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**Beyond the Rural-Urban Divide:
Migration in Post-Colonial Namibia**

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A distinct culture of migration, expressed in skewed population distributions, a high degree of individual mobility and mutual exchange relations characterize the multiethnic farm settlements on the Fransfontein commons in Kunene South. Based on a condensed presentation of results from ethnographic fieldwork, this working paper highlights some traits that distinguish the dynamics of migration in the former Damara homeland from a dominant, dualistic representation of 'labor migration' in Namibia and South Africa.[1]

Discourses of Dualism

Population mobility is a fundamental element of African social life (Geschiere and Gugler 1998, van Dijk, Foeken, and van Til 2001). This holds especially true for the former 'home-lands,' 'reserves' and 'Bantustans' in southern Africa.[2] In these areas, processes of migration are deeply embedded in historically formed social structures shaped by patterns of pre-colonial mobility, colonial wars, land dispossession, and the white settlers' endeavors to control and exploit the native labor force. In South Africa and Namibia, apartheid with its homeland policy and its racist constraints to population mobility has left particularly strong marks on the patterns of migration of the two countries' African populations.

A dominant representation of labor migration as experienced in 20th century South Africa and Namibia can be summarized as follows: Africans were deprived of their land and forced to live in ethnically specific and geographically marginal homelands. These homelands were not designed to provide enough agricultural potential for subsistence farming nor any other substantial income opportunities to feed their populations. The dispossessed homeland population was thus forced to send part of their male working force into wage labor to urban industrial areas and into the mines. The predominantly male African workforce, often recruited on exploitative contracts, was temporarily living in compounds and townships. Women, however, stayed behind in the impoverished rural homelands where they took care of subsistence farms and the reproductive needs of the migrants, depending on their remittances. Influx control measures and other restrictions to mobility forced the labor migrants to return to their rural homes once their labor was not needed anymore. They thus had a vital interest in supporting their rurally-based family.

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[2]   See for example Comaroff and Comaroff (1992), Crush et al. (2005), Murray (1981), Ngwane (2003), O'Laughlin (1998), Posel (2002), Kok et al. (2006).

These processes have led to a dichotomous perception and representation of rural and urban worlds. As Jean and John Comaroff (1992:160) observe:

> (...) the discourse of contrast—of work and labor, cattle and money, and so on—had its roots deep in the colonial process itself. That process, of course was to shape the political geography of South Africa, dividing yet binding the city and the countryside, white and black, the industrial workplace and the scheduled "native" reserve.

The colonial endeavor to efficiently rule the native populations and extract their labor created a regime that was built upon a strict rural-urban divide: "Urban power spoke the language of civil society and civil rights, rural power of community and culture. Civil power claimed to protect rights, customary power pledged to enforce tradition" (Mamdani 1996:18). Beyond these spatial, legal and administrative dichotomies, this regime allegedly entailed various other dualisms: The rural-urban divide shaped an economic order, separating rich from poor, capital from labor, accumulation from subsistence. It split society along race lines, while at the same time dividing the Africans into distinct rurally-based tribal groups. It divided families along gender categories, forcing men into labor migration and women into subsistence farming, and it created supposedly modern and traditional realms.

Only recently, cultural anthropologist James Ferguson has added another interpretation of the rural-urban divide (Ferguson 1999). Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Zambian Copperbelt and fierce criticism of previous anthropological attempts to analyze social change in Zambia, he suggests that rural and urban orientations are represented in opposing "cultural styles": These styles are encoded in diverging performative practices that express distinct "cosmopolitan" (urban) and "localist" (rural) values. Because the acquisition of both styles is too costly, he argues, the actors are forced to specialize in one style only (ibd.:100f). The cultural style thus separates the urban-based workers into two categories: Those that stay in contact with their rurally-based families and those that distance themselves from these relations.

In Namibia, dualistic conceptions of the rural and urban realms are heavily influenced by experiences and narratives of the former Ovamboland. There some of these traits are still represented by typical indicators, such as a highly unbalanced male-to-female-ratio. With reference to the Ovambo experience, Namibian sociologist Volker Winterfeldt (2002:68), for example, writes that labor migration has forced men and women to live in opposing worlds, where they are occupying "different spaces and places of living, opposing countryside and town, natural and artificial (…) develop different values and live by different cultural ranges (…)."

