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Socially Embedded Character of Informal Channels of Remittances: 'Omalayisha' in the South Africa/Zimbabwe Remittance Corridor

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Abstract

In this article, we cast some doubts on contemporary initiatives to formalise remittance channels by focusing on particular dynamics of the informal 'malayisha' system on the South Africa/Zimbabwe remittance corridor. We stress the socially embedded character of 'omalayisha' in some rural societies by demonstrating that the system is built on strong social and community relations of friendship, neighbourhood, kinship and referrals, and the development of strategic networks of state officials. We also seek to draw parallels between the historical movement of remittances from the cities to rural societies and the contemporary system of 'omalayisha'. Our argument suggests that 'omalayisha' are inherently part of the contemporary worker-peasant economy after the relocation and expansion of urban livelihoods to South African cities, and that their position in these societies extends beyond mere labour reproduction to accumulation and survival questions.

Keywords: migrants; omalayisha; remittances; socially embedded; South Africa; Zimbabwe.

JEL Classification: F22, F24

Introduction

Migration, remittances and development, have made inroads in discourses on development and poverty reduction in Africa and beyond (Gupta et al., 2009; IOM, 2006; World Bank, 2006). These are

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often invoked in contestations to remittance transfers through informal channels, which have become the subject of ambitious initiatives for regulation the world over. In the recent past informal remittance channels have been denigrated and stereotyped as lacking regulatory oversight, and as corridors for illicit activities (Endo et al., 2011; Todoroki et al., 2009). Thus, formalising these channels is often associated with reduced risks, efficiency and modernity, and economic benefits to the broader economy (both fiscal and for merchant capital) (Gupta et al., 2009; World Bank, 2006). Proponents have impressive reference points, particularly from Latin America and some parts of Asia to back their position, and there is now growing optimism that this can be replicated in poor countries in the Southern African region. Estimates of the total volume of remittances in the region vary. There is no consensus as to how much flows leave South Africa to countries in the region because large volumes move through informal channels, but estimates place the figure at a hopping R6.1 billion of cross-border flows annually (Truen and Chisadza, 2012).

The most immediate response to the opportunities offered by this market, in South Africa at least, was a 'rush' by merchant capital and other enterprising individuals to unveil formal sending channels (Western Union, Money Gram, FNB Money Transfer, etc.) and semi-formal channels including 'Mukuru' and similar channels, that would ensure that countries benefit from the remittance market. In Zimbabwe, the country's premier bank put in place legislative (the policy on international remittances through the Authorised Dealer with Limited Authority) and institutional (HomeLink) frameworks to mobile diaspora remittances and to facilitate 'formalisation of remittance inflows, effective accounting and monitoring' (The Chronicle, August 21, 2015). These initiatives generally attest to the general buy-in to the narrative on the opportunities for poor countries in formalising remittances channels. What such a modernist agenda has done however, is to shift focus to new possibilities, with little attention to certain complex dynamics within migrant sending societies, which may favour informal channels. The current narrative on formalising remittances, particularly along the South Africa/Zimbabwe corridor is thus misleading in so far as it presupposes that such modern methods of remittance disbursement will be suited to all concerned.

In former settler Southern Africa where colonial conquest was accompanied by territorial confinement of the indigenous populations into labour reserves, a migrant labour economy had emerged and split families became (and still is) a permanent feature in these migrant labour societies. Bush and Cliffe (1984: 77), define



migrant labour societies as 'rural areas reserved for Africans ...provide for the reproduction of labour power, used elsewhere in the economy in capitalist production, on terms that ma[k]e it available especially cheaply as some form of migrant labour' (Bush and Cliffe, 1984). Structurally, this led to the development of a worker-peasantry, which became overly dependent on remittances from the capitalist sector in a context where rural agriculture was severely stifled. Over the years remittances began to influence the social relations and the dynamics of reproduction, as well as social stratification in these societies (Bush and Cliffe, 1984; Cousins et al. 1992; Mosley, 1983; Murray, 1981). These aspects depended as much on the movement of remittances and people between the two sectors as the reproduction of labour. While this was achieved through the availability of a rural bus service and informal relationships that developed among migrants (including with bus crews, friends, neighbours and colleagues), these later became incorporated into rural socio-economic life.¹

