

**Re-situating and shifting cultural identity in contemporary
Namibia: The experience of rural-urban migrants in Katutura
(Windhoek)**



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Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Declaration	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Map of Namibia	viii
Map of Windhoek	ix
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Historical background of rural-urban migration in Namibia	3
1.2 Post-independence rural-urban migration in Namibia	5
1.3 Research questions.....	6
1.4 Structure of the thesis.....	8
Chapter Two: Urban Anthropology in Southern Africa	11
2.1 Introduction.....	11
2.2 Towards an understanding of rural-urban migration in Namibia	11
2.3 Towards the development of urban anthropology in Southern Africa..	13
2.4 Revisiting classical urban studies	17
Chapter Three: Setting the Scene	22
3.1 Introduction.....	22
3.2 A Brief background of Katutura	22
3.3 A brief background of Babilon informal settlement.....	24
3.4 In the field.....	28
3.5 Reflexivity: the researcher and her field	33
3.6 Doing anthropology at home.....	36
3.7 Challenges encountered in the field.....	38

3.8	Ethical challenges.....	39
Chapter Four: Escaping Rural Poverty - Out to the City		41
4.1	Introduction.....	41
4.2	Migrating to “make a living”	42
4.2.1	Local perceptions of poverty.....	44
4.2.2	Arriving in the city: the role of social networks.....	46
4.2.3	Life and social relationships on the urban fringe	49
4.3	Finding hope in the informal sector	52
Chapter Five: Life on the Fringe of the City		58
5.1	Introduction.....	58
5.2	Rough patches	59
5.2.1	“Okwooteka” (living together relationships).....	60
5.2.2	The untold dramas of young migrant men: a vanished dream	64
5.3	Passages of hope	67
5.3.1	Coping with the urban setting’s risky social life	67
5.3.2	Babilon youth choir – “a set of relations”	68
Chapter Six: Practices of “Owambo-ness” in Babilon.....		69
6.1	Introduction.....	69
6.2	“Ombwiti ya yile kOwambo”	71
6.3	Exploration of “home”	73
6.4	The reproduction of the rural in the urban.....	75
6.4.1	Commercialization of “traditional food”	75
6.4.2	“My culture is my culture”	77
Chapter Seven: The Emergence of a Namibian Youth Culture.....		80

7.1	Introduction.....	80
7.2	Putting youth culture in context	80
7.3	Youth culture – local music and the task of identification.....	81
7.4	Youth culture – mobile phones	87
	Chapter Eight: Conclusion	91
	References	94



Abstract

This thesis explores the shifting cultural identities of young Owambo migrants living in Babilon, an informal settlement on the outskirts of Windhoek, Namibia. Through an investigation of their social, cultural and economic lives, I show how these young people invoke their Owambo-ness, but how they also transcend their ethnic identifications through engaging in an emerging Namibian youth culture, which cuts across rural-urban, ethnic, and socio-economic divides.

I argue that young migrants from Ovamboland, who intend to escape their poverty stricken rural homes and arrive on packed busses, bringing with them few possessions and great expectations, constantly shift and resituate their cultural identities while trying to make a living in the city. These young people are eager to engage fully in a better life and hope to find employment in the urban economy. For many, however, this remains just that – hope.

In their daily lives, the young migrants replicate, reproduce and represent rural Owambo within the urban space. Using the examples of ‘traditional’ food and small-scale urban agriculture, I explore how their ideas of Owambo-ness are imagined, enforced and lived in Babilon. I argue that although migrants identify themselves in many ways with their rural homes, and retain rural values and practices to a large extent, this does not mean that they would remain “tribesmen”, as earlier, how classic studies in Southern African urban anthropology argued (Mayer 1961; Wilson and Mafeje 1963). They also appropriate “ideologies” and practices of the emerging Namibian youth culture, especially popular local music and cell phones. My study thus shows that the migrants develop multiple, fluid identities (with reference to Bank 2002); they identify concurrently with the urban and the rural and develop a synthesis of both.

The thesis is based on ethnographic research, which was conducted between February and May 2008. During the fieldwork, I engaged daily in informal discussions with many residents of Babilon, and carried out life history interviews, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with key research participants.

Declaration

I declare that “*Re-situating and shifting cultural identities in contemporary Namibia: The experience of rural-urban migrants in Katutura (Windhoek)*” is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Romie Vonkie Nghiulikwa

November 2008

Signed: 



Acknowledgements

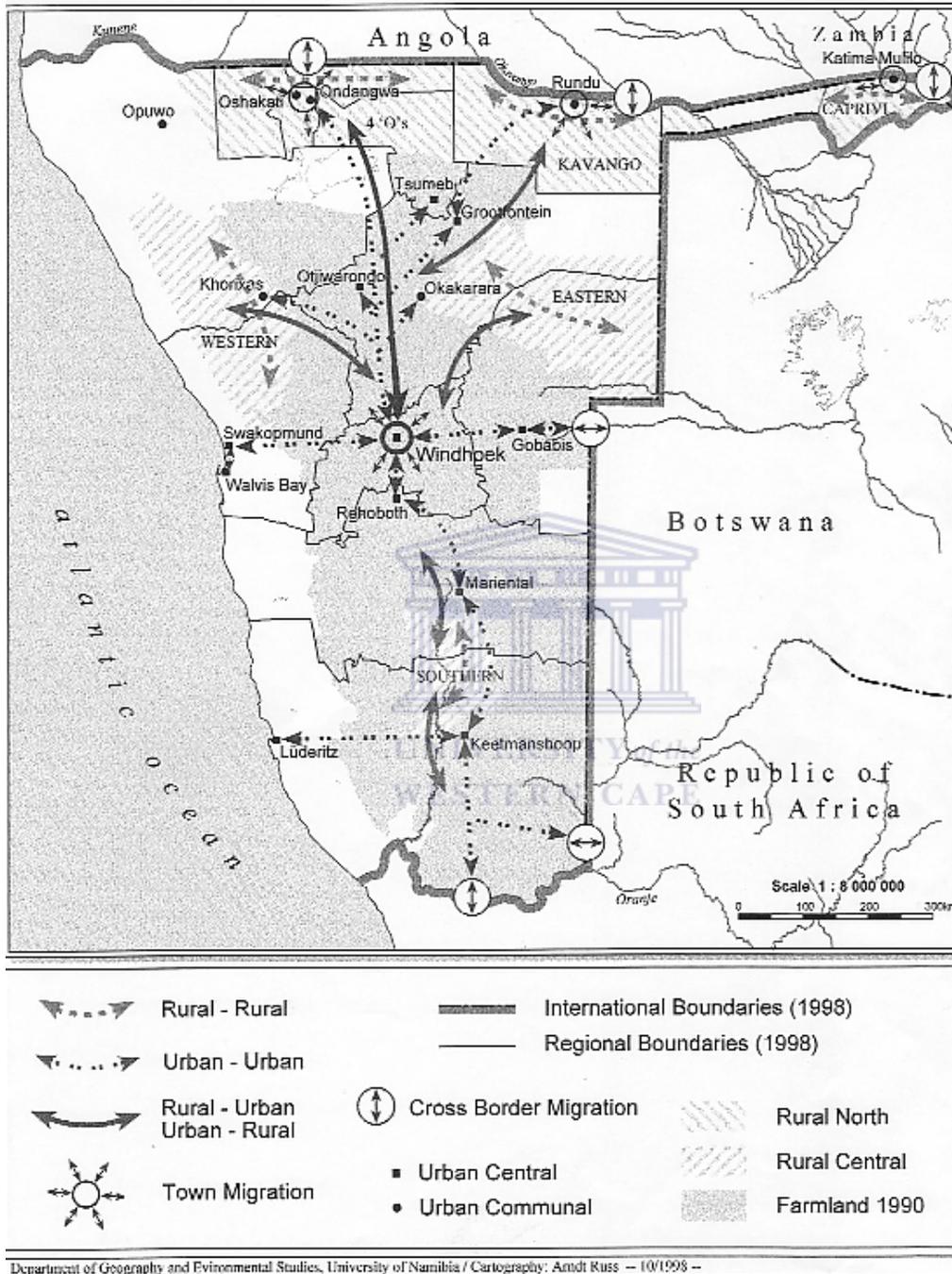
This thesis is a result of the efforts of many people, who gave their time and expertise to the research process. I would like to particularly thank the Carl-Schlettwein Foundation for the financial support it has offered me throughout my study at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). I acknowledge the support that my supervisor, Professor Heike Becker had given me throughout the research process; all the invaluable advices on the writing process; your everyday encouragement and all the technical support are highly appreciated.

Special thanks go to the officials of the City of Windhoek, particularly Mr. Faniel Maanda for providing me with valuable information needed for the compilation of this thesis. Importantly, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the people of Babilon informal settlement who found time for my interviews and allowed me into, and were open to tell me about their lives. I would especially like to thank Mr. Jonas Nghilifavali Hishoono for having guided me through Babilon, and providing his interesting insights about rural-urban migration in Namibia. Thanks to all those that I met at various occasions during the period of February – June 2008 and who helped me - shared their life histories, materials and linked me to their friends as well family members.

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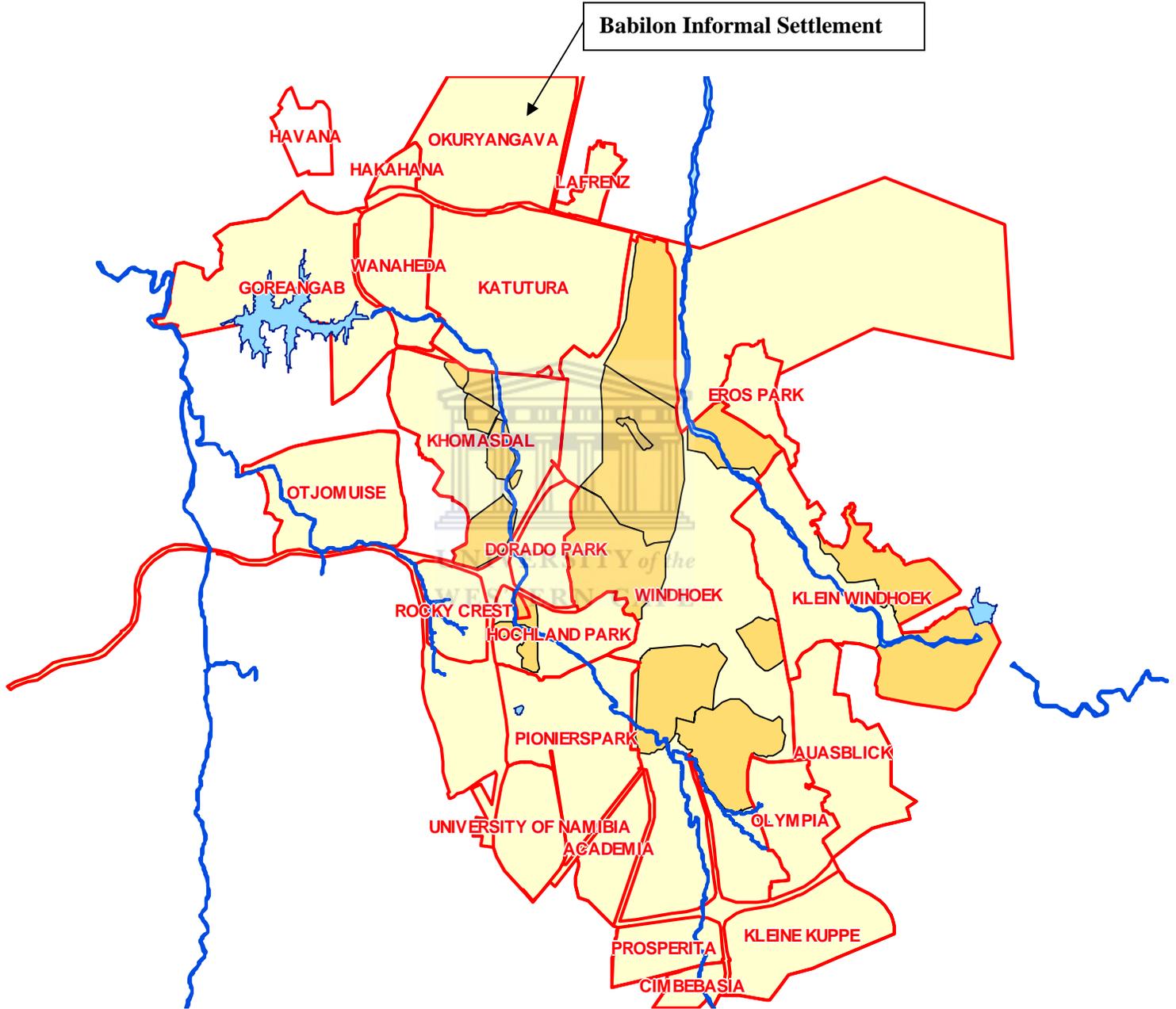
Without all the people mentioned above, this thesis would have definitely not been a reality. Thank you all!

Map of Namibia



Map 1: This map shows the location of Windhoek with arrows indicating recent migration flows both internal and cross-border towards Windhoek (adapted from Pendleton 2005).

Map of Windhoek



Map 2: This map shows the suburbs and townships of Windhoek. The arrow shows the location of Babilon Informal Settlement (adapted from Pendleton 2005)

Chapter One: Introduction

It was on a Sunday morning the 23rd of March 2008; I was on my way from “home”, in the village of Onyaanya in Oshikoto Region¹ where I grew up. I was in a mini-bus taxi full of mostly young people traveling to Windhoek, the Capital of Namibia. I have taken these kinds of trips countless times, but this time it was different – I was not only a passenger but a researcher at the same time. I was observing other passengers in the mini-bus. When we departed from Ondangwa², for about 100km traveling south everyone seemed to be in their own world of thinking. But the silence was suddenly distracted when we stopped at the market in Omuthiya³. All passengers jumped out of the vehicle to buy something. They bought all kinds of food stuffs ranging from cooked chicken, *eembe* (wild almond), both cooked and uncooked *omagungu* (mopane worms) and cultured milk. Owambo people consider these as “traditional food”. When everyone was back in the bus, we continued on our journey. The second stop was at a traffic point at Oshivelo⁴ for traffic check. The traffic officer inspected our mini-bus, checked the driver’s license and came inside to check for our identification documents. After that, she told the driver to proceed.

¹ Namibia is divided into 13 administrative regions. Four regions (Oshikoto, Oshana, Omusati and Ohangwena) are located in Owambo, the former Ovamboland - a homeland for Owambo people. I use the term Ovamboland in this thesis, because it is still in use in the everyday references to the area. More than half of the entire population of Namibia lives there, on just about 6% of the country’s territory. According to the Namibia’s Population and Housing Census Survey conducted in 2001, the population of Namibia is 1 830 330.

² Ondangwa is one of the two major towns in Ovamboland, the other being Oshakati in the Omusati Region. It is a pick up point for most people who are traveling to the central, southern and coastal towns of Namibia.

³ Omuthiya is an area recently proclaimed a town, just about 100km south of Ondangwa along the B1 main road that links the north-central regions with Windhoek.

⁴ Oshivelo is on the Red Line that marks the Police Zone. The Police Zone came into existence in 1906 under the German colonial rule. It comprised the central and southern of Namibia and it was prohibited to trade in guns, horses and alcohol beyond its northern border. The Police Zone was under police protection. Under the South African colonial rule, no person could cross the line marking the Police Zone without official permission and this became known as the Red Line (Silvester, Wallace & Hayes 1998). It is now the veterinary line, a check-point for transporting possibly infected livestock.

We continued with the journey and the same silence persisted in the mini-bus. I wondered, what must be going on in the minds of my fellow passengers? What is their mission? What are they going to do in Windhoek? Is it their first time to travel to the city? I put on a brave face and started a discussion with a passenger who was sitting next to me. He introduced himself as Haimbodi from Okongo in the Ohangwena Region⁵. Haimbodi indicated that it was his first time to go to Windhoek. He was in his early-twenties, and had just completed his Grade 12 senior certificate (school leaving) at the end of 2007. Haimbodi however, had not gained the minimum required points⁶ to be admitted to the country's institutions of higher learning, which are the University of Namibia, the Polytechnic (Technikon) of Namibia or even the teacher training colleges. This is a common fate for most young people especially those coming from the rural areas where the standard of education is rated as low in comparison to the urban schools, and many students do not perform well in their crucial examinations.

Haimbodi had been called to Windhoek by his cousin who had found him a job at a Chinese-owned building construction company. He told me that his cousin would provide him with shelter until such a time that he could live on his own. Just like one other passenger that I spoke to at one of the major stopping points en route to Windhoek; Haimbodi was hopeful and looking forward not only to see this place called Windhoek, but also to start a new life. He was looking forward to a life without poverty, a life where he would be able to feed and clothe himself as well as his siblings back in Ovamboland. He told me how he used to envy his friends who were living in Windhoek, who would come home during the Christmas festive season and other long weekends. They had fancy clothes, cellphones and could speak Afrikaans, but above all, they had all built for themselves brick houses within their parents' homesteads. My own conclusion from my discussion with Haimbodi was that his trip was really a leap into the unknown.

⁵ Ohangwena Region is one of regions in Ovamboland.

⁶ The minimum requirement to be admitted at the University of Namibia and the Polytechnic of Namibia is 25 points in five subjects and at least a C in English, while at the teacher's training colleges the minimum points is 23 points in five subjects and at least a D in English.

1.1 Historical background of rural-urban migration in Namibia

The above vignette opens up the subject matter of this thesis, rural-urban migration and shifting cultural identity in Namibia. The current process of rural-urban migration is related to various historical factors and trends that kept rural-urban migration limited during the colonial period. In a study series of the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) documenting migration trends in Namibia, Bruce Frayne and Wade Pendleton (2002) argued that the first major migration of rural dwellers to urban areas commenced as a result of German colonial occupation in Namibia from 1890 onwards. Rural - urban migration started off as an experience of primarily the Herero and Damara people⁷. In his study on the gender aspects of labour migration in Namibia, Volker Winterfeldt (2002) a Sociology lecturer at the University of Namibia presented historical records that show a growing urban population of other ethnic groups especially with the introduction of the contract labour system in the early 20th century, and particularly the 1940s when contract labour became a dominant feature of every male Owambo peasant's life. The two studies above indicated that under the South African colonial administration (1920-1990), policies and laws pertinent to the contract labour system introduced in the then South West Africa (now Namibia) were virtually identical to those in force in South Africa at the time.

The introduction of homelands in line with the Odendaal Report⁸ in the 1960s legislated a "homeland" for the white people, which occupied much of the inland plateau (43%) and is the richest in the country for farming purposes. Rural black people were designated

⁷ Ethnic groups in Namibia.

⁸ In 1963 the South African government published the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into South West African Affairs, commonly known as the Odendaal Report, named after its chairman Fox Odendaal the former administrator of the Transvaal Province. The authors of the report effectively conceded that very little had been done to promote the development of the African people of Namibia. However the report argued that a sound foundation for development could only be achieved by the white people, which explained why government support was largely directed at the white commercial farming sector. The Odendaal Commission recommended that the next stage of "development" should be based on the ethnic division of the Namibian society, hence the proclamation of eleven homelands based on racial and ethnic criteria, akin to the "homelands" in South Africa.

residential and farming rights in the rural communal areas⁹. The remaining land (17%) fell under government control and was either used as natural reserves or as mining districts. The allocation of limited and poor land in terms of agricultural productivity to the black people and the growing demand of labour in the Police Zone increased the reliance of black people on waged income. However, black people's reliance on wage income is deep entrenched in various historical factors. Historical research has shown that the Owambo traditional authorities (chiefs)¹⁰ played a substantial role in this development. Owambo traditional authorities had been trading with European traders since the 1860s, trading mainly in ostrich feathers, ivory and cattle in exchange for European commodities such as guns and ammunition. Ecological factors including the rinderpest epidemic in 1897 had however seriously curtailed the limited resources available, limiting the extent to which traditional authorities could trade with Europeans. Therefore, a growing demand for labour in the 1900s provided the traditional authorities with a new source of income. They sent young men to the Police Zone. These young men were supposed to bring "presents" to the kings and headmen on their return (Becker 1995).

Mobility to the Police Zone was limited and controlled through the creation of the Southern and Northern Labour Organizations (SLO and NLO) in 1926 which were later merged into one exclusive recruitment agency, the South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA) in 1943. SWANLA controlled labour migration from Ovamboland until 1972 (Winterfeldt 2002). It provided contracts for employment in the towns, mines, and farms primarily for Owambo men. When their contracts expired often after 12, 18 or 24 months, they were required to return to their rural homes (Frayne and Pendleton 2002). One central feature of the contract labour system was that migrant men were not allowed to migrate with their families, whom they had to leave behind in the homelands. No women from outside the Police Zone were permitted jobs in central and southern Namibian towns. Ndeutala Hishongwa (1992) herself a daughter of a migrant

⁹ This comprised of 40% of the total land areas.

