

Wealth-in-people and practical rationality: Aspirations and decisions about money in South Africa

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This article explores crucial decisions made by Sylvia, a Xhosa woman living in the townships of Cape Town, during a period of approximately thirty years. These decisions involved large sums of money and had important consequences for her own life, for those of her son and grandchild, and for the relationships she had with her first and second husbands and in-laws. Sylvia's decisions continued to be influenced by gendered ways of belonging to ancestors and descendants but also show important changes in connecting wealth and people. The wealth-in-people approach offers important insights into how Sylvia's decisions are guided by power and control over people as well as by prestige. However, it also becomes evident that the wealth-in-people approach does not sufficiently explain or theorize the agency of people. By drawing on the philosophical notion of practical rationality as a complementary analytical perspective, I explore agency in relation to aspirations and the acquisition of new open-ended values. The perspective offered by practical rationality increases our understanding of how individual decisions, especially complex decisions around money, are made because of their transformative potential and the aspiration to cultivate oneself.

Keywords Decision-Making; Wealth-in-People; Practical Rationality; Kinship and Family; South Africa

Drawing on Miers and Kopytoff (1977), Guyer explores the connections between self-realization, the meaning of exchange, and different political and economic hierarchies in equatorial Africa (Guyer 1993; see also Guyer 1995). Using museum collections and archival records, she analyzes how material objects in precapitalist equatorial Africa constituted personal qualities. The way objects circulated within transactional systems was part of gaining rights-in-people, often the ability to mobilize them to particular acts or to lay claim to their loyalty. These rights-in-people could then be mobilized for economic or political purposes. The wealth-in-people approach highlights that these purposes can be individual pursuits as well as collective — particularly kinship — pursuits. Such pursuits were not (only) material but also forms of self-realization that shaped personhood. This approach shows how regimes or systems of circulation increase people's status and respectability and have far-reaching implications for power dynamics within and between communities. Guyer concludes that wealth-in-people offers important insights into the “contingent cultural and political process by which, in both capitalist and non-capitalist economies, some things and some people may be realized as assets” (1993, 261; see also Guyer 1995; Guyer and Belinga 1995). By carefully examining museum collections and archival records, the wealth-in-people approach offers a comprehensive analysis of how people in precapitalist West Africa established connections between material wealth, possibilities for political mobilization, and the valuation of people.

Within the wealth-in-people approach, self-realization refers to the building of personhood. It shows how people try to gain status and prestige by how they are situated in transactional regimes; by the work transactions

involved; and by the accumulation of personal assets, characteristics, and skills. This fairly narrow definition of personhood highlights power and control. But are decisions about how to circulate objects within transactional systems guided only by these instrumental aspects of personhood, or do other dimensions, such as the fundamental need to belong and to develop a notion of self, matter as well? Questions that remain to be addressed are, How does a given individual decide to circulate objects in particular ways? Why does someone put wealth in one person or relationship and not in another? The approach has historically focused on the cultural and political constitution of regimes of value, transactional systems, and other more structurally oriented social dynamics. Ethnographically, the wealth-in-people approach has also set out to explore why *individuals* make certain decisions and to theorize change, for example, in Caroline Bledsoe's (1980) work on wealth-in-people in Kpelle society. Bledsoe carefully analyzes how access to money led women to seek new forms of wealth outside of marriage. However, these approaches still leave agency underexplored. More ethnographic work can more successfully theorize the agency of persons within wealth-in-people and the kinds of contextualized ideals, values, and decisions they take on.

Callard (2018) offers an inspiring philosophical argument that helps to analyze individual choice and dimensions of personhood that are not instrumental and that are not about controlling people. Her approach might present some ideas on how to "translate" the wealth-in-people approach to the study of contemporary societies and explore new connections between wealth and people. In *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*, Callard (2018) focuses on the notion of practical rationality. She argues that decisions are a result of people's aspirations: people make certain decisions because they aspire to transform values and identities. Practical rationality refers to a decision-making process that is guided by people's aspirations for new values and ways of becoming. Yet, as Callard points out, these decisions lead into unknown territory and are therefore always open ended. Decisions, especially complex ones, are made in particular ways because of their transformative potential and the aspiration to cultivate oneself. Here decision-making means trying to change or move oneself toward becoming a better, or at least a different, person.

