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# “A Town is Just a Town”: Poverty and Social Relations of Migration in Namibia

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## Résumé

*Les théories conventionnelles de migration rurale-urbaine se concentrent sur les conditions structurelles et les opportunités économiques à la disposition des migrants individuels, pour expliquer pourquoi les gens vont vers les villes. Une restructuration plus récente et des théories tenant compte des sexes en ont élargi la portée, mais en ont retenu le principe fondamental que les facteurs de “force” [push] et d’“attraction” [pull] conduisent à des mouvements de populations soit définitifs soit oscillatoires entre la ville et la campagne. Pourtant, le processus actuel de l’urbanisation de la pauvreté en Afrique – plus de la moitié des pauvres du continent vivra bientôt dans les petites et grandes villes – signifie que les facteurs d’attraction traditionnels tels que l’emploi, le revenu, l’accès aux services sociaux et une vie urbaine intéressante, ont perdu de leur validité. Malgré le danger de finir chômeurs dans les quartiers insalubres qui s’étalent de plus en plus, les gens de la campagne continuent d’émigrer dans les centres urbains. Pour ce qui est de la Namibie et des études de cas sur les relations sociales de la migration, cet article affirme que la migration vers la petite ou la grande ville devrait être considérée comme un des éléments d’une stratégie complexe d’adaptation impliquant les unités sociales à la fois urbaines et rurales. Si ce point de vue a été depuis longtemps avancé dans l’anthropologie de la migration, on n’a pas accordé assez d’importance au rôle de la seule pauvreté. Les migrants les plus pauvres sont dans l’impossibilité de maintenir des liens avec leurs régions rurales d’origine, ce qui contribue à leur marginalisation et à leur appauvrissement.*

## Introduction

Southern Africa is currently the most urbanised region in sub-Saharan Africa, with forty-eight percent of its population living in cities and towns. With the current urban growth rate, sixty percent of the population will live in urban areas by 2025 (United Nations

2000). Keeping pace has been a rising level of urban poverty, as evidenced by the sprawling informal settlements in most towns and cities (UNCHS 1996), often attributed to urban population growth, the crisis of unemployment, and the scale of housing and environmental problems. More than fifty percent of the poor in Southern Africa are expected to live in towns and cities by 2025 (Kamete, Tostensen and Tvedten 2001).

Despite this urbanisation of poverty, and the dismal future awaiting the majority of town dwellers in Southern Africa, urbanisation rates have not slowed down. The annual growth rate in the region for the period 2000-10 has been projected at 3.2 percent (United Nations 2000). Yet analyses of migration continue to focus on structural causes or individual migrants making rational economic choices between "push" and "pull" factors (Gugler 1997; de Haan 1999). Clearly, such economic theories cannot adequately explain continued urbanisation in the face of growing urban poverty.

Based on field research in Namibia — which is among the least urbanised countries in the region, albeit with one of the highest annual urban population growth rates — this article will argue that urban migration should be seen as part of a complex coping strategy involving both rural and urban social units. Urban-rural social links are central to the decision to move, as well as to coping strategies once settled in town. Focusing on the social relations of migration also reveals how the poorest sections of the urban population are unable to fill such relationships with material content and fulfil what James Scott (1985, 237) has called minimal cultural decencies — weakening rural relationships and further contributing to the marginalisation and impoverishment of poor urban as well as rural households.

The first part of the article places the issue of urban migration into a theoretical perspective; the second part gives an overview of urban Namibia; and the third and final part focuses on the nature of urban migration and urban-rural social links with particular reference to the capital Windhoek and the town of Oshakati in northern Namibia. The Owambo saying, "A Town is Just a Town" (*odolopa odoolopa ashike*), selected as the title of this article, reflects the decreasing attraction of urban life and modernity with the increasing urbanisation of poverty.

### *Urban Migration and Poverty*

Relatively little recent research has been done on internal migration flows in developing countries (UNCHS 1996). The studies that do exist imply that urban migration is increasingly diverse and complex (de Haan 1999). On the one hand, the causes of migration involve a variety of factors including: (1) catastrophes such as wars, drought, and floods; (2) regional inequalities of economic development and income; (3) high population pressures; (4) low agricultural productivity; (5) poverty and hunger in specific regions; and (6) attraction of towns as centres of employment, education, and social amenities. On the other hand, the migrants themselves are varied, for instance in terms of age, level of education, and socio-economic background. Recent studies have also demonstrated that female migration is of much greater volume and complexity than was previously believed, and differs from that of men in its form, composition, causes, and consequences (Chant 1992; Hugo 1995).

Recent literature has also reflected an increasing preoccupation with the extent and nature of urban poverty. Much of the debate is concerned not so much with estimating urban poverty's scale as with questioning the bases upon which poverty estimates are made (Wratten 1995). This literature discusses classical definitions of poverty and how minimum income and consumption requirements differ in rural and urban areas, but also addresses the issues of deprivation (isolation and powerlessness) and vulnerability (insecurity and exposure to risk, shocks and stress). For instance, Caroline Moser (1996, 24) sums up the notion of vulnerability as "the well being of individuals, households and communities in the face of a changing environment" and argues that urban populations are particularly vulnerable due to the rapid economic and sociocultural change associated with the urbanisation process. Even when using "classical" criteria of minimum levels of income and consumption, however, there is general agreement that the number of urban dwellers living in absolute poverty has grown considerably during the 1980s and 1990s (Kamete, Tostensen and Tvedten 2001).

In short, the literature suggests that people in Southern Africa continue to move to urban areas despite the real risks of not succeeding in an increasingly harsh social and economic environment. At the same time, however, people do not migrate to town by accident, but because they believe that towns can offer opportuni-

ties they do not find in the rural areas and that they will be able to find a way to take advantage of these opportunities.

