

Ethnography Detail Field Notes – (1)

Date: May, 5 2007

Location: Johannesburg

Subject: Do street vendors operate with an organized structure?

Overview:

Today May 5, 2007 is a beautiful sunny day with temperatures in the 60's, no coat is required and this will be my first visit to my ethnography site that is located: 2 km from downtown Johannesburg, South Africa; 1km from two major universities and up-scale corporate parks; and ¼ mile from a small mall; the town will be called Walpole¹. I have decided to wear casual clothes, jeans and shirt with no purse or bag, eliminating any need to worry about such items when on the street. I will not drive to the location to eliminate any attention to my type of transportation. My goal today is to observe the street vendors in hopes to form a better understanding of how they operate their daily trade. I am planning an early morning visit; this should be when the downtown area is just starting to come alive, for it is a weekend day in South Africa. Note: I will need to buy a small note book so I can insert notes as I observe.

Detail Notes: (note transcribing on May 6, 2007)

I started my walk to the site at 10:00 am on May 5, 2007, located two blocks from where the town center starts. I passed by one block of homes that were gated, larger in size, and presented an overall clean appearance, and there were no cars on the street. Upon turning onto the main road I saw the small round-a-bout that marks the beginning of the seven block commercial area in front of me. Before reaching the circle I passed by a blind school and a formal building that is under construction. When I reached the round-a-bout I noticed that on the right hand side of the street a bead store opening, in front of the store were the second group of bead workers that I

¹ Note book Walpole is name of town

originally considered observing, they had a few items out for sale, maybe ten, they had balboa trees and a few giraffes, the items were **scattered around the side walk**, two black men wearing Rasta type clothing were standing at the site. My first stop before reaching my ethnography site was the corner convenience store located on the left side of the street directly across from the bead store; this was the first establishment on the main road of Walpole. (Note to self, I did not notice the women selling baskets and bowls, -not sure could have missed)

Upon entering the shop I saw a older man who appeared Indian stocking shelves, I asked him if they had a small notebook I could buy, the man directed me to the cash counter where a younger black woman located a small book, which I purchased for five rand, it was ideal for my work. The convenience store was small and basic in nature it offered papers, soda, and small food items, I noticed two black individuals wearing stained clothing buying loaves of bread and soda's, they paid with change taken from their pant pockets. After leaving the store I started towards my site, walking pass two cafés that had a significant amount of white people sitting outside; customers were dressed in informal jeans and artsy type clothing, all enjoying breakfast (20). As I continued down the street I got a sense of a start of day, shops were opening, the street had a significant amount of parking spots available, and the business day was just starting. On my way to the site I passed another convenience store, a **fancy gift shop**, a flower shop, an antique store and a few restaurants and bars. I noticed a minimal amount of foot traffic and those that did pass me approximately (15) were white, dressed casually– jeans, khakis. After walking the three blocks from the start of town I noticed that there was a large quantity of restaurants just preparing to open for the day, workers were sweeping floors and cleaning tables. (Note based on shops and restaurants this has a feel of an artsy middle class type neighborhood - impression)

As I approached the area, I saw three black men dressed nicely arranging their beaded work in sections, the selling area was approximately the length of four parked cars, they were placing their work on the sidewalk closest to the curb of the main road and behind them was a solid wall which is part of the building that houses a large

Asian restaurant. The entrance to the restaurant is not located on the main road it is positioned at the cross street, the street vendor is located at the opposite side of the establishment's customer entrance. If you were standing on the street you can not see into the restaurant, the building design has the windows placed higher than the street level. The site layout is on the left side of the main road; a solid brown dark wall; sidewalk; bead work; curb, then main street parking. If I was to walk to the end of the workers area, I would be at a cross street, (3rd) if I turned left I would be at the entrance to the Asian restaurant which has an outdoor patio section on sidewalk, and a large interior, the restaurant serves 150-250. Directly across from the bead workers on the main road are; four food and bar places, one large corner restaurant, two bars, and one small food shop, three allowed seating on the main road outside.