The Ovambo are by far the single largest ethnic group in Namibia, representing about 50 per cent of the total population. They are also overrepresented in the former liberation movement, the South-West-Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), which today is the country's ruling political party. Their specific experience strongly influences the representation and the political

discourses concerning colonial labor migration.[3] However, as several authors have pointed out (Melber 1996, Pankhurst 1996), labor migration and problems inherited from colonial times are subject to substantial regional variations. In a comparative ethnographic study of two different Namibian communities, Fuller (1993) convincingly demonstrates the divergence of social institutions induced by the uneven exposition to colonial forces.

By analyzing the processes of migration in former Damaraland, this paper traces the distinctive regional development and explores its divergence from the paradigm outlined above. It will highlight the prevailing 'cultures of mobility', which are expressed in a specific rural population structure and circular processes of migration and exchange that entail strong mutual dependencies of rural and urban livelihoods. In the closing section of this working paper I will argue, that these dynamics can be interpreted as flexible and heterogeneous networks that cross-cut and connect rural and urban spaces.

In the following section, a short introduction to the background of the research area is given. The paper draws on the results of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork on migration and social security networks in the Fransfontein area (rural Kunene South) and the urban settings of Windhoek and Walvis Bay, conducted by the author in 2005/06.[4]

The Research Area

The small farms scattered on the commons surrounding the village of Fransfontein represent a settlement pattern typical for the wider region. It is characterized by an average size of about a dozen homesteads scattered around a communal water point. Windmills and diesel engines pump the water from the boreholes into a tank, from where it is distributed to a fenced-in watering place for the livestock and to a tap for human consumption. Water point committees represent the settlement's major political decision making units. As in many other parts of arid southern Africa, the availability of water and pasture are the main limiting factors for human settlements. The average yearly rainfall is at 209 mm[5] and subject to high regional variations. Recurring droughts like those in 1981–83 and 1991–93 are endemic to the climate regime and pose a constant threat to the livelihood of the local pastoralists.

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[3] See for example the novel by SWAPO politician Helmut Angula (1990), and the historical account given by Hishongwa (1992).

[4] The data presented is based on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork (Greiner 2007, 2008a, 2008b). The research project was part of the multidisciplinary collaborative research project ACACIA (Arid Climate, Adaptation and Cultural Innovation in Africa, SFB 389) at the University of Cologne, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). I am deeply grateful to Dr. Julia Pauli, the senior researcher of the subproject C10 and her husband Prof. Dr. Michael Schnegg for their friendly collaboration and their helpful methodological and conceptual advice. For further information on the ACACIA project see: http://uni-koeln.de/sfb389/.

[5] This yearly average refers to the nearby town of Khorixas in the period from 1957 to 1999. The standard deviation is at 104 mm (Zeidler, Hanrahan, and Scholes 2002: 391).

Typical homesteads comprise several small houses and shacks of a square layout. Built from a framework of Mopane wood poles, the walls are covered by a reddish-brown mixture of cattle dung and clay and roofed with corrugated iron plates. Some of the homesteads also contain stone houses with whitewashed walls and cemented floors. These houses belong to the more affluent families, representing a growing socioeconomic stratification within the rural population. Most homesteads are surrounded by fences of wire or waist-high walls. The fenced courtyards contain the families' cooking sites and the thatched open constructions which provide shade for the sitting area where most of daily social life takes place. Outside these courtyards but still located within earshot of the homestead are the livestock kraals. Here the household's cattle, goat, sheep and draft animals are kept during the night to protect them against jackals and theft. Scrap vehicles and donkey carts, broken water drums and remains of defunct houses and kraals cover the backyards of the homesteads, which are often located 100 meters or more apart from each other. While some of the farms are connected to a telephone landline, power supply is rare, as is individual water supply in single homesteads. Various stages of construction and decay in the different homesteads strongly support the impression that the settlement's structures are fundamentally shaped by processes of socioeconomic advancement and decline.

Livestock husbandry is the predominant economic strategy on the farms, though not in terms of absolute income. Most households keep some goats and cattle; some also keep sheep and draft animals. However, only few households survive on pastoral production alone, and many combine different sources of income to make a living (Schnegg forthcoming). In terms of absolute income, contribution-free old age pensions[6] and remittances (cash and kind), often in a combination, dominate in many households. Households with limited or no access to such transfer incomes usually belong to lower income strata. They eke out a living by performing odd jobs such as collecting and selling firewood or building materials and brewing homemade beer. Apart from the young men that work as hired herders, wage employment is rare and largely restricted to a few jobs in local government and administration.