The changing urban environment — decline in levels of formal employment, increase in “informal sector” employment, deterioration in the quality and distribution of housing and basic services, and decrease in the quality of the built and natural urban environment — has important implications for the migration strategies of first-generation urbanites, and for their survival strategies once they are settled in an urban environment. Social links between rural and urban areas are becoming increasingly important to the initial decision to move, to immediate strategies related to shelter and employment, and to longer-term urban survival strategies. These links have always been there (Baker and Aina 1995), but they have been transformed by the context of the new “urban crisis.” The urban population is not primarily “rural people in an urban context,” as argued in the earlier literature from Southern Africa referred to above, but urban people trying to handle relations with a rural context upon which they depend.

Recent studies from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Malawi emphasise how rural relationships mediate the adverse economic circumstances imposed upon urban populations by structural adjustment policies, high urban unemployment, and the rising cost of living (Andersson 2001); how the continued significance of the village not only include economic relations but also deep cultural and moral issues centred around witchcraft and funerals in a way that makes them inseparable (Englund 2002); and how people circulate within a limited social and geographical field to gain access to a range of networks and relationships through a strategy of “double rootedness” (Bank 1997, 24).

This study from urban and rural Owambo in northern Namibia shows how increasing urban poverty weakens these links as people cannot fill them with material content and live up to social and cultural expectations in their relations with the rural areas. The gradual weakening of the urban and rural links reaches a cut-off point beyond which they are very difficult to repair — questioning the general assumption that migration is a central element in the livelihoods of poor as well as rich households in developing countries (de Haan 1999).

Theoretically, two strands have traditionally dominated stud-

ies of internal migration patterns. In neo-classical or equilibrium models of migration, population movement is to be understood as a rational, individual response to the disparities in labour productivity and labour returns between the subsistence economy of rural areas and the monetary economy of modern urban areas. The models highlight the importance of rational calculations and decisions of individuals, which lead to the geographic movement of labour into higher wage regions (Harris and Todaro 1970; Todaro 1971). While neo-classical studies have rightly concentrated on the rationality of individual decision-making, they have been criticised for isolating economic decision-making from the social and political context within which the decisions are made (de Haan 1999).

In the structuralist models, migration is to be understood at the level of structure, in the Marxist tradition as part of the organisation and reorganisation of capitalist development (Safa 1982; Standing 1985). Migration arises from the spatial distribution of labour requirements among the different sectors of national and international economies. More recently, structural models have come to include differentials in public expenditures and investments between rural and urban areas, unequal employment opportunities in both the formal and informal sectors, and environmental conditions including land rights. The main criticism levelled against the structural models has been the inadequate attention that they pay to individual strategies within the existing structural framework, and hence the inability to explain differences in levels and patterns of migration within geographical areas and social groups (de Haan 1999).

More recently, two additional models of migration have been identified. One is referred to as the "structuration model," which responds to the critique of the traditional models by emphasising the complex interaction between agent and structure (Giddens 1987; Chant and Radcliffe 1992). In this model, the structural causes of labour market formation and uneven spatial distribution are combined with an awareness of the highly selective individual responses of Third World inhabitants faced with a number of alternative strategies for survival. The second recent model introduces gender as a central variable (Chant 1992; Wright 1995). Gender-informed models criticise the neo-classical assumption that men and women are subject to the same motivations to migrate and the

structuralist tendency to disregard women, particularly in descriptions of how capitalism use agricultural communities to provide for the reproduction of male labour power in the modern wage-labour economy.

Anthropology has long argued that the hegemonic models referred to above suffer from inadequate attention to the social relations of migration. Human relationships and family networks are central to people's decision to move and to their coping strategies once in town. These reciprocal relations represent intangible assets (claims that can be made for help or resources when in need) that may be at least as central to survival as the tangible assets (savings, stores, and resources already in possession) that normally are the focus of traditional approaches. Reciprocal relations have their origin in rural-urban family links, in kin and place of origin, and in more recently formed urban relations (Moser 1996, 11).

In the African context, studies of urban migration and networks were pioneered by British anthropologists working in Southern and Central Africa from the 1940s (Mitchell 1969). They described a situation of deteriorating urban-rural relations and a decline of tradition, which lead to the famous postulate "a townsman is a townsman and a tribesman is a tribesman" (Gluckman 1961). Equally relevant is the work from East London in South Africa (Readers 1961; Mayer 1963; Pauw 1963), in which the authors argue that while some migrants do indeed become townsmen ("school migrants") others maintain strong social and cultural links with the rural areas of origin ("red migrants").

Political and economic events in the 1960s and 1970s turned attention away from the social relations of migration, in its classical anthropological sense, to modes of production and theories of underdevelopment. Bernard Magubane (1971) criticised the anthropology of migration for failing to situate its analysis within a broader political economy of labour migrancy and colonial exploitation, and for its unilineal model of cultural development that constituted European civilisation and westernisation as the desired end point of African cultural development.

The "post-modern-age" of the 1980s and 1990s saw a renewed interest in the issue of networks and migration. A number of important studies have emerged from Southern Africa, most of which reveal a common perception of close links and mutual

dependency between urban and rural areas and — in line with post-modern thought — perceptions of the rural and the urban as constituting "a single social universe, encompassing both rural and urban geographical spaces" (Andersson 2001, 84). "Consequently" Jens Andersson continues, "dichotomies of rural and urban economic sectors, centre and periphery, elite and mass are of little importance." While these studies remain useful as corrections to the classical migration studies referred to above, they have a common problem of not paying sufficient attention to poverty or class in the sense of a set of different positions on a scale of social advantage — confirming Bruce Knauft's (1997, 286) argument that class background is undervalued in contemporary anthropology. In Owambo, urbanisation and poverty entail a process of commodification of social relations between the urban and the rural that has profound implications for the ability to maintain and develop mutually supportive relationships.

### *Urban Namibia*

In order to assess the link between social relations and poverty for migration in Namibia, it is useful to provide a brief overview of urban history, the main urban centres, and socio-economic conditions in the country's cities and towns. The picture emerging is one of slow and controlled urbanisation until Independence in 1990, followed by a dramatic increase in urbanisation and socio-economic differentiation among the urban population since Independence — underlining my point about the urbanisation of poverty.