When I approached the workers, all three were setting up, I decided it was best to speak to the first person in my path; Ashley² (**Sheppard**) was taking pieces of art wire out of a large plastic bag and organizing them on the sidewalk. He stood up when I approached, at which time we introduced ourselves and I asked permission to observe. I began by introducing myself and asking if I could spend time observing them for a project I had for school, he asked if I was doing research and I stated that this was a one week class assignment that was to cover six hours of work. Ashley was fine with my observations and I asked if one of them that was in charge, he said the man in the middle Robert³ was "the boss". Ashley told me that they were all brothers from Zimbabwe. After the introductions, we both crouched down so Ashley could finish preparing his formal setup, everything was in perfect rows, and great care was taken to organize the work in an attractive organized fashion. Ashley is a black man, medium height, stocky in build, had slight facial hair, clean cut, and wore a pressed white and brown shirt with white pants; his shoes were clean modern sneakers. Ashley's had approximately fifty items on display, a large amount of key rings, tree ornaments and a few larger items such as buffalo, cows, and sheep. His setup was the smallest of the three layouts.

² Ashley reference name

³ Robert reference name

As we were speaking the third man of the group Jimmy⁴, approached Ashley's setup and picked up an **antelope** which he handed to a couple in their late 20's or early 30's. Ashley and I both stood and observed the engagement between Jimmy and the couple. The woman was white, short in height (5'2) and had medium hair, she wore a light colored white coat and the man was white of medium height (5'8), stocky in build, wore casual pants and shirt, and had a receding blond hair. The couple wanted to buy this brown and white antelope that was about 16 inches tall, Jimmy started to negotiate with the couple he told them it was 350 rand, they said to high, and Jimmy came down to 270 rand, the couple gave each other looks of hesitation, they said they were going to go for breakfast and money, they would return later. The women really wanted the antelope, she kept holding and rubbing the antelope, she looked at it with admiration, the woman kept looking to her friend for approval, he however believed the price was too high. The conversation was quiet and focused on the sale, no personal conversation was held. I could not tell from their speech if they were local or foreign. Jimmy was clean cut, had slight facial hair, was taller and skinner than Ashley, and wore a bright pressed red shirt, black pants, bronze bracelet and had clean white sneakers.

After the couple departed the antelope was left at Ashley' spot and Jimmy went to his location; we were not introduced at the time. I felt it was time to ask Robert who was referred to as the boss if he also felt it was ok for me to watch and observe them for six hours. Robert was a tall slender man that was elegant in dress and appearance, he looked in his 30's (all the men looked in there 30's – note they were) he wore a beautiful pressed brown and green checked shirt, with khaki pants, bronze bracelet and newer pair of work / hiking style boots. Robert was quiet in voice and he introduced himself as I did, I explained my project and he was fine with my work, he asked where I was from and if I lived in the area. I explained that I did, living down the street.

I asked Robert where he was from and he said they were all from Zimbabwe and explained that all bead workers are from that region, he stated the art of wire started in

⁴ Jimmy reference name

Zimbabwe, and people then immigrated to South Africa where the beads were available. Robert explained that they lived in Brownfontien and five different members of the family work at this location. He explained that they had been at this site since 1995. I wanted to understand why he was **the boss**, and he explained that there had to be one leader otherwise it becomes confusing, he further articulated that when people wanted to place orders there needed to be one person a customer could trust. He explained that people had to pay up front for orders, for the men do not have enough money to buy all the beads and wire so he has a bank account and guarantees the work, thus he is the boss. He outlined that the largest amount of his business comes from large orders; he stated that in slow months they each made about 300 rand and in the busier season October and November they can make 5000 rand.

I asked about the amount of workers and he said they have five on site because the local establishments did not like to see **different faces** on the street, thus they rotated shifts by working 6 days a week from 10 to 5 or later in summer months. Robert spoke with grace and a sense of gentleness, as we were speaking the other men had finished organizing their work and placed the bags in this drop box that was part of the building, it was like an outside storage bin. (Note should of asked what the design was for and why it was there, maybe the establishment put it their for them, should of asked.)