Our argument here is that informal channels of moving remittances have both historical and social elements, and the socially embedded character of these channels, as well as their 'distinctive historical lineages' have been overlooked and missed in the current push to formalise remittance channels. This article will attempt to highlight some of these factors that may impede on any efforts to formalise remittance channels in the South Africa/Zimbabwe remittance corridor using the informal '*malayisha*' system or '*omalayisha*' (as they have become known), a private cross-border transport service operating between Johannesburg in South Africa and certain migrant sending communities in Zimbabwe. The term '*omalayisha*' is derived from the Zulu word '*ukulayisha*', which literally means 'to transport', but 'it has been used in different contexts to refer to different entities, including the channel..., the operator(s), and the vehicle(s)', although we need to also understand it from a broader context of identity – both migrant identity and service identity, mainly 'overloading, human smuggling, and always with some form of cargo' (Thebe, 2011: 654).²

The paper rests on secondary literature and extended studies of '*omalayisha*' and rural society in south-western Matabeleland conducted between 2009 and 2016. We have extracted material

¹ It became normal for people in the rural to expect the bus to bring goods, letters, money, husbands and sons on weekends and month ends.

² People identify '*omalayisha*' with overloaded trailers, ability to circumvent formality and illegal activities including people-smuggling.

specific to remittances from the wider range of topics. Our approach to the literature targeted three subject areas: colonial conquest and the development of capitalism, colonial policies, and a wider analysis of Zimbabwe migration to South Africa. Our sources include scholarship on the wider colonial political economy, migrant labour societies and postcolonial dynamics including the Zimbabwe migration crisis; research and other reports; and newspaper articles. To get an understanding of '*omalayisha*' and their place in rural society, we draw on data from two ongoing projects on the formalisation of the South Africa/Zimbabwe remittance corridor, and changing worker-peasantries in former labour reserves. From these broad projects, we draw data from brief periods of ethnography on '*omalayisha*' and migrant sending communities in rural south-western Zimbabwe. The participant observations sought insight into the dynamics of '*omalayisha*' operations, their place in migrant-sending communities and migrants in South Africa, their future in a changing global environment, and broadly, changes in formerly migrant labour societies. The next section provides a brief background for remittances in formerly migrant labour societies. The sections thereafter aim to demonstrate the social character of '*omalayisha*', and the associated challenges for formalising remittances, which are alluded to in the article's title and expanded in the conclusion, by suggesting that '*omalayisha*' have become a bridge between the migrant communities in South Africa and sending societies in Zimbabwe, and cannot be wished away.

Combinations of 'Wage' and 'Hoe'

Contemporary informal channels of remittances between South Africa and Zimbabwe or '*omalayisha*' and their place in migrant societies can be understood only in the context of a decades-old history of the development of capitalism in the region and the resultant migratory labour systems that developed, together with the fundamental role of remittances in the livelihoods for 'many, if not, most rural households' (Potts, 2000: 808). While this history has involved some significant changes since legislation designed to limit the rate of African urbanisation were introduced in some countries in the region, and even with the attainment of independence in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, urban-rural linkages were never completely destroyed. In migrant labour societies where combinations of 'hoe and wage' (Cordell et al., 1996) are central to livelihoods, possibly to take advantage of opportunities offered in both spheres and to minimise risks, labour migrants tend to retain rural links (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). Initially this could be understood through the nature of the development of capitalism in the region, better captured by Michael Neocosmos (1993: 60):



...in the Southern African region..., the dominant tendency has been for monopoly capitalist conditions to produce not a clearly demarcated proletariat, neither a proletariat in the making – nor for that matter a large 'pure' peasantry – but a strange amalgam....