#### URBAN HISTORY

Namibia's pre-colonial population did not develop larger population centres as did Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Angola (Tarver 1994). The main reasons for this were the small population, environmental conditions that favoured neither the concentration of people nor the creation of a sufficient economic surplus to maintain specialised urban functions, and the population's marginal location in relation to regional trade and migration routes.

The emergence of urban settlements in Namibia is thus largely a phenomenon of the colonial era, evolved on the basis of two dissimilar developments (du Pisani 2000). In the central and south-



ern parts of the country, urban settlements developed as commercial and administrative centres first under the German (1842-1915) and then under the South African colonial regime (1915-90). The Germans established commercial centres in their attempts to become less dependent on the German economy. South Africa was initially less interested in developing such centres beyond what was necessary to administer the territorial economy. However, a new "growth point policy" was established in the early 1960s, aimed at proving to the international community that South Africa was serious about developing the territory.

Throughout the German and South African era, permanent African urbanisation was discouraged, with a web of laws (including pass laws and prohibition of property ownership) controlling most aspects of the life of the African residents (Moorsom 1995). The African population was allowed to move into towns as labourers for limited periods of time, and lived in separate areas ("locations") with housing and services inferior to that of the white areas. The large majority of those moving to the apartheid towns were men working in "white" trade and industries, while a small number of women were mainly domestic workers.<sup>1</sup>

In the northern communal areas, urbanisation was a much later phenomenon. Although more than seventy percent of the population lived in the north, the lack of public as well as private investments effectively hindered such a development and maintained the north as a labour pool for urban industries elsewhere (Hishongwa 1992). Urban areas proper did not develop until the 1960s, as a response to administrative and military requirements by the South African colonial state. Towns were established as centres for the homelands created by the Odendaal Commission in 1964, with basic facilities such as government departments, hospitals, police stations, and schools. The towns expanded largely as a result of the increased militarisation of the northern areas and South African military incursions into Angola from the mid 1970s onwards (Hangula 1993).

Also these towns became effectively segregated, between formal and fully serviced "white towns" and illegal and under-serviced informal settlements. Formal townships ("locations") for the African population were also established, but on a much smaller scale than in the central and southern parts of the country.

The urban population in the north was made up of a mixture of soldiers working for the South African Defence Force, people working in trade and industries servicing the military structures, and people fleeing the war in the rural areas both in Namibia and in southern Angola.

The process of urbanisation through separate development was progressively tightened up until the beginning of the 1980s, when influx control measures were abolished through a General Law Amendment Proclamation (Simon 1988). People could then move freely to towns and in principle settle where they wanted, but the employment situation and the economic conditions in general inhibited larger scale urbanisation before Independence in 1990.

At the time of Independence, the majority of the urban population still lived in the central and southern part of the country. As seen from Table 1, the rate of urbanisation ranges from eighty-eight percent in the Khomas region to nil in the regions of Ohangwena and Omusati, with the national average being twenty-eight percent. Notably, the regions with the largest population and highest population density also have the lowest rate of urbanisation.

Table 1 Urbanisation in Namibia by Region

Region	Urban Population	Urban Population (%)	Population density (per km <sup>2</sup> )	Localities with Population +2000
Namibia	382 680	28	1 700	51
Karas	22 732	37	400	4
Hardap	29 020	44	600	5
Khomas	147 056	88	4 400	3
Erongo	35 062	63	900	6
Otjozondjupa	47 021	46	900	5
Omaheke	8 340	16	600	4
Oshikoto	16 211	13	4 800	2
Oshana	35 726	26	26 000	6
Omusati	0 000	0	15 100	2
Ohangwena	0 000	0	17 900	7
Okavango	19 366	17	2 700	3
Caprivi	13 377	15	4 900	1
Kunene	8 769	14	500	3

Source: Tvedten and Moputola (1995)

### MAIN URBAN CENTRES

During the first decade of independence, migration to cities and towns continued unabated particularly in the northern parts of Namibia, changing the urban landscape of the country.<sup>2</sup> An estimated thirty-two percent of the population currently live in cities and towns (EIU 2001). Windhoek is by far the largest urban centre in the country, with an estimated population in 2000 of 259 000 (Tvedten and Mupotola 1995).<sup>3</sup> Windhoek functions as a primate city both politically, economically, and in terms of socio-cultural organisation and perceptions. No other country in Southern Africa has such a large proportion of its urban population living in the capital. The second major urban growth point is Walvis Bay. The population has increased considerably since Walvis Bay became an integral part of Namibia in 1994, and is currently estimated at 35 000. Other municipalities and towns in the former commercial areas seem to have experienced a modest growth and in some cases (such as Tsumeb, Mariental and Usakos) even a stagnant or decreasing population.

In the former communal areas, the urban population live in six designated towns. The urban population growth is lowest in the towns of former Owambo (Oshakati, Ondangwa, Ongwediva) even though this is the most densely populated area in Namibia with forty-five percent of the country's population (Tvedten and Moputola 1995; Melber 1996). The main reason for this is that people from Owambo tend to continue migrating directly to Windhoek and other towns in the central parts of the country. Assuming an urbanisation rate of 4.5 percent, the current population in Oshakati is 32 100, in Ongwediva 9 200 and in Ondangwa 11 800.

The urbanisation rate since independence has been higher in the regional capitals of Okavango, Caprivi, and Kunene. The large majority of the people migrating to these towns come from the region itself, with an additional influx by illegal migrants from Angola and Zambia. Assuming an urbanisation rate of 6.5 percent, Katima Mulilo has a current population of 19 900; Rundu has 28 800; and Opuwo has 6 300 (Devereux *et al.* 1993; Graefe *et al.* 1994).

Table 2 shows the projected population of the eight largest towns in Namibia, again assuming an urban growth rate of 4.5 percent for the slowest growing and 6.5 percent for the fastest grow-

ing urban centres respectively. With such a growth rate, the four fastest growing towns represent as much as fifty-eight percent of the total urban population in Namibia. Windhoek alone represents forty-one percent.