I wanted to understand more about being at this location since 1995; he explained that the restaurant has allowed them to be at this spot and they came to South Africa at that time. As I was talking to Robert many black locals walked by greeting him by name, when further conversation occurred, I could **not understand** for it was not in English. I asked Robert what language he spoke to the other street vendors and he said it was Shona.

Robert had taken great care as did Ashley in setting up his work; all the animals and flowers were lined up by size and color. In looking at the three setups Robert and Jimmy invested a significant amount of time in making sure their work was displayed in a formal manner. For example all the animals were lined up by size, the key chains

were organized by object and color, and foreground items were smaller in size while those closest to the street were largest. Robert had over 100 items on display, the second largest display at this site. I asked Robert how things were laid out, he explained that each person had a designated section, Jimmy, Robert, Ashley, and Sheppard, they can display each others work or just their own its their choice each day what to put out. Robert explain that if he sells a piece of Ashley's work, he would then get a cut of the sale about 20% , the person who makes the item receives the largest cut, and in the end he said that they all worked together and share in the profits.

During my chat with Robert another person arrived who was sitting in the door well behind where Ashley was setup, he was also well dressed and a little stocky and wore a brown/green sweater, black pants and white shoes, all clean and pressed. He did not lay out any work but was starting to work on designing some wire work. He looked to the guys to ask who I was, they spoke in Shona. To give Robert some space, for we were kneeling and standing by his work I got up and walked over to the wall of the restaurant and stood. Against the wall were two milk crates, where the guys motioned for me to sit, which I proceeded to do.

As I was sitting Jimmy walked over to Ashley's site and took the antelope he had tried to sell to the couple earlier, he placed it in his collection. He then came and sat next to me, I asked him why he did that, and he explained that Ashley made it, however since he brought the couple to see the antelope if he sold it he then got a take of the sale, their policy was if you start to work with someone you continue with that **relationship**, to keep things organized. I asked Jimmy who the new man was and he said it was another brother and with a funny smile he said his name is Sheppard, I could sense a joke but I was not sure what it was about till later.

Jimmy inquired what I was doing and where in America I was from, I explained the project and that I had lived in South Africa for four years and since January in Johannesburg, I then explained where I was from in America. As we were sitting I noticed the street traffic walking by, a few workers however not a lot of other

potential customers. The people that passed were a mix of black and white individuals, all dress in work clothes or casual dress. As I spoke with Jimmy the others stood alone watching the street activity or next to each, however the conversation was limited. Most often as people passed they greeted everyone with hello, or spoke in Zulu, or Shona. While I was sitting people would greet me with hello and many times I could sense that those who spoke another language asked the guys what I was doing sitting with them.

As I was sitting with Jimmy the man who wanted to buy the antelope came back, without the women, Jimmy greeted him, they stood and discussed the antelope, I heard the customer offer 70 rand, at this time Ashley came and sat next to me. We both watched how Jimmy was getting upset with the man, his voice was raised slightly and his hands were motioning to the larger items. Jimmy then said you may have gotten a goat for 200, however someone now does not have a goat. Ashley and I both were watching the disagreement, and then the white man left with no antelope. Jimmy came over to where Ashley and I were sitting and he explained what happened, he said that someone on the street sold this guy a goat for 200 which is a rip off, obviously the goat was stolen now someone else has lost a goat. Jimmy said the goat was the size of their largest item, which was big, at least four times larger than the little antelope. Jimmy then in Shona spoke with Robert and Sheppard they were obviously upset. I asked Ashley to further explain and he said the goat must have been stolen and the man wanted to pay 70 rand for the antelope, they would not sell it for such a price, it would not even cover the cost of the beads. Ashley had bought a Pepsi for he was drinking a soda.

As Ashley and I sat on the crates the other guys stood at the other end of the work area, Sheppard was working on a spoon/key holder and Robert was standing in the street eating an apple, funny he chewed off all the skin before eating it, the skin he held in his hand then through it into the garbage can on the street.. The street had many empty parking spots at 11:00 am. The restaurants across the street were all clean and setup for the days business. While we were sitting a Rasta man came with dread locks and a purple hat, Ashley explained he also was from Zimbabwe however

he was not part of their group, he placed a beaded camera and two radios out to be sold, next to Roberts items. The others greeted him, however they did not engage in conversation.