¹⁰ Owambo chiefs are recorded to have prospered from the contract labour system operated by SWANLA. By 1955, Owambo headmen had doubled the taxes on migrant labourers to ten shillings (Cooper 1999)

labourer from Owambo, in her study of the contract labour system and its effects on family and social life in Namibia, argued that this gender-based labour migrancy contributed to the social disruption particularly, of the family structure. In his study on the institutionalization of the contract labour system in Namibia, Allan Cooper (1999:137), a political scientist at the Otterbein College, USA, argued that SWANLA “had been the primary source of exploitation and abuses that had eventually led to the rise of the independence movement, South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO)¹¹. SWAPO began to protest against the inhumane conditions imposed upon Africans by the contract labour system, and ended up transforming itself into a national liberation movement that achieved independence for Namibia in 1990”. The presence of many Owambo migrants in the urban central towns of Namibia, especially Windhoek dates from this early experience of rural-urban migration.

1.2 Post-independence rural-urban migration in Namibia

The attainment of Namibia’s political independence in 1990 saw the dissolution and repeal of the apartheid laws which controlled and restricted mobility. Under the new political dispensation, rural-urban migration processes and dynamics accelerated dramatically – I call it “a second wave of rural-urban migration but on a different scale”. The rapid increase in rural-urban migration should be seen in the context of the Namibian Constitution adopted in 1989, which guarantees freedom of movement for all its citizens. With no urbanisation policy in place in Namibia, the rate of urbanisation started, and will probably continue to increase as long as the perception persists that the city offers a better quality of life.

The 2001 Population and Housing Census Survey, which is the most recent conclusive statistical data source, reported that 33% of the Namibian population now lives in urban areas. Windhoek is one of the fastest growing urban centres, the other being Walvis Bay¹². The Population and Housing Census Survey also recorded a total of 233 529

¹¹ SWAPO has been the ruling political party in Namibia since 1990.

¹² Walvis Bay is a harbour town located along the coastal areas of Namibia within the administrative region of Erongo.

people living in Windhoek at a growth rate of 5.4% per year. Most of the population growth is reported to be taking place in Katutura, an apartheid-era African township where approximately half of the population of the capital live with an overwhelming majority of rural-urban migrants (Winterfeldt 2002). Around the turn of the century, the city had to accommodate 600 new-comers every month, 85% of whom had migrated from Ovamboland. At the time, researchers estimated that the population of Windhoek would double to more than 400 000 by 2010 and most of this growth would be gained from migration. Migration researchers further predicted that since the Katutura area would be unable to absorb it, considerable growth in the form of shanty housing would take place (Pendleton & Frayne 2002).

Considering the small population of Namibia (about 1.8 million, although the absolute numbers seem small), Windhoek is no exception when it comes to increasing mobility, which is on the rise throughout contemporary southern and eastern Africa. It is the increasing socio-economic disparities between people and communities, disparities between rural and urban areas and difficult rural life in general which are part of the country's colonial legacy that have resulted in an increasing rate of mobility. More and more people come to Windhoek in the hope of finding employment and a better life.

1.3 Research questions

The main focus of my analysis is the shifting cultural identity of migrants from rural Namibia, and especially from Ovamboland. I understand cultural identity as a shifting and often resituated concept, and the process of identity formation as a relational process, an ongoing cultural dialogue between spaces of representation and representation of space (Bank 2002). With that understanding, this research has specifically explored how rural-urban migrants situate themselves in the urban setting. I first use the framework of the social networks or sets of relations developed in the classic southern African urban anthropology studies in the understanding of social relations among rural-urban migrants. The question of how migrants define themselves in different spaces, for instance, at home, at the bars or their involvement in the urban economy (for those who are employed and those who are engaged in other economic activities) was explored. Secondly, I have

explored in great detail what migrants' participation in the urban economy means to them; whether it is just an approach to earn a basic living in Windhoek or whether there is more social and cultural significance to this. And for those who are not able to participate in the urban economy, what are their experiences? How do they cope? What are their everyday experiences in the search for survival? Thirdly, linking the migrants' quest for economic betterment to their shifting identities, I ask: how do these affect their cultural identities? What are the different experiences from a perspective of gender analysis? How do women and men situate themselves differently in the urban setting? While there are many unfortunate narratives of rural-urban migration especially those migrants who are not able to tap into the opportunities that the city presents, there are also fortunate narratives. I have therefore explored the encouraging side of migration, especially from the perspective an emerging urban youth culture in which young rural-urban migrants participate. How is it articulated in Namibia? On a more theoretical level my analysis contributes to the debate of how rural-urban migration affects cultural identity, the reproduction of the rural in the urban and whether there is a clear distinction between the rural and the urban besides the geographical divisions.

The central argument of this thesis starts from the widely-known knowledge which I found in my research to be a fact indeed that young people assume that the best recipe for a life without poverty is to live in Windhoek. Therefore, they seek to escape their poverty stricken homes in Ovamboland and arrive on packed buses, bringing with them a few belongings, great expectations, and an eagerness to engage fully in a better life in the city. They come with hopes of good services, and above all expectations of a society with plenty of jobs to choose from. However, for most of them, their dreams of moving beyond their parents' poverty quickly vanish when they come to Windhoek. Their hopes of a better life in Windhoek remain just that – hopes. They find themselves excluded from the promise of city life. As a result, they have to negotiate new understandings of what it means and what is involved in the path of “making a living”. In an effort to cope with these complexities, rural-urban migrants find themselves at a crossroads in terms of their cultural identities. They have to re-negotiate, to shift and re-situate their cultural identities. This is what this thesis explores in the following chapters.

I explore the definition of cultural identity from the perspective of my research participants. In an effort to map out the cultural identity aspects that rural-urban migrants adopt and adapt while in the urban context, I explore the meanings of *ombwiti*¹³ (a term which has long been used to describe urbanized Owambo people in a derogative manner). In addition to other aspects, rural-urban migrants' connection to their rural home and how often they visit rural areas is used as a measure of one's *ombwiti-ness*. In this context, I argue following Alan Gilbert and Joseph Gugler (1998) that:

“The commitment many migrants have to their rural communities of origin may be taken to suggest that they remain peasants at heart, that they do not become urbanites... Though migrants are used to rural modes of behaviour and frequently hold rural values, they also have varying degrees of familiarity with urban conventions of behaviour and ways of thinking... Adopting urban patterns of behaviour does not mean forgetting how things were done at home. Working life migrants will continue to behave in urban or rural ways as the situation demands (cited in Erman 1998:546).

Contrary to Philip Mayer's (1961) statement that “*a tribesman will always remain tribesmen in town*”, I argue following the above quote that identity as a situational concept which is shifting with change of spaces, situations and circumstances.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organised in eight chapters closely linked to its objectives. In **Chapter one**, I introduce the topic of rural-urban migration putting it in the context of Namibia in terms the historical and current trends of the process.

In **Chapter two**, I examine studies in urban anthropology, which were done in Southern Africa. It looks at rural-urban migration studies that have been conducted in Namibia. Central to this chapter are the classic studies, which have been conducted from the 1940s

¹³ Please refer to chapter six for a detailed description of the term *Ombwiti*.

through to the 1970s that have greatly contributed to the development of urban anthropology in Southern Africa and beyond, and have developed theoretical frameworks which remain influential to this day. I also look at recent studies, which revisited the classic studies and how their critiques and frameworks more specifically have informed my study.

In **Chapter three**, I present the study area - its location, the socio-economic and the demographic description. I present the approach used to collect the data, and my reflections on the research process. I further discuss my position as “a researcher at home” and how that has influenced the production of knowledge. Challenges encountered in the field are presented as well as ethical considerations.

In **Chapter four**, I focus on the migration process itself. I first investigate reasons for migrating – why do young people migrate to urban areas? Poverty was identified as one of the driving forces of rural urban migration. I explore local perceptions of poverty. I analyze the process of young people escaping rural poverty to urban areas to “make a living”. How do they cope in these circumstances? I also explore social relations developed in the urban settings and the reasons for their development. Because the urban formal economy is not able to accommodate everyone, most rural-urban migrants end up seeking for alternatives to make a living. I explore migrants’ engagement in the informal sector, as a survival strategy for most young people who are not able to find employment in the formal sector.

In **Chapter five**, I present the experiences of rural-urban migrants in the urban setting. I look at the rough patches that migrants go through while in the process of trying to make a living. I explore living together relationships as a strategy that is used by young people especially women as survival. I further look at what young men go through while in the process of looking for work at the job-seeker’s stations. I conclude this chapter with narratives showing the hopeful side of migration.

In **Chapter six**, I explore the practices of *Ovambo-ness* in Babilon. Exploring the social and cultural meanings of the term *ombwiti*, I examine how rural-urban migrants in

Babilon situate themselves in the urban context. I explore how they negotiate cultural identity. I also explore the ideas of “home” and what it means to migrants in Babilon. I further explore the rural in the urban or what I call the reproduction of the rural in the urban by focusing on the commercialization of “traditional food” in Windhoek, and the idea of “my culture is my culture”.

In **Chapter seven**, I focus on the emerging Namibian youth culture in which young migrants are involved. I explore local music as a way in which youth culture is largely articulated. I look at how young people in Namibia appropriate local music and how they identify themselves with popular culture (local music and branded clothing). What does it mean to their identity? I further explore the role of cell phones in the music industry and how influential cell phones have become in the everyday lives of young people in Namibia.

In the last chapter, I draw conclusions based on findings presented in the preceding chapters and propose ideas for further research.



Chapter Two: Urban Anthropology in Southern Africa

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine studies that have been conducted in Namibia to understand the process of rural-urban migration and in particular the lives of migrants in the urban settings. Unlike in many other Sub-Saharan African countries, there are no in-depth ethnographic studies mapping out the social and cultural lives of migrants in urban spaces in Namibia. In this chapter, I examine classic studies that were conducted from the 1940s through to the 1970s which have contributed significantly to the development of urban anthropology in Southern Africa. I also present recent studies that have revisited the classic studies and discussed how they informed my research.

2.2 Towards an understanding of rural-urban migration in Namibia

Before 1990, very little work was done in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of rural-urban migration in Namibia and more generally urban life. Early work on rural-urban migration and particularly the lives of migrants in town was conducted by Wade Pendleton in the 1960s. At the time, Pendleton, a young American scholar, conducted a study about people who lived in Katutura, Windhoek's township for those residents classified as "Bantu" ("African" or "Black" in later apartheid lingo). His work was conducted just after the Old Location was closed and its residents were forcibly removed and relocated to the new location, Katutura. In his work which was published in 1974 under the title, *Katutura: A place where we do not stay*, Pendleton showed the extent to which the apartheid policies implemented in Windhoek and Katutura influenced the lives of the people who lived there. He described the urban social structure and social relationships which were primarily shaped by the segregation policies in place. Beginning in 1979, and throughout the 1980s, most of the apartheid policies were repealed and Namibia eventually became independent in 1990.

In a new publication, Pendleton (1996) compared the life in Katutura township during the period of 1968-1970 and the period of 1988-1993, which was published under the title *Katutura: A place where we stay*. He focused on how post-apartheid life in Katutura differed from life under apartheid; he looked at how urbanization had taken place in Katutura; examined the characteristics associated with urbanization and stratification by looking at the socio-economic diversification of people in Katutura. These studies are valuable in that they provide historical records useful for the understanding of the transformations that have taken place in Katutura and the understanding of the lives of those who live there today. However, Pendleton studies do not provide close-up description, let alone an in-depth analysis of the lives of migrants from a cultural perspective.

Wade Pendleton, who taught at the University of Namibia in the 1990s, also coordinated a series of studies for the Namibian Migration Project which was part of the Southern African Migration Project. These surveys provided useful statistical information on the process of rural-urban migration in Namibia. The studies discuss relevant demographic issues about migration in Namibia; they also give accounts of social aspects of rural-urban migration. In line with the older classic studies of South African urban anthropology (see next section) on important theoretical issues such as strong ties between rural and urban areas that migrants maintain as well as social networks based on kin that migrants develop in town; however, Namibian studies did not develop these in any depth. Much of the work on the Namibian Migration Project, especially work that focused on survival strategies employed by rural-urban migrants in Windhoek was done by Bruce Frayne, a Canadian scholar who worked with Wade Pendleton as well as conducted his own work. In his PhD thesis *Survival of the Poorest: Migration and Food Security in Namibia*, Frayne (2001) explored issues of food security among the urban poor in Windhoek. His main argument was that food security is dependent on informal ties to rural relatives (the urban poor rely on rural relatives to eat and survive) and other survival strategies such as urban agriculture. He maintains the same argument in his follow-up work (see Frayne 2005; 2007). Frayne's work is useful for this thesis in that it provides updated data of the socio-economic situation of the urban poor, which is

particularly significant for my chapter three which looks poverty in Babilon. Equally important is the work of a Norwegian anthropologist Inge Tvedten (1999; 2004) who also addressed the question of urban poverty emphasizing the importance of social relations and networks (social capital) as coping strategies for the urban poor. Tvedten's work focuses on the northern urban locales such as Oshakati.

Working within my own field site ten years ago, Helvi – Mwachala Amunyela (1998) in her MA thesis assessed the socio-economic situation of female migrants in the Babilon informal settlement and investigated the coping strategies which they used in order to survive while in the urban context. Her work complements my own work in the understanding of women's adaptability to the urban social context. However, her work focused entirely on the economic aspects of migration, while my work brings in the dimension of cultural analysis.

The body of literature presented above lacks in-depth analysis especially the dimension of cultural analysis. Unlike for many other Sub-Saharan countries, there are no in-depth ethnographic studies mapping out the social and cultural lives of migrants in urban spaces. In my study, I contribute to the growing body of literature on rural-urban migrants' everyday lives in Namibia, mapping out their socio-economic conditions but importantly filling the existing gap by bringing in the dimension of cultural identity, contributing to the existing body of literature in urban anthropology in Southern Africa.

2.3 Towards the development of urban anthropology in Southern Africa

While little in-depth work has been done in urban studies in Namibia, other areas of Southern Africa have been highly significant for the emergence and development of urban anthropology. This is particular of true for the studies that were conducted on the Zambian Copperbelt by the Rhodes Livingstone Institute (RLI) and those conducted in South Africa by authors such as Mayer (1961), Wilson and Mafeje (1963). Even earlier, according to Hammond-Tooke (1997), the pioneer anthropologist to address the question of rural-urban migration and African lives in town was Ellen Hellmann. A South African-born anthropologist, Hellmann did her MA thesis in Social Anthropology at the

University of Witwatersrand, which focused on the lives of urban Africans in a slumyard in Rooiyard, situated near the city centre of Johannesburg. The study was published in 1948 as *Rooiyard: A Sociological Study of an Urban Native Slumyard*. Hellmann provided a detailed description of the physical conditions under which people lived, but central to it was what she as a scholar of the mid-20th century referred to as the culture contact and change specifically, how the “natives” accommodated Western culture. She examined how the “natives” had to maintain and adopt “old” and “new” identities but also the composite methods they are employing in dealing with potential crises of life or identities.

Next, the work of Monica Hunter in East London and Grahamstown is equally important. Monica Hunter, a South African-born scholar in 1931 commenced fieldwork in the Eastern Cape (Pondoland) which was about understanding culture with historical and political awareness. Her work, published under the title *Reaction to Conquest* focused on the Pondo’s reaction to contact within the “native” reserve, and farms but also included the reaction to conquest within the urban communities of East London and Grahamstown.

The most important early research of rural-urban migration and urbanization in South Africa however was done by Philip Mayer, a British-trained German born scholar in the 1950s. As part of a three coordinated studies of the Bantu speaking population, Mayer undertook an intensive study of labour migration dynamics in the African townships of East London. At the core of Mayer’s study was the cultural and institutional content of what he termed the *Red* and *School* as social categories of the Xhosa people. In his study, he described the *Red* people, also known less politely as *amaqaba*, “smearers” (from smearing of their clothes and bodies with red ochre), as traditionalists, conservatives, illiterates, who stood by the indigenous way of life, including the pagan Xhosa religion. On the other hand, the *School* were people products of the mission and the school, holding up Christianity, literacy and other Western ways as ideas (Mayer 1961:4).

Mayer’s main concern was how to conceptualize the process of urbanization using these categorizations. The main question was whether migrants in East London were to be thought as detribalized (or urbanized) and, if so, what it meant (Hammond-Tooke

1997:146). Mayer distinguished between the concepts of stabilization and urbanization. Stabilization referred to the length of the stay of Africans in the city and to the increasingly permanent urban settlement of African workers; while on the other hand he used the concept of urbanization to refer not just to the length of their urban residence but to the quality of the life that is lived in town. His notion of circulatory migration and permanent settlement in urban areas was aimed to challenge the prevailing wisdom in colonial government that a *'tribesman'* in town remained a *'tribesman'*. In his distinction between the quantitative process of urban stabilization and the qualitative process of urbanization, Mayer's argument was that staying in town for a long period did not necessarily lead to the loss of tribal identity and cultural orientation. Rather than picking up or discarding identities at will, he argued that being *Red* was a relatively fixed, total identity that had become re-enforced in town through a process of 'incapsulation' (cited in Bank 2002: 41). He argued further, that other Africans responded to urbanization and social change by shedding their rural *'tribesmen'* identities and adopting new urban identities to fit the situations they found themselves in.

Mayer used the concept of social networks or sets of relations to understand how the town located networks of migrants were formed, how they influenced their lives and explained the diversity found in East London. Prior to their migration, migrants established social links with their destinations that would create a platform for them to adapt and to be integrated into the new setting. Individuals from the countryside had been dependent upon these social links with their friends to secure entry, employment, and a place to live, and this has tended to delay their absorption into the group of townsmen. Most migrants located themselves in social as well as physical spaces around those from the same area. Mayer used the concept of "homeboys" to describe this tendency. It was a group within which migrants lived and eat and probably worked. Bringing in the conception of social networks, he argued that some migrants chose to cut off social ties with their rural home, joining urban groupings and forming attachment to urban women – which was referred to as to abscond and to adopt town ways and values.

The theoretical ideas presented above were also explored in the study by Monica Wilson in collaboration with her student Archie Mafeje at almost the same time (between

November 1961 and September 1962). Their study was conducted in the longest-established black township, Langa, located on the periphery of the City of Cape Town which was later published under the title *Langa: A Study of Social Groups in an African Township* in 1963. Wilson and Mafeje (1963) tried to answer two questions: the first, what were the effective social groups in Langa? And the second, when and why do they cohere, and when and why do they spilt or dissolve? The second question was directly linked to the questions guiding Philip Mayer above: what is the basis for the coherence of social groups or social networks? In answering to these questions, the study presented a detailed overview of the way in which people were connected to one another by social ties, how they identified themselves, before turning to the symbolic expression of these ties in “culture”. The study showed how people in Langa were linked to networks of families, churches, clubs, sport, by music, dancing and politics. Like Philip Mayer (1961), Monica Wilson and Archie Mafeje (1963) also identified the category of the *Red*, who were unassimilated and refused assimilation to the immorality of the city, and the *School* who were the opposite. In defining the concept of social networks or social ties, Wilson and Mafeje (1963) claimed that there was a structural predetermination with regard to a person’s network which is ascribed to a domestic circle consisting of his close kin.

The theoretical innovations presented above are among those that laid the foundation for the development of urban anthropology in Southern Africa. Of equal importance, are the studies conducted by the Rhodes Livingstone Institute (RLI) scholars. The rich corpus of material produced by the scholars of the RLI had brought understanding of Zambian societies and Zambia’s past. Under the directorship of J. Clyde Mitchell, a British-born and trained sociologist and anthropologist, the RLI initiated a full-scale program of urban research. The RLI scholars were primarily concerned with the socio-cultural effects of migrant labour. Early RLI scholars developed a framework to periodise the process of migration. They suggested that the first period corresponded with the colonial period, in which Africans who were still rural oriented, practiced circular migration between town and country. The second period was that of the late colonial and early post-colonial periods, when they noted a shift to permanent urban residence, emphasizing the growing

process of urbanisation. One exemplary study was that of Mitchell of the Kalela dance which was published in 1956. Mitchell analyzed ethnic relations in an urban environment of the Zambian Copperbelt, where the *Kalela dance* was immensely popular at the time. He drew conclusions that while on the one hand all the dancers in the group were of the same origin (Bisa), most of them from the same village, on the other hand, the basic imagery and the whole frame of reference of the performances was drawn from life on the Copperbelt where ethnic categories were assumed to be losing their relevance. Mitchell concluded however that this loss of relevance was only partial; they significantly remained for the lowest-paid workers' essential categories of daily interactions.

Critique of the above presented theoretical presuppositions was raised especially by Bernard Magubane, a South African anthropologist in exile. In a series of reexaminations of European social research in colonized African societies, Magubane (1971) argued that the scholars of the RLI had taken the colonial system for granted in their analysis of social change by avoiding important historical-cultural contexts. Magubane (1971) argued that by concentrating on the indices of education, jobs, clothing, income etc. to account for "acculturation", Mitchell's, Epstein's and others RLI scholars' conclusions were generalized and promoted western ideological agendas. Instead of using the word "acculturation" which meant indigenous populations' incorporation of European culture to theirs, Magubane critically used the term of Westernization or Europeanization (Hannerz 1980). Similarly, Magubane criticized the Xhosa in Town project (Mayer 1961) arguing that Mayer's arguments were not put into the historical-cultural context of the African populations. Magubane criticized Mayer and his colleagues for their use of subjective criteria in classifying people – criteria which he said lacked socio-historical determinants of behaviour.