Table 2 Population projections for the eight largest towns in Namibia

Municipality/ Town	Growth-rate (%)	Population 1991	Estimated Population 1995	Estimated Population 2000
Windhoek	6.5	147 056	189 183	259 197
Walvis Bay	6.5	30 452	39 175	53 674
Oshakti	4.5	21 603	22 575	32 104
Rehobot	4.5	21 439	25 566	31 860
Rundu	6.5	19 366	23 100	28 800
Swakopmund	4.5	17 681	21 085	26 276
Tsumeb	4.5	16 211	19 322	24 091
Keetmanshoop	4.5	15 032	17 926	22 339

Source: Tvedten and Mopotola (1995)

#### SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

In general terms, the urban population in Namibia is characterised by an older age structure, a larger proportion of males than females, smaller households, and a larger proportion of people in formal wage work than in the rural areas (NPC/CSO 1996). In terms of demographic composition, the average age is close to twenty-two years in urban areas and seventeen years in the rural areas. There is a male surplus in urban areas of 110 males for every 100 females, as against female surplus of 110 for every 100 males in rural areas. The average household size is 5.4 persons in rural areas and 4.7 persons in urban areas, and female-headed households represent forty-one percent and thirty-one percent of the total number of households in rural and urban areas respectively. The age distribution in urban areas is particularly noteworthy. There is an "urbanisation peak" in the age group twenty-five to thirty-nine years. In this group, forty-five percent of all men and thirty-seven percent of all women live in urban areas. In terms of employment and income, labour force participation is higher in urban (sixty-eight percent) than in rural areas (forty-eight percent). About twenty-five percent of the population over fifteen years of age in urban areas are unemployed,

and forty-six percent are underemployed. The corresponding figures for rural areas are sixteen and fifty-four percent. In other words, the combined unemployment and underemployment rates are not significantly different in urban and rural areas. The main source of household income in urban areas is cash wages (seventy-seven percent), with informal businesses, pensions and cash remittances being additional sources. In rural areas, fifty-one percent of the households have subsistence farming as a main source of income, with cash wages (twenty-seven percent) and pensions (fourteen percent) being sources of less importance.

The economically active population in Namibia is thus concentrated in urban areas, while there is a disproportionate number of economically inactive youngsters and older people in the rural areas. At the same time, the dependence on cash wages in urban areas underlines the individual vulnerability in an urban environment where access to employment is rapidly decreasing. This is reflected in differences in socio-economic conditions between different urban areas, as well as between formal and informal settlement areas within the same municipality or town.

Within municipalities and towns, the main indication of the differences found is the expanding informal settlement areas.<sup>4</sup> Urbanisation in Namibia is linked to significant changes in the social organisation of neighbourhoods, families and households. Congestion and economic hardships tend to make social units unstable, and many poor urban areas are severely affected by crime and social unrest. Some towns (like Walvis Bay) actively discourage uncontrolled settlement of this type, but most of them have seen uncontrolled settlements grow at an alarming rate. Table 3 shows the estimated proportion of the population in the three largest towns in the north and south respectively living in informal settlement areas.

There are thus reasons to state that poverty in Namibia is becoming urbanised. As argued in a study on poverty in Namibia for the average unskilled shanty town dweller,

... competition for employment is fierce, wages are low, and many are forced to eke out a subsistence in the urban informal sector. The informal sector itself is underdeveloped, with an overemphasis on petty-commodity trading which, in many quarters, has reached saturation point. Urban poverty is thus a

growing phenomena in Namibia and the situation is likely to deteriorate further if employment opportunities are not created in both rural and urban areas (Devereux *et al.* 1993, 41).

Table 3 Estimated population living in informal settlement areas in major Namibian towns

Municipality/town	Total population (2000)	Informal settlements (%)
Windhoek	259 197	30%
Walvis Bay	53 674	15%
Rehobot	31 860	15%
Oshakati	32 104	60%
Rundu	34 134	75%
Katima Mulilo	21 350	75%

Source: Tvedten and Moputola (1995)

### *Urban Migration*

Urban migration in Namibia is best examined in three stages, each based on different perspectives and methodologies. First, the issue of urban migration is examined from a national and structural perspective through the Namibian Population and Housing Census (NPC/CSO 1994). Second, social relations of migration to the capital Windhoek is assessed through a quantitative study on household opportunity situations (Peyroux and Graefe 1995). Third, social relations of migration is assessed through qualitative data and case-studies on urban migration to the town of Oshakati in northern Namibia (Tvedten and Pomuti 1994; Tvedten and Nangulah 1999). While surveys and quantitative data are necessary to ascertain the broader picture of migration, urbanisation and socio-economic conditions, participant observation, qualitative interviews, and participatory research have been necessary to grasp deeper socio-cultural causalities. Fieldwork in Oshakati and two villages in Owambo have yielded important information on social relationships and peoples' own perceptions of migration and poverty — being crucial for their own strategies and actions.

### MIGRATION PATTERNS

National data on migration in Namibia are limited, and the phenomenon was inadequately treated in the 1991 census (NPC/CSO 1994; see also Frayne and Pendleton 1998). The census

data do not capture migrants moving to towns in the same region (intra-regional migration), migrants staying in other regions or towns on a temporary or oscillatory basis, and cases where members of the same households stay in different regions. Neither is it possible to trace migration routes ("from where to where") of individual households. Moreover, the census does not answer qualitative questions: Why do people move; what are the reasons for their choice of destinations? What is their migration experience? What is the itinerary of their missions?

However, the census does give a basis for estimating the total volume and general direction of migration between regions,<sup>5</sup> by correlating region of usual residence with place of birth. Close to one million of the 1.3 million persons born in Namibia were enumerated in their region of birth, implying that 300 000 people have moved to another region. On the basis of census data reworked by O.O. Arowolo (1994), H. Melber (1996) outlines the volume of migration by arguing that with a few exceptions the influx into regions with large urban centres and urban "islands" (in particular the coastal towns) is a predominant feature. According to the data presented, the proportion of migrants into Okahandja is fifty-five percent, Grootfontein fifty-two percent, Windhoek fifty percent, Otjiwarongo forty-seven percent, and Keetmanshoop thirty-two percent. Regarding the coastal towns, the proportion of migrants into Swakopmund is seventy-four percent and Lüderitz sixty-three percent (Walvis Bay was not part of the census). The proportion of migrants into regions in the north is considerably smaller: 9.1 percent for Kaokaland, 8.2 percent for Ondangwa, 8.1 percent for Oshakati, 5.2 percent for Caprivi, and 2.8 percent for Okavango.