Cultures of Mobility

Population distribution and gender patterns

The population structure of the communal farming settlements surrounding the village of Fransfontein has been shaped by various processes of immigration. Fransfontein was founded as a settlement for Swaartbooi/Nama in the 1880s; the surroundings were already inhabited by Damaras. Because of its relative remoteness from colonial settlement patterns, white settlers arrived in the research area comparatively late (Sullivan 1996). In 1922, the area was declared

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6   In Namibia, every citizen aged 60 years and over is entitled to a contribution-free old age pension which is paid out on a monthly basis.

a Damara and Nama reserve (Bollig et al. 2006). In the late 1930s, a group of Herero-speaking pastoralists obtained permission to settle in the reserve. The newcomers, a group of comparatively rich farmers of mixed ethnic origin, had been forced to leave their reserve in the vicinity of Outjo. With their arrival, the reserve's population almost doubled and livestock numbers grew fivefold (Miescher 2006).

In the late 1960s, the Fransfontein reserve was incorporated into the newly created Damara homeland. This was established by the South African government alongside with 10 other, ethnically homogenous homelands, in the process of implementing apartheid policies in what was then a South African colony (Vesper 1983). Despite the South African attempt to separate the different ethnic groups, immigration of people of other ethnic background into the region continued. This was partly due to dynamics that Rhode (1993:8) has described as a "complex and largely hidden movement of peoples within and between localities (…) in response to dwindling resources". These processes usually followed the lines of kinship affiliation and mainly led to the immigration of Herero-speaking families into the research area. Another significant group of immigrants are hired herders and farm workers who have been increasingly employed by wealthier livestock owners since the mid-1980s. Most of these young men come from the northern areas of the country, predominantly from the Kaokoveld, but also from Ovamboland, the Kavango area and from the adjacent Angolan territories. Farm workers and their family members currently account for about 20 per cent of the total resident population.

Accordingly, today's population is ethnically diverse with Damara and Hereros constituting the biggest groups, followed by people of Ovambo and other ethnic origin such as Himba, Kavango, Nkumbi, San, Nama and Zemba. Conjugal and kinship ties, however, cross the ethnic boundaries, cultural practices are widely shared, and many people are multilingual, speaking both Khoekhoegowab and Otjiherero.[7] Ethnic heterogeneity can be found in other parts of former Damaraland, too (see for example Fuller 1993). In 1981, still under the influence of apartheid legislation, the national census classified roughly two thirds of the homeland's population as Damara, with Herero (17 %) and Ovambo (7 %) being listed as the other major population groups (Rhode 1993:23).

Processes of circular and return migration have led to a bifurcated age distribution: The resident population is dominated by pre-school children and old-age pensioners. The predominance of the youngest generation can be ascribed to the widespread practice of child fostering. Many urban-based parents send their pre-school children to grow up with their grandparents on the farm: About 40 per cent of all minors can be classified as foster children. They usually leave the farms together with other children their age to attend school. Schools are too far for daily commuting and the pupils reside either in school hostels or stay with relatives.

After this initial out-migration, people usually tend to stay in the urban areas, although many return to the rural areas where they spend some months or even years in times of unem-

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7   Otjiherero is a Bantu language, Khoekhoegowab is the language of the Damara and Nama (cf. Maho 1998).

