

The Social Embedded Character of Informal Channels of Remittances: Migrants, Rural Society and ‘*Omalayisha*’ in the South Africa/Zimbabwe Remittance Corridor

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 social embedded character of ‘*omalayisha*’ in migrant labour 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 suggest 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 migrant labour societies extend beyond mere labour reproduction to accumulation and survival questions, and identity.

Key words: Migrants, omalayisha, remittances, social embedded, South Africa, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Migration, remittances and formalizing remittance flows, have made inroads in discourses on development and poverty reduction in Africa and beyond (Gupta et al. 2009; IOM, 2006; Ratha, 2005; World Bank, 2006). These are often invoked in contestations to remittance transfers through informal corridors, which have become the object of regulations and ambitious initiatives to regulate. 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). But, more importantly formalising informal remittance channels is often associated with reduced risks, efficiency and modernity, and economic benefits to the broader economy (both government and merchant capital) (Gupta et al. 2009; World Bank, 2006). What such a modernist agenda has done is to shift focus to new possibilities, with little attention to certain complex dynamics within migrant societies, which favour informal channels.

In former settler Africa where colonial conquest was accompanied by the banishment and subsequent confinement of indigenous populations in African labour reserves, a migrant labour economy emerged. Migrant labour societies are those rural societies in Southern Africa that were reserved for Africans to ‘provide for the reproduction of labour power, used elsewhere in the economy in capitalist production, on terms that make it available especially cheaply as some form of migrant labour’ (Bush and Cliffe, 1984). Structurally, this led to the fragmentation of labour or ‘combinations of hoe and wage’ (Bernstein, 2004: 211), and the development of a worker-peasantry, which became over-dependent on remittances from the capitalist sector in a context where rural agriculture was stifled. Over the years remittances began to influence the social relations of production and the dynamics of reproduction, as well as social stratification (see, Amin, 1991; Bush and Cliffe, 1984; Cousins et al. 1992; Mosley, 1983). These aspects depended as much on the movement of remittances and people between the two sectors. While this was achieved through the availability of informal channels including the rural bus system, they became incorporated into rural life.

This social embedded character of informal transfers, as well as their ‘distinctive historical lineages’ (Bernstein, 2004: 211) have been overlooked and missed in the current push to formalise remittance channels, in particular the South Africa/Zimbabwe remittance corridor. This paper will attempt to highlight some of these factors using the informal ‘*malayisha*’ system or ‘*omalayisha*’ (as they have become known), a private transportation service between Johannesburg in South Africa and certain communities in Zimbabwe. The term ‘*omalayisha*’ is derived from the Ndebele 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).

The paper rests on literature and studies that primarily focus on the development and subsequent consolidation of capitalism in Southern Africa, and the dynamics of migrant labour economies, although it also sheds light on proletarianisation and accumulation questions, and to some extent, identity issues – the system as being identified with South African-based migrants. Some of the sources include contemporary scholarship on Zimbabwe, commissioned studies, press articles, and online sources. To get an understanding of the ‘*malayisha*’ system, its operations, place in rural society, and identity issues, we draw on data from two ethnographic studies of ‘*omalayisha*’ and their clients conducted between 2007 and 2014, and ongoing research on informal channels of remittances from South Africa to Zimbabwe. The next section provides a brief context for remittances. The sections thereafter aims to demonstrate the social character of ‘*omalayisha*’, and the associated challenges for formalising remittance channels, which are alluded to in the article’s title and expanded in the conclusion, by suggesting that ‘*omalayisha*’ are a bridge between the migrant community 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 Southern Africa, and with the attainment of independence in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Zimbabwe, urban and rural linkages could not be completely destroyed. In migrant labour economies where combinations of ‘hoe and wage’ (Cordell et al.1996) are key to livelihoods, possibly to take advantage of opportunities offered in both the urban and rural spheres and to minimise risks, migrants retain rural links (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). Initially this could be understood through the nature of the development of capitalist in the region, better captured by Michael Neocosmos (1993: 60):

in the Southern African region in particular, 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 as Wallerstein (1976) for one recognized some time ago.

However, its continuation after independence was due partly to the state's failure to develop a rural farming class, but also, as a broad strategy of survival 'to take advantage of the opportunities offered in both the urban and rural milieu, and to minimise risks' (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990: 678). This was particularly so after the adoption of turn-around policies during the last two decades of the twentieth century (see, Potts 2000: 814).