The highest proportion of migrants by region is not from the northern areas of former Owamboland as often assumed, but from commercial areas of the former "police zone" such as Omaruru (sixty-seven percent), Bethanien (fifty-four percent) and Maltahöe (fifty-three percent). In absolute figures, however, the overwhelming majority of migrants moving to other places are those from the regions of Oshakati (Oshana) and Ondangwa (Ohangwena) with 53 000 (fourteen percent) and 55 000 (twenty-one percent) respectively. Another striking feature is the low mobility of inhabitants from Caprivi, Okavango, and Kaokaland. The proportion of migrants from these regions are 9.3 percent, 9.1 percent, and 3.5 percent.

In sum, the available information indicates the existence of three central patterns of urban migration in Namibia, as depicted in Figure 1. One is from rural and urban areas in former Owambo to the larger urban areas in the central part of the country (mainly Windhoek and Walvis Bay). A second is from rural areas in the northern provinces of Okavango and Caprivi to their respective main regional urban centres of Rundu and Katima Mulilo. And a third is from rural and urban areas in the south to the main urban areas in the central parts of the country.<sup>6</sup>

As already shown, plausible explanations exist for the general trends of urban migration depicted as related to structural conditions and the socio-economic opportunity situation of urban and rural households respectively. Both historically and in the post-independence period, public and private investments, employment and income opportunities, physical infrastructure, education, and health services have been concentrated in the towns in the central parts of the country. The economic opportunity situation for individuals and households is still generally better in urban than in rural areas, as reflected in important variables like income, consumption, education, housing and access to other basic facilities. Finally, differences exist in the economic opportunity situation of women particularly through the informal sector in urban areas; and for younger people, urban areas represent a "modern" world that they do not find in their rural villages.

Political and economic context and the opportunity situation of individual households thus go a long way towards explaining the current migration trends in Namibia. However, important questions are also left unanswered, particularly related to the increasing unemployment and poverty in the sprawling informal settlement areas, which should discourage rather than encourage urban migration in the country. The deteriorating socio-economic conditions have been evident for some time, but there are no indications that urban migration is decreasing. On the contrary, the main urban centres (Windhoek, Walvis Bay, Rundu, and Oshakati) report an increasing external population pressure.

#### MIGRATING THROUGH NETWORKS

The main explanation for increasing urban migration is to be found in the role played by social relations and networks; indeed, moving



to town has become part of a complex survival strategy involving both rural and urban social units (Tvedten and Nangulah 1999; see also Bank 1997). People relate to their social networks within given structural constraints and their own economic opportunity situation, and they become particularly important in situations of poverty where households have inadequate resources to be viable in their own right. Social relations and networks between the rural and the urban are important for the decision to move to urban areas, for the immediate strategies particularly related to housing and employment, and for longer term economic coping strategies. They are also crucial for the degree to which people become "permanently urban."

This tendency seems to be confirmed in the few studies where the issue of social relations and urban-rural links have been pursued, mainly from Windhoek (Peyroux and Graefe 1995) and Oshakati (Tvedten and Pomuti 1994; Tvedten and Nangulah 1999). The first case reveals that urban-rural connections are indeed important, while the second case shows how the nature of these relations varies particularly with class and gender. The poorest migrants are unable to maintain links with their rural areas of origin, which further contributes to their marginalisation and impoverishment.

#### SOCIAL RELATIONS AND URBAN-RURAL LINKS IN WINDHOEK

A large influx of new urban dwellers has settled in two different types of areas in Windhoek. One is in the formal township of Katutura, where migrants have moved in with family members or friends, rented rooms, or built iron shacks or other structures in the backyard of existing houses. Katutura is now severely overcrowded. The other main alternative is to settle in one of the informal settlements surrounding Katutura, such as Ombili, Freedomland, Greenwell Matango, and Okuryangava. They are a mixture of organised reception areas where people can stay for a limited period of time and have access to basic urban services, and unorganised squatter areas outside the control of the authorities and illegal. Squatters represent sixty-four percent, and resettled residents thirty-six percent of the population in the informal settlements. They are currently estimated to have a population of 25 000-30 000 or approximately twenty percent of the population in

Katutura and ten percent of the total population of Windhoek (Windhoek Municipality 1996).

As many as ninety-three percent of the people in the informal settlements are first generation migrants from rural areas (Peyroux *et al.* 1995); thirty-five percent arrived after 1990, thirty-one percent from 1984 to 1989, sixteen percent from 1978 to 1983, and eighteen percent before 1970. The settlements include a very low number of recent migrants (having arrived within one year prior to the study) mainly because people tend to stay with family or friends in settlement units in more established areas before establishing a separate dwelling in the reception or squatting areas. In fact, the large majority of the migrants in the sample (ninety-seven percent) have stayed with family or friends for substantial periods before establishing their own dwelling. Sixty-six percent have lived in Windhoek more than three years before settling in the reception or squatting area.

Upon arriving, people move into larger residential units (that is, several units occupying a common dwelling), normally in Katutura. The residential units consist of nuclear households or single parents, extended family members, other family or friends from the rural area, and tenants. Fifty-six percent of the migrants stay with close family members when arriving Windhoek, and eighteen percent stay with friends and people from the rural area of origin. Of the remaining, ten percent stay in their work place and only two percent came to Windhoek without the type of relations mentioned.

The residential units tend to constitute a unit of basic food consumption and provision and funding of urban services,<sup>7</sup> as well as the main point of departure for building up a network for seeking employment. In addition, people use the residential units to limit expenditures and to save before building their own dwelling and facing expenditures for water, electricity, and sanitation. For both these objectives, staying with family or friends is vital.

