

Ethnography Detail Field Notes – (2)

Date: May, 8 2007

Location: Walpole, Johannesburg

Subject: Do street vendors operate with an organized structure?

Overview:

Today I will be visiting my ethnography location for the second time; I have selected a week day, with a time period that is later in the day. Based on input from Robert (boss) during my first observation, I will visit the site from 2 pm. – 5 pm; this will provide me with a chance to observe their closing procedures. It is a sunny day (fall like) mid 60's, I will wear casual clothing however I may have to bring a jacket do to the cooler temperatures at night time. I will try to take fewer notes today, the men seemed to notice, not sure it bothered them; however, I will work on the skill of noting fewer reminders.

Detail Notes: (note transcribing on May 9, 2007)

I was late in arriving to the site based on my goals I had thought about not going to the observation however I choose to move forward. It was a beautiful sunny day temperatures around 65 degrees, I carried a coat for the temperature was falling as the day proceeded. I started my walk to the location at 2:50 pm arriving to the observation at 3:00 pm. During my walk down the main road, I noticed a busy vibe, there was a significant amount of foot traffic and I noticed a large amount of different races, the majority of people walking on the street were black. I passed maybe 50-60 people on my trip to the site; it appeared that most people were in their 20's to 50's, I did not see any children. Additionally, I noticed all the restaurants I passed had people sitting outside drinking or eating, most were dressed casually.

Upon approaching the site I noticed that there were four groups of art work displayed and a large amount of glass picture frames in addition to the bead. Robert and Jimmy were sitting on black milk crates against the wall watching people go by and a Rasta man (Peter⁶) with a huge hat was sitting on a third crate. Robert had on brown slacks, a green shirt and wore sneakers, Jimmy had on a blue Puma shirt, black pants and wore sneakers, both men had clean pressed clothes. Peter wore an older jacket, blue jeans, a very large hat, and he had very long dreadlocks, his clothes were worn and not ironed and his sneakers were rather tattered.

The men greeted me with a hello and smile, Jimmy got up to let me have a seat, I asked them where the other men were, Robert said that both had gone home to work on special custom orders. Sheppard had received a custom order that day from a film producer who wanted two blue beaded cars for a shoot; the work had to be done by the next day. Ashley was also back at the shop working on bead work and some personal business. I asked how business was going for the day and he said they had three sales for the day, a bird, a sheep and some placemats. Jimmy went and got one of the placemats so I could see what it looked like, this was a new item they had put out, he took it from Ashley's section. The placement was circular with black and silver beads about 12 inches wide. This led the guys to ask me about what type of products Americans use, Jimmy wanted to know if I would take them all back to America (joking). He said it with a smile. Jimmy stood in the street watching the people go by, Robert, Peter, and I sat next to each other on the three black milk crates. The restaurants across the street had six people sitting at outdoor tables. The street traffic was primary black people; many stopped and spoke with the vendor.

Jimmy's section had some additional work there were 20 miniature pink hippos' that had been added since my previous visit, he said they were made over the last couple of days. Roberts section appeared to be the same in content, with an identical layout as last time, Sheppard's work appeared to be the same also with the addition of 20 some picture frames located next to his work, Robert explained to me that the picture frames were someone else's work from Zimbabwe not Sheppard's. On this day

⁶ Peter reference in book

Ashley had a display on the street, it was smaller in size and resembled in many ways Sheppard's layout, including smaller items such as key chains and ornaments. The displays of all the vendors covered approximately 5 to 6 car lengths in size.

Peter was extremely talkative he was greeting everyone that went by with a loud expressive voice. He was working on a radio and wanted to know if I wanted to buy one. I told him that I was there to observe and was not in need of a radio. Peter spoke with the people who walked by however he did not engage in conversation with Robert and Jimmy. Peter was older than the family vendor group he was close to 50, as he talked he would **seamlessly craft** his wire radio, he showed enormous ease in sitting, talking and working all at the same time.

After I had arrived Jimmy went to speak with a middle aged black woman wearing a blouse and shirt, he left with her then returned with a green drink in a tall glass. He gave it to Robert who was sitting next to me, Robert did not get up Jimmy just handed him the glass and walked to the street and stood. Robert told me it was soda and the woman works at the restaurant on the corner. No one else had a drink. The parking spots were pretty much full there were a few empty spots, however the majority were occupied. The foot traffic appeared to be heavy (note end of day), many greeted the guys in foreign tongue.

I asked Robert if they were taking to people from Zimbabwe he explained that they were South Africans and Zimbabweans, I was hearing them speak two different African languages Zulu and Shona. Robert asked me when I was going back to America and I explained my Mom just died so I was not sure when I would return. I inquired about him returning to Zimbabwe and he said in June, I asked if his brothers would be going and he informed me that the guys were not all his brothers, only Jimmy was, the two other men I had met are married to his mothers and dad brothers and sisters. They are brother in family but not blood. As we are talking Peter continues to draw attention by engaging with every person that walks by. Most often people would smile and engage in some conversation with Peter (didn't need a radio),

for his mannerisms were gentle but funny, other times people were not sure what to do and just walked by without any recognition that he spoke.

