accelerated out migration to the city, leaving villages de-agrarianised. That an agrarian or rural lifestyle continues to exist, albeit in different forms and shapes, tends to be overlooked. Thus, the persistence of an agrarian identity and how this translates into the kinds of land use and farming one encounters in villages in the former Ciskei and Transkei regions of the Eastern Cape today, are rarely given focussed attention. This analysis of styles of farming aims to overcome such short comings, and contribute to re-farming what we mean by both farming and arable decline.

In our observation, field abandonment, or what we term de-activation (van der Ploeg, 2008: 7) of field agriculture, due to numerous constraints and challenges described later (also see Andrew and Fox, 2004; de Klerk, 2007; and de la Hey and Beinart, 2016), does not exclude cultivation of home gardens and, moreover, that, after some years, rural dwellers may attempt to re-activate and rejuvenate cropping in distant fields, with or without the support of development agencies (see Van den Berg et al. in this issue). De-activation/re-activation, we believe, is a more nuanced way to frame the cropping activities we observed on the southern Wild Coast, as it adds a dynamic dimension to the practices this paper describes. We argue that the notions of under-cultivation, under-utilisation and abandonment can be problematic. This is not only because they underplay the possibility of re-activation, but they ignore that fields are also used for multiple other purposes (e.g. collecting herbs, medicinal plants, grazing) and are seen by residents as potentially productive components of the landscape (Masterson, 2016).

Cultivation has been shown to be important in the livelihoods and well-being of rural Eastern Cape residents in a recent study by Rogan (2017). Using the Statistics South Africa 2008/9 Living Conditions Survey and its annual General Household Surveys, he has shown that, in the absence of wage income, hunger levels are lower amongst farming households. He argues that the income poverty literature has underestimated the role of family cropping in promoting well-being and that this activity needs to be taken seriously by policy makers for its contribution to supporting food security amongst poor rural households. Such findings legitimise our focus on the continuity of agriculture amidst a de-agrarianised landscape, and our wish to understand why and how people farm. Interesting policy considerations can be drawn from such analysis.

Given that we found that the continuity of arable farming is unfolding in heterogeneous ways, we applied the notion of styles to characterise these differences. The value of describing styles of farming is that each style tells a story about how the actors involved discursively explain their way of farming and their envisioning of the future. These styles, however, do not exist and emerge in a political and historical vacuum. Styles, as we will show in this article, build on past strategies and relations; they also do not simply co-exist in parallel, but may overlap with one another. We identified two main styles: ‘*keen farming*’ which is very much supported by lifestyle ideas that ‘*farming is our life*’ and ‘*we like farming*’, and a second one that suggests it ‘*saves money to continue farming*’. These styles are neither static nor homogenous.

In the next sections, we start by elaborating on the theory behind ‘styles of farming’ as an approach to ordering the agrarian landscape. This is followed by a description of the methods used for both the field cultivation and home garden surveys, in which we mention how the research forms part of four years of interdisciplinary work in the study area. An overview of the study area is then provided. The two sections after that contextualise the study within the historical and contemporary agrarian context of the Wild Coast, drawing on the work of numerous authors and the findings from our two surveys. We discuss both field and garden cultivation and the commonalities and linkages between them. Following this, we distil out and characterise the

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