A large majority of the migrants in the informal settlements (seventy-nine percent) come from former Owambo; ten percent are Damara (Kunene Region); 5 percent are Okavango; and the remaining are Herero, Tswana, San, and Nama. The predominance of Owambos is confirmed in other studies (Pendleton 1996, NPC/CSO 1996). Thus, the difference in the frequency of migration

between people from former Owambo and the other regions in the north is maintained also during the current urban crisis.

The migrants tend to establish their own household unit after some time, as a result of overcrowding and problems in the larger residential unit and access to formal or informal employment and income. A large proportion of those who build their own dwelling have saved money or borrowed money through informal relations (residence in the informal city does not give a basis for loans). Once established with a separate unit, relations with rural areas seem to increase in importance as part of the survival strategy. The majority of the households (eighty-four percent) in the informal settlement areas continue to have dependants in their rural area of origin. Ten percent live in Windhoek without their partner; forty-eight percent live in Windhoek without or with only their smallest children; and thirty-three percent are *de facto* female-headed households. Only twenty-five percent of the households in the sample are complete nuclear units. No significant differences in living situations distinguish the most recent migrants from earlier migrants, implying that urban-rural links are part of a complex and long-term strategy.

The importance of urban-rural relations and networks is further underscored by the fact that as many as eighty-nine percent of the households return to their rural area of origin at least once a year, with only ten percent visiting only occasionally or never. Equally important is the fact that nearly half of them (forty-eight percent) stay in the rural area one month or more, while only seventeen percent stay less than a week. The urban-rural links thus involve exchange of labour, childcare, agricultural produce, and other goods and services. The large proportion of female-headed households among those who do not maintain relations with the rural areas is attributable to a combination of low income, lack of rights to land and other resources in the rural area, and difficulties in leaving children and other dependants behind in the city.

#### SOCIAL RELATIONS AND URBAN-RURAL LINKS IN OSHAKATI

Quantitative studies focusing on individual households and their opportunity situation like that of Windhoek outlined above are useful, but do not fully reflect the complexities involved in the social relations of urban migration (Gugler 1997; Bank 1997). A

particularly important source of error seems to be the distinction between meaning and practice. The cultural importance of rural life and rural relationships is deeply embedded among many urban migrants, prompting people to overstate the importance of such relationships. The final section of this article takes a closer look at qualitative aspects of migration in the town of Oshakati, showing that relations of migration differ significantly particularly around the variables of class (as a set of different positions on a scale of social advantage) and gender. The poorest sections of the population may be involved in urban-rural relationships, but without being able to fill them with material content — eventually leading to their discontinuity.

Oshakati is the main urban centre for approximately 800 000 people living in Owambo (Hangula 1993; Tvedten and Nangulah 1999). The town was established in 1966 as part of South Africa's apartheid policy in Namibia and a springboard for incursions into Angola, and grew rapidly throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Initially the development of Oshakati brought employment opportunities for Owambos employed with the South African Defence Force, but there were also formal employment opportunities in construction work, factories, hospitals, and shops. Also the informal sector grew rapidly, with opportunities for tradesmen and women selling goods ranging from traditional foodstuffs and beer to second hand clothes, and for informal occupations including tailors, barbers, hair-dressers, and prostitutes. Most of these establishments were located in expanding shantytown areas. At Independence in 1990 Oshakati had a population of approximately 21 000 (NPC/CSO 1994).

The withdrawal of South Africa at Independence in 1990 had immediate consequences for employment, income, and social conditions. People associated with the South African Defence Force left or lost their jobs, and thousands of unemployed SWAPO freedom fighters moved in from the regions or from exile. In the informal settlement areas, the transitional period was characterised by poverty and social instability. People had no jobs, and the informal sector had no customers. The social instability ensuing was exacerbated by the presence of people having been on different sides in the war.

The population of Oshakati is currently around 32 000, imply-

ing an annual population increase of near six percent in the past few years (Frayne and Pomuti 1997). Sixty percent or 23 000 people live in the four sprawling shantytowns Amunkambya, Uupindi, Oneshila, and Evululuku. The areas give an immediate impression of poverty, deprivation, and vulnerability, verified by quantitative data (Tvedten and Pomuti 1994).<sup>8</sup> Only twenty percent of the adult population in the shantytowns are formally employed, with the remaining depending on a saturated informal economy or hand-outs. The majority of households have a monthly income of less than N\$ 500 per month, meaning that approximately sixty percent of the shanty population fall under the official poverty line.

The differences in levels of income are reflected in other socio-economic conditions. Sixty-four percent of the shanty population live in iron-shacks, and only thirty-four percent in brick houses. Seventy-four percent of the shanty population depend on water from communal taps; sixty-five percent do not have access to proper toilet facilities; eighty-eight percent depend on wood for cooking; and eighty-three percent depend on candles for lighting. Finally, fourteen percent of the population above school age have no education at all, and forty-seven percent have grade four or less, implying a functional illiteracy rate of more than sixty percent.

The large majority of the urban migrants in Oshakati thus find themselves in a very difficult socio-economic situation. Nevertheless, people continue to move to Oshakati, and the rate of migration has even shown an increase the past few years. In moving to town, people use and depend on a number of different relations and networks, of which relations with family, relatives, and friends from the rural areas of origin are of crucial importance (Tvedten and Nangulah 1999).

First, people from the same ethno-linguistic group and geographical area cluster in each of the four main shantytowns in Oshakati. Accordingly, one shantytown is dominated by Uukwambi, one by Ndonga, and two are dominated by Kwanyama (Tvedten and Pomuti 1994). Household composition further reveals that fifty-seven percent of household members are closely related to the household head, with as many as thirty-three percent being extended family members and ten percent being friends and other non-relatives from the same area of origin. As in the case of Windhoek, these data show the importance of social relations for

the decision to move to town.