2.4 Revisiting classical urban studies

The presentation above demonstrates the extensive and influential body of literature that contributed to the development urban anthropology in Southern Africa. The classic studies provided useful descriptions in the understanding of rural-urban migration and African responses to contact with urban settings and ultimately the European culture.

Mostly importantly, they provided a useful theoretical framework within which to contextualize the process of urbanization. Work published post-1990 brought new insights and critiques towards the propositions developed by the classic studies. Of importance to my study is the work of Leslie Bank, a South African born and trained anthropologist who revisited the Xhosa in Town project, and James Ferguson, an American anthropologist who worked on the Zambian Copperbelt.

In the previous section, I showed how early researchers at the RLI have noted a tendency of circular migration between town and the country and a shift to permanent residence, emphasizing the growing process of urbanization - a tendency which was also argued by Mayer and his colleagues who were interested in showing how some Xhosa during the course of their stay in East London underwent a transition from migrants to townsmen while others did not. James Ferguson's (1999) findings, based on his research during the later 1980s on the Zambian Copperbelt showed no apparent progression from circulatory migration to permanent residence. He questioned why the early researchers were convinced that they were witnessing a profound transition in migration. This was however, attested to be a result of the influence of the notions of social evolution, progress and modernization which dominated anthropological thinking in the "academic core" at the time. They were derived from the metanarratives of modernization and the Enlightenment era. Ferguson noted that migrants on the Copperbelt saw themselves as having advanced to a stage of development and that they had plan for post-industrial life in rural areas. This discredited the old notion that those workers who retained contact with rural areas represented an inevitably diminishing phase of stubborn attachment to tradition (Ferguson 1999). On the contrary, urban workers who retained their rural connections were just as urbanized as those who opted to give up their ties. Ferguson called these styles "localist" and "cosmopolitan".

On the one hand, "localist is associated with the connection of urban migrants with their rural "homes" (which is perceived as the primary home) to which the migrants return at intervals while on the other hand, cosmopolitan (often better off migrants) regards the "home" village as a faraway place. Rarely if ever actually seen or visited, to which one is connected more by nostalgia and sentimental attachment than by social and economic ties or life trajectory" (Ferguson 1997:81).

As the promise of urban and industrial development failed to materialize, a growing tendency among urban residents became apparent not only to remain connected to rural areas, but to continue to actively invoke rural identities in the city. He theoretically calls this ‘a tendency of localism’. This tendency according to Ferguson (1999) signifies rural identification and attachment. It also signifies a migrant’s readiness to accept responsibility for rural kin and allies and the willingness to return to a rural ‘home’ community, without necessarily implying the importation of rural cultural forms or ‘traditions’ into the city. Ferguson’s observations became very important for my study where I also came across a tendency of young migrants actively invoking the rural in the urban.

Another re-study of early urban anthropology in Southern Africa is important for my study. Leslie Bank (2002) who revisited the Xhosa in Town project made an important strong argument from a methodological perspective which recognizes the importance of “locality” and argues for a move toward an anthropology of urbanism. Bank’s concept of an anthropology of urbanism refers the complex hybrid cultural forms and spaces in urban settings that would result in hybridity and fluid identities. He follows Papastergiadis (2000) who argued that:

“identity is neither in the interior space of already known experience nor doomed to the exteriority of an experiment with the unknown. Cultural identity is thus never confined to a space of an enclosed segment, nor is it projected onto an open plane, but it is formed through the practice of bridging both the differences and similarities between the self and the other” (cited in Bank 2002:27).

In an age of globalization, Bank raises questions as to what the possible meanings of the representations of the rural in the urban setting might be. He argued that identity formation should be seen as a relational process, as ongoing cultural dialogue between spaces of representation and representation of space. Bank criticized Mayer and his colleagues for their fieldwork strategies and conceptual framework which was primarily “confined to home” or the “household” and the “backyard” and ignored key public sites of cultural production beyond the house and consequently missed the critical aspects of the location’s changing cultural dynamic” (2002:37). In his PhD dissertation Bank showed how Mayer’s focus of trying to provided cultural and institutional content to the

Red and *School* as social categories, diverted attention away from points of intersections and process of hybridization in identity formation and style making in the East London's location.

It is this body of recent influential literature within which my study is framed. Amid the rapid growth of rural-urban migration in the context of the changing socio-economic situation of Namibia, there is a need to constantly map out the changes and transformations these may have within the Namibian society. Putting Namibia on the map of the growing body of urban anthropology, important processes such as urbanization and what it means to the urban poor need to be understood. I ask how is the process of urbanization is understood by those we study? My aim is not to develop presuppositions of urbanization but to rather give the voice to rural-urban migrants to describe this process using their own experiences. Is, and if so, how is the old notion of social networks or "homeboys" applicable to the Namibian situation? In reference to Wilson (1941 & 1942) and Malinowski (1945), Ross and Weisner (1977) stated that the migrant moves from an "integrated rural community" to a "westernized urban setting" and through contact with a new culture in the city migrants develops different behaviours and lose their tribal identity. With reference to such understandings, I have recognized a treatment of culture as something that is bounded this is especially true for the early urban researchers. I agree with Moore (1994) who also criticized the classical studies for their view of "culture loss as resulting from a movement from one total system to another" (cited in Bank 2002: 43). In contrast, Škodová (2004) puts it differently that, identity is actively being reproduced through the act or task of identification. I agree that the process of identification is a context and time dependent process where a move in time and space generates a shift of context in terms of "sets of relations" (cited in Eriksen 1993:157). Similarly, Papastergiadis (2000) has argued that identity is never confined to a space of an enclosed segment, nor is it projected onto an open plane, but it is formed through the practice of bridging both the differences and similarities between the self and the other" (cited in Bank 2002:27). I take the position that, identity formation is an ongoing process of negotiating difference.

I follow the approach suggested by Bank (2002) to recognize and explore the connections between the social and the spatial. He argued that “the urban neighborhoods we work cannot be taken as predetermined sites through which people with pre-established identities pass unthinkingly. They need to be considered as spaces that are themselves constituted and constitutive of social identities and cultural process” (Bank 2002:15). In contemporary urban development studies, urbanization is largely equated with the increasing number of people taking up residence in urban areas ignoring the cultural dimension of the process or the way people live from a cultural perspective. It is understood mainly from economic perspectives, leaving a void of understanding the everyday cultural lives of those who live in growing urban areas.



Chapter Three: Setting the Scene

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the study area - its location, the socio-economic description and the demographic description. I present the methodological approach followed to collect the data, my reflections on the research process and my relationship with my research participants. I discuss my position as a researcher at home and how that has influenced the production of knowledge. I have highlighted the challenges that I experienced while doing fieldwork as well as ethical challenges I faced and how I overcame them.

3.2 A Brief background of Katutura

Katutura, an apartheid township was developed by the Windhoek Municipality during the 1950s. At the time, South West Africa as it was called then was administered by the Government of the Republic of South Africa as its de facto-fifth province and the apartheid policies implemented were equivalent to those in South Africa. Before Katutura was developed, most black people lived in a location west of the Windhoek city centre, called the Old Location. After more than fifty years of residence at the Old Location, the black residents were removed to make room for the development of the present day Hochland Park, a suburb originally designated for lower middle class whites. Katutura was developed in line with the Odendaal Plan, which required that black residential areas were to be five miles away from areas for the whites (von Garnier 1986).

Naturally, there was a general opposition to the apartheid policies and in particular opposition toward the relocation to the new area. The conditions in the new township were perceived as unfair, home ownership was prohibited, the residents were forced to rent. The distance of the new location to the town centre was another concern. Opposition to the relocation reached a climax on the 10th of December 1959, when a protest meeting was held in the Old Location which later ended in a bloody confrontation with the police. Eleven people were killed and forty-four people were wounded. Today, the 10th of

December is commemorated as the Namibian Day of Human Rights in honour of those who revolted against the forced removals to Katutura. However, despite the refusal of the Africans to move to the new area, the segregation procedure was eventually completed with the closing of the Old Location in 1968. Eventually all black people moved to Katutura (Pendleton 1974, 1996; von Garnier 1986).

Katutura initially consisted of about 4 000 rental houses. People were required to live in their “own” ethnic group location, allocated to the ethnic groups under which they were registered (Wambo location, Herero location, Nama location and Damara location). The fifth location, Wanaheda that was built later accommodated people from all four ethnic groups (Wambo, Nama, Herero, and Damara as the name shows). In addition to these locations was the compound where contract labourers were housed in “single” types of accommodation. During the 1970s and 1980s, additional locations were developed to provide more municipal rental housing: Soweto (the name which was derived from the Soweto township in Johannesburg), Shandumbala (which means more and more houses), Golgotha, Freedom Square, Grysblock (Grey area) and Luxury Hill with suburban-types of better quality housing (Pendleton 2002).

The original Katutura was much smaller than the Katutura of today. About 20 000 people lived in the area in 1968, whereas nowadays, according to the latest statistical records, half of the population of Windhoek (233,529¹⁴) that is over 100 000 people live in Katutura. Most of this growth comes from rural-urban migration. This growth has resulted in the development of informal settlements on the periphery of Katutura, which did not exist before 1990. Between 1991 and 1994, in response to the influx of migrants, the City of Windhoek developed three Reception Areas¹⁵ that were intended to be “temporary”. The areas attracted more settlers even before the sites had been laid out or could be provided with basic services. One of these “temporary” areas was Babilon.

¹⁴ The 2001 Population and Housing Census Survey

¹⁵ A reception area is a development area with site-and-service plots created for the temporary accommodation of recent migrants to an urban area pending their eventual entry into permanent settlement schemes. (City of Windhoek 2002)

3.3 A brief background of Babilon informal settlement

Before setting out for the fieldwork I had not yet decided which informal settlement in Windhoek I was going to conduct my research. This is why the title of this project did not specify the field site, beyond the locality, Katutura. Although I have lived in Windhoek for the past eight years, I never realized the divisions between the greater Katutura and the informal settlements to its north and northwest. As a resident of Katutura myself, my observation is that in everyday life the divide is not that firm but rather flexible, let's say if I want to get a taxi¹⁶ from the city centre to Okuryangava situated in the northwestern part of Windhoek, of which Babilon is a part, I will say I am going to Katutura. Getting an understanding from the City of Windhoek's official has however, helped a great deal to understand the Katutura map which facilitated in the selection of Babilon as my research site.

Babilon, roughly 15km away from the centre of Windhoek, is one of the informal settlements developed in the first half of the 1990s to accommodate migrants from rural areas as well as internal migrants from other parts of Windhoek (greater Katutura in this case). Babilon was named after the hill overlooking the site. Amunyela (1998) described Babilon as a "rural island" in an "urban sea". One of my research participants said, Babilon is like a "developing country" within a "developed country". Seen from the centre of Windhoek, it is a distant place. It will take you about 30 minutes waiting for a taxi to take you there from the central Windhoek and about 10 minutes waiting for a taxi to take you back to the city centre. The drivers are reluctant to travel all the way to this far-away, purportedly "undeveloped" place. The response that you get from the drivers will be along the lines: *"it is far and it is dirty - I just washed my car now"*.

It was on Sunday, the 24th of February 2008 when I first went to Babilon accompanied by a male friend. We took a taxi from Wanaheda and entered Babilon from a southwestern direction. The taxi driver dropped us at the market on the main street which separates

¹⁶ "Taxi" refers to vehicles operating privately-run businesses that provide cheap "public" transport within the city and the townships.

Babilon from Okahandja Park¹⁷. Sitting under the shades of cardboards and rickety structures at the market, people, mostly young women, displayed a variety of commodities ranging from food stuff i.e. pancakes, red meat, mopani worms, sweets, fruits and vegetables, to non-food stuff i.e. wood, cigarettes (see picture 1 below). The prices for the commodities ranged from 10 cents for the sweets, 50 cents for the pancakes, 50 cents for an apple or orange, N\$ 1¹⁸ for one cigarette and N\$ 5 for a pile of wood. The main street was dusty with pick-up vehicles (running up and down) fetching mostly young men who were working as security guards for the afternoon shift in town.



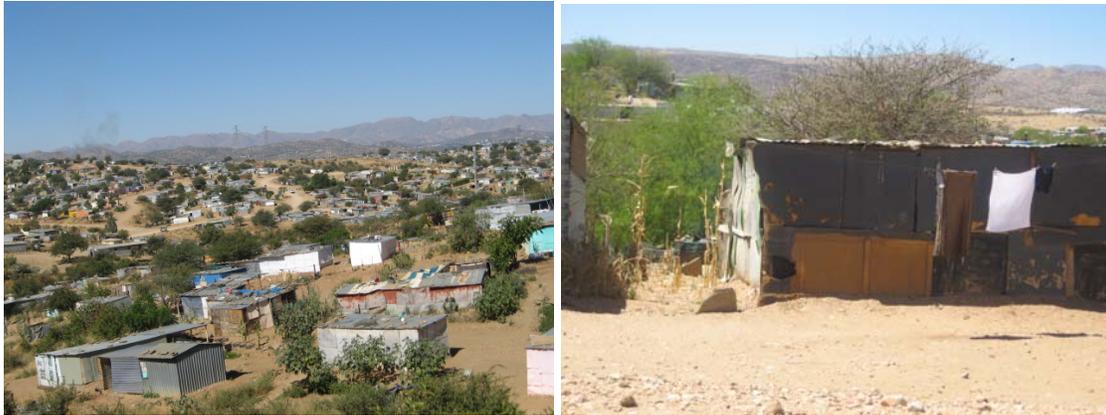
Picture 1: The two pictures above show the market on the main street of Babilon.

Dwellings in Babilon are made from scrap plywood, corrugated metal, and sheets of plastic (see picture 2 below). Characterized by gravel roads, corrugated iron shacks (see picture 2) with limited amenities such as running water¹⁹, electricity and ablution facilities, Babilon is home to an estimated of 5,000 people living in abject poverty.

¹⁷ Okahandja Park is an informal settlement adjacent to Babilon. The two settlements are just separated by a gravel road.

¹⁸ One Namibian dollar is equivalent to one South African Rand.

¹⁹ In Babilon, more than 30 houses share one communal water tap.



Picture 2: This picture shows the building structures of housing in Babilon. They are locally known as *kabashus*, a term which is used interchangeably to refer to both the shacks or informally-run taverns.

Some people sat outside their *kabashus*, drinking *otombo* (home-brewed beer), others especially women were busy doing laundry and children playing around. Walking around Babilon, I noticed the names written on the *kabashus*: *Oshuulula*, *Eenhana*, *Okongo*, *Onaanda*, *Epoko*, *Oshuuli*, *Okatyali*, *Shaakwanyoka*, *Omutsegonime*, *Onheleiwa*²⁰ etc. We stopped at a *kabashu* named *Oshuulula* where there were five men sitting drinking *otombo*. We had been walking around for about an hour, on a sunny and hot day and were very tired and thirsty. We ordered cokes and sat there listening to the conversation of the other customers. One of the customers – a middle-aged man asked “where are you coming from?” Wanaheda, I replied. “You have families here”, he asked again. No, we are just walking around, getting to know Windhoek, I replied. They continued with their discussion which was about the *Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP)*, an opposition party recently established in Namibia under the leadership of Hidipo Hamutenya and Jesaya Nyamu, both former leading members of the ruling party, SWAPO and former cabinet ministers. Ever since the establishment of RDP, SWAPO and RDP have been embroiled in a heated power contest, which keeps people interested.

As the morning wore on, customers left one by one until it was just us and the *kabashu* owner, who introduced himself as Heita. I initiated a discussion about the name of the

²⁰ All these are names of small towns and villages in Ovamboland.

kabashu and the reasons for it. He indicated that it was the village where he comes from. I told Heita why we were in Babilon, that I was a student doing research on rural-urban migration and cultural identity. After my explanation, Heita offered to help me with my research because he found it interesting. Heita became one of my key research participants, and referred me to other young people. It was getting dark; therefore we decided to get a taxi to go back “home” (my friend’s apartment in one of the newer post-1990 suburbs, which are popular among young professionals). It took us about 5 minutes just waiting for the taxi.

Reflecting on my first day in the field, I had an impression that people from Kavango were the majority. They seemed to dominate the streets of Babilon – most of those we saw being picked up by the security guard vehicles, or even most of those in the street were speaking Rukwangari (the main language in the Kavango region, in the northeastern of Namibia). However, according to the City of Windhoek’s Socio-Economic Survey conducted in 2002, the majority (about 40%) of the population in Babilon is from Ohangwena Region in the far northern part of Namibia. About 10% of the population is from within Windhoek, an indication that they are not able to afford formal housing in the formal settlements. Omusati, Kavango and Oshikoto contribute between 5% and 10% each to the population; with the rest of the remaining regions contributing less than 5% each (City of Windhoek 2002). As Ohangwena, Oshana, Omusati and Oshikoto are predominantly Owambo, the majority of the residents of Babilon are Oshiwambo-speaking. About 63% of the population in Babilon is of the active age group (18 - 59 yr) of which only about 50% are employed²¹. The level of income in Babilon is very low. The income of most of those of my research participants who are employed is about N\$ 500.00 per month. The majority of the population in Babilon has a low level of education and is dependent mostly on informal business activities for their livelihoods. You can buy just about anything you need on the streets of Babilon – groceries, and you can even have your hair done.

²¹ Most of these are employed as labourers and domestic workers

Crime is said to have become rife – muggings have become common at night. With very low wages, most of the population cannot afford the cost of land that the municipality has provided them; therefore, they have formed money saving group schemes where they are registered and pay a certain amount of money to buy plots of land collectively. However, not all people in Babilon are members of these saving schemes (some say they don't trust the saving schemes, a few say they can afford their own plots and some say they will not stay in Babilon permanently).

3.4 In the field

In the context of this study, a reflexive ethnographic approach was appropriate. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of five months (February – June 2008) in the informal settlement of Babilon on the outskirts of Katutura. My primary research participants were young men and women in their early to late twenties who recently migrated from the rural north, Ovamboland. The main approach in conducting this research was to let migrants speak in their own voices and to let them explain their experiences as migrants in an urban setting. This was important particularly in the context of their self-identification and how this is shifting and re-situating itself across different spaces and circumstances. The question of whether migrants remain rural or become urban has often been addressed from an outsider's perspective (social scientists or economists), ignoring migrants' own definitions of themselves, and more importantly, their reasons for these definitions (Erman 1998).

During the initial phase of my fieldwork, I consulted with the City of Windhoek which provided me with updated background data on migration flows into the city as well as socio-economic data of the informal settlement of Babilon. After studying the documents, I began with the actual fieldwork. I observed everyday life in Babilon. Except for my discussions about my research with Heita, I first familiarized myself with the physical setting and observed the social interactions of people in Babilon either by being a customer, or just someone walking around and observing things and events as they unfolded. It was toward the end of the first week that I got to meet with some recent rural-urban migrants through informal discussions, some of whom later became

participants in my research. They often introduced me to others. Upon gaining their trust and having explained the objective of my research, I began the actual work in the subsequent weeks. The young people who became key participants in my research and my friends in the end were three young men and two young women, whom I introduce in this thesis as Heita, Evelina, Rauna, Hamutenya and Angula²². They are all recent migrants who came from Ovamboland in search for employment.

Heita is 26 year old young man. He came from Oshuulula in the district of Okatope in the Ohangwena Region. He came to Windhoek in 2001. He is currently working in a sugar production company. He lives with his girlfriend in Babilon. Heita has a Grade 8 of schooling.

Evelina is 26 year old young woman. She came from Ondobe in the Ohangwena Region. She came to Windhoek in 2006 after completing her Grade 12. Evelina now works as an attendant in a tavern for her cousin. She lives with her boyfriend in Babilon.

Rauna is a 22 year old young woman. She came from Ohamatundu in the Ohangwena Region. She came to Windhoek at the beginning of 2006 when she failed her Grade 10. At the age of 22, Rauna is already a mother of two. She lives with her mother, her two children and her one niece in Babilon informal settlement. Rauna is unemployed.

Hamutenya is in his early twenties (he did not say his age); he is from Okongo in Ohangwena Region. He came to Windhoek after having completed his Grade 12 end of 2007. He is working for a Chinese-owned construction company. He lives in Babilon.

²² Not their real names.

Angula is 26 year old young man. He came to Windhoek in 2006. He is from Omuthiya in Oshikoto Region. He lives in Babilon and is unemployed. He is one of the young men who go to Hochland job-seeker's station to seek for work.

Developing personal relationships with these young men and women was crucial as it allowed me to gain their trust. As time went on they became open to share with me their life histories and their experiences in the migration process.

In addition to the ongoing participant observation, I also conducted interviews oriented towards personal life histories, and focus group discussions. Most importantly, I participated in the daily activities especially of the two women Evelina and Rauna, and observed their interactions with other people in Babilon. I used to go to fetch water at a collective water point or to go collecting firewood in the nearby mountain areas with Evelina. I would also help Evelina with her laundry, which she did on weekdays. Evelina would cook chicken for me (which is locally known as “traditional chicken” – it is not the chicken bought in Pick ‘n Pay²³ but a live chicken bought at the market that is later slaughtered and prepared in a specific way). She would prepare it together with *oshifima*²⁴ (these are all considered traditional dishes among the Owambo people). In the process, Evelina would explain the reasons she cooks *oshifima* in the urban setting – a way to keep in touch with “culture” while being in the urban setting. Through my regular interaction with Evelina, Rauna and Heita and the others, I was able to gain first hand experience and observe their day to day lives in a home environment. Mondays, Tuesdays, Fridays were the days when I spent my time to collect data in a home environment.