However, its continuation after independence was due partly to the state's failure to develop a rural farming class, but also, a coping strategy following the natural and economic challenges in the 1990s in countries like Zimbabwe (Bird and Shepherd, 2003). This was particularly so after the adoption of turn-around policies during the last two decades of the twentieth century. In the case of Zimbabwe, the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) represented a significant shift towards semi-proletarianisation. Instead of squeezing households towards a peasant existence through job losses and unemployment, the hardship that followed ensured that households continued to fragment labour through cross-border migration to South Africa and Botswana (Maphosa, 2010; Thebe, 2011).

Labour fragmentation has often been cited as a stratification factor in rural communities. This is supported by empirical studies that have shown that households that combined 'hoe and wage' were wealthy and could have access to additional labour (Adams, 1991; Thebe, 2012; Weiner and Harriss, 1991). In systems like those of colonial Zimbabwe where the success of capitalism was highly 'dependent both on migrants retaining access to rural subsistence production, and also on that production being insufficient to meet family needs' (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990: 678), a system that would link migrants and their remittances to the rural space remained a crucial factor. Assuming of course that migrants retained links with families they left behind through the flow of goods, cash or occasional visits.

The process of semi-proletarianisation was to a large extent a result of a process of colonial land expropriation in which white capitalist land interests were championed, and through which 'social formations where agrarian capital dominate[d] land ownership and agricultural production and accumulation while combinations of "hoe and wage" (or wage and hoe) [were] key to the reproduction of labour' (Bernstein, 2004: 211). The process had resulted in the establishment of labour reserves as labour supply areas for the emerging capitalist economy (Bush and Cliffe, 1984). Thus, the land dispossessions and the creation of reserves meant that Africans either occupied agromarginal land or survived through tenant or 'kaffir' farming on white-owned farms (Worby, 2001). Besides the quality of the land in the reserves, there was widespread overcrowding resulting in massive land degradation and reduced productivity.

In countries like South Africa and Zimbabwe, where cheap labour was central in the development of capitalism, the creation of non self-sustaining communities highly dependent on the wage was not a coincidence, but a strategy to incorporate Africans into the capitalist mode of production, albeit at cheaper rates (Bush and Cliffe, 1984; Stoneman and Cliffe, 1989). In his analysis of the development of capitalism in Rhodesia, Johnson (1992: 111) observed:

The need to minimi[z]e production costs in the mining industry, and the appearance of undercapitali[z]ed farmers seeking to make their fortune from the land, created a demand for a large supply of African labo[u]r at the cheapest possible cost.

Thus, state policy focused on developing a large supply of cheap male labour on a migratory system. In colonial Zimbabwe, the state also deployed extra-economic means of coercion to recruit African labour (Arrighi, 1970; Mosley, 1983). However, in the context of inadequate labour supply in the economy as a whole, employment opportunities were readily available and labour was freely mobile (Johnson, 1992). Where restrictive legislations prevented the migration of whole families, and the urban wage was low, 'women and children were forced to stay behind in remote rural reserves, undertaking subsistence cultivation to feed themselves and to subsidi[z]e the men's wages' (Schmidt, 1991: 733). The worker-peasantry then became a central component in the colonial development framework (Potts, 2000). The 'hoe' remained a key aspect of household production but the wage was also equally important in financing agricultural production for successful rural farmers (Bernstein, 2004). But for marginal farmers, the wage became a means for both consumption and accumulation. It was not surprising that colonial attempts to eliminate worker-peasantry in Zimbabwe were strenuously resisted before and after independence (Bush and Cliffe, 1984; Chimhowu and Hulme, 2006; Thompson, 2004, 2007).