ployment, illness, or if their help is needed. Some younger men and women stay on the farm to guard the homesteads of absent relatives. Others settle down and try to make a living through livestock husbandry. Most farm-related work, however, is performed by hired herders who are not related or otherwise affiliated with the resident families. Some of these workers bring their families along, but most are single young men in their 20s and 30s, as is highlighted in the population pyramid.
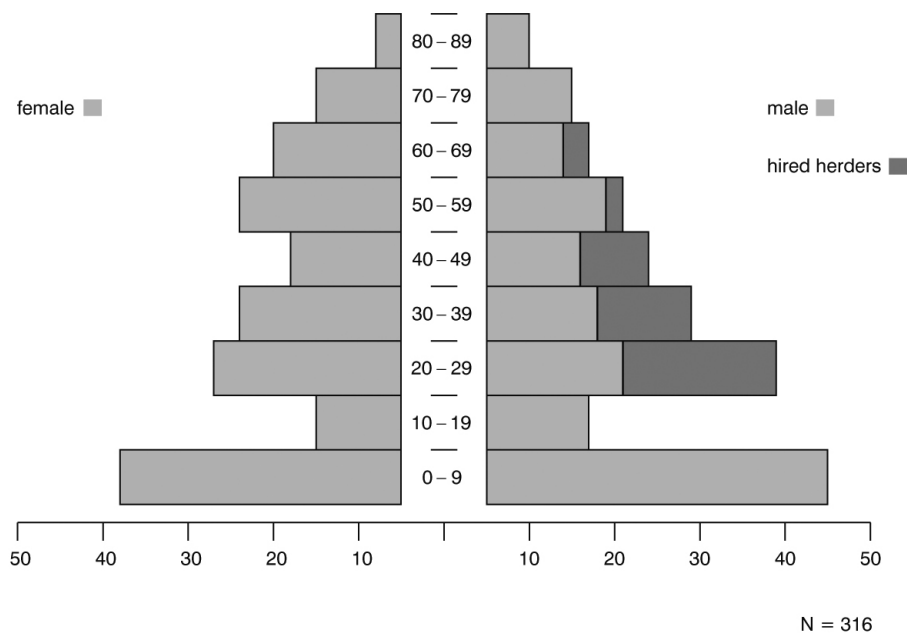

Figure 1: Population pyramid

Upon retirement from their jobs in the cities, older people usually return to the farms: About 21 per cent of the farm residents are aged sixty and older. This figure is three times higher than the national average of 7 per cent (Republic of Namibia 2003:11–12). This emphasizes the continuing significance of return migration. The population pyramid (figure 1) represents the tendencies described above as well as the gender distribution. It represents the rural research area and is made up of the data of the population on 10 farms.

Contrary to the skewed age distribution, the sex ratio in the research area is balanced. If the farm workers and their families, which usually reside in the area on a temporary basis, are excluded[8], the resident population represents a sex ratio of 97.[9] This figure is close to the ratio given for the Kunene Region as a whole.[10]

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8   Hired herders and their families represent about 20 per cent of the total farm population in the research area. If they are included, the sexual proportion is highly unbalanced toward the male side (119). Hired herders are exclusively male (N=43), their family members (N=23) are predominantly female. They are not highlighted in the population pyramid (figure 1).

9   N=256. The sex ratio is defined as the number of males per 100 females.

10   For the Kunene Region, a ratio of 101 is given. The national figure is at 94 (Republic of Namibia 2003:4,11).

Female patterns of out-migration do not differ from male ones. However, remittances sent back from urban-based women significantly exceed the contributions made by their male counterparts: 47 per cent of the daughters and only 37 per cent of the sons of the rural household heads send remittances (N=125/121 respectively). By the same token, the monetary value of the daughters' remittances is substantially higher.

Regional census data from 1981 (Rhode 1993:24) and from 1991 (Naeraa et al. 1993) indicate that the balanced sex ratio has been stable during the last decades. With reference to these figures, Naeraa and colleagues noted in the early 1990s: "This situation is contrary to expectations, as the research team had expected to find a predominance of women in the study area as a result of both, historical and contemporary migration patterns" (1993:73). In contrast, the sex ratio in the "Four-O-Region", constituting former Ovamboland, is highly unbalanced.[11]

Circulation of people and goods

As described above, emigration from the farming settlements starts around the age of six years, when children leave to attend school. Schooling is compulsory, and most pupils stay at their relatives' homes or at school hostels. A frequent change of residence is common: By the end of their school career, most children have lived in several towns or cities and with different relatives. Some of the former pupils then return to the rural home for some months or even for years. Youth unemployment is one of the major reasons for this. In the countryside, life is cheaper than in the urban areas, and there is always domestic or farming work young people can help out with and still occasionally leave the farm to look for a job in town. These patterns already shaped the biographies of many children from the rural areas long before independence.