It is important to note that my research is not only informed by the theoretical orientations but also the methodological considerations, which have been developed by the classic and recent studies in Southern African urban anthropology. My approach was primarily informed by the recent work of Leslie Bank who has revisited the Xhosa in

²³ Pick ‘n Pay is a popular South African supermarket chain, which also has a substantial share in the Namibian market.

²⁴ Stiff porridge made from omahangu (millet) meal-meal.

Town Project. Bank (2002) who emphasized the quest to move from urban anthropology to an anthropology of urbanism, strongly argued that we need to be prepared to review the spatial practices that we should employ during field work in the fixed localities that constitute our urban field sites. He writes that we need to examine the cross over between public and private spaces in order to begin to develop an understanding of the relational dynamics of urban style making and identity formation.

In an effort to appreciate the relational dynamics of identity shifting across different spaces of Babilon, my research was not only confined to a home environment. I also visited taverns which are locally known as *kabashus*²⁵. Saturdays and Sundays were good days to visit taverns because most people were not at work and spent most of their times at the taverns drinking *otombo*²⁶ or bottled beer, provided the later was available. A one litre jug of *otombo* costs N\$ 1 while a bottle of beer costs N\$ 8. I played the role of a customer so that I could be part of the system. I would go sit at the taverns (which were open as early as 09h00 am), buy a cool drink and just sit there, converse with other customers about a wide range of issues – the discussions were dominated by the floods that were affecting Ovamboland at the time, the political climate in the country (especially the fierce rivalry between the RDP and SWAPO political parties). Because these places were busy with customers coming in and out, taverns were not good platforms for interviews, observation and informal discussions were applicable methods of collecting data. In our informal discussions, I brought up many issues, indirectly related to rural-urban migration, unemployment and cultural identity. I was also lucky to be invited to a braai (barbecue) organised by one of Heita's friends (Kafute), which was held on the last weekend of March 2008. Kafute is also from Heita's village. Observing the interactions at the braai I deduced that most of the people at the braai were from *Oshuulula*, Heita's home village.

²⁵ *Kabashus* can conceptually be equated with “*cuca shops*” in Ovamboland (a term which has not been transferred to the urban context); another term for informal taverns in use in Windhoek (but not in Babilon) is “*shebeen*” which is derived from South Africa.

²⁶ A traditional brew among the Owambo people.

As one of my objectives was to look at how migrants engage in the urban economy and what it meant to them, I had informal discussions with women working at the informal market in Babilon. I learned about the challenges they face as migrant women. I also learned what their participation in the urban economy meant for them, in addition to those who are unemployed. I also interacted with people like Heita and Evelina who are employed as semi-skilled or unskilled workers, people working mostly as tavern attendants, construction workers, and security guards or doing other menial jobs that do not require much education.

I was particularly interested in the experiences of those who had not been successful in their quest for employment. To answer that, I included the main street intersections of Hochland Park in my research. Hochland Park, one of Windhoek's suburbs has some of the city's biggest street intersections where young migrant men gather in search of work. Every day you drive by, there are places along the streets where you find a number of young men waiting in the shade of trees looking for work as labourers. I paid three visits to the station; the first visit was to familiarize myself with the young men there and to ensure that it was safe for me to work there; during the last two visits I had discussions with work-seekers. During the visits, we would sit under the trees with the young men and discuss a wide range of issues pertaining to rural-urban migration, life in the urban areas, what their everyday life experiences were and how they saw their cultural identity.

In total, I have conducted life history interviews with five key participants and extensive informal discussions with more than fifteen participants. I also held group interviews with about ten young men at the work-seeker's station. Most importantly, I conducted extensive observations of everyday life in Babilon and events as they unfolded.

I used photography in the process of recording and representing my data. The usage of visual methods has been suggested by Bank (2002) in his re-visit of Xhosa in Town Project. He argues that an anthropology of urbanism should involve a re-assessment of spatial strategies, which includes a shift from the merely textual to the inclusion of the visual. Though in the context of the research site, carrying a camera implied a question of social and economic prestige caution was taken into consideration in the first place in

terms of my security and perceptions that the research participants had of me as a young woman carrying a camera.

3.5 Reflexivity: the researcher and her field

Reflexivity is important in any kind of research particularly for anthropologists doing research “at home”. Davies (1999:4) broadly defines reflexivity as “a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. It refers to the ways in which the results of research are affected by the researcher”. There are different dimensions in which one can reflect: between the researcher and the research itself, the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, reflections on the field site, reflections on the methodologies, and reflections on the data collected. During the fieldwork it was important for me to reflect on these different dimensions: my relationships with the young people I worked with, the social field of Babilon, the methods I employed to collect data as well as the data itself and importantly, my positionality as the researcher. I constantly asked myself how my presence as a researcher affected different research situations and the actors involved in the production of knowledge.

At the end of each day I sat down and analyzed the activities of the day. I re-visited my little notebook that I carried with me every time – a reflexive activity that has been termed “benign introspection” (Davies 1999). In doing so, it was crucial for me to ascertain that the data collected conformed with the objectives of my research and whether the approach I took to collect data needed to be improved. I extracted follow-up questions for the following day and refined the approach of collecting data, i.e. in the case of some of my participants I used informal interviews based on pre-set questions which did not work. I only got “yes and no” answers hence the need to change the approach to discussing issues on an ad hoc basis or in an informal manner. On the other hand, with respect to the events that I observed, I needed to get facts in order to have an accurate picture; therefore, my key participants played a big role in filling this gap. Within this dimension (confirming data collected in public spaces through observation) which is called “social reflexivity”, I ensured reflection on my possible subjectivity and tried to maintain a level of unbiased observation. In respect to using other methods such

as interviews (with my key participants mainly), I avoided structured interview questions but rather used open ended questions, or questions arising from the discussion. In this, I had some control of the interview situation, but I avoided control of what the research participant would answer, making the discussion more open ended. Reflection of all these dimensions meant that the production of knowledge was not a result of me as the researcher going in the field, with a list of questions, but it was a result of my interaction with the people, what I would call reciprocators, in producing that knowledge. I found the dynamics involved in the process of doing research interlinked.

Another dimension of reflectivity in my research was “the self”, how did the “me” or who I am affect my research situation? Having grown up in the same area as most of my research participants (Ovamboland), speaking the same mother tongue, and having experienced similar conditions when I was living in Katutura while I was a student at the University of Namibia (2001 – 2004) as well as being in the same age group as the young people that I worked with, the research undertaking was easy in terms of establishing contacts with them – an advantage of doing anthropological research “at home”. With that background, I did not have to go through the process of getting to know the place and my participants - to some extent I would say, I qualified as an insider. I speak the language that my participants are conversant with – there were no language barriers. My gender made it easier to establish contacts with the female participants, but I had no specific problems in establishing contacts with the male participants either. The young women whom I worked with regarded me as a friend and they often asked for my advice on “women’s issues” – they basically treated me as one of them. In the instance of the men, they were more interested in knowing about life in Cape Town, whether it was easy to get a work permit to work there, and how I coped with the xenophobic attacks in South Africa at the time.

I was aware that my position as a young woman, a student and an Oshindonga²⁷ speaker, to a certain extent could influence the production of knowledge. My greater insight and reflexivity inherent in my position as an Owambo researcher could have been

²⁷ One of the Oshiwambo dialects.

counterbalanced with a potential ‘blindness’ and taking important aspects I may have taken for granted. Being aware of this before I went in the field, however, was the first step towards recognizing every little encounter that might generate good discussion for my research.

I was aware that as a student carrying a digital camera, being dropped mostly by a private car, buying a cool drink and even buying Babilon residents some beer or *otombo* meant that, I somehow held some economic superiority. What was interesting for me was when some of my participants tried to take advantage of my position as a researcher and the subject question of my research, i.e. cultural identity. On occasion, a young woman would come to a *kabashu* selling *omagungu* (mopane worm) for instance, and participants would ask me to buy some for them and in the process they would try to explain that “eating food from rural areas/home is part of keeping one’s culture in the urban setting”. I had similar experience when they wanted me to buy them *otombo*. I became aware that my position as a researcher with a little money in the pocket to a certain extent influenced the discussions.

My participants at the Hochland Park job seeker’s station, for instance, wanted to dwell more on the sufferings they were going through in their everyday life as migrants. Their narratives focused on the lack of employment, the lack of opportunities, how inhumanly they are treated when they do this casual work, and even how they are mistreated by their own families because they could not contribute to the household. They also spoke about how going back to the rural areas is not an option, because it shows that one is a failure. I realized that in my analysis I might tend to over-represent the plights that rural-urban migrants are going through; however, I perceive this to be implicit side effect of personal contact which any researcher may encounter during fieldwork.

Mascarenhas-Keyes (1987) adopted a strategy of “a multi-native” in an effort to achieve a higher degree of consonance in different contexts of her research, a strategy that I also used. She argued that styles of clothing are important signals of social status and the fieldworker can influence attitudes toward her by adopting particular habits of outfits for each respective context. Going to the Municipality of Windhoek offices to collect official

demographic data of the Babilon informal settlement and rural-urban migration in general, semi-formal wear (a dress, high heels and a hairstyle that made me look older (I am 25 years) was appropriate. The approach to the city's officials was also different from the approach to the research participants that I worked with in Babilon. With the city's officials, I spoke English, I introduced my research upfront. On the other hand, with my research participants in Babilon, the approach was different. I spoke Oshindonga or Oshikwanyama²⁸ and only spoke English on rare occasions. In Babilon, I dressed in jeans and t-shirts, sometimes those imprinted with brands of local artists (see chapter seven). Sometimes discussions were prompted from the way I was dressed or outfits of those passing by – for instance, a male participant would comment, *in our tradition women never wore jeans, you should know all these things*.

In presenting this, I show how necessary it was for me to adopt being a “multiple-native” in order to deal with complexities and dynamics of my field; and how my identity as “one of their own” and “a researcher” was shifting as context and circumstances demanded – an approach that affected the production of knowledge.

3.6 Doing anthropology at home

Anthropology has traditionally focused on “exotic cultures”; it was the study of “the other” (Mascarenhas-Keyes 1987). Kelly (1996) described the anthropological study of “other” exotically located regions and the neglect of its “home” as the discipline's worst example of exclusivity and elitism (cited in Rapport & Overing 2000). Since the 1970s, anthropologists have however developed an approach toward doing fieldwork “at home” which generally refers to the fieldwork undertaken in the anthropologist's own society or “among people who, one way or another, belong to the same “cultural” area as the anthropologist” (cited in Becker, Boonzaier & Owen 2005:123). In Southern Africa, Eileen Krige and Monica Wilson are some names that come to mind when talking about the early pioneers of studying at home, although they did not study their own “culture” in terms of language, race or ethnicity. Mascarenhas-Keyes (1987) argued that the

²⁸ Another dialect among the Owambo people.

anthropology “at home” requires a professionally induced schizophrenia between the “native self” and “professional self”. In doing anthropology at home, we should be more aware, both of ourselves when we turn into objects of study, in the process learning more about our own society and at the same time, of ourselves as undertaking the study. We should also become more aware and sensitive to towards the methods that we employ in doing research and the data that we collect, increasing our reflexivity to the research (Strathern 1987).

I conducted anthropological fieldwork “at home” – my fieldwork was undertaken in the social and cultural context from which I come linguistically and culturally, which I am familiar with. It was easy for me to enter the field, but once I introduced my research to my participants and spoke about the university I am studying at, I became more than just one of their own. Although I considered myself as one of them - a young person who is from the same socio-cultural background and interested in issues about negotiation culture in the urban context, my research participants saw me as a researcher and an educated person. In some instances, when having general conversations (which were not particularly related to my research), the young people that I worked with asked me whether the conversations we were having were also part of my “research” or how this conversation fitted in with my research question. Therefore, my identity as “one of them” and “a researcher” on the other hand was shifting from time to time. According to van Dongen (1998), in doing research at home, “identities are not fixed and otherness is not a stable phenomenon” (cited in Sass 2005:32).

Another comment I received quite frequently was, “*you are also an Owambo, you should know the answers*”. In such cases, being a “stranger” was not understood if not to say not welcomed, by some of my research participants, as I was seen as one of them by default. While they regarded me as a researcher, they still regarded me as one of their own, who should know all the answers. In such cases, I may not have acquired the extent of information, which “an outsider researcher” would have got. Those are some of the challenges involved in doing anthropology “at home”. Nevertheless, being familiar with the social context of my fieldwork site and my research participants I developed new interests in issues that I once took for granted. These enhanced my personal insight but

most of all, it developed my understanding about people and myself. In the process, I came to realize that things do not just exist or events do not just take place. I ended up questioning every aspect or issue related to my research.

3.7 Challenges encountered in the field

I conducted fieldwork mainly during day-time. For security reasons, I could not work in Babilon during the evenings although on some days especially when I was invited to a braai or when my participants were still coming back from work, I stayed over into the early evenings – on such occasions, I had asked a male friend to accompany me to spaces which were deemed unsafe.

The main challenge I encountered was the conceptual, particularly in respect of the usage of the term culture or cultural identity. Anthropologists (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991) have been questioning the old notion of “culture” as homogeneous, bounded, and static as something that is carried around from one space to another. The people that I worked with, on the other hand, tended to use exactly this old notion of “culture” that anthropologists are trying to transcend. My research participants equated culture with tradition or customs of the Owambo people. In his work on “*Checking the Kulcha*”: *Local Discourses of Culture in the Kavango Region of Namibia*”, my colleague Michael Akuupa (2006) also noted a similar trend among the people in the Kavango Region. During fieldwork, I used the word tradition interchangeably with culture which means “*omuthigululwakalo*” in the Oshiwambo language which I knew would have implications on the outcome of my study. This became significant in the interpretation of my data.

I experienced challenges especially with some migrants who told me, “*you are talking of cultural identity and you are an Owambo person, you should know all the answers*”. However, I greatly appreciate the usefulness and effectiveness of observation as a tool of investigation. Despite the fact that I could not talk to people about their ideas, I could still observe and I could still draw good conclusions from my observations which were later confirmed through indirect discussions with my key participants.

Other challenges included the question of sensitivity of migrants' experiences and the question of morality of some issues. In chapter three I discuss the rough patches that migrants go through in the urban setting. The questions of living together relationships which I tried to discuss some participants, proved to be particularly sensitive. The women involved in it were a bit hesitant to speak about it because of the question of perceived immorality connected to it, so I only got unsatisfactory "yes and no" answers from those who are directly involved in such relationships.

3.8 Ethical challenges

Informed consent was obtained from my participants before conducting the research. I had briefed them from the beginning of the research of what my research was about, the reason for doing the research and how I will present the research data. The participants were told that they should feel free to withdraw from the research at anytime or alert me if I was touching on sensitive matters. Confidentiality and anonymity was adhered to during the research process and in the writing-up. In the thesis, the names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Consent was sought from the participants to take photographs and permission to use these photographs taken for academic purposes was secured.

As rural-urban migration is a highly complex and sensitive social and economic issue, research participants were approached in a sensitive manner. As their plight is connected to the fact that most of them only have school leaving certificate or less, I avoided being judgmental. Also considering the poverty they were living in, it was not my aim to bring in my perceptions about their poverty, but to hear what they had to say about it. And for those who are in living together relationships which have both social and economic dimensions, it was not my aim to question the morality of these relationships, but again to listen to what these women had to say about their experiences. I regard fieldwork ethics involving a high level of respect for the people that I worked with.

During the fieldwork, I experienced an inner conflict between being a researcher, friend and a person that sympathizes with the young men and women in their predicament as

being unemployed and living in abject poverty. Being sympathetic to their plight, I was careful not to make any promises. This was sometimes difficult as most of my participants begged me to help them find a job and talk to the government to develop projects for the youth. Walking around Babilon with Angula (one of my key participants), he said *“I do not know where we are heading to; we all came to Windhoek thinking that life is better or opportunities are many here, but here we are, struggling. The government has a lot of money, but does not create opportunities for us. They just make promises but they do not keep them.* He then went on to plead that if I had any connections or if I should hear about job opportunities openings I should let him know. He suggested that even development of youth projects will help. Although I concurred with this young man’s suggestions of youth projects, I did not make any promises, but rather deliberated on the possibilities that may exist, something that he was thankful for.

My key participants often made references to others: brothers, sisters, uncles or friends. In some cases, they told me the stories of the people they were referring me to and linking me up with, then they connected me with them so that I could get their side of the story. My key participants usually took me to their relatives or friends’ homes and would be present when we were having the discussions. On one occasion, Heita told me a story of a cousin who came to Windhoek from Ovamboland, stayed with the family for a while, and started “sleeping around” (having many casual sexual relations). Now people are speculating that he was HIV/AIDS positive because he had been in and out of the hospital lately. Heita insisted that the cousin had a good job, but he just “messed it up”. My meeting with the cousin was an interview type of a meeting – questions and answers. I could not bring in the discussions pertaining to HIV/AIDS because Heita was present and, I thought that it was only ethical for me to avoid the topic completely. However, we discussed issues about the importance of family in the urban setting, and because of the presence of Heita, all I got from him was “yes and no” answers. The discussion was not going anywhere, and because of ethical considerations, I did not force the discussion to continue, I ended it.

Chapter Four: Escaping Rural Poverty - Out to the City

4.1 Introduction

In Oshiwambo language, there is a saying that, “*uushimba ohambo, uuna puna opuna, uuna kaapuna kapuna sha, ngele p na omboloto to li, uuna kaapuna omboloto to imanga epaya*”. This means that “urban life is like a life at the cattle post²⁹. When there is food to eat, eat, but when there is no food, you have to “hang in there” or “tighten your belt”. This is advice that young people commonly get from their parents when they decide to go to *uushimba*” (a term used to refer to the urban areas in southern and central Namibia). Many young people try to escape their poverty stricken homes in Ovamboland and arrived in the city on packed buses, bringing with them few possessions, great expectations, and an eagerness to engage fully in a better life in the city. They come with hopes of finding employment - a plan for escaping the poverty in which they perceive their parents to be trapped.

The central argument of this chapter is that young people assume that the best recipe for a life without poverty is to live in the city (Windhoek). However, their dreams of moving beyond their parents’ poverty quickly vanish when they come to the city. Their hopes of a better life in Windhoek remain just that – hopes. Most young people end up resenting their exclusion from the promise of city life. Exclusions of young migrants from the prospects of what the city has to offer, and their frustrations and disappointments in not finding what they are searching for, lead them to seek alternative means of survival, strategies to earn a living in the city of Windhoek. In an effort to cope with the complexity of the urban setting, rural-urban migrants find themselves at crossroads. Through exploring the migration histories of some of selected key stories of my research

²⁹ Distant grazing areas where men and young boys stay for three to four months looking after cattle, then return to the village with cattle at harvest time (April/May) and go back again (Amunyela 1998). It is one of the symbolic spaces within which Owambo male identity and manhood is defined. The abilities of young men to handle cattle are of “cultural significance”.

participants, this chapter show how rural-urban migrants are continuously shifting and resituating their identities in an effort to “make a living”. Considering the socio-economic circumstances that are deteriorating in the urban setting, rural urban migrants are forced to negotiate new understandings of what it means and what is involved in “making a living”.

4.2 Migrating to “make a living”

It was in the early days of my acquaintance with Heita. I had gone to visit him in Babilon on a Saturday afternoon, the 8th of March 2008. He was seated alone outside his *kabashu* – drinking *otombo*. “Good afternoon Heita, why are you alone, where are the people – I asked. “It is the second weekend of the month Romie, people are broke”, he explained. Last weekend it was fully packed, I even run out of beers – you know these young men when it comes to month end. They drink up all the money and a few days later they are back to square one. But it is good that it is not so busy today, so we can discuss openly”, said Heita. It was on this quite afternoon that Heita told me how he came to live in Babilon.

Third-born in a family of eight, Heita grew up in his maternal grandfather’s home. His major role as a young boy was to look after cattle at the cattle post. Because of his role in looking after cattle, Heita only went to school up to Grade 8. When he was growing up, education was not really a priority for him; in fact no one encouraged his schooling or even explained to him why it was important to go to school. To him and his grandfather, looking after cattle was more important. In their village, no one had ever gone to the University of Namibia or the Polytechnic of Namibia; a few had attended the Ongwediva College of Education to become teachers. The initiative to study was not there, there was no one to inspire him and other young people in his village.

The only source of monetary income in his grandparents’ house was his grandfather and grandmother’s old age pension³⁰ of about N\$ 150.00³¹ each per month at the time. However, monetary income to the homestead did not play a significant role in the perception of poverty in Heita’s life during his childhood.

³⁰ In Namibia, as in South Africa, there is provision for a minimal old-age pension for all aged citizens. It starts at the age of 60).

³¹ The monthly pension is now R 370.00 per month.

To them so long as it rained, they had a good harvest, their livestock was well looked after, there was no poverty. However, as he got older, he started realizing that life is not all about looking after cattle, and as a man there are other expectations “to provide for the family” which he said are of cultural significance. Heita realized that there was no future for him in the rural north.