Linking Migrants and Places of Origins

As noted elsewhere (Thebe, 2011), the subject of this paper – '*omalayisha*' – emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to migration flows from rural south-western Zimbabwe. It later grew with the growth in the population of migrants from these areas in Johannesburg and the growing demand for remittances occasioned by perennial droughts in the 1990s.³ Its emergence represents early

³ A lot has been written about the post-independence events in Matabeleland that partly contributed to cross-border flights, but also, as others have shown, cross-border movements from these societies have a long pedigree, and came to be seen as a rite of passage.



efforts by migrants to bridge the geographical gap between Johannesburg in South Africa and migrant sending communities in Zimbabwe. While it has transformed through time, both in scope, geographical coverage and fleet, it has maintained its informality. Even at the risk of oversimplification due to overlaps in the transition phases, and with the other cross-border couriers, it is superficially neat to view it as having developed in three broad phases, each characterised by different demands, mode of operation, relationships and services offered.

The initial phase, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, was characterised by a part-time, irregular and exclusive service that was confined to those closely associated with the vehicle owners, who gave them goods, money or letters to take to families back home. These people mainly used their own private and smaller vehicles, and with time and as the demand for transportation grew, they started towing small trailers in order to ferry more goods. These vehicle owners were often neighbours, friends or relatives living in the same community as the remitting migrants. The practice itself was not new, and built on the system of '*ukuphathisa*' (sending goods through other people), which was a popular method of sending remittances in migrant labour societies. A key point here is that migrant men in urban areas would send goods, money and letters with the bus crew, neighbours and colleagues to wives and family in the rural areas when they were unable to pay a visit to the rural home. As these migrants were largely dependent on others for the goods and messages to reach loved ones back home when they were not travelling, reciprocal relationships developed where whoever was travelling home took with them goods, letters, money and messages for others.

Going back to '*omalayisha*', changes in their operations happened in the 1990s with increased migration as the effects of ESAP and droughts began to be felt in the former reserves.⁴ This marked the second phase and the transition into a more regular full-time service that also expanded to other parts of Matabeleland including Bulawayo. Goods transported during this period were those that were not available locally, but with time, it became cheaper and trendy for migrant sending communities to consume South African

⁴ The effects of ESAP on livelihoods have been covered extensively by scholarship on Zimbabwe, what is missing in this literature however, is the explicit evidence linking ESAP to out-migration.

products.⁵ It was this new social setting, yet, significantly contextualised by a long history of consumption of foreign goods since independence that set the scene for a public but still informal cross-border courier service. Unlike the part-time service before it, which had a community orientation, '*omalayisha*' became highly commercialized and could deliver anywhere and for anybody.

As the flow of migrants into South Africa intensified after 2000, more transport operators joined the industry, and the service spread to other parts of the country including areas in the Far East of the country, which marked the third and final phase of the transition. This period brought more subtle changes to the movement of goods and people. This was a new space and time where the fact that certain laws and processes could be circumvented through illicit payments, enabled '*omalayisha*' to move anything across the borders. In the words of one transport operator: 'the economic situation in Zimbabwe informed what moved in and out, and human smuggling became one of our core business' (Mbawula, 2009).⁶ People smuggling and goods courier became so lucrative that '*omalayisha*' became the *nouveau riche* (Maphosa, 2010). Many migrants were reluctant to let their families and friends continue enduring economic hardship in Zimbabwe and were sending for loved ones to join them in South Africa. This had economic implications on '*omalayisha*', the people often tasked with the responsibility of bringing these people to South Africa even without travel documents. Charges for transporting undocumented migrants were often five times the normal fee, making this by far the most lucrative function (Tati, 2008). The context also allowed operators to change their fleets by acquiring modern off-road double cabin vehicles and passenger carriers like the Toyota Quantum, and some acquired large fleets and employed other people to operate them.

Despite these changes, trailers remained a distinguishing characteristic, and these got bigger and stronger to cope with increased loads and frequency of trips. Since the emergence of the '*malayisha*' system in the 1980s, and despite the transition, there has been one area of continuity that made '*omalayisha*' indispensable: the 'pick and deliver' and 'home to home' convenience they offered.⁷ In over three decades, '*omalayisha*' offered a rapid 'same

⁵ A series of droughts took place in the 1990s, and migrant households received their food requirements from South Africa through '*omalayisha*'.

⁶ Interview, 18 December 2009.