Sheppard then got up and grabbed different pieces of bead work from the guys, I asked Ashley what he was doing, and he explained that they walked up and down the main road with goods to help with sales. Sheppard went over to the section where the bags were stored and grabbed a wire which he hung the pieces to sell; he then took off down the street. Ashley explained that they sold a lot of merchandise in this manner. As we sat talking, I could see another group of bead vendors walking down the street with their items to sell, at the same time a group of women selling bowls on their heads passed by, they did not speak with the bead vendor; however Ashley said they were from Swaziland.

The street traffic was minimal, a woman who was dressed in waitress clothing, walked by twice, the second time she commented to Robert that it “was slow out”. Ashley was working on a wire bowl and the others were standing on the street watching or talking to me. On a regular basis one of them would come and speak with me, it did not appear that they felt comfortable leaving me by myself. Many times they would pick up the keys I had set next to the crates to remind me not to forget them. As the time went on I had a feeling that I did not impact them at all, in some ways I got a sense they enjoyed having someone new on site.

Around 11:30 the woman that wanted the goat came back, her and Jimmy started talking, he raised his voice about the goat, “someone now does not have a goat”, her male friend was not around. Jimmy held the antelope and she stood with her hands in her pockets head down, listening to him, we all watched. I could hear him ask for 250 rand, she kept her head down and placed her hands in her pocket, the woman was uncomfortable, in a very short amount of time she pulled out money, and took the antelope, as she walked down the street she held the antelope and kept her head down. Jimmy came over and explained that he told her that she had someone else’s stolen goat, that they could not make money selling items of that size and craftsmanship for

70 rand. Jimmy took the money out of his pocket and gave Ashley who was sitting next to me 200 rand, Jimmy kept 50 rand, no words were exchange just the money, the antelope sold for 250 rand.

At this same time I notice to my right that some of the Rasta man street vendors from down the street were talking to Robert and Sheppard; Jimmy and Ashley get up and move over to the conversation. The discussion is about the goat, they are speaking in Shona however with slightly raised voices and their hands are used to express emotions, the word goat is used again. Jimmy comes back and sits with me, he explains that the goat was not stolen, the guys are trying to put them all out of business, the other vendor had sold the goat for 200 rand. He said they told the guys they can not price products that low it will hurt their businesses. The other bead vendor had left when I noticed the man and woman that bought the 200 rand “goat” walking up the street, they were parked across the street from where I sat, the car was a grey Audi with GP plates, they placed the antelope that was four times bigger than the antelope she had just bought for 250 rand into her trunk. (Note: the goat was not a goat but an antelope just bigger) The guys did not seem to notice.

I got up and went to speak to Sheppard for the first time; he appeared shy and stayed to himself working on some wire goods. He introduced himself as Ashley, I said I thought your name is Sheppard and he told me that Sheppard was naughty and told me a lie. He said he did not know why Sheppard did that, but his name was Ashley. He inquired into my studies and discussed what he was making, a wire bowl and key holder. I asked why he did not have any goods out and he said that he had to work on his wire for a customer. **(With this new information, I must NOTE that from this point forward I will use the name that is truly associated with the person.)**

Ashley was working thus I felt uncomfortable talking to him so I walked back to the middle of the area and stood, I asked Sheppard why he told a fib and he just smiled and laughed, being funny. As we talked a person walked by and said “hello gents” and addressed Robert, I was not clear if it was gents or Jim so I said Robert your not messing with me too, all with a smile and he said come. He pulled out his asylum card

to prove that he was telling the truth, by facial expressions and voice Ashley and Robert did not understand why Sheppard pretended to be Ashley. Robert and I spoke about the business a little more, I ask how they got all the goods to the location and he explained that two shops allowed them to **store their goods** overnight; they did not have to carry them back and forth. He said the new work they make at night time is brought by buss or taxi.