This awakening came as a result of a growing number of young people from his village who had moved to Windhoek and had come back with new ideas, ideas of progress. In addition to these, there came a point in his life when his family had expectations of him, they expected him to provide for the family. Therefore, for Heita, the only way out was to come to Windhoek. In 2001, his uncle who was living in Windhoek invited him to come to Windhoek and look for a job. His uncle was working for a sugar production company where they often took in casual workers. However, Heita did not get a job immediately – months passed without getting a permanent job. When he was finally employed (second half of 2001), Heita saw this as a good opportunity. He thought his dream of “making a living” and meeting his family expectations was becoming a reality. Coming to Windhoek, Heita was lucky because his uncle could help him to get a job where he is still working today. In our discussion, Heita referred to other young men whose dream “to make a living in Windhoek” was never met. Those young migrants keep wandering around the streets of Windhoek seeking for employment but their hopes have remained just that, hopes.

“To make a living” – this was the response that I got from other young people that I worked with when I asked why they came to Windhoek. This became a catch phrase for me as I came to meet more people. I started to question it critically – what do they mean ‘to make a living’? What is the underlying meaning of this? In relation to the core focus of my research ‘cultural identity’ and after a few discussions with my research participants, it became clear that rural-urban migration is some kind of ‘rite of passage’³² that every young person should go through. Just as the traditional salt-fetching journey to the Etosha Pan was considered as an initiation rite, going *kuushimba* also qualifies to be called some sort of initiation rite (Winterfeldt 2002). The young people in Babilon emphasized the fact that it is a process that signifies a shift from an unfulfilling life to a fulfilling one. Making a life or achieving a fulfilling life is something that is locally defined and mobility is a requirement to making a life in order to achieve a fulfilling life. Some, especially young men, indicated that a fulfilling life is one that meets the

³² I would like to argue that, with circumstances, the rite of passage is born out of the colonial migrant labour system which has survived demolition even after then demolition of the SWANLA in 1972.

expectations from the family or the “expectation of lineage” (to borrow Winterfeldt’s (2002) term).

With these expectations young people see Windhoek as a place where they can both meet those expectations and as a place where they can fulfill their personal dreams of “making a living”. The young people I spoke to in Babilon perceive Windhoek as a place of many opportunities, a place where “development” is taking place. It is the hopes and dreams of young people to tap into the apparent employment opportunities that the city presents. However, these only materialize to a limited extent. Despite the fact that employment opportunities have broadened since Namibia attained its independence, the sheer volume of urban growth appears to negate the potential benefits for the urban poor (Frayne 2007).

4.2.1 Local perceptions of poverty

Closely linked to the phrase “to make a living”, is another concept which dominated the discussions I had with the young people in Babilon: *oluhepo* (“poverty”). They singled out “poverty” in Ovamboland as one of the forces which drove them to migrate to Windhoek. But what are the local perceptions and conceptions of poverty, what entails poverty in Ovamboland? That was the first question in my mind. Young people that I worked with emphasized what I came to call the “deficiency factor” or “lack of something factor” in their perceptions of poverty. They especially emphasized the lack of employment opportunities in Ovamboland, in their definition of poverty. *“Although life is difficult in Windhoek, it is better than sitting at home back in Ovamboland”*, said Hamutenya. Hamutenya explained that if he had stayed in his village, he would have just depended on his parents to make things happen. *“You are always at the receiving end”*, he said. Hamutenya thought that the main problem was that there were no employment opportunities for young people in the rural area, especially not for those who only had completed high school without any further education. *“That’s poverty to me”*, Hamutenya stressed. For young people without much education, the only way to escape poverty, he felt was to migrate to Windhoek where they could choose from the many opportunities presented by the urban economy.

Like Hamutenya, many young people believe that having a job is crucial for their position in society and that it is through a good formal education that one could secure a better job. Therefore, missing out on a good education is in itself a serious deprivation that the young people I worked with directly linked to poverty in Ovamboland. Young people in Babilon emphasized that because they had poor education and were not able to attain the minimum requirements needed to further their study at the University of Namibia or other institutions of higher learning in the country, their life chances of good employment were slim. On the other hand, they saw that in Ovamboland, options were limited; the economy in the rural north is largely based on cultivating *mahangu* (millet) and keeping livestock. In the context of this thesis, poverty is therefore, defined as a relative condition. As a relative condition, it describes an individual's or a group's level of wealth in relation to other individuals or groups in the society (Tvedten & Nangulah 1999).

Based on this conception, I follow Englund (2002) that “migration is pathological, a phenomenon that would not exist if the socio-economic conditions were right” (2002:139). The findings of the Socio-Economic Survey conducted by the City of Windhoek (2002) in Babilon confirm that people migrate to Windhoek with hopes and perceptions that life in the city is better than the socio-economic conditions in the rural areas. Undoubtedly, cities such as Windhoek have enormous potential for improving people's lives. According to UNFPA's (1996) state of the world population report cities are the main beneficiaries of globalization, the progressive integration of the world's economies. They host capital investments and markets for entrepreneurs and innovators at all level of economic activity. Amunyela (1998) followed a dependency theory approach, asserts that foreign investments promote rural-urban migration as well as service and informal sector labour, with foreign investment drawing migrants to urban areas. She writes: “Windhoek is the centre of all economic activities bringing together forces of development that feed on each other; and it is a strategic location where industrial, commercial productions, wholesale, retail distribution and service industries are concentrated” (Amunyela 1998: 5).

Rural-urban migrants follow the potential of taking advantage of these capital investments by seeking employment opportunities in the cities. What is interesting for me are the two questions: Firstly, what happens to those who are able to imagine these opportunities but are not able to join or to take advantage of them? In other words what is the difference between the perception and the ability or inability to access these opportunities? And what is the way out or an alternative strategy? Secondly, in respect of those who are able to partake in the urban economy, though at a marginal level, what do they make out of it? Recent studies in Namibia note “a tension between migration, urbanization and urban poverty, which has been described as an “urban crisis” and conceptualized as a transfer of rural poverty to the urban context” (Frayne 2007:92).

4.2.2 Arriving in the city: the role of social networks

I have gained insights from the young people I worked with about the significant roles that social networks play in the lives of rural-urban migrants, especially when they first arrived in the city. I must indicate here that, the work of Philip Mayer, Monica Hunter Wilson and others in the 1950s are my primary reference points in the understanding of social networks in urban settings. These works emphasized the vital role that social networks play in migrants’ lives in the urban settings. This framework had also been used in recent work done in Namibia on survival strategies of the urban poor through a focus on the roles of relations and networks (social capital³³) that urban poor people relate to in the daily lives and mobilize in terms of crises (Tvedten & Nangulah 1999). It appears to be generally agreed that information about employment opportunities is passed through social networks which are the determining factors that facilitate rural-urban migration. In his proposition of a notion of “sets of relations” model, Mayer (1961) explained the diversity found in African urban environments. He argued that, prior to their migration, migrants established social links with their destinations that created a platform for them to adapt and to be integrated into the new social setting. Based on research in Langa, Cape Town at about the same time as Mayer’s study in East London, Monica Wilson and

³³ According to Portes (1998), social capital is defined as the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures (cited in Tvedten and Nangulah 1999).

Archie Mafeje (1963) similarly argued that, migrants from the countryside were dependent upon these social links with their country friends to secure entry, employment, and a place to live. Mayer (1961) also argued that these “homeboys” formed a group within which the migrant lived and ate. More recently, Tvedten (2004) argued that rural-urban migration should be seen as part of a complex of coping strategy involving both rural-and urban social units. He pointed out that rural-urban social links were central to the decision to move, as well as to coping strategies once settled down. It seems that social networks theories still hold some validity in the 21st century.

Staying with family and relatives is important when one first comes to the city. The young people I worked with in Babilon could easily relate to this. Heita, for instance, had been living with his uncle and two other relatives during his first two years in Windhoek. Because Heita had only limited schooling, he was not able to get a permanent job immediately when he first came to Windhoek. He indicated that the first few months were especially hard. He could only get casual jobs. Sometimes two or three months passed without him getting anything. Therefore, his uncle and the other two relatives played a great role in Heita’s survival in Windhoek. He felt that although living in Babilon informal settlement with his uncle and other relatives was not ideal and it was not what he had hoped for, it was much better than living in the rural areas. Heita indicated that his coming to Windhoek had a complex dimension - a dimension of searching a platform from which he could exercise his freedom. Staying with family and relatives in Windhoek meant more than the fact that he did not have a place of his own. He emphasized the cultural values attached to it- that extended family was still important in society. He felt that Windhoek is such a confusing place. As migrants, they meet with people from all walks of life and if one did not have anyone from one’s own background, especially during the first few months of one’s stay in Windhoek; one might end up on the wrong side. In our discussion Heita emphasized that as migrants coming from Ovamboland where people are of the same background and coming to Windhoek they meet people from different backgrounds and they somehow have to fit. However, since there are other young people are not from Ovamboland but in the same situation (making

a living in Windhoek), Heita argued that they also play a role in their lives while in Windhoek.

Throughout my discussions with Heita and other young migrants in Babilon, I heard similar stories many times. Their insights with regard to the role of social networks or sets of relations in defining, maintaining and re-constructing the cultural identity of rural-urban migrants became challenging for me. The explanations of young migrants in Babilon show that the social networks theory as developed by Mayer and others still hold true to an extent, although Heita's description also indicates that the "homeboys" networks are perhaps less important than much of the literature suggests. Wilson and Mafeje (1963) noted the challenge to social networks during the colonial period, namely the compulsory direction of labour by the colonial government which tended to break up the groups of "homeboys". On the other hand, they pointed out that some restrictions on entry to town, and a shortage of accommodation, probably helped to maintain groups of "homeboys". Based on what I saw in Babilon, I would also argue that in the present time, social networks and the role they play in migrants' lives are being challenged. If you are unemployed for a long time, which is often the case for most rural-urban migrants, problems about not being able to contribute anything to the homestead start, even with your own family and relatives. Young people find themselves at crossroads as an older relative of a young man (Penda) I worked with explained that they are all trying to make a living, they are all struggling. He indicated that sometimes one can not afford to keep on feeding another man if you are also in the same situation. Referring to his nephew (Penda), this relative stated that he told Penda to go build his own *kabashu*. "Keeping him here means he is going to be living an easy life, but once he gets his own place, he will strive by all means to find a job. He is spoiled here and does not know how difficult it is just to bring food on the table", he said.

The role that social networks (extended family and immediate family) had been reported to be playing in migrants' lives in the urban areas is currently facing serious limitations and challenges. Migrants come to Windhoek to stay with immediate families as their primary hosts, but because of the circumstances, as one of the young people called it the

“dry and extreme circumstances” in Windhoek, people find themselves living apart even if in Ovamboland they lived in the same homestead.

4.2.3 Life and social relationships on the urban fringe

In moving to urban settings, migrants are presented with the world of new environments and social settings that demand adaptation and integration (Skodova 2004). They have to adapt to live in new social settings; and, at the same time, keep and maintain aspects they brought along from the old cultural context; these are like two sides of the same coin and there must be a dialectical balance between them. In consideration of the above view, I paid particular attention to what Bank (2002) referred to as “anthropology of urbanism” in contrast with “urban anthropology”. He distinguished those two fields of urban research as follows: urban anthropology historically focused on specific social groups in the city or a “specific cultural context” within which the meaning and desirability of western modernization was under scrutiny; while an anthropology of urbanism does not only focus on specific social groups and identities in the city but recognizes the spatial relationships between town and country, and within the city itself. In the study of urbanism, it is the urban locality itself that is the primary subject under investigation (Bank 2002: 13-14) - the importance of “spaces”. For the purpose of this study and in relation to urbanism as proposed by Leslie Bank, I emphasize the significance of social spaces. By social space I mean social relationships that migrants establish when in urban settings - relationships that shift across spaces either with people from “home” or people they just got to know in Windhoek. Heita told me about Hangula, a young man from his village. In their childhood, they used to play together, they went to the cattle post in the same areas, and basically they are what Mayer (1961) would call “homeboys”. According to Heita, Hangula has given him moral support during his early days in Windhoek. Having being in Windhoek long before Heita came, Hangula knew what life is like in Windhoek and helped Heita adapt to the new setting.

Hangula introduced Heita to his four girlfriends (sexual partners) – who were all employed. Just like other young men in the same predicament, for Hangula, this was a survival strategy. He was able to get monetary support from his girlfriends and was able

to pay his rent N\$ 200 per month and buy a few basic necessities. This was a life that Hangula had never imagined before he came to Windhoek. It is important to note that Hangula's case is quite "unique" as it is rather uncommon for young men to form multiple relationships for their own survival. The situation is the other way round – women form multiple relationships as survival strategy. Hangula's story and the strategies he employs "to make or sustain a living" in the city of Windhoek provide evidence for my argument about the difference between perception and ability to participate in the urban economy. Back in Ovamboland, young men never imagined that they might have to depend on their girlfriends for survival. But when they go back to Ovamboland during Christmas or other holidays, it does not show that they struggle in Windhoek. Instead, they show off their expensive phones and their nice clothes bought in the city. No one will ever imagine that Hangula and other young people live on the geographical, economic and social fringe of Windhoek. On the contrary, they are role models to many young people back in the Ovamboland – who do not know what their reality in Windhoek is like. Hangula has been in Windhoek for many years but has never been able to find a permanent job- a dream that has long vanished. He has been doing casual jobs, but they do not pay well.

Working with these young men, I constantly asked myself, what their shattered dreams meant to their identity - a question that seemed straight forward and easy to answer when I brought up it up with Heita in relation to Hangula's predicament. Heita stressed that in the Owambo "culture" a man provides for his family, but not the other way round as it is in Hangula's case. But Hangula had no choice, with life being so hard in Windhoek, people can go to "extreme" just to survive, said Heita. In a way applauding Hangula, Heita indicated that it is better that Hangula did not turn to crime, which is often the path for some young people in his situation.

Most of the young people I worked with emphasized the sacrifices that they have to make just to make a living. Migrants find themselves shifting and resituating their identities from one context to another, they develop new identities to fit a certain context. It is a matter of survival as most of the young people I worked with emphasized. I therefore argue that urban spaces are social fields where migrants find themselves negotiating their identities, partly, as a matter of survival. As pointed out earlier in this chapter, many

young assume that the best recipe a life without poverty is to move to Windhoek- they come seeking for a better future. I relate my argument to the view that there appears to be a relationship between capital and mobility; people migrate with hopes of capturing a greater percentage of the flows of capital that are circulating worldwide at the same time, global capital is constantly seeking new sites of production and consumption (Appadurai 1990; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Although this view deals more with transnational migration on a global scale, I maintain that rural-urban migration as a phenomenon is directly linked to global flows of capital and consumption. Despite the poverty they are living in, the young people of Babilon are connected to this new global trend of information and communication technologies. They all have mobile phones³⁴.

With the rapid increase in information and communication technologies, information about variety of opportunities is also becoming easily accessible to rural dwellers Rural-urban migration is a result of a desire to take advantage of capital and investments in the city. For those who are lucky to take advantage of these directly and capture-labour based entitlements (although marginally), they strive to make the most out of it. When Heita got a permanent job in the second half of 2001 (which he still holds today), he moved out of his uncle's *kabashu* and went to stay with his cousin. Things became hard in their everyday lives; he started having problems with the relatives at his uncle's place³⁵. His uncle and other relatives were now eyeing at his hard earned income – they regarded it as “if it was payback time”, says Heita. However, his hard earned money was saved; he made sure that he sent some “home” (to his grandparents) while the rest was used to sustain a basic life in Windhoek. He emphasized that he did not spend it on alcohol or expensive mobile phones. Englund (2002:139) reminds us that “migration presupposes a measure of relative well-being, which provides that material and ideological conditions for seeking new fortunes through spatial mobility”. Judging from Heita's position, which is shared by many of the young migrants I worked with, I argue following Englund

³⁴ In chapter seven, I discuss the significance of cell phones, micro technologies and youth culture in more details.

³⁵ See above- another dimension of challenges facing social networks

(2002:139) “that mobility is best seen as a lifestyle in which improvements in the village are pursued through a stay in town”.

There are however also those who are able to participate in the urban economy, but do not maintain connection with their rural homes and who do not make efforts to improve their ‘homes’ in Ovamboland. If a migrant does not make efforts to enhance his home in the village, people start questioning the reason for his stay in town. People develop negative perceptions of him. They start referring to him as “*ombwiti*”³⁶ a derogative term referring to people who live in urban areas and fail to maintain their connections with their rural homes. It is a negative connotation that implies that one is like a weed in the millet – i.e. such a person cease to be a real Owambo. If people are referred to as *oombwiti*, their quest for a meaningful life or even making a living becomes questionable, worthless and pointless. Heita described one of his friends in such rather disparaging terms: “I have a friend who has no sense of culture at all. He does not go home even during the festive season or even when there is a death in the family. He is a typical of *ombwiti*. I do not like people who transform themselves. This guy just wants to be someone else – he hangs out with Damaras from Khomasdal, wears earrings and speaks Afrikaans only. That is a clear denial of culture” said Heita.

Mahler (2000) argues that we must look at “things” as well as “people” if we are to understand transnationalism. I say that, equally, we must look at “things” as well as “people” if we are to understand rural-urban migration. Her reason for stressing “things” lies in the unequal access to mobility experienced by people around the world. But my reason for stressing things lies more in the unequal access to opportunities available and the ability to take advantage of these opportunities.

4.3 Finding hope in the informal sector

In response to the inability to tap into the opportunities in terms of employment in the formal sector, rural-urban migrants find refuge in the informal sector (Frayne 2007).

³⁶ Please see detailed discussion on the concept of Ombwiti in chapter six.

Cities provide capital, labour and markets for entrepreneurs and innovators at all levels of economic activity. Rural-urban migrants often assume that employment opportunities are better in big cities; they are often right, but in the rapidly expanding urban areas, employment opportunities are now fewer than applicants, in other words, the people in search of work outnumber the opportunities (UNFPA 2007). In the past, the process of rural-urban migration was associated with the process of industrialization and economic development to meet the labour demand. However, surveys done in Windhoek from the late 1990s onwards indicate that the extent of rural-urban migration in recent years has greatly exceeded the capacity of the modern industrial and other urban sector to accommodate the number of migrants flocking to the urban areas and this trend is associated with rising urban unemployment (Amunyela 1998). Another survey undertaken in the informal settlements of Windhoek in 2002 reported an unemployment rate of 46 per cent among households (cited in Frayne 2007). It appears that although the migrants I worked with were optimistic about their chances of getting jobs in the city, they admitted that getting a job was however not easy and that the process of job search is painful and indeed very lengthy. Heita introduced me to a young man Nambahu who came to Windhoek in August 2007 and had lived in Babilon for about six months when I talked to him about his work seeking strategies. Nambahu said, he got to know a man who was also unemployed, and together they went to Hochland Park to look for jobs. Every morning they wake up at 6h30, walk for about 20 km to the Hochland Park job seekers station; they spend the whole day there and for most of the days without getting anyone who wants them to clean their yards. He indicated that they are many at the station and the prospective employers can't take them all. "One has to be really lucky to get a job on any one day", said Nambahu. He emphasized that this piece of work was also not a permanent job and the pay was very little. "Sometimes you can only get N\$ 30.00 for a full day's work", he sighed.

Surprisingly, in spite of these difficulties, migrants seemed to be adamantly sticking to the city. Tvedten (2004) writes that people continue to move to urban areas and stick to urban areas despite the real risks of not succeeding in an increasingly harsh social and economic environment. Timalsina (2007:IV) explains that "as theories provide certain

ways of looking at the world or issues and are essential in defining research problems, migration theories and livelihood approach can be adopted to look at the issues to get insights how poor rural-urban migrants are making a living in the urban informal sector”. While there are some stories of those who are fortunate to get a job, it is usually hope, not reality that attracts migrants to cities as discussed in the sections above, but for most of them, their hopes remain just a pipe dream. As a result, many migrants end up feeling the pain of exclusion from the promise of the city’s opportunities. Exclusions of young migrants from the prospects of what the city has to offer, and their frustrations and disappointments in not finding what they are searching for, lead them to seek alternative means of survival, strategies to earn a living in the city of Windhoek. Many young people are forced to resort to entrepreneurship and self-employment, although they would still prefer formal employment. The informal sector encompasses largely small scale activities including: small enterprises, household enterprises and, self-employed street vendors (Timalsina 2007). Most young people I worked with are engaged in petty-commodity trading which Frayne (2007) argued that it has reached saturation point. Rauna for instance buys cheap scrap meat from the abattoirs; she cooks it and sells it outside her mother’s *kabashu*. Evelina works in her cousin’s *kabashu*, she also sells sweets to kids coming from school everyday, and she also sells cigarettes. Sometimes she makes *oshikundu* (a non-alcoholic traditional brew) which she sells for N\$ 1 for a litre jug.



Picture 3: The two pictures show the activities (selling oranges, apples, sweets, cigarettes) that rural-urban migrants are involved in order to earn an income.