⁷ *Omalayisha* mostly travelled during the night, possibly to avoid traffic and law enforcement officials, and arrived at destination in the morning. Migrants would send



day or overnight' service, which bridged the geographical gap between Johannesburg and even the remotest areas of Zimbabwe by transporting people, goods and cash, which provided a sustainable seamless exchange between labour and its earnings (Thebe, 2011). It is important here to recognise that even the cross-border passenger bus service transports remittances and people, engages in people smuggling and delivers passengers to their door steps in Zimbabwe, but it terminates in urban centres.

The Social Character of 'Omalayisha'

In this section, we argue that there is a social dimension to the process of '*ukulayisha*' – be it the transaction relationship, community membership of '*omalayisha*', high visibility in the communities they serve, or how they have been accepted as part of migrant society – that makes the service virtually irreplaceable. The relationship between '*omalayisha*' and their clientele is far from a business transaction, it is a relationship entirely based on trust from both parties. Trust in this case is derived from community membership (neighbourhood and friendship ties, kinship relations and referrals) but also, trust is earned through reliability, honesty and good interpersonal relations (Maphosa, 2010). The system has operated on an informal personal basis since its emergence, and both migrant clients and '*omalayisha*' have tended to develop relations of trust. Simply put, migrants trust that '*omalayisha*' will deliver goods, money and people in his care regardless of the legal status, and '*omalayisha*' trusts that his clients will honour their end of the bargain even without any signed documentation. For example, '*omalayisha*' would smuggle relatives of migrants into South Africa upon the promise that the payment will be made at the destination, and trusts that the payment will be made upon arrival. It is important to state here that migrants have a preferred '*omalayisha*' or '*omalayisha*', and each '*omalayisha*' has his clientele. Unlike the public passenger transport service that caters for everyone, patronage of a particular '*omalayisha*' is through previous relationships or recommendations by friends and acquaintances. If a migrant has goods or money to send home and his '*omalayisha*' is unavailable, he/she seeks referrals from close friends or colleagues to their '*omalayisha*'.

Migrants or people back home would refer friends, relatives and colleagues to '*omalayisha*' they have interacted with before and have absolute trust in their conducts. One particular '*omalayisha*', Thwalumuntu Mangena, had earned popularity among migrants for

fresh products including bread and meat products to their families, and they would be received still fresh.

taking illegal migrants through the border post. In other words, he was trusted because '*uhambisana phezulu, akangeni emanzini*' [does not take his clients through the Limpopo River] (Doreen int.). He concurred:

...reputation is earned, and your reputation determines the size of your clientele. People trust us with their belongings and loved ones, and they pay for such trust..... All we need to do is to honour our obligations (Mangena, int).⁸

As noted elsewhere (Thebe, 2011: 654), '*omalayisha* owe their popularity from the speed of delivery, convenience and the ability to transport anything across the border', but not all accomplish these on a regular basis. At times, vehicles break down or the goods get lost or are confiscated at customs, which may lead to a breakdown of trust. These situations are more likely to lead to conflict. But conflicts are mediated by factors governing the relationship – friendship, neighbourhood, and kinship – and are significantly less pronounced in rural routes where '*omalayisha*' were community members than in urban routes where clients have even filed theft charges with the police against some '*omalayisha*'.

Relationships also inform the kind of contract that the parties enter. These contracts are not written and are not enforced by any legal statutes, but bind both parties through social expectations and dictates. Depending on what is being transported, '*omalayisha*' operate three types of contracts. The first and most common, is the 'cash and deliver' contract, where migrants or people back home pay first before any service can be rendered. In cases involving the smuggling of people into South Africa or the repatriation of corpses, they also accept payment in the form of assets, usually livestock or furniture. The second, and one mostly applied in the movement of undocumented migrants, is the 'pay forward' contract. These are of two types and depend on who and where the contract is entered, but they are mostly entered between the would-be migrant and '*omalayisha*', with the benefactor only consulted when the process is already underway, although migrants in South Africa would also enter into these arrangements and request '*omalayisha*' to assist with the smuggling of relatives into South Africa.