The use of the term *rationality* might raise eyebrows among economic anthropologists. After all, economic anthropology has extensively revealed the limitations of the utilitarian approach by highlighting the importance of a moral economy and by showing that what is defined as rational is contingent on political, historical, and cultural processes. Callard uses the word *rationality*, but at the same time, she rejects the utilitarian principle of rationality that says decisions are made to increase one's happiness. But if agency is not the result of a person trying to maximize her utility, then how does someone make a decision? If not utility, then what is it that motivates or drives someone to make a decision? To understand this, Callard explores what she calls *big decisions*. Big decisions are not the outcome of utilitarian principles but are instead driven by aspirations to change values and identities without really knowing what that change will bring about. While rejecting the utilitarian principle, practical rationality does explore the role of agency in decision-making processes: "agency, as distinct from mere behaviour, is marked by practical rationality. Insofar as becoming someone is something someone does, and not merely something that happens to her, she must have access to reasons to become the person she will be" (Callard 2018, 5). It is this rejection of utilitarianism and simultaneous embrace of agency—a conceptual move that is made possible by focusing on the transformation of values and identities—that I find particularly insightful. To clarify what practical rationality means, Callard explores a woman's decision to have a child and become a mother. She argues that the decision to have a child is *not* based on fulfilling a need or satisfying a desire, as utilitarians would have it. Instead, deciding to have a child is about a woman changing who she is. It is a key example of how big decisions are not made to fulfill one's desires but rather to transform those desires, without having a full grasp of what those new desires will be and what that new identity (being a mother) entails.

The decision to have a child features centrally in the argument about practical rationality. At the same time, Callard does not theoretically elaborate on the significance of motherhood as a kinship relation, even though this seems to be crucial to understanding decision-making. Practical rationality does not fully grasp that the transformation of desires and personhood are inherently social processes, epitomized by childbirth and the creation

of a new consanguinal kinship tie. Thus the web of relationships that underlie decision-making and decision-making that attempts to shape one's web of relationships in specific ways are left underexplored. This significantly contrasts with the wealth-in-people approach that offers greater theoretical depth to these more structural and societal dynamics of personhood. Kinship adds a crucial dimension to decision-making in that one of the things it does is reveal how personhood is inherently tied to kinship relations.

Both the wealth-in-people approach and philosophical practical rationality approach have their theoretical strengths and limitations, and in this article, I attempt to set up a conversation between the two. The aim is to explore how agency and the quest for rights-in-others shape the circulation of money in a contemporary urban context. I do this by analyzing the decisions—not exclusively financial—made by Sylvia, an African woman who lived part of her life in what today is the Eastern Cape Province and in Cape Town.¹ I have known Sylvia for more than twenty years and have had the privilege to share many conversations about how she, over a period of thirty years, made crucial decisions regarding becoming a mother, building a house, consanguinal and affinal ancestors, and aspirations for herself and her son, none of which, sadly, prevented her son from eventually committing suicide.

Deciding on motherhood

Sabelo was born in the mid-1980s in a town in the Eastern Cape Province located just outside of the apartheid Bantustan Ciskei. Sabelo's mother died during childbirth, leaving Sylvia, Sabelo's mother's sister, to take care of him. Sabelo grew up thinking that Sylvia was his mother, and he was never told that his biological mother had died. Neighbors and friends must have known the truth, and Sabelo himself possibly found out at some point in his life. However, I never talked to Sabelo about this and respected this carefully maintained silence. There was a second silence surrounding Sabelo's birth. His biological father was a colored man who lived in the same town. There was a popular stereotype about colored people lacking culture, since they had no rituals involving ancestors. Sabelo did not know about his biological father, and remarks or rumors about the relatively light color of his skin were consistently ignored. For most of his life, all Sabelo knew was that Sylvia and Fezile, her husband, were his biological parents.

Money for education

Sabelo and I met for the first time in 1997, when he was eleven years old and living with Sylvia and Fezile in a shack in Indawo Yoxolo, one of the many new squatter areas that emerged in postapartheid Cape Town (see Bähre 2007). Although the townships of Cape Town are among the most dangerous places in the world, the couple moved there in the hope of earning money.² While there weren't many job opportunities for Xhosa migrants with little formal education, it was better than the Eastern Cape.

Parents often left their children with kin in the Eastern Cape, expecting that this would provide them with a safer and more stable environment. But Sylvia and Fezile made a different decision. In addition to the fact that they would miss Sabelo, they were concerned that if they left him behind, their kin in the Eastern Cape might not take proper care of him and that it would add financial demands that would make it impossible for the couple to manage their life in Cape Town. They also believed that Cape Town had better schools. However, the primary school that Sabelo attended was far from ideal. Initially, his classes took place in a shipping container, and only later did they move to a brick building. But there were other problems, too. It was not uncommon for Sabelo to have more than fifty classmates, many of them going to school on empty stomachs and having to deal with complex social and emotional problems associated with growing up in a poor and violent neighborhood.

