

A F R I C A N D Y N A M I C S



Transforming Innovations in Africa

Explorative Studies on Appropriation
in African Societies

BRILL



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Entrepreneurship, colonial monetary economy and the limits of creativity: Appropriating trading stores in Northern Namibia, 1925-1980

Gregor Dobler

Innovations originating from a different social setting rarely remain unchanged when adopted in a new society. Anthropologists have described the creative agency involved in this process and argued against a belief in the homogenizing force of globalized modernity. Innovations come with varying degrees of malleability and not all can be freely adapted to a society's needs, with some innovations engendering fundamental changes when adopted into a new society. This chapter outlines the history of trading stores in colonial Ovamboland, a 'native reserve' and later 'homeland' during segregation and apartheid in Namibia. It shows how, under favourable economic conditions, an outside innovation was quickly adopted by local entrepreneurs who grew to be a new social and economic elite. This choice of development path had consequences that were no longer controllable by the entrepreneurs and that became an economic liability after Namibia's independence. Building on this case study, an attempt is made to differentiate between four types of objects and institutions, whose adoption will have distinct and typical consequences: objects used for their sign value, objects used as tools, tools whose efficiency changes the social context, and objects linked to a set of new practices without which it would be impossible to use them.

Introduction

Innovation comes in many guises. It often emerges within a given social context: through human creativity alone, in inner-societal conflict or

cooperation, or in changing social or ecological conditions that demand different solutions to old problems. However when new things become desirable, societies do not always invent them but may import either objects or institutions from others who have already invented them. The old cultural history school in German anthropology, which called this process 'diffusion',¹ was wrong in defining it as the main avenue of cultural change as inner-societal creativity is at least as important as the diffusion of outside inventions, all the more so since processes of diffusion are always linked to, or lead to, innovation. But if seen in its complexity, diffusion is still an interesting variant of social and cultural change and its analysis leads to the core of concepts of continuity and change. What is social about the way we deal with objects, concepts or institutions? How do they change when they are taken over by a different society? What scope is there for social creativity, and how freely can we ascribe meaning to objects and practices? What exactly is the difference between social reproduction and social change?

Such questions form the core of two distinct strands of literature, in social anthropology on the one hand, and history and science and technology studies on the other. Social anthropology is not usually very interested in the invention of things and the history of science. Instead, anthropologists look closely at the receiving end, at appropriation. They see appropriation as the process by which a society actively engages with a new object or institution, fits it into the new context and locally changes its meaning.² For social anthropology, innovation is thus the process of social change linked to the active appropriation of a new object, institution or practice through human agency.

Science and technology studies, on the other hand, prefer to concentrate on the spread of innovation and technologies, following an object or institution through its social contexts and analysing the conditions of its acceptance in a society. Innovation has two faces for science and technology studies. Firstly, it describes the invention of a new technique, a new institution or a new object and, secondly, it denotes the process of social adaptation in which the meaning and social role of an innovation is defined. This phase ends with 'closure', the point at which the inno-

vation's meaning is defined and it ceases to be new. It becomes part of normality.³

The two perspectives are closely linked and describe the same processes but their different use of the concept of innovation can lead to misunderstandings. In the study of science and technology, innovation comes first, before adaptation and appropriation, while for social anthropologists, adaptation and appropriation constitute the innovation. How the object or institution was originally developed is mostly beyond the interest of anthropologists unless it happens to be invented in the society they are studying.

This chapter starts from the second perspective and relates the history of trading stores in the northern Namibian reserve (later homeland) of Ovamboland. This is interpreted as the successful appropriation of an institution developed outside society. The innovation linked to the spread of trading stores appears to consist of new social practices and ways of relating to the world at large that are necessary, although not predefined, concomitants of the integration of trading stores into the local society. What is interesting here are the local social innovations linked to the appropriation of trading stores, not so much the origins of the institution as such or the way it changed its character when spread through diffusion. This chapter demonstrates that the social changes linked to the appropriation of trading stores cannot be understood if the processes of creative appropriation alone are considered.

Anthropological studies of appropriation have often celebrated the creative freedom to adapt externally invented goods, institutions and practices to a society's needs. Globalization, it is argued, brings people into closer contact with the same goods but practices linked to these goods are not prescribed by their original design. 'No imported object, Coca-Cola included, is completely immune from creolization. Indeed one finds that Coke is often attributed meanings and uses within particular cultures that are very different from those imagined by its manufacturer' (Howes 1996: 6).

This perspective has certainly been important as a corrective to all-too-encompassing theories of modernization and globalization. But there are limits to creative adaptation. In this chapter, the appropriation of the trading store is used as a case study to explore such limits. The trading

1 For an elaborate and comparatively sound propagation of this perspective, see Graebner (1911).

2 For a classic but little-cited example of this trend, see Thurnwald (1932). See also Abulughod (1989), Beck (2009), Burke (1996) and Hahn (2005, 2011).

3 See, for example, Carroll *et al.* (2003), Haddon (2007), Hess (1994) and Silverstone & Hirsch (1992).

store is a complex institution – an interrelated set of normalized expectations and practices (an institution) that integrates social actors in different lived worlds into a common logic of agency. To understand its meaning, the inherent institutional logics that come with the original innovation have to be taken into account and cannot be entirely discarded when appropriated by a new society. In short, the two perspectives on innovation outlined above have to be combined.