The last is the 'pre-paid' contract, usually entered between migrants in South Africa and '*omalayisha*' to smuggle relatives into South Africa. The transportation fee is settled in advance by the migrant even before '*omalayisha*' departs for Zimbabwe. This contract is

⁸ Interview, 19 December 2009.



particularly common when migrant parents want to be reunited with children they left with grandparents in Zimbabwe. Migrant parents in South Africa would request '*omalayisha*' to bring into South Africa children – both those with legal documents and without – for a visit, particularly when schools are closed. For this service '*omalayisha*' would charge R300 for a child holding a passport and up to R1 500 for undocumented children. The smuggling of children into South Africa has become necessary following regulation changes to the cross-border movement of children after May 2012.

Research has shown that the regulations, which were adopted mainly to curb child trafficking following United Nations Protocols on Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Chronicle, Aug. 23, 2012; Netsianda, 2007; Zoutnet, Dec.12, 2012), have actually spurred cross-border child smuggling activities. '*Omalayisha*' have become very important in maintaining normalcy in the culture of reuniting children with parents despite the tough regulations. According to the regulations, 'a parent or guardian intending to travel to South Africa in the company of minor children is ...required to produce an affidavit signed by the other parent or both parents in the case of those travelling with a guardian before the child's passport is stamped' (Chronicle, Aug. 23, 2012). The majority of migrant parents in South Africa and those we interacted with were lowly skilled, and due to the nature of their jobs, children stayed with grandparents in Zimbabwe, and only linked up with parents during school holidays or when parents visited home. It was easy for parents to be linked with children when and if they wanted them to visit. All they did was to pay a trusted '*umalayisha*' to transport their children for them. '*Omalayisha*' are highly skilled in circumventing formal and legal procedures, and despite highly publicised incidents of arrests and incarceration, they still perform these responsibilities with distinction.

As in every other process that involves third parties, there are great risks involved, and migrant parents agreed that it is an emotional process. This is however, offset by careful choice of '*omalayisha*'. The choice of '*umalayisha*' is often based on trustworthiness, previous association and good references from other migrants or neighbours and relatives. Parents prefer '*umalayisha*' who does not expose children to danger by using undesignated entry points. The most popular '*omalayisha*' are those who use formal entry points. Over half of the parents we met had utilised the same '*umalayisha*' for years while others had a list of individuals '*abahambisana phezulu* (move people through the border post)'. A peculiar element we realised about the relationship between '*omalayisha*', the children in their

custody and the parents, is the closeness. The children appeared comfortable around certain individual operators, and referred to them with a variety of respectful names like 'bhuti Mandla', 'bab' omncane' or 'malume'.⁹

Besides the movement of children, 'omalayisha' have been involved in the repatriation of infants from their mothers in South Africa to grandparents in Zimbabwe. This is amply captured in a newspaper report entitled '*Omalayitsha double as road nannies*' (ThinkAfrica Press, Dec. 16, 2013). According to the report, mothers originally from Zimbabwe who struggle to find the time and resources to care for their young children often pay 'omalayisha' 'to smuggle their children back to Zimbabwe where they can be looked after by family or friends'. Although this is a rather unique and uncommon function of 'omalayisha', the 'omalayisha' we met had all done it before and were prepared to do it again if requested. Nonetheless, and despite the negative picture created by the newspaper report, the process is less cumbersome – a point stressed by those involved – as the infants are often cared for by other women passengers during the journey. The role of 'omalayisha' is thus not that of the 'nannies', but facilitators at the border posts and delivery men at the assigned addresses.