Once settled in town, as many as seventy-three percent of the urban household heads consider themselves as part of an extended "split" household unit that also includes a rural entity. This type of household may include children, parents, unmarried brothers or sisters, as well as more distant relatives (Tvedten and Pomuti 1994). The proportion of "split households" is higher among male-headed than among female-headed households, with seventy-eight percent and sixty-one percent respectively. The importance of urban-rural links is further substantiated by the fact that as many as eighty-eight percent of the urban households have access to land, thirty-nine percent have access to cattle, and fifty-four percent visit their rural areas of origin once a month or more. Male-headed households generally have more frequent contact with their rural areas of origin than female-headed households.

Quantitative data from Oshakati thus confirm the importance of urban rural linkages both for the decision to move and for the coping strategies once in town. However, deeper qualitative case studies reveal that the type and nature of these relations largely depend on class and gender (Tvedten and Nangulah 1999). Moreover, hegemonic cultural perceptions about urban migration are not easily captured in quantitative analyses. The rationale for moving to town is to secure employment and income, and not living up to such expectations has far-reaching consequences particularly for men who are seen as the main providers for the household and extended family.

Urban-rural relations in Oshakati are primarily based on extended family relations (*aakwanezimo*), even though clanship and friendship also play a role. The Owambos are matrilineal, meaning that ego's family is traced through the mother's kin and with the mother's brother being the most important social person. There are traditional cultural rules for rights and responsibilities related to the *aakwanezimo*, but these are undergoing continuous changes and are subject to negotiations in each individual case.

Urban households are in a special situation as they do not live in the same setting as their extended family, implying that relations have to be maintained with people living in villages that may be difficult and expensive to reach. While rural family members visiting town are expected to bring traditional foodstuffs such as

millet (*mahangu*), spinach (*evanda/ekaka*), meat (*onyama*) and traditional brew (*omakadu/omalovu*), urban family members visiting villages are expected to bring money or capital items such as clothing, canned food, cooking oil, beverages, and detergents. In addition, participation in agricultural tasks like ploughing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and herding are expected to be done by the urban dwellers themselves or by paying a labourer or relative to fulfil their agricultural responsibilities. And finally, important socio-cultural events such as birth, weddings, and funerals demand money as well as physical presence.

Urban male-headed households with employment and income are in the outset in the best position to maintain relations with their extended family and rural areas of origin, but they are also most susceptible to claims from the extended family. It is, in fact, nearly impossible for better off households to cut ties with the rural areas without getting into serious problems with the extended family. With the large expenses related to both traditional and modern marriage, employed men are most likely to be formally married which unites extended families and defines rights and obligations (the lavish marriage celebrations should be seen as a way to secure that each partner has the means to support the spouse in a context of poverty and insecurity). Maintaining relations is partly a question of visiting and being present on important social occasions, and partly of contributing with money or goods. With the commercialisation of agricultural production, male-headed households with employment and income are also most likely to have cattle and own land in their village of origin — which further strengthens relations both culturally and by employing people to take care of their assets.

Unemployed men with limited and fluctuating income are at a double disadvantage. On the one hand, their options of maintaining relationships are limited as they have problems visiting the rural areas and maintaining the relationship with money and other assets. Often, they will also lack cattle and land, which are important parts of extended family relations in their own right. At the same time, being unemployed and poor is a violation of the very rationale for becoming urban and leaving one's cultural roots in the first place. Extended family members are less likely to visit a relative who is poor with inferior housing, not only because there is

limited space and less to gain but also because having children or other relatives in town who have not made it is considered a disgrace. In the same vein, many poor urban men do not return to their villages of origin even though socio-economic conditions would be better there, because they cannot face their extended family members as "failures."

Women and female-headed households are in a special situation. Their ties with the extended family are to a large extent based on children as extended family property. Children are often sent to the rural areas to be taken care of by the mother's matrilineal family, which is also expected to support the urban-based women with *mahangu* or other agricultural products. Women traditionally do not own cattle and agricultural land in rural areas themselves, even though the increasing commercialisation of land has opened up options for land ownership. There also seems to be lower expectations for money and other contributions from women in town, based on the traditional perception of men as principal breadwinners. However, there are increasing concerns in the rural areas about the economic burden of having a large number of children from urban-based relationships.

Mateus Shonga and Johannes Martin live in Oshakati and are neighbours and good friends, despite the very different situations in which they find themselves. Mateus lives in a small iron-shack with his girlfriend and a child, and he barely manages to make ends meet through occasional work unloading trucks and income from a small *cuca*-shop. Johannes lives in a brick-house built with loans from the Government's Build Together Programme, is formally married, has four "official" children and is permanently employed by the Oshakati Town Council.

Johannes constantly has relatives and friends visiting from his village — which he perceives as a mixed blessing. They bring *mahangu*, spinach, meat, and traditional brew as custom demands, but they tend to stay for long periods of time, looking for work or just hang around in town, thus becoming an economic burden. At the same time, not taking them in may jeopardise his position in the rural areas where he has fields and cattle — and ultimately wants to retire. "A house full of people is a rich house" (*waana omutanda kunongomba*) is a common saying.

Mateus, for his part, is constantly in need of money, and he has tried to have his extended family support him through all possible and



impossible means. He has pleaded, threatened, referred to Owambo culture, and even tried to take them to traditional court. At one stage, he also moved back to his village, leaving his girlfriend and their child behind. But the extended family keeps refusing — officially because Mateus is not properly married but more likely because they know they will not get anything in return. The last time I accompanied Mateus to his village was in 1998. He claims that he has not been there since then, because, I suspect, he finds it too difficult to face his family in his current condition.

Traditionally, the clan (*ezimo/epata*) also had responsibilities to support people finding themselves in difficult situations. Each individual belongs to two clans, of which the mother's clan is considered most important. Clan responsibilities were particularly important when people travelled away from their own area into other territories, where fellow clan members were expected to treat the visitor as a brother (or sister). The importance of the clan was gradually reduced in rural areas with the impact of Christianity, apartheid policies, increasing commercialisation and changing residence patterns. However, indications are that the clan is becoming an important part of people's survival strategies in poor urban areas. Well-off households try to suppress the notion of *ezimo*-responsibilities in order to avoid further burdens, whereas poor households try to evoke them in order to be able to put claims on a larger number of people for support.