Labour fragmentation has often been cited as a stratification factor in rural communities. This is supported by empirical studies that show that households that combined 'hoe and wage' are wealth and can access additional labour (see, Adams 1991a, 1991b; 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), issues of labour and its movement remained a crucial factor. Assuming of course that migrants retained links with families they left behind through the flow of goods, cash or occasional labour (Arrighi, 1966), how these reached rural societies was critically in the reproduction of labour for capital accumulation.

The process of semi-proletarianisation was to a large extent a result of a process of colonial land expropriations 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 resulted in the establishment of African areas, which also acted as labour reserves for the emerging capitalist economy (Bush and Cliffe, 1984; Cousins, 2007). The large-scale dispossession of land that took place and the establishment of special areas for Africans meant that Africans either occupied agro-marginal land or engaged in tenant or '*kaffir*' farming on white-owned farms, paying 'rents in cash, crops or labour' (Worby, 2001: 480). Besides the quality of land in the reserves, there was widespread overcrowding resulting in massive land degradation and reduced productivity (see, Mare, 1980; Platzky and Walker, 1985; Prescott, 1961).

In countries like South Africa and Zimbabwe, where cheap labour was central in the development of capitalism, the creation of non self-sustaining communities that were highly dependent on the formal wage sector was not a coincidence, but a strategy to incorporate Africans into the capitalist mode of production, albeit at cheaper rates (Bush and Cliffe, 1984; Duggan, 1980; 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 colonial state also deployed extra-economic means of coercion to recruit African labour (Arrighi, 1970; Mosley, 1983). But also, in the context of inadequate labour supply, there were increasing opportunities for people to sell their labour, and people were freely mobile (Johnson, 1992). In colonial Zimbabwe, out-migration for urban jobs and even cross-border migration to South Africa also increased during this period, particularly after the enactment of the Compulsory Native Labour Act of 1942 (ibid).

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 subsidize the men's wages’ (Schmidt, 1991: 733). The worker-peasantry then became a central component in the colonial development framework (Arrighi, 1966; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). Rural agricultural production remained a key aspect of household production but as others have observed, the wage was also equally important in financing agricultural production for successful rural farmers (Bernstein, 2004; Duggan, 1980; Worby, 2001). But for marginal farmers, the wage became a means of consumption and a vehicle for accumulation. It was not surprising that colonial attempts to eliminate the worker-peasantry by creating peasant and proletariat classes in Zimbabwe were resisted (Bush and Cliffe, 1984; Duggan, 1980; Thompson, 2004, 2007). Similar attempts after independence were equally unsuccessful (Chimhowu and Hulme, 2006).

‘Omalayisha’ as a Link between Migrants and Places of Origins

As noted elsewhere (Thebe, 2011), the subject of this paper – ‘*omalayisha*’ – emerged in the late 1980s as a convenient channel for moving remittances and people between Johannesburg in South Africa and rural south-western Zimbabwe; it later grew with the growth in the population of migrants from this region and the growing demand for remittances following perennial droughts in the 1990s and ESAP-induced livelihood crisis.¹ Its emergence represents early efforts to bridge the geographical gap between the migrant community in South Africa and sending communities in Zimbabwe, by facilitating the movement

¹. 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.

of goods and people. It has transformed through time, both in scope, geographical coverage and the fleet, but 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 mainly used smaller vehicles, and with time, and as the demand for transportation grew, they started towing small trailers. These vehicle owners were often neighbours, friends or relatives living in the same rural community as the people who sent the goods or money. The practice itself was not new, and built on the system of '*ukuphathisa*' (sending goods through other people), which is a popular method of sending remittances in migrant labour societies.

This was to give way later to a full-time service with increased migration after 1995 as the effects of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) and continual droughts began to be felt.² This marked the beginning of the second phase, and the transition of the service into a more regular and full-time service that also expanded to other parts of Matabeleland including urban localities like Bulawayo. Goods transported during this period were those that were not available locally like agricultural products and electronic appliances, but with time, it became cheaper and trendy for migrant sending communities to consume South African products.³ 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 service.⁴ Unlike the part-time service, which had a community orientation, during this phase it became highly commercialised, and '*omalayisha*' would deliver anywhere and for anybody.