In parallel to the relationship at the level of clientele, 'omalayisha' also develop strategic social networks with officials in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. This is essentially for two reasons. The first involves road safety regulations and legal rights to operate. From the time of their origin, they had no umbrella body and no regulatory framework in the form of operators' permits, which created perceptions of impropriety. Furthermore, the service was conspicuous for an unroadworthy fleet and overloading, which violated road transport regulations. Thus, networks developed through bribing traffic and law enforcement officials, became a key part of its operations. Incidents of bribery of traffic enforcement officials manning the road network illustrates the ability of the system to negotiate barriers, and makes it a perfect channel for an illegal migrant population. Second, and related to the first, is the smuggling of goods and people. The service would ship anything across the two borders at a price, and on a regular basis, and to achieve this 'omalayisha' would create relationships with border officials by paying implicit (cold drink fee) or explicit bribes.¹⁰ The whole process of moving people across the border is rather simple as we were told – 'you simply negotiate the immigration process and

⁹ This means 'brother' and 'uncle' respectively in either Ndebele or Zulu.

¹⁰ The cold drink element also is implied with officials ask for a bribe. The statement is always 'ngomile (I am thirst).



pay your way all the way' (Mabhena, int.).¹¹ We realised that on average '*omalayisha*' can pay between R2 000 and R5 000 in bribes in any single journey. Clients also understand that '*omalayisha*' have to pay and are often available to offer financial support if their '*malayisha*' is stuck. This is not surprising since some of these migrants have a long history of interaction with their '*malayisha*'.

The place of '*omalayisha*' in migrant labour society

In rural communities, where '*omalayisha*' are neighbours, kin and community members, they operate on an informal personal basis. Societal factors lead to personal relationships where people from a particular geographical location utilise the services of particular transporters. Even during the changing economic environment, after the adoption of the multiple currency and return of goods on shelves in Zimbabwe, these transporters remained in business and transported cash, foodstuff and other goods that included empty 20litres plastic containers and buckets. As one of them put it at the time:

....people in rural areas need the containers to collect water....when people in South Africa come across these containers they buy ...and send them home where they are of great use (Mangena, int).¹²

The community character of '*omalayisha*' became even clear after 2009 when urban-based transport operators/entrepreneurs started to employ drivers from certain rural communities to serve these communities on their behalf. In 2010, we found new entrants in certain rural routes, some were relatively new in cross-border transportation, but they had also developed their own social networks at points of entry and exit. This followed challenges in serving the urban routes after 2009. To maximise the benefits of migration, migrants from urbanized areas were opting for cash remittances rather than consumer goods, a move that cut-off the '*malayisha*' agents completely. This was also occasioned by the reasonable food prices in Zimbabwe as well as exorbitant pricing by some '*omalayisha*' as revealed in migrants' interviews with Siji Ncube of the Voice of the People (VOP) Radio:

It is better to send cash than groceries because grocery prices in South Africa and home (Zimbabwe) are almost similar. After all, *omalayi[t]sha* charge exorbitant prices to transport goods

¹¹ Interview, Kholwani Mabhena, Johannesburg, 17 December 2014.

¹² Interview, 2 January 2012.

especially during the festive season so why should I lose money when I can buy groceries home? (Mthandazo Ncube).

Why should I lose money sending groceries home if I can just send money to my wife so that she buys groceries at home (Zimbabwe)? (Libani Dube).

In a community where migrants maintain strong links with their places of origin, and perform all rituals and ceremonies at places of origins, '*omalayisha*' also continue to play major roles in repatriating the dead, and transporting funeral and wedding parties.

One reason for the popularity of the '*malayisha*' system is the personalised service. Due to the nature of the relationship that developed over time, but also the community orientation, they sometimes offer services on friendly and humane terms. As Siphathangani Ncube testified, "had it not been for them my children would still be here without jobs, they were taken to South Africa by these guys and I paid them in instalments" (The Standard, Jan. 14, 2014). They also offer credit or other concessions. As members of the community, the migrant, the remittance recipient and the '*umalayisha*' have a relationship that transcends monetary transactions. It is symbiotic. '*Omalayisha*' rely to a large extent on referrals by existing relationships for new relationships, while they, in turn, often bring with them news, letters, goods and sometimes relatives for migrants in South Africa (Thebe, 2011). The study showed that most of the migrants have entered into some form of arrangements with one or more operators during the course of the relationship. Some had goods or relatives transported on credit, others had made 'pay forward' arrangements, and others had made installment arrangements. Of those who made payment arrangements, the majority have used '*omalayisha*' regularly for home and return journeys. While some have legal travel documents, others are illegal and rely entirely on '*omalayisha*' to maintain contact with families back home.