Robert and I stopped talking and Peter asked me again if my mommy wanted to buy a radio I said no thank you, they were nice however I was not in the need for one. I asked him if he was at the site on Saturday and he said that was his brother, who was busy sleeping and being lazy. I noticed while talking to Peter the large wire cow that Robert had been working on the last time I was at the site.

I inquired about the cow and Robert said he was being lazy, he had no desire to work on the cow today; he was tired and would start work on it tomorrow. Jimmy was busy talking to some locals; Robert explained to me that most of them worked in some of the shops. I decided to ask Robert why Jimmy's section was so much larger than the rest and he said it's because he **works harder**, the work was made by Jimmy. I went to look at the new items Jimmy made and when I touched one they all fell down in a domino fashion, they were lined up so perfectly it caused such an effect. Robert laughed and I put them back in order, they were cute. Jimmy was off talking, he did not see my error.

I asked Jimmy how much he would get for the cow and he said 2500 rand and the cost would be 1300 rand to make. We spoke a little about custom orders and he said the largest order he has received was for 5000 key chains. I asked how the work got done and Robert explained to me that they paid women 10 rand a pack to put the beads on the wire, and the men did the wire design then plastered the beads onto the wire once the women wired the beads. Robert said it is **impossible to create a lot of art** if you had to wire, bead, and plaster all on your own, it is too time consuming.

An older black gentleman came up and started to talk with Jimmy, Robert said they were talking about the man's niece who worked in a neighboring restaurant. They spoke for about 10 mins then Jimmy went and spoke with this middle aged woman on the corner, she was well dressed and serious in nature. I ask Robert who she was, he said he did not know what Jimmy was doing and appeared interested, we sat and

watched their conversation. Upon his return Jimmy and Robert spoke in Shona, after Jimmy left he explained to me that the women's laptop was stolen and she wanted to know if any one was trying to sell one on the street. Robert went on to explain that this is customary if something is stolen, people come and talk to the street vendors, if someone comes to them and asks them if they want to buy a computer they say bring us the merchandise and we will talk. Then when the thief goes home to get the goods, they call the victim who then comes and sits at one of the restaurants and watches.

It was around 4:00 when Jimmy went and picked up all of Ashley's and Sheppard's work and placed them in large plastic bags, he then carried them up the street into a shop. Robert stated that the shop where they store part of their goods was closing; the other storage facility did not close till later. Robert, did not help Jimmy, it took him two trips. Upon Jimmy's return he stood in the street then he motioned to Robert to finish his drink, he then walked over to Robert who was still sitting with me and took the glass back to the restaurant for Robert.

I asked Robert if they brought lunch and he said no they buy food from different places on the street. I inquired about where they went to the toilet and he stated they use the bar across the street. Robert sat quietly on the crate talking with me off and on, while Peter continued to talk to everyone that passed by about buying his radio. I could sense that Robert could tell that I thought Peter talked too much or he was feeling that way, because he started to talk about his style of selling. He preferred to have people come to him; he thought if you addressed people too quickly or did not provide them with enough time to look at the goods before approaching them it would scare the people off. He said they each had different styles however he preferred the less aggressive selling strategy.

A tall white man came by and spoke to Robert in Shona, he said the man was from Zimbabwe and opened a shop down the road; he fled due to Mugabe's actions. During my observation thus far no one appeared to be interested in any work, the area was busy with people getting ready to catch taxis and buses. One young woman, who

worked in the restaurant across the street, mentioned she had just missed her bus as she was running up the street.

The bar across the street now had about 10 white people sitting outside, I got a few looks of why is that woman sitting with the beads workers, it was an interesting feeling, one could see the looks. Peter was finishing his radio and was now taking apart a brand new radio so he could use the components to put into his wire radio. As I was sitting with Robert and Peter, I heard my name it was a women from one of my classes, I walked over and said hello she pulled over in her late model green car and we talked for a short time. Robert and Jimmy had watched and when I returned asked who she was, Jimmy asked if she was married, I said no.

Around 4:45 Robert announced they were packing up, they went and got the plastic bags and started to load their work into separate bags; they carried the bags down the street to a building off the side street, it took two trips for both of them to carry all the items. The items were just placed into the large bags with no wrapping; the smaller items were places into smaller bags which were then placed into the larger bags.

While the guys were doing this I noticed that this vendor who sold large art canvases was placing his work on the same spot that Jimmy had his work, at the same time to my left I saw one of the Rasta men bead workers placing his balboa tree down where Ashley had his work. At this time Robert and Jimmy came back to say goodbye, Jimmy had a pizza box in his hand to take home (no idea where it came from) they came close to me and I told them thanks and we shared greetings, Robert asked me if I wanted to walk with them up the street. At this time there were now six Rasta men and the entire sidewalk that was 10 minutes ago covered with the family bead vendors work was now covered in paintings and another group's bead work. Robert glanced at the guys and me, I told him I was fine, I had 45 mins left to observe so I would stay behind.