As the flow of migrants into South Africa intensified after 2000, more transport operators joined the '*malayisha*' industry, and the service spread to other parts of the country including areas in the far east (Masvingo, Mashonaland and Midlands), 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

². 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.

³. A series of droughts took place in the 1990s, and migrant households received their food requirements from South Africa through '*omalayisha*'.

⁴. Zinyama (2002) has documented how since independence Zimbabwean traders would cross into South Africa to buy wares for re-sale in Zimbabwe.

'*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).⁵ People smuggling and goods courier became so lucrative that '*omalayisha*' became the *nouveau riche* (Maphosa, 2010). 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 or Venture, and some acquired large fleets and employed other people as drivers.

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 service 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.⁶ In over three decades, '*omalayisha*' offered a rapid 'same day or overnight' service, which bridged the geographical gap between Johannesburg and even remote areas of Zimbabwe by transporting people, goods and cash, which provided a sustainable seamless exchange between labour and its earnings (Thebe, 2011).

The social character of '*omalayisha*'

In this section, I 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 an integral 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 in the 1980s, and both migrant clients and '*omalayisha*' have tended to develop personal relationships. Simply put, every migrant has his/her 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 recommendation by friends and acquaintances within the migrant community. If a

⁵ Interview, 18 December 2009.

⁶ *Omalayisha* mostly travelled during the night, possibly to avoid traffic and law enforcement officials, and arrived at destination in the morning. Migrants would send to their families fresh products including bread and meat products, and they would be received still fresh.

migrant has goods or money to send home, he/she seeks referrals from close friends or colleagues to their '*malayisha*'.

People would refer friends, relatives and colleagues to '*omalayisha*' they have dealt with before and have absolute trust in their conducts. One of '*omalayisha*' once told us:

...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 with hard earned cash. All we need to do is to honour our obligations (Mangena, int).⁷

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 breakdown 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*' are 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', 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 a relative into South Africa. The transportation fee is settled in advance by the migrant even before '*omalayisha*' departs for Zimbabwe.

⁷. Interview, 19 December 2009.

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 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 (cool drink fee) or explicit bribes. We were informed that on average they pay between R2 000 and R5 000 in bribes in any single journey.

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, they still transported cash, foodstuff, furniture, outdoor appliances, building material. They also transported unfamiliar cargo – empty 20 litre 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).⁸

The community character of '*omalayisha*' became even clear after 2009 when urban-based transport operators started to employ drivers from certain rural communities to serve these communities. In 2010, we found new entrants in certain rural routes, some were relatively new in cross-border transportation, but they had also developed 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 like

⁸. Interview, 2 January 2012.

Bulawayo, 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 agents 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 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).

Nonetheless, ‘*omalayisha*’ remained as central actors in transporting financial remittances, despite the introduction of semi-formal channels like ‘*Mukuru*’, the Western Union, and other modern electronic money transfer systems. In a community where migrants maintained strong links with their places of origin, and performed all rituals and ceremonies at places of origins, ‘*omalayisha*’ also continued to play a major role in repatriating the dead, and transporting funeral and wedding parties.

One reason for the popularity of the ‘*malayisha*’ system was the personalised service. Due to the nature of the relationship that developed over time, but also the community orientation, they would 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 installments’ (The Standard, Jan. 14, 2014).

They also would offer credit or other concessions. As members of the community, the migrant, the remittance recipient and the ‘*omalayisha*’ had a relationship that transcended monetary transactions. It was symbiotic. ‘*Omalayisha*’ relied to a large extent on referrals by existing relations for new relationships, while they, in turn, often brought with them news, letters, goods and sometimes relatives for migrants in South Africa (Thebe, 2011). The study showed that most of the migrants had entered into some form of arrangements with one or more operators during the course of the relationship. 52 had goods or relatives transported on credit, 36 had made ‘pay forward’ arrangements and 23 had made installment arrangements. Of those who had made payment arrangements, the majority use ‘*omalayisha*’ regularly for home and return journeys. While some held legal travel documents, others had no documents, and relied entirely on ‘*omalayisha*’ to maintain contact with families back home. If they could not afford to make the home journey, migrants trusted ‘*omalayisha*’ to deliver the goods, money or messages to their families.