Another factor that contributes to the popularity of '*omalayisha*' in rural society is the lack of alternative forms of transport from South Africa direct to the rural hinterland. There are notable differences in options available to migrants from rural communities and urbanised areas where there is an efficient bus and cross-border passenger service. For migrants from rural localities, '*omalayisha*' remain the only convenient means even for documented travellers. On the occasions we met '*omalayisha*' on the outbound, their passengers included men, women and mothers with children together with their luggage. Sometimes the vehicles would have broken down, and in others,



journeys would take longer because the breakdowns were major. Despite these unfortunate circumstances, the study showed that rural migrants still prefer the use of '*omalayisha*' than the public passenger courier, which terminates in urban centres. Some complained about the travel logistics including issues of lodgings and the challenges of connections to their rural areas.¹³

A variety of factors – persistent droughts, growing unemployment, state neglect, economic crisis, etc. – have coalesced to make '*omalayisha*' a central part of everyday life for migrants and migrant societies alike. They are highly visible in most rural communities, on the roads, shopping centres and in homes, and every migrant household derives a life from what they bring. For some households, '*omalayisha*' are sons, husbands, sons-in-law and neighbours. As Siphathangani puts it, 'they are part of the community, and they 'cannot [be] wish[ed] ... away' (The Standard, Jan. 14, 2014). In every aspect of rural life, '*omalayisha*' have become central role players. In a context of persistent droughts where migrants feed the rural home, '*omalayisha*' continue to provide a convenient same day, home to home service, which ensures peace of mind for migrants and normalcy in food availability for the majority of households, and in the process, it has replaced the rural bus service, which for long has been the epitome of life through which remittances reached the worker-peasantry.

Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to cast some doubts on contemporary initiatives to formalise remittance channels through the case of '*omalayisha*'. We have shown how the '*malayisha*' system is built on strong social and community relations – friendship, neighbourhood, kinship and referrals – and the development of strategic networks of state officials, which allow it to link migrants and their remittances to even the remotest rural areas in Zimbabwe. We also sought to highlight how '*omalayisha*' have remained key actors in the socio-economic lives of both migrants and remittance receiving communities in Zimbabwe, given the large proportion of migrants that relies on their services, and communities in Zimbabwe that receive remittances and continue to send migrants to South Africa. It is not difficult to recognise the socially embedded character of the '*malayisha*' system after dominating migrants' economic and social spheres of life for over three decades by continuously bridging the geographical and time gap between communities in Zimbabwe and

¹³ In some rural areas, the bus service from Bulawayo is only available twice a week, which provides a challenge to some rural migrants.

Johannesburg. In rural communities, '*omalayisha*' are highly visible, and have assumed a position of indispensability and *heir apparent* to the rural bus service, which for long had been a livelihood courier for worker-peasant households.

We argue that there are certain parallels between the historical movement of remittances from the cities to rural societies in Zimbabwe and the contemporary system of informal cross-border remittance delivery through '*omalayisha*'. Our argument suggests that the '*omalayisha*' system is inherently part of the contemporary worker-peasant economy after the relocation and expansion of urban livelihoods to South African cities, and in the context of a pervasive worker-peasantry (Bush and Cliffe, 1984; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990), the role and position of such channels in migrant societies extend beyond mere labour reproduction to accumulation and survival questions. In a rapidly globalising environment where transnational livelihoods have become a central component of life even in marginal communities, the physical gap between the local and non-local has certainly transformed remittances and their movement, and in migrant labour societies '*omalayisha*' continue to guarantee that this is achieved with minimum complications and disruption to the social life of migrants. There is a need to recognise them. One alternative is to legitimise their operations like the taxi industry through registration and operation permits.

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