Peter had gotten up and left sometime during the goodbyes I assumed he had left for the night. The area that Jimmy occupied was now covered with over 30 large African style paintings, in front of me in a very disorganized fashion was a couple balboa trees

and some pigs hanging off of it, further down was a giraffe and a few birds, maybe 20 items in total. A loaf of bread had been set next to me and a large group of Rasta men were talking about 20 feet from me in foreign tongue. A few of them said hello.

In was around 5:20 pm and the street was filled with people coming and going, the darkness had settled in and it was evening on main street. I noticed Peter walking down the street and he came up to me and said your still here, he proceeded to talk to the group of Rasta men. The men were from Zimbabwe, black, wore clothing typifying the Rasta image, hats in green and red, dreadlocks, a somewhat messy look to their dress. I asked Peter why he sat with the other group and the others didn't, one man stepped forward and said, do you not know who he is, he created wire work, they seemed very serious that this man was the 'father' of wire work. (He could produce amazing work in a very short amount of time)

This one shorter black man wearing red shorts, a Rasta hat, and blue sweatshirt. came and sat next to me on the ground, he had strong body odor, he introduced himself as Steve⁷. He asked if I wanted to buy some work, he explained they had sold nothing and need to get money for taxi work, he held in his hand a balboa tree with pigs hanging on it. I explained that I was doing a class project and if it was ok to observe them for 30 minutes or so, he said that was fine however, was I sure I did not want to buy some work.

He said they live in the inner city of Johannesburg, all of them are from Zimbabwe and they work at the end of the street during the day and move here at night because its prime location. This was the group I had considered as a possible site when evaluating groups to observe. Steve was in his late 30's I asked him why they did not have more work out, he said you must have capital, also it was labor intensive to create the bead work you had to wire, bead, and plaster. He said it was difficult to produce a lot of work if you had to do all the work on your own, I asked if they had people to help and he said they do **all the work themselves**. He said they were

⁷ Steve Reference name in book

thinking of moving to Keene⁸ because there are more tourists and business is slow in Walpole. While talking to him one of the sellers came up to me with some beaded work and asked me if I wanted to buy some, I explained no thank you, three of them took their work and started down the street to do rounds. (Note Robert and Jimmy did not do rounds today).

I asked Steve why they did not work together as groups and he said they are competitors, so sales would not be good if they all sold from the same spot. I asked when they get most of there sales and he said during the nighttime, they worked the streets till midnight or later depending on the bar crowd. As I was talking to Steve a slender, well dressed, black woman approached some of the bead workers standing further down from me she bought a key chain from the guys.

Steve got up and left for awhile, a tall slender man came and asked if I would like to buy something and asked about my project, during this time I notice another group of guys walking towards the group they had a loaf of bread. The man carrying the bread sat next to me and shared the bread with the group, he offered me some, I declined, Steve came back and sat next to me still holding the balboa tree, I noticed he was wearing slippers. The man with the bread was the owner of the art paintings he was talkative and asked about my research, he said that he wished more research was being done to understand how tough their lives were. He said that once he went into a book store and looked at an Art book and it had a picture of him from the street in it, the book was 350 rand he could not afford it, however he was mad that the people came and took a picture but did not tell him or give him a book. **He thought it should be a mutual win for both groups of people, if you research someone in the end that research should make those that you researched lives better, not just benefit the researcher (almost his exact words).** As we were taking a well dressed professional business man walked up to the painters work, a negotiation took place for 800 rand, the man said he really liked the work it was a painting of Mandela, as the painter was talking to the customer, the picture frame guy who had his work out earlier went up and tried to sell his frames. Note, the picture frame guy was not present during my

⁸ Keene Reference name in book

observation of the family group, his work was, however he was not. The man said he was going for drinks and would come back later.

The paintings covered two car lengths and the beaded work was laying all over the place, as I sat and watched there were some 15 different men coming and going, dropping off art or picking stuff up and walking around the neighborhood. Steve, starts asking me about my personal life, if I married, have children, why I am not married, when will I be, don't I want a family, would I go out with him, it went on for 10 minutes. He asked me again if I wanted to buy some work and I explained that I did not at this time. The bars across the street were getting busier and lights were taking over the darkness. I asked Steve how long they had been working in this area he said for over 10 years.

My time was ending it was getting colder out and the group was still in a social mood of talking amongst themselves and working on selling goods. As I got up to leave I thank the guys and they asked me to buy something or as one man asked can you buy us some drinks, I decided that based on living in the neighborhood and for the purpose that this was a class project and not ongoing research, I gave them 50 rand for food. Steve, turned and asked me if we could go out for a drink or coffee, I declined and headed home. The street was quiet once I left the ethnography area, the night had embraced Walpole.

Final Thoughts

Different forms of structures are in operation

Class structures?

Informal vs. Formal

Does the status reflect the outcome of an organized vendor structure, both long term operations however, definite signs of wealth and status variation amongst the two groups?