I went and sat and Jimmy joined me, we talked about the family and how they were all brothers, at which time a tall old white man walked by, in a raised voice he said “Who cleans up this Mess” “Who cleans up this Mess” I turned to Jimmy and he responded the cleaner is coming. I looked across the street and garbage was in the gutters as it was in the gutters next to this street vendor. I looked further up the street and I also saw garbage in the gutters, thus I asked who this man, they stated he owned the **fancy art shop** at the corner. Jimmy got up and looked at the garbage and sat back down.

Ashley and Sheppard went on rounds to sell, Robert stood by himself in the street watching a woman that was hanging into a car window parked directly across from our location. Jimmy and I both watched the woman as did Robert; she sadly was high on drugs, from all accounts. We watched the man she was with get out of the car and try to help the woman, they walked to the bar across the street and 5 mins later she came out and got on the hood of the car and started dancing. Robert and Jimmy both watched, quietly making comments that the woman was wasted at such an early time in the day. As the guys returned Robert expressed his concern about the woman, they all continued to watch the woman with great focus. This went on for some 10 mins. The man she was with seemed fine so every one watched from a distance, the woman motioned to Robert at one point and he just smiled and waved back.

As this event concluded an older man came up and said you know your sitting next to the next prime minister of Zimbabwe, I was sitting next to Jimmy, he did not respond however gave a smile. The man engaged with Ashley, Jimmy got up and Robert came and sat. The older grey haired white man had a list he took out of his pocket and went

up and down with Ashley and picked out key rings and a few smaller items, he told the guys “you need to make more goods that people can use”, Ashley stayed with him and then they walked off together down the street. I asked Robert who this was and he said he owned the book store down the street; Ashley left with the man to get paid at the store.

The Rasta man had just come back and had sold his camera piece, he had the radio at a high volume sitting at the end of the setting, Robert looked at him, the music was too loud. Robert got up and went to Jimmy’s section and started to organize his work, when the Rasta man went to him and started talking, Robert did not respond he kept his head down and appeared annoyed by his presence.

A tall white guy approached to look at the music statues Jimmy had displayed, I heard him say I will come back later. Jimmy’s section was huge compared to the rest he had at least two times the amount of work the others offered, he had all of his items lined up with precise order as did Robert. Jimmy had the largest animals such as sheeps, cows, and buffalos. I ask Robert who had come to sit next to me who bought the goods, his said most of their business is from tourists. I then see Jimmy walk over to the street and pick up all the garbage that was in the gutter and put it in the garbage bin. The other guys looked at him as he did this, 5 mins later a black slender man came and started to pickup trash off the street. (Note: Jimmy was concerned it was not going to get done).

Next to me was a set of wooden bowls which were not on display, Ashley noticed these and put them down in Jimmy’s section. Around 12 pm I started to see more non merchants walking on the street. One group of young men and woman arrived and upon approaching the site, half walked through and the others walked around the display of art. A tall black man approached me while I was watching and started to ask why I was sitting, he discussed that he lived in Soweto and was here doing some business. He wanted to know where I was from in America and what my research was about; he then gave me his travel business card and continued on, the bead men had watched us as we spoke.

It was almost 1:00 pm and the restaurants across the street still did not have any customers sitting outside and parking spots were still empty, it appeared to be a slow business day. Ashley and Sheppard made rounds again and the Rasta man had left for somewhere, his goods were still sitting with Roberts items. Robert came and sat next to me after he finished working on this large wire cow, it was a custom order; he left the cow standing next to the wall. With the day ending, I spoke with Robert about times to return, he said that the weekends were not always busy many times the weekdays are better because tourists are their target buyers. I asked if it was ok to come back and he said yes, as I got up to say goodbye they all greeted me with a farewell and I thanked them for letting me stay and observe. As I walked through the town of Walpole it still had a feel of a slow lazy day.

Reflections

Relationship to neighborhood Strong

Professional nature of laying out artwork, clothing and form of speech

Openness to being observed

Business of selling the work