Looking at the urban-rural relationship from the rural end, people in the villages of Ompundja and Oniihende differ considerably in the extent to which they maintain contacts with urban relatives and friends (Tvedten and Nangula 1999). Oniihende is most remote, has the oldest and least educated population, and is generally poorer than Ompundja. In Oniihende, no household earns more than \$N 250 Namibian per month, while fifteen percent of the households in Ompundja earn more than \$N 3 000 Namibian per month. Also in terms of land and livestock, Ompundja is better off than Oniihende. In the former village households harvest an average of 140 *oratas* (one *orata* is approximately fifteen kilograms) and eighty-five percent of the households own cattle, while households in Oniihende harvest an average of thirty-four *oratas* and only forty-five percent of the households have cattle — most of them with small herds.

The differences in levels of income are reflected in the frequency of visits to Oshakati and other urban areas. In

Ompundja, fifty percent of the households have members who visit urban areas very often (at least once a week), with very few households visiting seldom (once a year or less). In Oniihende, twenty percent of the households have never visited urban areas; twenty-seven percent visit urban areas sometimes (less than once a month but at least once a year); and as many as fifty-three percent visit seldom. Thus, also at the rural end, poverty inhibits urban-rural relationships. This is further underlined by the much more limited proportion of household heads in Oniihende than in Ompundja who have lived in urban areas for any extended period of time. In the more traditional Oniihende, moreover, decisions to move are normally made in close consultation with the extended family — which tends to limit the number of migrants. In Ompundja, younger people are more exposed to urban areas and often leave the village in violation of the advice of the elders — who have seen too many who do not succeed.

An older man in Ompundja laments:

People who go to town say that it is boring here [in the village], and that they will go to town to work and make money. But what happens? They don't get a job and they don't have money. Then they expect us who live in villages to support them, but when we visit them they don't accept us. They think we are intruding in their family lives and expect us to pay our own expenses, while they do not pay anything when they come here.

And in the harsh words of an old man in Oniihende,

We do not support people who have no contact and do not support us and we do not feel we have any responsibility towards them. The only time we have [responsibility] is when they die. We have to bury them.

### *Conclusion*

People in Southern Africa continue to migrate to cities and towns, despite the majority ending up impoverished in sprawling urban slum areas. More than fifty percent of Africa's poor will live in urban areas by 2025. The continued movement to town in the face of urban poverty challenges conventional migration theories focusing on structural conditions and individual opportunity situations within an urban bias paradigm, as well as more recent post-modern

discourses defining cities as "engines of growth" and rural-urban linkages in notions of beneficial exchange between groups of complementary difference (Bryceson and Bank 2001).

This article has argued that the basic premise in both paradigms, that "push" and "pull" economic factors lead to definitive or oscillatory population movements between rural and urban settings, need to be complemented by a focus on the social relations of migration. Attention to the qualitative aspects of the migration experience yields important information on why people migrate, the strategies that they pursue once in town, the nature and extent of the relations maintained with rural areas of origin, and differences in migration strategies between different social groups.

Following a long period with political and structural constraints on urban migration in Namibia and a low level of urbanisation, the post-independence period has seen a strong increase in urban ward migration and a concomitant increase in urban poverty. Quantitative data from Windhoek and Oshakati reveal the importance of rural-urban linkages in migrating to and surviving urban poverty, showing that the majority of urban migrants maintain part of the household in rural areas, visit the rural areas with frequent intervals, and exchange money, food, and other material items.

However, the poorest sections of the urban population are not as able to maintain such links. Poor, unemployed men are in a particularly disadvantaged position. By not succeeding in the urban environment, they cannot reward their relations with material resources and have violated the very rationale for moving to town. Therefore, they lose much of their status as men. For poor, unemployed women, the problem of filling relations with material content is equally serious, but children bind them to their rural areas of origin in a different way.

Bryceson and Bank have recently noted:

Notions of urban bias are now giving way to an amazing optimism about urban growth and rural-urban linkages, but the urbanisation process itself is virtually directionless and uncontrolled (2001, 19).

While social relations of migration are important for the decision to move, for urban coping strategies, and for urban-rural relations, urban-rural links also represent important processes of impover-

ishment and marginalisation that must be taken into consideration when designing urban development policies (Kamete, Tostensen and Tvedten 2001).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1970 the urban population in Namibia was estimated at 236 500 or twenty-three percent; forty percent of this population was white, and sixty percent was black. The equivalent number for rural areas was ninety percent black and four percent white (UNIM 1986).

<sup>2</sup> The Local Authorities Act (Namibia 1992) distinguishes between municipalities and towns. Municipalities represent the highest level of local authority, and are generally the most developed areas with a large degree of financial and administrative autonomy (Simon 1996).

<sup>3</sup> The 2001 census data were still not available at the time of writing. The figures following are projections made on the basis of the 1991 Census. Smaller distortions are likely, without changing the basis for the arguments.

<sup>4</sup> In line with standard colloquial usage, the term "township" is used to denote low-income areas with formalized housing, access to basic social services and a system of secure tenure. Informal settlement areas (also called squatter areas) lack all these attributes and are generally (but not necessarily) poorer and more deprived.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of the 1991 census, the sub-national administrative level was called districts, roughly corresponding to the present-day regions with the exception of the populous former Owamboland that was divided into four regions. For the purpose of the general argument of trends of migration, the terms will be used interchangeably in this article.

<sup>6</sup> There are also initial signs of a fourth trend from the south and the north towards the urban areas in the north, partly at the expense of migration to Windhoek. This mainly seems to involve people with formal skills who can get formal employment in the public or private sector.

<sup>7</sup> Other expenditures (cloths, transport, schools, and hospitals) tend to be shared within each family unit.

<sup>8</sup> The following data are taken from a survey based on a seven percent sample, stratified proportionally by settlement and with systematic random sampling.

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