Although primary school was almost free, there were other expenses, such as school uniforms, books, and other learning materials. To pay for Sabelo's schooling, and to shape the educational aspirations that Sylvia had for him, Sylvia joined an *umgalelo* group of neighboring women. *Umgalelo* is a Xhosa word that means "to pour," which refers to the group members pouring money into a fund. The group collected money at the end of each month and

then doled out to members in December. Sylvia used her part of the money to buy whatever Sabelo needed for the new school year, which started in January.

The *umgalelo*'s proper name was Masifunde, meaning "Let Us Learn," which focused on educational aspirations. The members were women who saved money for the education of their children or grandchildren. It was difficult for Sylvia to set aside money for Sabelo's education. In addition to managing her household in Cape Town, she had to deal with requests for money from her parents as well as from her siblings and her husband's kin. The *umgalelo* group helped Sylvia and the other women to resist some of these demands. By putting her money in the *umgalelo*, she safeguarded it for Sabelo's education and could thus truthfully tell kin that she had no money and could not help. In this way, the *umgalelo* group played a crucial role in reshaping Sylvia's kinship relations because it limited her support of kin, especially affinal kin, and prioritized the aspirations she had for her son.

Joining the *umgalelo* was not the only way in which Sylvia shaped her kinship relations and aspirations. Just as crucial was the fact that Sylvia refused to marry Fezile according to customary law, preferring only a judicial marriage. Just like so many other African women living in South Africa today, Sylvia objected to customary law because she did not want to be subjected to her in-laws. A customary marriage would have meant bridewealth payments (*lobola*) from Fezile to Sylvia's father, which would increase the level of control her husband and her in-laws could have over her. *Lobola* would also give them more rights over Sylvia as well as her son, and she worried that this would further escalate the demands her husband's family could place on her. They had already given several indications that they wanted her to conform to traditional gender roles, which greatly upset her. Customary marriage and the *lobola* payments that were part of establishing affinal bonds would put more pressure on her to comply with rules of avoidance (*ukuhlonipha*). *Ukuhlonipha* meant that she had to show respect to her husband's ancestors by accepting a new first name and by drastically changing her clothing and composure. Additionally, to obey these rules of avoidance, Sylvia would have to learn how to speak in a new way, as she would no longer be allowed to use certain letters that were associated with the names of her husband's ancestors.³ So Sylvia made it clear to Fezile that she would not be subjected to these dramatic changes to her identity. Her decision to put money in an *umgalelo* and resist customary marriage and *lobola* payments had important consequences for the flows of money, Sylvia's identity, and the aspirations she had for herself and her son.

The marriage between Sylvia and Fezile did not last. The couple had many fights about money and other issues. Fezile found it problematic that Sylvia earned her own money, which was compounded whenever he was unemployed. He did not like depending on his wife's earnings and disagreed with how she spent money. His humiliation was intensified by the pressure he felt to help his parents in the Eastern Cape. When he could not help, as was often the case, he increased pressure on Sylvia to give him money so he could send part of it to his parents. His masculinity was compromised by his inability to provide for his parents and his household, and he had no ritually sanctioned authority over his wife. Her independence and their fights over money and patriarchal authority increased until Sylvia finally decided to leave him and get a divorce.

She moved to the township Philippi, where she met her boyfriend, Robert. Initially, the two of them and Sabelo lived together in a shack, but when their financial situation improved, they bought a brick house in the same area. Sylvia and Robert got married, and again Sylvia insisted on having a judiciary marriage rather than a customary marriage. The fights with her previous husband had confirmed to her the importance of being independent of her affines. Although Sylvia was very committed to her relationship with Robert, she did not want a customary marriage or *lobolo* payment, which would mean extending this commitment to her affines, with consequences for both the flow of money and her identity. Sylvia aspired for a good education for Sabelo that would improve his job prospects. She hoped that he would be able to complete secondary education and possibly continue afterward.

After a school shooting, Sylvia decided to send Sabelo to a former Model C school in one of the former white suburbs of Cape Town. During apartheid, Model C schools were for white children only. After apartheid was abolished, Model C schools were open to all South Africans but continued to have superior resources when

compared to schools in the townships, primarily because of the fees the parents paid. They also had much better pass rates than schools in the townships and were generally much safer.⁴ The Model C school Sylvia and Robert found for Sabelo was expensive. Not only did Sylvia have to buy Sabelo a school uniform and books but she also had to pay the school's substantial tuition fee and for the minibus taxi that would take Sabelo to the southern suburb where the school was located, a journey that would easily take an hour. Private transport was necessary because public transport was too dangerous and would take even longer. To afford Sabelo's new school, Sylvia joined more *imigalelo* (plural of *umgalelo*). One was with her previous neighbors in Indawo Yoxolo, and another was with her new neighbors in Philippi.