In the picture above I show some of the examples informal activities other young people are involved in. The majority of the people entering the informal sector are recent rural-urban migrants who are unable to find jobs in the formal sector. Their main reason for taking part in the informal sector is to use what little skills they have to obtain sufficient income to survive (McCatty 2004). Despite being a saturated sector, most street vending activities in Babilon have increased. Considering the conditions under which rural-urban migrants live, the informal sector seems to be the only opportunity for them to make a living in Windhoek. Walking around the streets of Babilon, I could observe countless women selling grilled meat (which is locally known as *okapana*), selling local beer (*otombo*), and working in *kabashus* (taverns).

Frayne (2007) noted that migrants survive in the urban areas in part because of food they receive from the rural areas. These range from cultivated foods, wild foods, some meat, poultry and fish. My research participants indicated that while this is partly true, some of these foods are used for other purposes other than consumption at home. City dwellers also sell part of it in order to earn an income. Frayne's (2007) findings show that a certain small portion of food received is used for other purposes i.e. 91% of the urban respondents of his research responded that they fully consumed food they received, only 6% used some of it for business purposes, and 3% shared with friends and families. Although I do not have statistical data, I came to think that in Babilon today a proportion of foodstuffs received from Ovamboland are used for commercial purposes. I was visiting Evelina one day, when a friend of hers came by. We were discussing the importance of "traditional food" and the role it plays in the everyday survival of people in Babilon. This young woman, Nangula indicated that she receives *mahangu*³⁷ from home. "My parents send this with my friends who go home on a regular basis. We use it to eat everyday, but also to make "oshikundu"³⁸ and sell to people around here", she said. Evelina confirmed that Nangula is known for making the best "oshikundu" in Babilon. "I

³⁷ Pearl millet (*mahangu*) is the staple cereal crop in Namibia

³⁸ Traditional brew made from pearl millet

sell a one litre jug for N\$ 1.50 and I can sell about 15 jugs per day. I make about N\$ 15.00 from this; enough to buy bread at least” said Nangula.

I also noted a large proportion of wild foods collected in Owambo which have been commercialized in Windhoek. These include *oombe* (wild almond) and *omagungu* (mopane worms). Mopane worms (un-cooked) for instance are sold measured in a jug at N\$ 10.00. With a 50 kg bag one can make a good profit. This business activity is seasonal, but women use the opportunity to its fullest. The whole cycle of this business is run mostly by female migrants. Some of them collect mopane worms in Ovamboland and transport them to Windhoek. Women in Windhoek buy them for home consumption as well as for business purposes. They cook and sell them measured in tins for N\$ 1.00 per container. Wild fruits are being marketed along similar lines. One can buy in bulk from someone who had just come from Ovamboland and sell them to the residents of Babilon measured in small tins. Peas and beans are other food stuffs that are transferred from rural areas and are commercialized in the urban areas.

In this chapter, I have highlighted the reasons for migrating and explored the social realities of mobility in which rural-urban migrants find themselves while in the urban setting. Because of their low level of education, rural-urban migrants find it hard to find employment when they come to town. I found that, the role of social networks is significant in providing support in terms of survival to those who are not able to access the opportunities that the city presents. Engagement in the informal sector is also discussed as an approach to make ends meet for most young people, despite the fact that it is saturated.

Following from what Heita explained about his friend who had cut his ties with his rural home, I argue that with each experience that rural-urban migrants have in their daily life in the urban site, they are reminded of their connections to others in a larger community and at the same time, they are reminded of the need to keep close with what they term their “culture” (*omuthigululwakalo*). This argument is in relation to what I would call a replication of rural life in the urban setting, which I shall discuss in chapter six. Walking around the streets of Babilon I saw that migrants have and are increasingly building their

rural presence into the city. I asked myself, what does this mean to them? I was struck to see that people have planted little gardens of millet (*mahangu*), maize and beans- what does this mean to them? It can only be one of the two reasons- either people do this for survival or people do this to keep their cultural identity. But if they do this as a survival means, is this enough? This discussion is presented in more details in chapter six. In the following chapter, I discuss the everyday experiences of rural urban migrants in Babilon.



Chapter Five: Life on the Fringe of the City

5.1 Introduction

Visiting Babilon was a daily activity for me. I was interested in observing how each day unfolded in the lives of rural-urban migrants. I sat at different *kabashus* where young people sell different kinds of brews. On one occasion I was sitting at my favourite *kabashu* (Heita's *kabashu*) when three young men came by. They were selling second hand clothing. After they left, Heita commented, "that is part of a survival strategy". But I was thinking something else – the price range of the goods of between N\$ 2 – 20 was questionably low. I was thinking that they might have stolen these clothes from somewhere. What was surprising is the fact that it seemed such a normal occurrence for the customers at Heita's *kabashu*. They were buying and no questions asked. To them this seemed just like buying in departmental stores such as Pep or Edgars³⁹. Heita however, indicated how criminal activities such as petty theft are on the increase in Babilon. "Everyday you hear of a burglary in the neighbourhood. "You can not just wash your clothes and leave them there unattended. Someone will come steal them", said Heita. But he seemed more disturbed by the lack of neighbour-lines – even if people could see someone breaking in their neighbours' *kabashu*, they will hesitate to intervene. He thought this was so because people are afraid of risking their lives. In Babilon's vernacular, the petty thieves are called *Zula Boys*⁴⁰. But what was impressive was that Heita was still hopeful for his community. "Young people in my community need to be mobilized, we need inspirational speakers here. Young people need help to change their behaviour. But for some, it is really not by choice that they are engaged in criminal activities, it is survival my friend", said Heita". I could observe during my field work that, even if they do not get involved in criminal activities, young people in Babilon are

³⁹ South African chains of department stores which dominate the Namibian market.

⁴⁰ This term is not only used to refer to young boys who are petty criminals. It a term used within the youth culture – through music. Please refer to chapter seven.

drinking heavily and smoking cigarettes. Most of my research participants felt that the difficult living conditions brought about these perceived societal mishaps.

In this chapter, rough patches that urban migrants go through while in the urban spaces are presented. However, despite the risks and challenges that urban migrants face, there are also stories of those who are fortunate to finding employment in the formal economy and are members of networks that are supportive. This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section that I call “rough patches”, urban migrants’ rough experiences of urban life are presented; in section two that I call “passages of hope”, experiences of urban migrants are presented from a more hopeful angle.

5.2 Rough patches

I begin my discussion by pointing out important gender dimensions of rural-urban migration. Migration in post-independent Namibia has a different face from that of the apartheid period. During the apartheid period, Owambo men migrated and women did not; on the other hand, during the post-independence period, Owambo women’s share in migration has increased significantly. Nowadays, women account for nearly half of the residents of the informal settlements of Katutura (Winterfeldt 2002). According to the UNFPA (2006), gender is not a usual category of aggregating migration statistics; female migrants seem invisible in migration statistics. The absence of gender-specific data hinders the understanding of women’s experience in the migration process. Female migration is much of greater complexity and differs from that of men in its form, composition, causes, and consequences (Tvedten 2004). Therefore it is essential to understand the characteristics and social realities of migration – its gender-specific issues, including gender-based violence and the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (UNFPA 2006).

In a quest for personal freedom and economic independence, more young women today are migrating. Thus, female migration may be seen as a quest for gender equality and an element of shifting gender expectations and practices. Women’s recent involvement in migration comes at a cost. Female and male migrants each face different challenges and opportunities as they try to make a living and adapt to the urban environment.

Recent literature on urban poverty in Namibia (Tvedten 2004; Frayne 2007) highlights deprivation (isolation and powerlessness) and vulnerability (insecurity and exposure to risk, shock and stress). In my research I realized that women in Babilon are in an even more disadvantaged position in the migration process than men. The chances of unskilled⁴¹ women to get employment are even slimmer than those of men.

Bank (2001) noted a social expression of the counter-cultural tendencies of the youth in Duncan Village (East London) in the 1980s i.e. the prolific growth of young *ukuthlalisana* (living together relationships) houses. His findings showed that young men and women were moving in together in unprecedented numbers to set up houses as unmarried couples in the new shack areas. Ten years ago, Amunyela (1998) found in Babilon that most female migrants were engaged in “partnership” or living together relationships. In my discussions with the young people I worked with, references to the term *okwooteka* (a term used to refer to living together relationships) came up often. My research participants indicated that these are often encouraged by the hardships and difficult conditions women are facing while in the Windhoek.

5.2.1 “Okwooteka” (living together relationships)

In a discussion that I had with Evelina, she told me her story of being in a “living together relationship”. Evelina, a 26 year old woman came to Windhoek in 2006. She had been in Babilon for two years when I talked to her in early 2008. Just like other young people I worked with, Evelina did not attain the minimum points required to study further.

A friend from her village who was working in Windhoek with Ramatex⁴² passed on the information that Ramatex was recruiting at the beginning of 2006. At this point Evelina

⁴¹ Most of research participants are unskilled having only high school level of education

⁴² Ramatex is a Malaysian textile manufacturing company that opened its operations in Namibia in 2001. Ramatex's decision to locate production in Namibia was motivated by the objective to benefit from the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) which allows for duty free exports to the US from selected African countries who meet certain conditions set by the US government. The Namibian government was optimistic that Ramatex would make a tangible contribution to the development of the country through its provision of modern industrial skills to a largely unskilled labour force in Namibia. By 2006, about 6000 young Namibians were employed by Ramatex. During its

decided to migrate to Windhoek to look for employment at Ramatex. However, she was never able to get a permanent job at Ramatex but only menial jobs on casual basis in Windhoek. Evelina considered herself lucky that a cousin of hers who is employed with one of the ministries in the capital owns a *kabashu* in Babilon. This is where Evelina now works. She earns N\$ 250.00 per month. She considers this a respectable wage in her situation – particularly for someone who lives in Babilon where people live in abject poverty. Out of the N\$ 250.00 every month she sends N\$ 100.00 to her parents in Ovamboland and the remainder is used to maintain her lifestyle in Babilon. Today, she lives with her boyfriend, Nangolo, who is from Omuthiya in the Oshikoto Region about 150km south of Evelina’s rural home.

Her boyfriend works for a security company and brings in about N\$ 400.00 per month. In our discussion she raised concerns that her boyfriend has other women – “he recently impregnated a young woman here in Babilon. Now he has to support both of us”, said Evelina. She indicated that she is worried because her boyfriend might leave her for his pregnant woman. But what she is more worried about is that, her boyfriend bits her up when he comes home drunk, especially at the end of the month. “He knows that I depend on him financially, and he does whatever he likes”, said Evelina. She stated that there are other women in Babilon who are living well with their boyfriends. “Not like Nangolo, they have respect for their girlfriends. Even though they are not married, they look like families, but for us, it is just fights most of the times. But my hands are really tight, because where do I go” Eveline sighed. She however indicated that there are also some women that are making many babies, and because they can not afford to live with their children in Babilon they send them back to their parents in Ovamboland. She gave an example of a friend who she said has five kids with three different men. But she only lives with the last born, the rest have been sent home. Evelina stressed that even if she is also in the same situation, that she cannot trust Nangolo because he has other women

operations, Ramatex has suffered serious criticisms that include labour practices (abusive of workers rights, low wages, unfair labour conditions, and insufficient health and safety measures); and environmental conditions (contamination of the city’s underground water sources). As a result of these critics, the company started running at a loss therefore its closure of business in March 2008 leaving thousands of youth in the streets unemployed.

outside, her friend with five children with three different men may put her at the risk of contracting AIDS. “But those are the hardships of life in Babilon”, she argued.

I asked Evelina how common living together relationships were in Babilon. She replied that, they were rather common – “it is a survival strategy for most of us” she said. On a similar occasion, I was visiting Heita who also lives with his girlfriend, with whom he has a son. Heita took me to one of his friends, Mathew (a young man who came to Windhoek in 2006 and works as a security guard), who also lives in Babilon. Mathew too lives with his girlfriend; they have a daughter together who stays with Mathew’s grandmother in Ovamboland. When we got to Mathew’s place, and greeted, Heita asked: “where is Naita (Mathew’s girlfriend)? Mathew replied that she went to buy *uufila* (mealie-meal) at the shop. “She was supposed to go in the morning, but she was just sitting at home doing nothing. I don’t know what she thinks sometimes” said Heita’s friend. He then went on to complain how his girlfriend does not respect him stating that maybe she expects him to go buy meal-meal himself. “She tends to forget that she is the woman in this house. Is it because I did not marry her or what? It is more or less the same thing anyway; I feed her just like any husband would feed his wife and family. I think it is only fair if she also treats me like a man and a husband is supposed to be treated”, Heita’s friend argued.

In her study of the socio-economic aspects of female migrants in Babilon and their coping strategies, Amunyela (1998) noticed a trend of dispersal of children to the parents in Ovamboland where elderly rural residents often feel overwhelmed by the task of raising their migrant daughters’ children. One day I was listening to a call-in programme on the Oshiwambo Radio, one man, whose voice sounded elderly, angrily raised concerns about the *kabashus* and living together relationships in Windhoek. He called on the government to demolish all the *kabashus* in Windhoek. He argued that young people there are making many babies and they dump them to Ovamboland. “We do not have time to be looking after kids. Every year, is a child dropped off here, and the women go back to make more, they have become *oombwiti* there” said an angry man. He argued that this limits their productivity – “my wife cannot just do her daily work effectively, there

are children to look after also. And those young women and men in Windhoek do not even support their kids; we do not get any money from them”, said the caller.

A similar feeling about living together relationships was expressed by Evelina’s friend (Nathalia). Nathalia, in her mid-twenties arrived in Babilon in 2007. Unlike Evelina, she was lucky – she got a job at Ramatex factory. In her first few months in Windhoek, she lived with her brother (in his *kabashu*) in Babilon. When her brother got a girlfriend, Martha, who moved in with them in August 2007, Nathalia indicated that as soon as she (Martha) moved in, she started controlling everything, especially money. Nathalia indicated that her brother’s girlfriend behaved as if she was married to him. Nathalia further argued that her brother had even stopped sending money home. “All the money goes to this woman”, said Nathalia.

My interest in living together relationships concerns both the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of these partnerships. My data, and that found in other studies (see Amunyela 1998), show that living together relationships in Babilon are used as survival strategies by the urban poor, yet others object to living together relationships arguing that they lead men into destitution, to forget about their family back in Ovamboland, “all the money goes to their women”. However, women involved in such relationships shared concerns of risks of AIDS and domestic abuse⁴³. The social connotations of living together relationships were also expressed to be matters of concern. As the angry caller to the Radio programme demonstrated, living together relationships have negative connotations, similar to those being called *oombwiti*. As Heita puts it, “we may be living together here in Babilon, but when we go back home, each go to their own village”. Thus, living together relationships fail to establish kin relations which is one of the main reasons why they are regarded with disdain.

While they are a survival strategy for some young people, I argue that these forms of domesticity also represent what Bank (2001) called the desire of the youth to establish

⁴³ Regularly you read in the local newspapers about a young man arrested for beating up his girlfriend in Windhoek, or even killing her. See The Namibian October 2002, March 2003, December 2004, November 2008

spaces within which they could express their own identities and new found confidence (gained from moving away from parental control). In his study in East London, Bank argued that living together relationships emphasized social flexibility and the quest for independence, especially from the demands of the older generation. He views living together relationships as an ideological and a social practice – by ideological practice he associated it with the rejection of older forms of family structure and obligation (such as organised marriages). I am not convinced that this is also the case with the living together relationships in Babilon. Instead, as I have shown above, men adopt patriarchal practices and treat their lovers as they would deal with their “customary wives”. This leaves young women in a vulnerable situation. They are expected to behave “like wives” by doing domestic chores.

5.2.2 The untold dramas of young migrant men: a vanished dream

Hochland Park is one of the better off suburbs of Windhoek. It has some of the city’s bigger street intersections where young migrant men gather in search for work. Every day you drive by, there are points along the streets where you find a number of young men in the shade of trees looking for work as labourers. It was about 14h00 on a Sunday afternoon that I visited one of Hochland Park job seeker’s sites. There were about ten young men probably in their mid-twenties. All of them were rural-urban migrants who came to Windhoek within the past two years. At first, they thought I was a prospective employer. For security reasons, I pretended to be waiting for someone, so I just sat there and tried to bring up a discussion not related to my research. I soon learned that, they were hesitant to talk; everyone seemed to be thinking about their own concerns and was on the lookout for the cars stopping by. Standing in the shade of the trees there, a pick-up track stopped, and all the young men ran towards it. It stopped a few meters away from where I was standing, so I could not hear what the driver said. All I saw was that two guys jumped on the back of the car and they left. The rest of the men came back to the shade. They later started talking to me.

What I heard, I found very disturbing. These young men wake up very early in the morning and walk for about 15 kilometers to come to this site. Most of them are

frustrated because a week can go by without getting any job. If they are lucky, they may be picked up to go do gardening for about N\$ 30.00 or in exchange for food. It is noted in a study by Frayne (2005) conducted on migration and urban survival in Windhoek that piecework and in-kind services for food is an important informal coping strategy that households employ during times of economic hardships. This is not the life that these young men had thought of when they decided to come to Windhoek. However, just like their female counterparts, they are not prepared to go back to Ovamboland. One of them puts it “that just shows that you are a failure. You went *kuushimba* but you came back empty handed. I am not prepared for that. I will continue trying until I get something” said a young man (Penda). Despite what seems to be trying conditions for these young men, they are still hopeful.

Penda described what they have to go through by giving a rather disturbing example of how they are treated. “One day a car stopped by. It was a white man driving a Toyota Bakkie⁴⁴. We all thought it was someone who wanted one of us to go clean their yard or other work we normally do”, said Penda. He stated that they all ran to the car and the driver shouted that five of them should jump in the cabin of the car. Penda and other four young men jumped in and to their surprise there were bees in the cabin. “Jumping in the cabin was as if we disturbed their nest. It was hectic, we had to jump out quickly for our safety. The guy just looked at us laughing and he drove away”, said Penda. Penda indicated that that is not the only story of how people treat them, sometimes they are even insulted. However, Penda stated that there are good Samaritans out there who sometimes stop by and give them bread or even second hand clothing. “But this one day, a car stopped by. It was a white guy again. He offered one of us a big lunch box and he shouted, please share. They thought it was just one of the good Samaritans. “He drove a few meters away from us probably waiting for us to open the lunch box and see our reactions. To our biggest surprise and dismay when we opened the box, there was a big snake. We all jumped and ran away and to him this was some kind of a joke. He just laughed and left”, said Penda and other young men there confirming to this incident.

⁴⁴ A term used to refer to a pick-up van

In her study, Amunyele (1998) also reported similar stories that migrants had told her. She reported a young man telling her that they were sitting at the robots⁴⁵, a white man stopped his car asked if he wanted a job, he said yes, but when he came closer to him he poured a cupful of water into his face, laughed and drove off. Another incident at a crossing, a pick-up car stopped, the driver told him to jump in if he wanted a job, while he was climbing the driver drove off laughing. This young man fell off and almost broke his arm, luckily, there was no incoming car. The worst day was when he and his friend got picked up by a white man; he drove them to the sewage dams to fill his bakkie with dried sewage for his garden. He did not want to tell them how much he would give them. They worked the whole day; their noses were filled with dust and could hardly breathe. At the end of the day, the man gave them N\$ 5 each and drove off. They were so disappointed, tired, thirsty and hungry, they walked back home. "It is a tough life being unemployed. You are constantly told to go to Sam Nujoma (the former president of Namibia), or that there are lots of other people out there who can work for this or that, you can as well go, if you are not interested in the job", said the young man (Amunyele 1998).

The long periods of waiting for piece jobs as well as the way young people are treated while searching for work increases psychological tension among rural-urban migrants. Many young men end up resenting their exclusion from the promise of city. Out of frustration some of them choose criminal paths as a way of making a living. Poverty is also linked with violence and crime (UNFPA 2006). Urban violence is often connected with alcohol and drug abuse and young people are documented to be at the forefront of alcohol and drug abuse. The increase in crime and violence has contributed to a general feeling of insecurity, especially among the urban poor. I agree that, the concepts of insecurity, vulnerability are directly linked with survival. Moser (1996, p. 24) defined vulnerability as the well being of individuals, households or communities in the face of a changing environment (cited in Frayne 2004). In the context of this research, the changes that increase vulnerability are limited employment opportunities and worsening crime.

⁴⁵ Robots is a terms used in some countries (South Africa, Namibian, Zimbabwe) in Southern Africa to refer to traffic lights

5.3 Passages of hope

5.3.1 Coping with the urban setting's risky social life

Despite the challenges and risks presented in the last section, I have come across a number of urban migrants (both men and women) who are speaking of positive experiences in the migration process. I argue that there are those young people that are fortunate in the migration process. During my fieldwork, I got to know the Babilon youth choir, which is a group of fifteen youths (10 women and 5 men) who are all rural-urban migrants from Ovamboland. They all have some sort of employment around the city. They sing church songs, do bible studies together and advise each other on various life matters. On Thursday afternoons, they meet at Monica's *kabashu* (because it is more spacious and she lives alone). On the question, why this group has been formed and who decides on who is welcome to join the group Haindongo, the group leader replied that they are all from Ovamboland and they are all members of youth choir groups in their respective church congregations back home. "But most of all we all live in Babilon. This is our neighborhood and our community, our home away from home", said Haindongo.

He stated that the group was established from a common feeling that "we are all feeling the pinch of urban life and from the saying that, if you bring three or more people together you can make a difference", said Haindongo. He indicated that they try to make a difference for the youth in their community by creating a community of belonging. He indicated that the group started off with five members and now they are fifteen members, and they welcome more members that would like to join.