The relative proximity to Windhoek, but especially to the coastal towns of Swakopmund and Walvis Bay has enhanced a high mobility between the farm residents and their urban-based relatives even during the times of apartheid. A figure given by Rhode (1993:23) will give some idea of extent to which the homelands' residents are linked to the urban areas. He noted that in 1981 more than a third of those classified as 'Damara' by the South Africans were living in the Katutura area of Windhoek. At least since the 1950s, the Damara have been the most urbanized group in Namibia. In the 1960s, about 42 per cent resided in urban areas (Botha 2003:5).

In contrast with the Ovambo and other inhabitants of the homelands north of the 'police zone', who were bound into the contract labor system, black people from other homelands were allowed to enter Windhoek on a temporary basis. Upon arrival, they had to apply for a permit within 72 hours. Persons under 16 years of age were exempt from this regulation (Pendleton 1996:30). The families in the Fransfontein region whose kinship networks stretched into the capital seemed to have made excessive use of this relative freedom. Many school children were

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[11]   The respective figures for 2001 are: 83 (Ohangwena), 81 (Omusati), 84 (Oshana) and 90 (Oshikoto), indicating a clear predominance of females in these Regions (Republic of Namibia 2003:12–16).

sent to stay with their relatives in Windhoek, where they stayed and acquired a permanent residence permit.

Returning to the rural home at the end of the working life completes the circular structure of migration, which is accompanied by a circular flow of material support and services between town and country. Urban-based relatives support the rural households with remittances in cash and kind. Many rural households, especially those that do not qualify for the pension scheme, depend on these transfers. The rural homes, in turn, provide their urban-based kin with meat, dairy products, and in some cases also with money, generated from livestock sales. Meat is comparatively expensive in the urban centers and is therefore highly appreciated by the urbanites. In many families it is common to slaughter a goat just before departure of an urban-based visitor, who will take the meat along to freeze or share it with friends and relatives.

Services provided by the rurally-based households, like child fostering and caring for sick family members, underline the importance of the rural areas for the city dwellers. In this context, the contribution-free old age pensions play a crucial role. Implemented in 1973 and augmented after independence in 1990, the pension system enables the elderly to lead an economically independent life and even care for their dependents. For the rural families, their urban-based relatives who take in new migrants coming to the cities to look for work or to attend school are a "bridgehead to the outside world" (Geschiere and Gugler 1998:310).

The emerging picture is not one of unbalanced, one-sided dependency. There is no impoverished rural area surviving on migrant transfers only. Rather, there are relationships based on mutual dependence, bilateral exchange and reciprocal strategies of informal social security: Survey data on transfer relations show that in 2005 the economic value of rural-urban transfers was largely equal with the value of remittances sent by urban-based family members.[12]

Cultural adaptation to mobility

One of the results of the conditions described above is that people become acquainted with a mobile way of life during their childhood. Migration is not seen as a threat to ethnic identity or family solidarity, but rather as a necessary and even welcome step which belongs to certain stages of life. This is reflected in linguistic patterns:

Among the Oshivambo-speaking people, there is a term for those who went to town and have broken their ties with their rural-based family. These people are called 'Omwbiti' which means that they have "lost their roots" (Frayne and Pendleton 2001:1066). This implies a cultural concept of migration which suggests a fear of alienation similar to what has been

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[12] We can assume, however, that the value of transfers varies cyclically, depending on the ecological conditions and events such as droughts and on the national economic situation. In 2005, when data for this project was collected, the rural situation was affected by previous raining seasons with above average precipitation.

described for the "red Xhosa" on the Eastern Cape by Mayer (1971). Many of the residents on the Fransfontein commons are familiar with this term; they know that some of the hired herders and other immigrants to the region became "Ombwiti". However, they themselves do not use this word, nor do they have a similar term. I would agree with Frayne and Pendleton (2001:1066), in arguing that this possibly reflects a long exposure to town life. When asked whether they use a similar word for their migrants or townspeople, people from Fransfontein usually reply that there is no need for such a term because people always come back and stay in contact.

People in the Fransfontein area rather express their claim to acquiring the cultural competency to live in both worlds, rural and urban. Only this flexibility will allow them to survive in an environment characterized by a high degree of individual mobility in response to economic and ecological insecurities. People become familiar with this 'culture of mobility' from their childhood on. The opinion of a 28-year old urban-based Fransfonteiner is exemplary for this attitude: Asked, if he and his friends tried to adapt to an urban lifestyle, he answered:

> … You won't stay for the rest of your life in town. One day, you will have to go back to the rural area where you are coming from (…). So if you are moving there, you won't be able to cope with the farm activities. But if you are both, you know the lifestyle of the town and you know the lifestyle of the rural areas, it will go. Wherever you go, you will be able to cope.