Another factor that contributes to the popularity of '*omalayisha*' in rural society is the lack of alternative forms of transport from South Africa and direct to the rural hinterland. There are notable differences in options available to migrants from rural communities and urbanised areas like Bulawayo, where there is an efficient bus and cross-border passenger service (Maphosa, 2010). 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 had taken longer because the breakdowns were major. Despite these unfortunate circumstances, the study showed that rural migrants mostly preferred the use of '*omalayisha*' than the public passenger courier, which terminated in Bulawayo. Some complained about the travel logistics including issues of lodgings and the challenges of connections to their rural areas.⁹ Over half (about 41 of migrants) had only used '*omalayisha*'; 36 had embarked on the dual journey; while others only passed through Bulawayo when they had issues to attend in the city.

A variety of factors – persistent droughts, growing unemployment, state neglect, economic crisis, etc. – have made '*omalayisha*' a 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, they 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 player. In a context of persistent droughts where migrants feed the rural home, and distance from cities, '*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 years has been the epitome of life through which remittances reached worker-peasant households.

Linking migrant parents with their children

Just as the rural bus service allowed 'worker-peasants' to maintain links with families in rural areas, '*omalayisha*' also played an important role in reuniting migrant parents with their children they had left with grandparents in Zimbabwe. It was normal for migrant parents in South Africa to request '*omalayisha*' to expatriate and repatriate their children – both those with legal documents and without – at the beginning and end of every school holiday for a fee. They charged R300 for a child holding a passport

⁹. In some rural areas, the bus service from Bulawayo is only available twice a week, which provides a challenge to some rural migrants.

and up to R1 500 for undocumented children. And just as policy on the cross-border movements of children toughened after May 2012, '*omalayisha*' became ever so important in maintaining normalcy in the culture of reuniting children with parents. Our 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 spurred child smuggling activities.

According to the regulations, 'a parent or guardian intending to travel to South Africa in the company of minor children is now 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 their parents during school holidays or when parents visited home. It was still easy for parents to be linked with their children when and if they wanted them to visit. All they needed was to pay a trusted '*umalayisha*' – someone they have close relations or someone they have been referred to by others – 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 (Africa Review, Dec. 27, 2013; Bulawayo24, Jan.12, 2013; Chronicle, Aug. 17, 2012), they still perform these responsibilities with distinction.

Through the networks developed within the border enforcement and police systems, the whole process was made simple as one told me – 'you simply negotiate the immigration process and pay your way all the way to Johannesburg' (Mabhena, int.).¹⁰ We also realised that parents understood the process and were often available to offer financial support if their '*malayisha*' got into trouble with the law. This was not surprising since some of these migrants had a long history of interaction with their '*malayisha*'.

As in every other process that involves third parties, there were great risks, and migrant parents agreed that it was an emotional process. This was however, offset by careful choice of '*omalayisha*'. The choice of '*umalayisha*' was often based on trustworthiness, previous association and good references from other migrants or neighbours and relatives. Over half of the parents we met had utilised the same '*umalayisha*' for years while others had a list of trusted individuals they used. A peculiar element we realised about the relationship between '*omalayisha*', the children in their custody and the parents, was the closeness. The children were comfortable around certain individual operators, and referred to then with a variety of respectful names like '*bhuti Mandla*', '*bab' omncane*' or '*malume*' (brother and uncle respectively).

¹⁰. Interview, Kholwani Mabhena, Johannesburg, 17 December 2014.

Besides the movement of children, *'omalayisha'* are sometimes involved in repatriating infants from their mothers in South Africa to grandparents in Zimbabwe. This role is amply captured in a ThinkAfrica Press article *'Omalayitsha double as road nannies'* (ThinkAfrica Press, Dec. 16, 2013). According to the article, 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'*, all had done it before and would do it again if requested. Nonetheless, and despite the negative picture created by the ThinkAfrica Press article, 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'* here is thus not the 'nannies' but facilitators at the border posts and delivery men at assigned addresses.

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 was built on strong social and community relations – friendship, neighbourhood, kinship and referrals – and the development of strategic networks of state officials, which allowed them 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 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 suggest that the *'malayisha'* 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; Duggan, 1980; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990), the role and position of such channels in migrant societies extend beyond mere labour reproduction to accumulation and survival questions, and identity. 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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