Sylvia's aspirations and substantial monetary investments in Sabelo's education were not only to improve his employment opportunities. They also seem related to notions of modernity and tradition. These notions and the role of schooling have been explored extensively in the research conducted by Mayer and Mayer ([1961] 1974) on East London in the 1950s and 1960s. They argued that one could easily identify two Xhosa groups, namely, the Red people and the School people. According to the Mayers, rural Xhosa could clearly distinguish the two groups by their distinct ways of dressing, lifestyles, and cultural values. The Reds—which refers to the significance of red in Xhosa cosmology and ritual practice—strongly believed in maintaining the traditions guided by the ancestors, thus resisting Westernization and modernization. On the other hand, the Schools—which refers to “modern” schooling—were oriented toward modernity and Christianity epitomized by formal education at typically Christian schools (Mayer and Mayer [1961] 1974). The claims that the Mayers made have led to extensive debates about the existence of such a sharp Red–School division among Xhosa people, with opposing arguments stating that Redness and Schoolness are cultural repertoires that are mobilized within specific situations.⁵ In the process of industrialization and urbanization that occurred during and after apartheid, certain orientations and aspirations were stressed. Some were more related to tradition, the ancestors, and the continuity of values and lineages, while others highlighted the importance of change, education, and aspirations to make use of new opportunities and freedoms, especially women confronted with strict and confined gender roles as wives and mothers (see Ainslie 2014; Bank 2011; Mager 1999; McAllister 2006).

Sylvia's decision to use *umgalelo* money for Sabelo's education and to resist bridewealth payments reveals both the role of her agency and her aspirations toward certain cultural values and identities, both for herself and her son. The flows of money and the decisions that underlie them allow Sylvia to be a married woman who is at the same time highly independent of her affines. Thus she forcefully pushes back against the traditional expectations of what it means to be a wife and resisted that bridewealth payments, as a form of wealth-in-people, served both collective kinship goals and highly gendered and gerontocratically shaped goals of individuals. For Sylvia, wealth-in-people was about investing in her son's future, which served a different kind of kinship relation than bridewealth would, and which possibly would also mean that her son would support her during old age. But Sylvia's decisions were not only about the more instrumental dimensions of personhood that the wealth-in-people approach highlights. Sylvia's decisions simultaneously shaped the aspirations she had for her son's identity as an educated person that historically was central to the Schoolness repertoire. This also includes a cultural orientation pointed toward the future that gave substance to her identity as Sabelo's mother.

“You cannot fool the ancestors”

As Sabelo grew older, his initiation into manhood became imminent, something Sylvia regarded as important. The initiation ritual takes place when boys reach the age of eighteen. Typically, a small group of initiates leaves for “the bush” or “the mountain,” where they spend several weeks in a makeshift grass hut. The initiation sites are usually far away from inhabited places, preferably in the vicinity of the father's home in the Eastern Cape, because it is close to the ancestors. However, initiation huts made of wood and plastic are sometimes seen on the Cape Flats, often

close to the highway, which is generally seen as an embarrassing and disrespectful practice that shows the family's poverty.

The initiates have to endure hardship by not ingesting food or water—the latter being particularly trying in the semidesert areas of the Eastern Cape. The initiation is intended to fortify the relationship with paternal ancestors. Older men teach initiates what it means to be a man and about their responsibilities. The initiates are then circumcised by removing the foreskin of the penis without anesthetics. To show their bravery, the initiates cannot utter a sound. In the final phase, the initiates walk back to their paternal homes, where cheering crowds reintroduce them as young men.⁶

Sylvia was not sure where Sabelo should be initiated and by which lineage, and she was worried that she might not make the right decision; it took her approximately two years to think things through. At the age of sixteen, Sabelo still did not know—or at least was not supposed to know—that his biological father was a colored man. All he supposedly knew was that Fezile, Sylvia's first husband, was his biological father. But Sylvia did not think it was right for Fezile's lineage to carry out the initiation. According to her, it was impossible to keep pretending that Fezile was Sabelo's biological father, and it was clear that the distinction between biological and social fatherhood was very important to her. During one of the many conversations we had about this, she assured me, "You cannot fool the ancestors" (personal communication, July 5, 2004), stating that keeping up the pretense of a biological relationship would bring misfortune to Sabelo. One possibility that Sylvia considered was to tell Sabelo that Fezile was not his biological father but still ask that he be initiated by his lineage. However, Sylvia eventually did not see this as an option. This was not only because she had gone through a bitter divorce with Fezile but also because Sylvia and Fezile had never had a customary marriage. Like so many other poor African men living in the townships of Cape Town, Fezile was not able to make substantial *lobola* payments, and he and his lineage had therefore fewer rights over Sylvia and Sabelo.