"Wherever you go, you will be able to cope." This attitude is fundamental to the 'culture of mobility' which requires a flexible and adaptive competence: The actors need to adapt to urban and rural contexts alike. Specializing in one style only—rural or urban—would deprive them of their capacity to move and to make use of the advantages that both spaces offer.

Furthermore, the circulation of people and goods between town and country also entails an exchange of ideas. People retiring from their urban jobs build township-style houses on the farms; they bring in 'modern' furniture and other amenities of urban life such as international soccer magazines and solar-powered TV sets. Many urbanites, on the other hand, keep their own livestock in the rural areas, which often is part of their old-age security. Some keep their animals in the family kraal, others keep their own flocks, looked after by hired herders. These people—most of them are economically successful labor migrants—are called part-time farmers. For all of them, however, farming is an important and welcome leisure activity as are the regular visits to the rural areas.

Conclusion: Toward a Networked Space

In many respects, Namibia is still under-researched. When assessing the rapidly changing social structure of the post-independent country, it is essential to identify major research gaps and to question paradigmatic patterns that are taken for granted or accepted as 'typical'. With this paper, I want to question the dominant representation of labor migration. Highlighting some of

the demographic, economic and cultural aspects of migration in former Damaraland will reveal patterns some of which will conform to the paradigmatic representation, while others will converge from it.

The converging pattern is a circular structure of migration, which continues to exist widely in other parts of Namibia and South Africa, and which is said to be intrinsic to many instances of population movement in sub-Saharan Africa (Adepoju 2006, Gugler 1996, Posel 2003). Embedded in this circular structure however, there are significant variations from the situation perceived as 'typical':

As a consequence of historical and recent migratory movements, the population in rural Damaraland is characterized by a high degree of ethnic heterogeneity. This distinguishes the region from the allegedly 'typical', mono-ethnic homeland structure. People migrating to the urban areas therefore do not leave a 'tribal' area to be exposed to a new world of interethnic complexity, as such processes were described for example in the famous studies of the Manchester School in urban South Central Africa (Hannerz 1980, Werbner 1984). People from the Fransfontein area have longstanding interethnic relations at home.

Another pattern which significantly diverges from the paradigmatic representations of migration is the balanced sex ratio. Women migrate as much as the men, and remittances sent by women even exceed those sent by men. Contrary to what is described for Ovamboland (e.g. Hishongwa 1992) and former homelands in South Africa (e.g. Murray 1981), families are not divided along gendered patterns. The rural population is rather divided along age-specific markers such as schooling and retirement. Migration seems to be inherent to certain stages in the life cycle.

The 'culture of mobility' sketched above bridges these generational divisions and closes the rural-urban divide: The exchange of goods and services, the circulation of people and ideas connect town and country and brings the actors into a position of mutual interdependence. Contrary to Ferguson's observation in urban Zambia, there seem to be no mutually exclusive cultural identification schemes of distinct urban and rural values. Rather, people try to keep a foothold in both spheres because this appears to be the most suitable strategy.

From the divergence of migration patterns, we can conclude that the paradigmatic representation of the Ovambo experience tends to overshadow the diversity of historical trajectories and current practices experienced by the country's manifold groups and regions. In order to come to a better understanding of contemporary social dynamics, these experiences have to be uncovered and compared. Clearly, more research is needed here.

But how can we assess the spatial dynamics described above? How can we overcome a dualistic perception and representation of rural and urban spheres? For this purpose, space has to be conceptualized as a networked structure, enabling a multidirectional circulation of people, goods, services and ideas. However, contrary to a Castellian 'space of flows' with rather

arbitrary and unspecific network connections (Castells 2001), the networked space found here is grounded in highly specific places. It resembles the trans-local networks described by Karen Fog Olwig (1997:12) in her ethnography of a Caribbean island: The networks are "grounded in cultural constructions, associated with particular localities (…)". These nodal points, or "cultural sites", are crucial for the reproduction of the networks (ibd.:17). Only a networked space, created by the actors and rooted in their own conventions, connects farm and city, kraal and township, while transcending the inherent dualistic notions.

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