With this group, the young people involved have developed a greater sense of belonging in their neighbourhood. They do not originate from the same village but they have developed a feeling of being relatives. Despite the challenges that each of them is going through in their respective lives⁴⁶, there is a greater hope for them in their choir group where they share problems, advise one another and even help each others out financially

⁴⁶ Some of them are working as insurance brokers, others as shop attendants and others own salons (they are all employed).

when one is in dire need. If there is a sudden death in one of the members' family, each member of the group contributes whatever they can afford to the transport expenses their friend will have. One member will be nominated to escort the colleague home (in Ovamboland). In times of happiness such as a wedding in one group members' family, the entire group is invited to attend. They organise themselves and sing in well-established big congregations such as Hosianna and Immanuel in Windhoek (Hosianna is located close to old locations of Katutura, and Immanuel is located in Wanaheda); they also take trips to go and sing at their respective home congregations in Ovamboland.

5.3.2 Babilon youth choir – “a set of relations”

Hearing and observing this group's activities I was constantly reminded of the theoretical work on social networks' development in the urban settings that I have studied. Prior to their migration, it was noted that migrants establish social links with their destinations that will create a platform for them to adapt to the new society. Individuals from the countryside have been dependent upon these social links with his country friends to secure entry, employment, and a place to live, and this has tended to delay his absorption into the group of townsmen (Mayer 1961). Ross and Weisner (1977) extended this model in the description of the city of Nairobi where most migrants located themselves in social as well as physical space around those from the same area.

However, what I observed in Babilon seemed to contradict what earlier authors like (Mayer 1961) have argued, that it was mostly migrants from the same village or region who would form these kinds of social networks. However, Epstein (1967) with reference to Gluckman (1960) already argued that the man who comes to town himself gets involved in groupings which are different from those which he obtained in the village, indicating that there is no single pattern obligatory in one's choice of circle in the town. A migrant may decide to live with a brother, or an age mate, or a group of several age mates, or friends related in neither way or a completely new grouping established in the urban setting. It is these personal associates in town that provide a platform for the migrant to either mould himself into an urbanized man or a resister to urban life. Epstein (1967:280) concluded that every African urban dweller tended to be involved in “a

complex network of social relations”, although at the core of the network are those who are readily fitted into the elastic categories of kinship provided by a classificatory system of terminology and those who count as fellow tribesmen.

In this chapter, I have concentrated on everyday experiences of rural-urban migrants in the urban settings. I have highlighted both the fortunate and unfortunate experiences. Through the discussion of selected life stories, my discussion gave a sense of the lives of rural-urban migrants and the pressures as well as the risks of urban living. Rural-urban migrants have left their rural homes to look for work. Their realities include those who are engaging in disregarded situations to earn a living, rural-urban migrants who become victims of sexual abuse and violence. Sometimes even become perpetrators of violence themselves. However, despite the risks and challenges that urban migrants face, there are also fortunate stories. The instance of the Babilon youth choir shows how this maybe achieved through the establishment of social networks which go beyond the old notion of networks consisting of those from the same village or being family. Young people are using new links as supporting networks in their everyday struggles to make a living. In the following two chapters, I will now look more closely at the shifting of identities in everyday life in Babilon. In the first of these two chapters I will demonstrate social practices that aim at the re-construction of Owambo ethnicity in Babilon.

Chapter Six: Practices of “Owambo-ness” in Babilon

6.1 Introduction

*“Okamati kamwe komo lokasie yetu otaka lombwele yakwawo takati:
“omuweteko nu, shondayile kOwambo ouma okwa tulilandje po uuchuna mbwiya
wafa u CD (ekaka), esiku lyalandula okwa tulilandje po uuchuna mbwiya hawu*

kala tau stapa modjoina mos (ondjuhwa). Oh man, oombwiti dhino nee. I hope you people won't forget ur languages n end up saying such thingz”.

The direct translation of the extract above reads:

“One boy from my location was telling his friends: “you know, when I went to Ovamboland my grandmother cooked for me that food in the shape of a CD (dried spinach), the next day she cooked for me those creatures that wander around the house like models (chicken)”. Oh man, these “oombwiti”. I hope you people won't forget your languages and end up saying such things.”

I received this forward sms⁴⁷ through my cellphone while I was doing my fieldwork. The message was telling a joke, mocking those who are regarded as *oombwiti*. Starting my discussion from this joke spreading via cellphones, I am engaging the term *ombwiti* (plural *oombwiti*), which is a socially constructed reference used in the context of rural-urban migration and cultural identity. In this chapter, I explore everyday ideas and constructions of “Owambo-ness” in Babilon. I follow an approach that acknowledges the diversity of migrants and their varied perceptions and practices of what is “urban” and what is “rural” to describe the notions of what is applicable in Babilon and what is applicable in Ovamboland. I explore how cultural identity is imagined, contested, enforced and lived in Babilon. I further investigate what I call the “reproduction” of the rural in the urban and how migrants relate to the ways of retaining links with their rural homes. Mayer (1961) argued that, while it appears that the individual was left with limited choices on how to act while being in the rural setting, when one moves to town where the system is marked by greater social diversification – (availability of several alternatives), migrants are compelled to build up their own personal synthesis. In Bank’s (2002) terms this would mean that hybrid cultural forms and spaces in the urban settings result in hybrid and fluid identities. In this chapter, I argue thus, that rural-urban migrants may carry both their rural and urban identities at the same time and may develop a synthesis out of the two combinations.

⁴⁷ Short messages sent via cellphones.

6.2 “Ombwiti ya yile kOwambo”⁴⁸

Early on in my fieldwork I asked my research participants, “when we talk of cultural identity and rural-urban migration, what comes to your mind first”? Most of them highlighted the “danger” of becoming *ombwiti*. They emphasized that when one is called *ombwiti*, your loyalty to “Owambo culture” is questioned. *Ombwiti* is a derogative term referring to Owambo in urban areas who do not maintain connections with their “homes”. It is a negative connotation that implies that one is like weeds in the millet – i.e. not a real Owambo. If migrants are referred to as *oombwiti*, their stay in town becomes questionable, worthless and pointless. This view seems to suggest a resilient pride in the culture and lifestyle of the Owambo. In chapter three, I showed how Heita was referring to one of his friends, whom he regarded as an *ombwiti*, in rather disparaging terms. He emphasized the number of years that his friend has been living in Windhoek without going home, the lifestyle his friend lives in Windhoek and the people that he hangs out with. According to Heita, his friend had been in Windhoek for four years and had never gone back home, although he has the means to do that because he has a good job and a good salary. Heita indicated that his friend did not even go home when his cousin passed away in 2007. He does not send money home, even in difficult times. His family complains because he has children at home, but do not support them. He does not even have a hut of his own in his parents’ homestead, and they wonder where he would sleep when he decides to come home one day. In a disapproving manner, Heita further indicated that his friend only hangs out with Damaras and Zimbabweans – “*his girlfriend is even a Damara*”, said Heita. Heita argued that these are signs of *ombwitness*. Heita then went on to describe how his friend had become *ombwiti* because he wears earrings and likes to speak Afrikaans only. Heita stated that he likes people who “keep to their culture”. He pointed out that he and his other friends like going to the open market (locally known as *omatata*) to buy *oshikundu* (non-alcoholic Owambo brew), *okapana* (grilled meat) and other foods which he regards as “traditional”.

⁴⁸ Ombwiti went to Owambo.

Other young people I worked with in Babilon also told me similar stories. They all concurred on the same aspects by which they measure one's level of *ombwiti-ness*. The main aspect however, as my friends made clear, was how often one returns to Ovamboland and whether during their stay in the city, they have made a difference at "home" – for instance building a brick house within their parents homesteads or supporting their parents financially. Another important aspect highlighted was how the migrant lived his/her life in the city. Men wearing earrings were specifically singled out as a style linked to *ombwiti-ness*, as was wearing mini-skirts in the case of female migrants. These are styles that young people I have worked with indicated that they would be hesitant to apply in Ovamboland arguing, that they will not be welcomed. If I am to relate these to Philip Mayer's (1961) terms this distinction would be between "country-rooted migrants" and "town-rooted migrants". Country-rooted migrants continued to lay their main emphasis on the people in the village and on their relatedness to them, even if they can only keep up these relations in absentia. On the other hand, town-rooted migrants mainly emphasized people and relations in town. The town-rooted no longer accept or recognize the old country-located part of their networks. Mayer further related the above distinctions to dependents and properties that migrants might have or not have in the rural areas. Migrants with dependents owning properties in the country were giving a *prima facie* indication of county-rootedness, he argued. Another aspect that Mayer identified was the frequency with which the migrant visits the village, in Mayer's terms the regularity of visit (Mayer 1961:9). Following Mayer, migrants who regularly visit the country and continue in full interaction with kin, neighbours or other associates there, and those who claim to have their "best friends" or lovers there, were also indicating country-rootedness.

My research indicated that this rigid distinction is certainly not true in the case of the migrants in Babilon. The examples of young people who are said to have become *oombwiti* are in their mid 20s; they do not have acquired access arable land in Ovamboland, some have no children or lovers in Ovamboland.

A dimension which was interesting for me was however the distinction of one's *ombwitiness* based on the people that one associates with while in the city. The young

people I worked with gave examples of “*he likes hanging out with Damaras or his girlfriend is a Damara*”. These give a sense of distinctions based on “us and them” – which are ethnically defined. In her study on rethinking masculinities in northern Namibia, Becker (2005) findings show how the “boys” and “guys” (as they called themselves) felt that it was acceptable for an unmarried urban youth to have temporary sexual relationships with “girls” from other cultural and racial backgrounds, but that he should return to Owambo women for marriage. Marriages with Damara⁴⁹ women were however ruled out with particular emphasis. Like the young people that I worked with in Babilon, Becker’s participants used negative examples of the supposed Damara immorality to draw an opposition, idealized image of the Owambo family. The recurrent tendency of the young people that I worked with to define their friends’ level of *ombwiti-ness* by referring to the people they associate with, emphasizes the role of ethnicity in the construction of identity while in the urban context.

6.3 Exploration of “home”

Walking around the streets of Babilon showed me that migrants have and are increasingly stamping their presence onto the city not only in social terms but in physical terms as well. During my first visit to Babilon, I was struck by the realization as to what extent rural-urban migrants identify themselves with their rural origins. I noticed this by observing the names written on the *kabashus*. I came across many *kabashus* which are inscribed with names of villages in Ovamboland: *Eenhana, Okongo, Onaanda, Epoko, Oshuuli, Oshuulula, Okatyali, Omutsegonime, Onhelelwa*⁵⁰ etc. Evelina with whom I was walking around at the time explained that these are the names of villages in Owambo where the owners of the *kabashus* are from. She emphasized that this is the way people associate with the places where they come from. She argued that it shows that people are proud of where they come from. My discussion with Evelina is related to another occasion during one of my visits to Babilon. Evelina and I went to fetch water from a

⁴⁹ The Damaras are a black, Khoi-speaking people.

⁵⁰ These are all names of villages in Owambo where the respective migrants come from.

collective water point. At the water point we found a young man in his mid-twenties also fetching water. When we greeted, he asked me my name and where I come from. I told him my name and that I came from Wanaheda. He replied that he knew I was from somewhere in Windhoek but what he wanted to know was where I came from in Owambo. I asked him why that had to be my first point of reference. He said “*because Owambo is your first point of reference, it is for everyone, me too*”. He further emphasized that if I tell him that I am from Wanaheda, it does not tell him much about me, even if I was born in Windhoek. Our discussion with this young man resembled many others that I had with other young people whose reference to “home” meant Owambo – the first reference point.

In line with other anthropological studies (e.g. Bank 2002, Ferguson 1999), I found a tendency of urban residents to remain connected to their rural “homes”, and to actively invoke rural identities in the city. In his study on the Zambian Copperbelt, Ferguson (1999) argued that Zambia failed to produce the conditions necessary for the emergence of a large and stable working class, which resulted in a growing tendency for urban residents to emphasize rural identities in the urban context. He further argued that this tendency signified rural identification and attachment. It also signified migrant’s readiness to accept responsibility for rural kin and allies and the willingness to return to a rural “home”, without necessarily implying the importation of rural cultural forms or “traditions” into the city. Working with young people in Babilon, I argue that they reproduce their identity through a process of identification as a kind of “rear projection”. It is a context-dependent and time-delayed process, where a move in time and space generates a shift of context in terms of “sets of relations and modes of consciousness” (Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) cited in Eriksen 1993:157). Similarly, Papastergiadis (2000) argued that “identity is neither in the interior space of already known experience nor doomed to the exteriority of an experiment with the unknown. Cultural identity is thus never confined to a space of an enclosed segment, nor is it projected onto an open plane, but it is formed through the practice of bridging both the differences and similarities between the self and the other”, (cited in Bank 2002:27).

6.4 The reproduction of the rural in the urban

6.4.1 Commercialization of “traditional food”

Frayne (2007) noted that migrants survive in the city in part because of food they receive from the rural areas. These range from cultivated foods, through to wild foods, meat, poultry and fish. The young people that I worked with indicated that they receive food from Owambo. Evelina for instance said she receives *mahangu* (*pearl millet*) that she uses to cook at home and make *oshikundu* (Owambo traditional brew) that she sells to people in Babilon. She sells a one-litre jug for N\$ 1.50 and makes about N\$ 15.00 a day which seems little but she emphasized that from the profit she makes she can at least buy bread everyday. She also receives mopane worms and *eembe* that she sells in Babilon (see chapter three). Information about the availability of mopane worms or *eembe* from Evelina’s place is spread by word of mouth through a network of friends within Babilon. She does not go to the open market (*omatala*) to sell but she operates from her *kabashu*.

My question was whether there is more to the business in “traditional food” than the reasoning of “survival strategy” which is what Frayne (2007) implies. For those selling the foods in town, it might be for economic reasons. For the buyers however, it is not simply about nutrition and everyday sustenance. Food seems to symbolize “culture” as Heita emphasized that, “*I don’t like people that abandon their culture. As for me, I like buying oshikundu, omagungu and other traditional food from home. I miss them sometimes and I just have to go all the way to look for them.*” Another young man that I met at Heita’s *kabashu* was concerned of the decreasing value that people put on “culture” and the transformations in the Owambo society, which he said that he had witnessed over the past few years. He stated that some years ago, going home in summer was a “culture”. In addition to the Christmas festive season, going home during the weekend of Independence Day (21 March) and Easter was very much popular. He associated this period with the foods which become available in the rural north during later summer, such as beans, cultured milk, mopane worms and others. He argued that the food that once formed the core value of the Owambo people are nowadays being commercialized in Windhoek. As a result most people do not go “home” during that time anymore, breaking that “culture”. This young however iterated that, when people

appreciate their “traditional food” and buy things from “home”, this is also one of the ways to show that they do not become *oombwiti*.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that many people in Babilon have small gardens in their backyards (see Picture 3 below); I wondered what this meant to the migrants. These little plots are just too small to meet the food needs of a family – three stalks of *mahangu* in a garden, for instance, will not make any difference. My research participants told me that their little gardens were partly aimed to complement food for the house but also a way of retaining to their “culture” – “*we are just practicing what we do at home*”.



Picture 4: This picture shows little gardens at the backyard of *kabashus* of migrants in Babilon

I do not dispute the fact that urban agriculture does contribute to the level of food security in the city. On average, urban agriculture produce saves household approximately N\$60 per month in groceries that they would otherwise have to purchase from retail outlets (Frayne 2007). Rather, I relate my questions and findings above to the concept of “localism” by James Ferguson. In his study on the Zambian Copperbelt, Ferguson (1999) noted a tendency he calls a form of localism. In the urban context, localism should be seen as a cultural style or a disposition that signifies rural identification and attachment. I am also reminded of Van Binsbergen (1997) who termed such practices the “virtualization” of the village in the urban, where it serves as a trope allowing disaffected urbanites an anchor of meaning and identity. I argue that rural-urban migrants grow and consume these foods as a part of their strategy to “keep their culture”. I suggest that the distinction between the rural and urban in social sphere is fading away. The rural is

present in the reality of urban life or as Erman (1998) argued, we can see the “protrusion of the village life in the city”. It does so in a very visible material way. As my research participants described, if a friend went to Owambo, when they come back people will be asking what he brought along. It depends on the season, but in the summer they will be asking whether their friend brought along *eembe (wild almond), cultured milk, fresh beans etc.*

The city itself is also present in the reality of rural life as much as the village is present on the fringe of the city. It does so in a very visible material way (which is making a difference at home through mobility), but also in an imaginary manner and often through the physical absence of the migrants. In my discussion with Heita, he described the presence of the urban in the rural, particularly during the Christmas festive season: “*if you come to our village in December, you will smell the presence of uushimba (referring to the towns in the south and central Namibia), everyone is home for Christmas, bringing with them a lot that is associated with uushimba– sweets being the common one*”. Heita’s description is related to a saying among the Owambo people that emphasize this “smell” of *uushimba* or the urban in the rural - “*ngele omunamoonda eyapo kehe ondjuhwa otayi tondoka nenkandjangali lyayo*” which means “when a migrant is visiting home, there are plenty of goods for everyone”.

6.4.2 “My culture is my culture”

My research participants regularly indicated that there are things that they do in Babilon that they would not be able to do back in Owambo. They highlighted that in Babilon they are mixing with people from different backgrounds like Herero, Damara, Kavango, even foreigners from Zimbabwe. People from a range of cultural backgrounds make up the social space of Babilon – “*we all bring in our cultural practices*”, as Heita puts it in one of our discussions”. He gave an example that “*when you come to my house and in our culture it says you should not go inside the house with your shoes on, you ought to abide to that rule. You see culture is about respect also. But most importantly it is about give and take, there are some things that cannot fit in the urban context, so one has to filter*”. In other discussions that I had with young people in Babilon, they argued that “filtering”

the cultural practices that are suitable for the city is something that they live with in their everyday life as migrants. They gave an example that killing a dog in the city is illegal and slaughtering one as a meal for the day can land you in trouble, as it was the case recently with a woman who slaughtered her dog and found herself in trouble with the City of Windhoek's officials. In these discussions, my research participants emphasized that "*my culture is my culture*", but in the city, certain cultural practices are not possible.

When they visit the rural areas, my research participants indicated that they have to try to fit in again. They have to "filter" and find out what of their urban lifestyles context fit in the rural context. This is the case especially for most of my female research participants. Evelina for instance indicated that she likes to wear mini-skirts in Babilon, but cannot to do that in Owambo; she can go to bars and come back home whatever time of the night she wants to while in Windhoek but that will not be possible at "home". *If my uncle is coming to visit me from Owambo, I will make sure that I do not wear mini-skirts or other sexually revealing clothes*", she said. In Owambo, it is generally expected that women are responsible for preparing meals, this is still largely practiced in the urban context. However, in the urban context men cook too – as one of the Heita's friends puts it that his sisters are not in Windhoek and he does not have a girlfriend so he cooks for himself but when he goes back home, things go back to "normal", the expected gender divisions of labour.

This chapter shows that the commitments many migrants have to their "homes" in Owambo do not necessarily suggest that they remain peasants at heart nor that they do not become urbanites. This is in contrast some classic studies such as that of Mayer (1961). Although they identify themselves largely in rural terms and hold rural values, they have shown that they have varying degrees of awareness of conventions of behaviour and ways of doing things in the city. Practicing urban patterns of behaviour does not mean forgetting how things were done at home, my research participants reminded me time and again. Migrants will continue to behave in urban or rural ways as the situation demands (Erman 1998). I therefore conclude in this chapter that, rural-urban migrants may carry both their rural and urban identities at the same time or develop a synthesis of the two. In the following chapter, I explore how young migrants transcend

their ethnic identifications through engaging in an emerging Namibian youth culture, which cuts across rural-urban, ethnic, and socio-economic divides.



Chapter Seven: The Emergence of a Namibian Youth Culture

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on what I call youth culture in the making in Namibia. I explore the interactions between the youth of Babilon and youth from other parts of Windhoek as well as young people who live in the rural areas. I ask questions about how youth culture is articulated in Namibia, how its performed, who the different actors are and how young people appropriate youth culture. The subject matter of this chapter (youth culture) was not part of the initial research design; however, it was an interesting issue that unfolded in the process of my research as I noticed the importance of contemporary music, the associated material culture (clothing etc.) and cellphones for the young migrants with whom I worked in Babilon. As I present the current trends of youth culture in the making in Namibia, I raise questions that I intend to explore in detail in future research in order to understand this social phenomenon.

7.2 Putting youth culture in context

It is well documented that in the rapidly changing urban environment young people learn much about what to expect and how to behave from their peers and increasingly from mass media (UNFPA 2007). This has led to the creation of youth culture, which is fluid in nature and serves as a reference point for many young people in the development of their identities. I explore the most important trends of youth culture, how youth culture is constructed and practiced in the urban setting of Windhoek as a social space. But before I go to the tenets of my discussions, I briefly explore the concept of youth culture. I am more interested in the aspects of youth culture, how youth culture is shaped and expressed in Namibia rather than a definition *per se*. Just like other social concepts such as poverty, identity, exclusion etc., youth culture/identity is a context-bound relational concept. There is no universal definition of it, therefore, I rather focus on its aspects relative to the Namibian context.