Another possibility that Sylvia thought about was to carry out the initiation in Robert's hometown involving Robert's lineage. Sylvia and Robert were in a stable relationship, and he played an important role in the everyday upbringing of Sabelo. The bond between Sabelo and Robert was affectionate and caring, but nonetheless, Sylvia finally decided against this option too. When I asked why, she offered no clear explanation, just that she had thought it through very carefully and that this was a decision that she and Robert had made together. Although Sylvia and I had known each other for a long time already, there were aspects of her life and relationship with Robert and Sabelo that she was not willing to talk about, or maybe she had no words to explain to me why this was not the right thing to do. Theorizing in terms of wealth-in-people, what mattered was that they had not married according to customary law and that Robert had not made any bridewealth payments to Sylvia's father. This meant that Robert and his kin, including his ancestors, had no ritually sanctioned rights over Sabelo. Although this is what Sylvia had wanted for her to maintain a large degree of autonomy in regard to her affines, it now played a role in the decision about where to initiate Sabelo. Sylvia eventually decided, in consultation with Robert, that Sabelo's initiation would take place in her hometown and that he would be initiated by his mother's lineage, a decision that flew in the face of patrilineal cultural values about personhood. Just after Sabelo turned eighteen, he was initiated in his mother's village, and his mother's brother took up an important role in his initiation.⁷

This decision took place within a context where the precarious identity of men is one of the causes of violence against women in South Africa. The so-called crisis of masculinity refers to how the personhood of men is compromised by men's decreasing role in shaping life through rituals involving their ancestors, especially in urban areas like Cape Town. It also refers to the difficulties that men encounter in being respectable wage earners in a capitalist economy, which has far-reaching consequences when it comes to establishing a household, marriage, and other kinship bonds that feature so centrally in many men's notions of who they are or want to become. Such men may be unable to build wealth-in-people, which not only limits their authority over other people, women and children in particular, but also limits aspirations that form manhood. While some men try to find new ways of

shaping masculinity and fatherhood, many experience their identity as fundamentally precarious and challenged.⁸ Initiation not only marks the transformation from boyhood to manhood; it is also part of the father's aspiration to become an ancestor. Becoming an ancestor is a social process that requires descendants to perform rituals. If a man is not able to establish the right kind of relationship with a descendant, for example, because of the absence of customary marriage and bridewealth payment, then who will be there to recognize him as an ancestor?

One can appreciate why it took Sylvia such a long time to make a decision if one considers the far-reaching consequences for both her and Sabelo. The decision process shows how the structural and instrumental dimensions of personhood that are so central to the wealth-in-people approach merge with agency that revolves around the aspirations that Sylvia has for herself and her son. Sylvia's aspirations and ideas of becoming, both for herself and her son, were directly related to a gendered positionality within a patriarchal and simultaneously contested lineage. Earning her own income, mostly cleaning at shopping centers and working as a security guard, Sylvia had achieved a degree of independence that she was not willing to give up by conforming to the traditional gender norms that were part of customary marriage. The freedom she had to make her own choices had inevitable consequences for gendered identities vis-à-vis those "up" the lineage (parents and ancestors) and "down" the lineage (relations with descendants, also after death).

Aspiring a home

After his initiation, Sabelo left school without a degree. Studying was not his forte, even though he liked school and aspired to learn. Shortly thereafter, he moved to Johannesburg in search of employment and the adventure of living in a different city. Sylvia no longer needed money for Sabelo's education, but she nevertheless continued participating in *imigelelo*. She now used a substantial amount of the money to build a house in the Eastern Cape where, despite still being in her early forties, she saw herself retiring with Robert. She decided to build the house in Robert's hometown rather than in her own. Although Sylvia got along well with Robert's parents, she had always carefully kept her affines at bay by refusing a customary marriage, by not insisting on *lobola* payments, and also with her decision to initiate Sabelo in her own hometown and not by Robert's lineage. But now that Sylvia was older and Sabelo was a man who did not need his mother to support his education, her aspirations seemed to shift.

Robert and Sylvia's aspiration to build a house in Robert's hometown and retire in the Eastern Cape needs to be seen in light of how homes and kinship were affected during colonialism and apartheid. The twentieth century was marked by the brutal and forced resettlement of Africans; the theft of ancestral land; and racist labor laws that separated migrant men from their homes, wives, and children. Building a house and aspiring a home in Robert's hometown in the Eastern Cape, on the land of his ancestors, is socially and symbolically charged with aspirations to relate in particular ways to ancestors and descendants (see Ainslie 2014; Bank 2011; McAllister 2006). The relationship between the homestead (or *umzi*), land, and kinship becomes particularly clear when examining the rituals that center around the house. Traditional houses are round huts with thatched roofs and walls made of soil mixed with cow dung and other materials. Symbolically, it is the same soil in which the ancestors are buried, and the dung comes from the same cattle that play such an important role in the rituals that shape the relationships with descendants and ancestors. One of the practices where these notions of personhood are attached to the house takes place after childbirth and is called *inkaba*. After a child is born, it is customary to take part of the placenta and the umbilical cord—which represents the relationship between mother and child—and plaster it so that it becomes part of the wall of the house. In this way, a symbolic relationship is established between the mother, her newborn child, the home, the soil in which ancestors are buried, and the cattle that are part of *lobola* payments and other rituals that involve the ancestors.