Youth culture in Namibia both urban and rural, is shaped by and expressed to a large extent through what is generally referred to as local music. I say youth culture in Namibia rather than Windhoek because youth culture is not limited to urban youth only. One can go to rural areas and observe similar trends of expression of youth culture. Therefore, this chapter is not suggesting that there is a rural-urban divide in youth culture. In Namibia young people have adopted a saying that “*local is lekker*” or local is better. Kwaito, hip-hop, kwiku (a combination of Kwaito and hip-hop) and Afro-pop are terms used locally to categorize music genres by local artists in Namibia. The discussion focuses on two leading kwaito artists. It is not the aim of this chapter to provide detailed textual readings of musical lyrics⁵¹ but rather to look at how local music is portrayed by the media and how it is appropriated by young people in search of new identities. Interestingly, most of the upcoming Namibian artists are also migrants from rural Namibia who now live in Windhoek and have gone through what most of the young people that I worked with go through in the urban setting. It is argued here that it is through these experiences that they find their own forms of expressions – through music and clothing. The questions guiding my discussions are: How do these expressions influence other young people in the country? How are these expressions appropriated by other young people? What role do these expressions play in the shaping of youth culture in general? Following the discussion of music, I will explore another major aspect of contemporary Namibian youth culture, namely cellphones (as mobile phones are generally referred to in Southern Africa). I ask what roles mobile phones play in the expressions of youth culture. What other roles do mobile phones play in the Namibian society, particularly among the youth?

7.3 Youth culture – local music and the task of identification

On a Saturday afternoon, the 12th of April 2008 I was sitting at Heita’s *kabashu*. There were four other customers, all young men sitting outside the *kabashu* drinking *otombo*. Heita was playing local music on his radio. He was playing mostly The Dogg’s⁵² music. I

⁵¹ To understand the textual readings of the lyrics, it will require an in-depth study just focusing on that.

⁵² The Dogg is one of the local artists.

spent about three hours with them, during which I brought up a discussion on the growing local music industry. I asked the young men who their favourite local musicians were. One of them said, I am “*Omshasho for life*”, (The Dogg’s group) and the other three said “*GMP till I die*” (Gazza’s group). An argument about which of the two artists is “best” and who is receiving most support among the youth soon erupted between the young men. The argument went on for about thirty minutes. During that time, they were taking turns in playing music by the two artists and rating who is “best” and who is not. I asked the young man who was supporting The Dogg as to why he thinks The Dogg was better than Gazza and his answer was “*Omshasho is the culture, I have to keep the culture. He is the best artist in Namibia, he has won most awards and he sings well – Mshasho for life, even a two year old child will tell you that*”. I also asked the other three young men why they supported Gazza. The answer was “*GMP till I die. Gazza’s music tells the reality, the hard life that we as young people are facing, it is our culture. 467 represent*”. Heita kept quite and was just listening to our discussion. He later commented that, “*the distinction between The Dogg and Gazza is like uukomunisi and uudemocracy (communism and democracy), it is like ukriste and uumuslim (Christianity and Muslim), George Bush and Osama Bin Laden; and to move closer to home the distinction between SWAPO and RDP. His astounding comparisons clearly show how deeply entrenched the two “cultures” are in the Namibian youth culture. Walking around Babilon, it was apparent that it is not only through listening to music that young people appropriated the two “cultures”. One sees writings on kabashus all over Babilon, which advertise that the occupants subscribe to that respective “culture”. This is also evident in the clothing they prefer.*

This vignette opens up my discussion of local music as an aspect of youth culture in Namibia. I concentrate on the two leading Namibian Kwaito artists “The Dogg and Gazza⁵³” and how their music is shaping youth culture and identity in Namibia. Being not only a young Namibian but also an ardent supporter of one of the two artists myself, I will try to present the findings with as little bias as I can manage. The two artists have

⁵³ The Dogg and Gazza are stage names, their real names which are rarely used are Marti Morocky and Lazarus Shiimi respectively.

created passionately-followed “cultures or ideologies” among the youth in Namibia. On the one hand, there is an ideology of “*mshasho*” or “*mshashoism*” representing the music by The Dogg and on the other hand, there is an ideology of “*GMP*”⁵⁴, representing the music by GAZZA. Heita puts it that nowadays when one talks of Namibian music; the first thing that comes to mind is *mshasho and GMP*⁵⁵. On the social networking site (Facebook), a fan describes *mshashoism* as a culture, a way of living, a unique way of doing things. Talking to adherents of this music ideology, both in Owambo and Windhoek with youngsters of all social backgrounds, I learnt that people who follow this culture like it because they feel it allows them do what ever they want to do, at any place anytime given. If they feel like saying something they will, they would even tie a *mshasho* towel around their waist and go into town (Windhoek Central Business District) if and when they feel like doing so. The name *mshasho* is derived from the record label of the same name, which is considered by its fans to be the “best” record label because not only does it produce music but it also has a clothing line which is rated the “best” in the country and it has more awards than any other label” (this was said by a fan of *mshasho* on the social networking site Facebook). On the other side, with crafty words, rested in the pavements of township life, is *GMP* who methodically brings to life the stories of the streets by painting real life images with his words and tying those stories to the unseen hope and fulfilled dreams for all to see. This is how my friends (and I admit myself) see our favourite GMP. This is reflected in the titles of his albums *Tanauka*⁵⁶, *Zula to Survive*⁵⁷, *Stof-lap-Chikapute*⁵⁸, and *467/GMP Till I die* which portray social issues in contemporary Namibia.

⁵⁴ Gazza Music Productions

⁵⁵ In actual fact, *mshasho and GMP* are just record labels but out there among the youth, there is more to them than just record labels.

⁵⁶ Turn around

⁵⁷ Struggle to Survive

⁵⁸ Stof-Lap is a symbol of new beginnings and Chikapute is a street term referring to those who have nothing, so the title Stof Lap Chikapute defines a nobody starting from nothing.

Both artists have clothing lines in form of t-shirts, caps, bracelets, jerseys, key holders, to mention but a few, which exist in different colours, prints and designs such as *Mshasho unlimited*, *Mshasho-u cant ignore*, *Mshasho 3545*, *Mshasho for The Dogg* and *GMP*, *Gazza*, *467*, *GMP for life* for Gazza. Everywhere in the country, in the city, in small towns and even deep in the rural areas, you will see young people wearing caps, t-shirts and sporting towels representing the artists they support. In our discussion, Evelina rightly puts it that, being the two biggest and most supported “cultures” in the country, it is IMPOSSIBLE not to see Mshasho or GMP merchandise in the streets of Windhoek on any given day.

The other way in which local music is appropriated by the youth and is playing a great role in their daily lives is through mobile phones. Virtually or all young people I have worked with in Babilon have mobile phones with ring tones of Gazza, The Dogg or other local artists⁵⁹. What I have found about contemporary Namibian youth cultures reminds me of Becker and Dastile’s (2008) article on African-language hip-hop in Philippi township in Cape Town. The protagonists of youth culture through local music in Namibia have appropriated local music in form of different genres kwaito, hip-hop, kwiku etc. in their quest for alternative and fluid youth identities and in their efforts to cope with the challenging modernities in contemporary Namibia.

I would like to link the findings presented above to the discussions in the urban cultural anthropology of the 1990s, with reference to what Ferguson (1999) calls forms of localisms- the attraction among urbanites to Western commodities and cosmopolitan lifestyles. Important questions raised included whether the appropriation of such styles reflects an acceptance of western lifestyles, or whether they are not better understood as a form of resistance to domination (cited in Bank 2002). When one thinks of urban youth culture, one thinks of music. Urban areas are places where young people find their own forms of expression, which often involve rhythm. I find Mans’ (2002) deliberations on constructing cultural identities in contemporary musical tradition as strategies of survival

⁵⁹ (please see the discussion on youth culture and mobile phones below for more discussions on how mobile phones play a role in young people’s lives)

and change useful for my discussion here. She argued that music is something people do and it is always informed by the social context from which a person emerges. Until a few years ago, Namibians listened to American Country and Western music with the regional favourites being Lucky Dube, Brenda Fassie, Arthor Mafokate, Mandoza and others South African musicians. This trend has changed tremendously. I argue that there is some sort of renaissance of nationalist youth culture that started roughly about eight years ago. Nowadays, most young people listen to Namibian produced music. Prominent popular styles of music in Namibia include hip-hop music, R&B, and the South African style of kwaito. Does the recent popularity of local music constitute a trend among the Namibian youth to resist a domination of lifestyles which have been generated elsewhere? To ascertain whether this is indeed the fact, it needs further in-depth studies. However, what is clear without any doubt is that this trend shows that young people are innovators and constructors of their own culture rather than mere imitators (Bank 2002). Nevertheless, this does not imply that “foreign” music tastes are completely erased from local consumption. Performances from world renowned artists are being adapted and integrated by the local artists. This reminds us that, we are not on an island but part of the growing “global cultural movement” (to borrow Becker and Dastile’s (2008) term) that is forged to fit local situation.

This is evidenced in the way that Namibian local artists are putting the Namibian name on the map of African music by undertaking tours to other African countries to showcase their music. As a result their works are nominated for International Music Awards such as Channel O Annual Music Videos Awards. Channel O Annual Music Videos Awards recognizes and celebrates the success of African artists. Each year it has a different theme, the theme for 2008 is “*Uniting Africa through Music*”. This theme raises questions, such as: what does this theme entail? Is there more to it than its present literal meaning? It appears to be carrying a message of *Africa-ness* or an attempt to create an African identity through African music; and an attempt to unite Africans through music. But, the question is whether it does also appear to carry a connotation of “us” and “them”. I do not have enough data at this moment to draw any conclusion, nonetheless, this apparent opposition appears to affect and influence Namibia local music.

This year (2008) alone, there are five Namibian local artists' who have been nominated for the international African awards of which The Dogg is one. What interests me here is how Namibian youth are participating in this process. Short text messages (well known as sms) are circulating where people can cast their vote for the nominated local artists; in one of the calls it says "to vote for The Dogg, sms code 7E or go to the Channel O website www.channelo.co.za and let's make it happen - lets make Namibia proud" (this was also said by a fan on Facebook). While the theme is "uniting Africa through music", artists seem to enter the competitions with the aim of taking or claiming their respective country's stakes. This explains the "let's make Namibia proud" saying. In addition to pan-African competitions, similar events are organised on a national level. The Sanlam-NBC Music Awards provide a platform for local musicians to showcase their talent. Organised annually, the awards aim to celebrate Namibian musical talent whilst the artists will be accorded the opportunity to make their own history and leave an indelible mark on the music scene. It is most interesting to see how young people even those without access to computers and internet facilities like my friends in Babilon participate in these prestigious national and regional events. It is the interplay and connection between this process and the appropriation of this culture that interest me, in order to shed another light on the lives of the migrants in this informal settlement on the fringe of the city.

Apart from being music artists, local musicians also play a role in wider society. The Kwaito artist GAZZA for instance, is a Goodwill Ambassador officially appointed by the Namibian Ministry of Education as well as an Ambassador for Team Namibia, an initiative aimed at promoting the use or consumption of Namibian produced products, including music. The Namibian branch of First National Bank (FNB), one of South Africa's major banks, has also appointed GAZZA as a Youth Product Ambassador in order to use his status as a much beloved, respected and award winning artist to promote FNB's newly launched banking products, namely, Future Forward and Future Save aimed at the youth market. It remains to be seen whether Namibian musicians can also play a major role in local and international HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. Headlines in the local newspapers read "*Namibian musicians double as local and global AIDS*

awareness advocates. The article further reads that “*their roots may be in Namibia, but a group of local musicians are spreading the message of HIV/AIDS awareness across the globe on a world tour that spans three continents*” (The Namibian 29 February 2008, 1 August 2008). Namibian musicians are fighting social evils through entertainment; they are role models for many young people and many young people identify themselves with them.

7.4 Youth culture – mobile phones

In spite of the pervasive poverty, in which most of the young people in Babilon live, everyone (or almost everyone) owned a cell phone, which many indeed regarded as their most prized possession. Cell phones play a major role in the lives of my friends in Babilon. They all spend much of the little earnings they make on airtime and you regularly see in the settlement young people busy with their cell phones. They send sms's and make calls to stay in touch with their peers in the city and with their family and friends back home. While I was doing my fieldwork, an interesting event took place in Namibia. It was Mobile Telecommunications Ltd's (MTC)⁶⁰ 13th birthday in April 2008. MTC ran a nationwide advertisement on Thursday (24 April 2008) in which it promoted its 13th birthday anniversary. As an appetizer, it planned to sell 13 phones (Nokia 3500) to the first 13 customers who would pass through their doors at all MTC outlets countrywide for a mere N\$13 on the Friday the 25th of April 2008. The normal price for these fashionable cellphones was N\$ 1500.00 at the time. At 5 a.m. of that Friday I went to mobile phone outlets around Windhoek in an attempt to be also one of the 13 people to get such a fabulous cell phone at that cheap price. It was interesting to see the number of people that turned up – it was chaos, drama, pushing and shoving as people mostly young people tried to take advantage of this offer. It was the same situation in other parts of the country, where people reported that queues had formed as early as midnight with people hoping to cash in on MTC's anniversary promotion. The newspaper headlines that Friday morning read: *Chaos ensues as people rush for cheap phones* (The Namibia 28th April

⁶⁰ Namibia's mobile phone services operator

2008). Young people that I worked with in Babilon walked for about 15km to the city centre hoping to be among the first 13 people, however most of them where not lucky to get any. I have heard people talking of a young man who was lucky to get one of these phones. However, I was not able to talk to him. This event shows how influential cell phones have become important possessions of people – to such an extent that people would sleep overnight at a mobile outlet.

Another interesting case which shows how influential cellphones have become to people in Namibia happened in May/June 2008 during my fieldwork. Suddenly, rumours started circulating in the country, claiming that anyone who answered calls on the cell phones originating from numbers ending with 777 or 999 risked death, five people had already died, it was said. People phoned and sent text messages to friends and family members warning them of the killer numbers. I myself received warnings even through sms and email. Two weeks later, these rumours had faded. I present this case to confirm how information technologies - mobile phones in this case have become influential in the everyday lives of the Namibian people, especially the youth. Considering the factor of limited accessibility to technologies such as cable television, computers and internet, mobile phones are the technological innovation which is most influential to youth culture and lifestyle in Namibia.

A local newspaper, New Era (7 January 2008) reported an estimated number of 800,000 mobile phone users in Namibia a country of just over 1.8 million people babies included. However, it is important to note here that most mobile phones are still used primarily for voice and text communications. What I am interested is however, how young people in Namibia appropriate these. For many years, there was just one mobile operator in Namibia, MTC. Most recently, the introduction of a new mobile operator Cell One has increased the rate of cell phone ownership and usage. The prices of cell phones as well as SIM cards (Subscriber Identity Module) have been reduced dramatically in the past two or three years. Young people are taking full advantage of the offerings of services such free as sms, free calls as part of companies' marketing strategies. Young Namibians have generated their own lexicon of abbreviations, an economy of language that has become part of Namibia's youth culture spanning across the boundaries of ethnic cultures and

socio-economic class. It was astonishing to see during my fieldwork in Babilon that the relatively low educated young migrants made use of cell phones technology just like my own circle of friends who have been educated at universities in Namibia and South Africa.

Mobile phones have changed the way young people relate to one another irrespective of their social backgrounds. They have introduced and spread globalized aspirations and patterns of consumption. In this digital age, young people are utilizing and appropriating multiple ways using a wide range of technologies in the making of youth culture. Other than being simply a means of facilitating communication and exchange of information, Amupolo and Tyson (2008) have shown in their Namibian research that mobile phones are also used as fashion accessories and markers of social status. As several of the young people in Babilon explained, if you look at the youth and their preferred styles, you would have found global brand clothes such as Nike, Filla, Reebok shoes or tops, or a cap for the past few years. Nowadays, responses will definitely include mobile phones as well. Most of them indicated that a branded cell phone ownership is a style statement as well as a status symbol i.e. if you have a “better” phone, you are considered to be “better”. As I already mentioned in the last section, mobile phones are also used in the transfer of local songs from one phone to another and thus enhance the promotion of the new Namibia youth culture.

In the context of rural-urban migration, the advent of mobile phones has revolutionalized communication between families and friends separated by long geographical distances. However, what is more interesting to explore is, what do young people do with their mobile phones and how youth culture is shaped, configured and reconfigured via mobile phones and what threats if any, do mobile phones and the eruption of popular Namibian music pose threat to the dominant understanding of “culture”. Based on the findings presented above, I argue that youth culture is in the making in Namibia. Young people are presented with these alternative identities which they largely identify themselves with. However, for a detailed understanding of youth culture, further research directly focused on this is needed. At this point, it is clear however that the emergence of a 21st century Namibian youth culture, contests the old notions, which see “culture” as the

possession of “traditional” ethnic communities. My research in Babilon and observations in Owambo also show that the new youth culture cuts across the rural-urban divide, as well as across socio-economic and educational status. In the final concluding chapter I will link these significant observations with the findings that I presented in the previous chapters.



Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This thesis explores the shifting cultural identities of young Owambo migrants living in Babilon, an informal settlement on the outskirts of Windhoek, Namibia. Through an investigation of their social, cultural and economic lives, I show how these young people invoke their Owambo-ness, but how they also transcend their ethnic identifications through engaging in an emerging Namibian youth culture, which cuts across rural-urban, ethnic, and socio-economic divides.

I explored the replication or construction of “Owambo-ness” in Babilon or what Binsbergen (1997) termed as “virtualization” of the village in the urban. Using examples of “traditional food” and small scale agriculture, I conclude that young migrants identify themselves with their rural homes, and retain their rural values and practices to a large extent. Classic urban anthropologists such as Mayer (1961) and others would have understood and defined this tendency to refer to “tribesmen” in town. However, I conclude in line with Erman (1998) that the commitment many migrants have to their rural communities of origin and their identification with what is regarded rural may be taken to suggest that they remain rural at heart, that they do not become urbanites. Though migrants retain rural modes of behaviour and frequently hold rural values, they also have varying degrees of familiarity with urban conventions of behaviour and ways of thinking. Adopting urban patterns of behaviour does not mean forgetting how things were done at home – they are not “townsman” as this tendency would have been understood in the classic studies. Migrants will continue to behave in urban or rural ways as the situation demands. They will identify concurrently with the urban and the rural and develop a synthesis of both.

Young migrants’ commitment to their rural home is a way to avoid being referred to as *oombwiti*. While the frequency with which they visit their rural home and the “development” they have brought forward in their rural home is used to measure one’s level of *ombwiti-ness*, my findings reveal that lifestyles which migrants follow while in

the city are also used in determining one's extent of *ombwiti-ness*. My findings indicate that ethnicity plays a role in defining one's *ombwiti-ness*. Examples of migrant men in relationships with women from other ethnic groups were singled out. These distinctions give a sense of differentiations between "us and them" – distinctions which are ethnically defined. Therefore, I conclude in line with Bank (2002:27) that identity is formed through the practice of bridging both the difference and similarities between the "self and the other".

I show how young people transcend their ethnic identification through engaging in an emerging Namibian youth culture, which cut across rural-urban, ethnic, and socio-economic divides. While they are stamping "*Owambo-ness*" in the urban, young people are increasingly appropriating cosmopolitan lifestyles (see also Becker 2008). Highlighting the roles of local music, branded clothing and the usage of mobile phones – I conclude in this thesis that young Namibians are in the process of innovating and constructing their own culture, a culture that lives in parallel with the dominant "culture"; a culture that is not defined by ethnic boundaries or by social class, economic background, but most importantly a culture that cuts across the boundaries between the rural and the urban. The most important trends of youth culture in Namibia according to the present research are articulated through music, fashion, usage of communication technologies. I argued that independence has led to a renaissance of nationalist youth culture – most young people seem to listen to Namibia music now. In the 1990 young people listened to US Country and Western music with the 'local' or regional favourites being Lucky Dube and Brenda Fassie, but that trend has changed.

What remains challenging is how we can explain the forms of *Owambo-ness*; the increasing use of micro technologies (cell phones) and the increasing forms of popular youth culture which my research has showed to co-exist? How can we explain the tendency of differentiating some social relations between the "self and other" based on ethnicity ("dominant cultures") while on the other hand, within the emerging Namibian youth culture ethnicity do not matter? In this context, I conclude by highlighting the importance of understanding identity formation as a relational process, an ongoing cultural dialogue between spaces of representation and representation of space (Bank

2002). Findings of this research especially the emergence of the Namibian youth culture are sufficiently challenging to suggest important in-depth anthropological research directions. Can the emergence of the Namibian youth culture be better understood as a form resistance to domination? I call it youth culture in the making in Namibia, but what is its position in relation to the dominant discourse understanding of “culture”? Young people that I worked with see “culture” as an aspect defined by ethnic boundaries “references have been made for instance *“in the Owambo culture, we do things this way, that’s not our culture or in our culture we don’t do that”* – what is the position of the “youth culture” in the context where “culture” is supposedly ethnically understood? How is this development influenced by the global trends and how does it influence the growing global trend of “youth culture”? How is gender played in this trend? It will be interesting to know what young people are singing about by analyzing their lyrical contents. I intend to explore this further in my future doctoral research.



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