Another practice that features the home is *ingqithi*. It is sometimes used when a child is seen as too immature for his or her age, for example, when the child still wets the bed at night, continues thumb-sucking, or other indications

that a child is not growing up properly. *Ingqithi* is typically done when a child is about two or three years old. Sylvia told me this is her earliest, most vivid childhood memory. One night, her father woke her up to take her to the kitchen. He heated a knife on a flame to disinfect it and then, without warning, cut off a piece of her finger, removing the distal phalange of her ring finger. The phalange was then plastered into the wall of the hut, again using soil and cow dung. Her wound was treated with soil taken from a molehill and bandaged. It seems significant that the soil comes from a molehill, seeing as the shape of a molehill resembles a freshly made grave. Both a grave and a molehill contain soil that is brought to the surface, and in *ingqithi*, it symbolically highlights the connection between child and ancestors. *Ingqithi* shores up ancestral support and protection to end the child's troubled nights.⁹

Today, houses, including Silvia's in the Eastern Cape, are often made of concrete blocks and cement. However, the fact that cow dung and soil are no longer important building materials does not completely do away with the symbolic and social significance of the house. Sylvia's decision to use *umgalelo* money to build a house in the Eastern Cape revealed several aspirations that revolved closely around personhood and kinship. Both Robert and Sylvia were looking forward to retiring there, hoping that they would have enough money to have a dignified life, and possibly also expecting that Robert's kin would help them when they were too old to take care of themselves. But their aspirations also revealed their desire to be connected to the land of the ancestors. During our conversations, Sylvia regularly told me that she always had a good relationship with her in-laws, even though they would fight sometimes. But now she also saw herself retiring patrilocally, living only a few streets away from her husband's parents, with whom she envisioned living in harmony.

It seemed that Sylvia's aspirations changed after Sabelo was initiated into manhood. It could be that her aspirations shifted because she no longer had to worry about hiding the truth about his colored father and the death of his biological mother. The embarrassment was now resolved, at least as far as it concerned Sabelo's initiation into manhood. It could be that the secrets regarding Sabelo's biological mother and father contributed to Sylvia's reluctance to strengthen ties with her husband's family. After Sabelo's initiation into manhood, it was less complicated to strengthen the ties with her in-laws.¹⁰

Moreover, many African women avoid a customary marriage and do not want to be subjected to control by in-laws (see also Bähre 2007). Sylvia made it clear to me that she would not accept it when kin tried to subjugate her to traditional gender roles. She would not allow it when in-laws or her husband would try to force her into behaving in a way considered appropriate for a woman who was married, according to customary law. She despised being subjected to what some men saw as the proper role of a married woman. She would hate having to speak according to the rules of avoidance (*ukuhlonipa*), would always refuse to go on her knees for her husband when offering him food, and detested the clothing that traditionally married women earned. She earned her own income and wanted to remain independent to a high degree, but at the same time, she had the desire to retire in her husband's village, close to his family, both living and dead, which marked a new orientation toward the future.

Sabelo's "house"

Sabelo's stay in Johannesburg did not work out very well. Sabelo was often without a job and, now in his early twenties, he started having psychological problems. He had become an active member of a church, hoping it would help him cope with his demons. He enrolled in several courses that the church offered and aspired to become clergy and devote his life to God. But he was unable to complete his education and was unemployed, and so he returned to Cape Town to live with his parents. Sylvia and Robert soon realized that Sabelo was not going to leave home anytime soon, so they built him a room of approximately ten square meters in the back of the yard so Sabelo had some private space.

Sabelo went to a nearby psychiatric hospital, where he received psychological treatment and medication, which did not solve his problems completely. He met a girl with whom he had a fairly stable relationship and fathered a

daughter. Sabelo was keen on having his own house where he could live with his girlfriend and daughter, but he could not afford it. Instead, he stayed in the room that Robert and Sylvia had built for him. His mental problems worsened when his girlfriend ended their relationship. However, after the breakup, Sabelo continued seeing his daughter, now a toddler, and the child would sometimes stay with him, Sylvia, and Robert. Eventually, the former girlfriend left Cape Town and moved to the Eastern Cape but did not take her daughter with her. I could not find out why she had made the quite radical decision to leave her daughter behind with Sabelo and his parents. It was a new silence that was carefully maintained.

Jobless, Sabelo became actively involved in the daily care of his daughter, who now lived with him. However, Sylvia and Robert were concerned that Sabelo might endanger the child, since he regularly left the house with her for long walks without saying where he was going. One night, Sabelo and his daughter did not return home, and Sylvia received a phone call from Cape Town International Airport. Airport security had found Sabelo and his daughter sleeping near the airport's entrance hall. Sylvia and Robert rushed to the airport, and when they arrived, they found Sabelo in a confused state, relaying a disjointed story about flying with his daughter to a different place.

Sylvia and Robert agreed that it was no longer safe to leave the child in Sabelo's care and decided that Robert's kin, who lived in the same town where they were building their retirement home, should take care of her. Thus Sabelo's daughter went to kin that Sabelo and his daughter hardly knew and with whom they had no ritually confirmed kinship relations.

For Sabelo, it had been very important and meaningful to spend time with his daughter, even though sometimes his attempts at taking care of her put her in danger. Sabelo had a lot going against him in life. He was an adult who could not find a job; he was plagued by mental problems; and he was unable to continue the relationship with his daughter's mother, much less build a house for them. His ancestral relations were complex, to say the least, and far removed from the traditional patrilineal and patriarchal ideals. It seemed that fatherhood was something he could cling to. It gave him meaning. After his daughter was sent to Robert's kin in the Eastern Cape, Sabelo attempted to commit suicide by hanging himself in his room, but Sylvia and Robert arrived in time to save him. Soon after, Sabelo made another attempt to take his life. This time, he locked and barricaded the door of his room from the inside. A relative who was staying with them for a while saw him through the window when he tied a rope to the ceiling and put the noose over his head. He shouted at him, begging him to stop while trying to force the door open. When he failed, he called Sylvia and Robert, but by the time they arrived home and opened the door, it was too late. Sabelo was later buried in Robert's hometown, the same town where his daughter was, but not among the ancestors who had played such an important role in his initiation into manhood.¹¹

Making sense of decisions

History and philosophy are excellent neighbors of anthropology that offer indispensable contributions to anthropological theory. The wealth-in-people approach that is based on ethnographic research (Bledsoe 1980) and the analysis of archival material and museum collections (Guyer 1993) have been extremely helpful for anthropological understandings of transactional systems, for recognizing how societies convert wealth in things to wealth-in-people and how these conversions are charged with power and control. A close look at Sylvia's circulation of wealth—in this case, money—uncovers the importance of self-realization and gendered power dynamics that were so central to the wealth-in-people analysis. Power dynamics were an important part of the bridewealth payments that Sylvia obstructed by refusing a customary marriage. They were important when she used part of her income to participate in *umgalelo* groups that helped her to shape kinship relations. She joined the *umgalelo* to promote both individual and kinship goals. At different moments, she used the *umgalelo* to resist financial claims from her first husband and in-laws; to invest in Sabelo's education, which would also make it possible for Sabelo to take care of his mother

during her old age; and to build a house in her second husband's town in the Eastern Cape, where she could, she hoped, retire comfortably.

Sylvia successfully resisted being subjected to traditional patriarchal gender roles and so made it clear in both her relationships that she did not want a customary marriage and the associated bridewealth payments. This too has consequences for the rights that her affines had over her son. When Sabelo was initiated by his matrilineal lineage, it was confirmed that Sylvia's first and second husbands had no rights over Sabelo. The struggles between Sylvia and her first husband, and the way in which Sylvia drew on neighborhood relations in the *umgalelo* to manage kinship obligations, also reveal the strategic decisions that Sylvia made to translate wealth in money into wealth in specific people. These decisions were guided by the need to "invest" in kinship and at the same time not be subjugated by a patriarchal ideology that would severely restrict Sylvia's freedom.

The wealth-in-people approach has a fairly instrumental approach to personhood. It clarifies how Sylvia uses the money she earns to mobilize specific people and strengthen specific kin relations and how it is used to gain control over people as well as over her own life. At the same time, this approach does not explore in great detail how and why Sylvia's choices changed over time and were informed by dynamics that were not so much about power and prestige. It is at this point that philosophy offers complementary insights that can be explored ethnographically. Callard's (2018) notion of practical rationality is helpful in exploring how individual decisions and noninstrumental dimensions of personhood are related to open-ended aspirations. The decisions made by Sylvia, and the way in which she reflects on them during our conversations, suggest that there is more to the example of motherhood that Callard used to clarify the notion of practical rationality. The big decisions that Sylvia took all concerned kinship, especially the relationship she had with her son. The decisions that she made regarding the use of the wealth that she earned as a cleaner and security guard showed how she strived toward open-ended values and the transformation of personhood. Surely issues of power and control were part of these decisions, but so were ideas about how to be a good mother, about becoming a grandmother to Sabelo's child, and about retiring within a very specific kinship configuration by building a house in her second husband's town. These aspirations became clear when Sylvia started to take care of Sabelo after her sister died and by keeping the identity of his biological parents a secret. When Sabelo's initiation was eminent, it was no longer possible to keep the secret, as the ancestors would not be fooled. Out of several options, Sylvia chose, in consultation with her second husband, to have him initiated by his matrilineal kin, which transformed Sabelo from a boy to a man and simultaneously changed his relationship with Sylvia. Then Sylvia revealed new aspirations in which her son was much less prominent. Building a house in the village of her second husband and sending Sabelo's child to the same town to be taken care of by her husband's kin were big decisions that revealed how Sylvia's aspirations for the future had changed.

Sabelo's suicide was a particularly painful and tragic decision. Sabelo was constantly confronted with obstacles and unfulfilled aspirations himself, and there was only so much that Sylvia could do to help him.¹² Sabelo's self-worth as a man and father was often compromised, notwithstanding the help he received from his mother. In fact, it seems that Sylvia's aspirations had problematic consequences for Sabelo as well. One cannot help but wonder what would have happened to Sabelo if Sylvia had conformed to strict patriarchal gender roles by opting for a customary marriage and substantial *lobola* payments. Maybe Sabelo was unable to have a life worth living because he was unable to build a house with its multifaceted economic dimensions that connect him to older generations (parents and ancestors) and younger generations (descendants). It might even be that the way in which Sabelo chose to take his own life, by hanging himself in his room, is symbolically significant in that the house marks relationships with ancestors and descendants.

What I appreciate particularly in the practical rationality approach is that people are not quite sure in which direction they are heading or even in which direction they would like to go. It is clear that prestige and power play an important role when using money and converting money into wealth-in-people in order to gain control, but also to push back against control—in Sylvia's case, control that is sanctioned by a patriarchal ideology of what the lives of

married women should look like. In addition, Sylvia's biography shows how important personal transformation is. These transformations are marked by becoming a mother of her sister's son, becoming a grandmother of her sister's son's child, and retiring with her husband among her affines without losing some of the independence she was able to create for herself.

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Notes

- 1 I use *African* to denote the members of Bantu language groups, in this article, Xhosa, and *colored* for people who were thus classified during apartheid and who often still uncomfortably identify themselves as such. I use *white* for English- and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans. Here I follow common practice in South Africa while simultaneously recognizing the problems with these definitions.
- 2 See Manaliyo (2014) and statistics provided by the South African Police Service, which can be found online here www.saps.gov.za/resource_centre/publications/statistics/crimestats/2015/crime_stats.php. Ranking compiled by Mexico's Citizens' Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice; see <http://www.seguridadjusticiapaz.org.mx/biblioteca/view.download/5/177>. See Bähre (2007) on violence in Indawo Yoxolo.
- 3 On *ukuhlonipha*, see Mager (1999, 178–79) and Kuckertz (1997).
- 4 For a detailed analysis of schooling in South Africa and the strategies that parents utilize to improve their children's education, see Hunter (2019).
- 5 Bank (2011) offers an excellent historical analysis of the work of the Mayers in light of South African politics and anthropological debates about modernity and tradition. In Cape Town, "red" and "school" were never identified as separate groups (see also Wilson and Mafeje 1963, 52–53). See also Lundy (2018) on male initiation and the contestation of modernity in Guinea-Bissau.
- 6 For Xhosa initiation in relation to the spread of HIV, see Vincent (2008).
- 7 Jones (1998) also found that, against public norms, both matrilineage and patrilineage play important roles.
- 8 On the struggles over redefining masculinity in South Africa, see, among others, Bank (1999, 2011), Mkhwanazi (2010, 2014), and Reid and Walker (2005). On how changing initiation practices affect masculinity and hierarchy in Guinea-Bissau, see Lundy (2018).
- 9 A detailed symbolic analysis of the customary Xhosa homestead is given by McAllister (1997).
- 10 I am grateful to anonymous reviewer 1 for bringing this important point to my attention.
- 11 The funeral costs were partly covered by Sylvia's burial societies and funeral insurance. On the social and moral tensions of burial societies and life insurance, see Bähre (2007, 2020).
- 12 See Niehaus's (2013) gripping biography of Jimmy Mohale, who eventually blames his father for many of the difficulties he experienced in his life.

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