While people were free to adapt the institution to their needs (and made ample use of the opportunity to do so), they were less free to change the wider institutional setting into which it was embedded and which became socially relevant through the appropriation of the trading store, namely consumer capitalism based on wage labour. The link between a useful innovation appealing to many actors and its wider context changed the conditions of local agency. This was not due to any limits in the creativity of appropriation but to the cunning of institutional reason. The last part of the chapter presents a typology of processes of appropriation according to the degree of creative freedom involved in them.

The outside innovation: White-owned trading stores

Ovamboland is the colonial designation of a geographical area in central northern Namibia, an endorheic basin to the north of the Etosha Pan of roughly 400 km × 120 km. Due to higher rainfall that makes the area suitable for subsistence agriculture, it is one of the most densely populated areas in Namibia, and is inhabited today by about a million people. In the nineteenth century, its society was organized into a number of centrally governed polities whose settlement areas were separated by stretches of wilderness but due to an increase in population in the twentieth century, almost the entire area became settled, with people living in scattered homesteads surrounded by fields. In 1906, trying not to disrupt the supply of labour in the context of the Herero wars in the central areas, Germany declared Ovamboland a Native Reserve, made it off-limits to most Europeans and introduced a pass system for contract workers going to the central parts of Namibia. When South Africa took over as the military occupant in 1915 and a mandatory power in 1920, it kept the reserve structure in place and established the first permanent colonial presence in the area. A Native Commissioner was stationed in Ondangwa in a former mission station close to one of the Kings' Courts, and an Assistant Native Commissioner was posted to Oshikango on the border with Angola.

Seen from the colonial capital, the Commissioner's main task was to prevent any disruption in the supply of workers to the colony's mines

and farms. Most of the contract workers came from Ovamboland or, via Ovamboland, from Angola. Young men came mostly to look for work and took contracts of about a year, after which (officially) they had to go back onto the reserve. Before going back though, they bought goods in the south, which they could then barter for a profit in the reserve. Most used the wages they had earned from a few years of contract labour to pay for their bride price and set up their own household. The incentive was strong but the process was long, working conditions were harsh and the pay (even multiplied by barter) was low. As in other parts of Southern Africa, the mining economy was short of labour in the early part of the twentieth century, and the colonial administration had no direct means of coercion to induce people to look for work. On the contrary, outside interventions or tax collection were seen as potentially disruptive in the northern areas as long as the colonial presence there was solely built on the co-optation of local rulers.

In this situation, the Chamber of Mines in Lüderitz approached the administration in the early 1920s with the aim of establishing a trading store in Ovamboland. Afraid of exploitation and unrest, which were common around trading stores elsewhere in Southern Africa, the government had so far blocked all attempts by private traders to open a store on the reserve. The Chamber of Mines, however, argued that the store would not be there to make a profit but solely to encourage prospective labour migrants and make trade goods more accessible. If workers could buy trading goods after their journey instead of carrying them home on their backs, the mines argued, their wages would bring them higher benefits. In addition, the presence of modern goods at home, where the families and elders could see them, would increase the demand for money and secure a supply of labour for the mines. This argument was taken up by Native Commissioner Hahn and convinced the Secretary for South-West Africa, who granted the licence.⁴

In January 1925, the first trading store in Ovamboland opened at a place called Ondjodjo, near the Native Affairs Office in Ondangwa. It was operated as a limited company, the Ondonga Trading Company, and was wholly owned by the Chamber of Mines in Lüderitz.⁵ Six months later, the

⁴ See NAN A450 7 2/18, Annual Report 1924; NAN SWAA 1057-35/22 Letter Drew, Native Affairs Windhoek, to NC Hahn, 6.9.1924.

⁵ OTC was registered at a statutory meeting on 10 February 1925. The share capital was £1000 divided into 1000 shares, of which Hans Härlin, the General Manager of CDM, held 998 and two other CDM directors one each 'in a representative capacity on behalf of the Lüderitz Chamber of Mines', as a letter from OTC explained to the Registrar in 1943. OTC

same company opened a second store in Omafo, in Oukwanyama near the Angolan border. Both stores were named after their locations, 'Ondjodjo' and 'Omafo Store'. They were operated as a monopoly until, to increase competition, a private trader was granted a licence in 1937. Ondjodjo and Omafo stores were taken over by the new South-West African Native Labour Association in 1943, after which the private trader's licence was withdrawn and his store was taken over by SWANLA as well. When the SWANLA was disbanded after the strikes in 1973, the Bantu Investment Corporation in the new 'homeland' of Ovamboland took over the stores. The history of the white-owned shops is interesting in itself and is closely linked to the history of the institutionalization of contract labour in Namibia, clearly showing how the colonial administration's conflicting aims were played out. But this is not the place to relate their history.⁶ Instead we are interested here in the appropriation of the concept of the trading store by local entrepreneurs.

Unlike many other outside innovations, even the white-owned trading stores did not have to be made acceptable by adaptation. They were a huge success from the start. People were enthusiastic about having goods available locally and chiefs from other regions lobbied the administration to have new trading stores opened in their areas. This is unusual in itself, all the more so since the shop was meant to increase labour migration, and Ovamboland society, like many societies, did not always react enthusiastically to outsiders trying to change their priorities. There were two secrets to the stores' success. First, trade as such was not a new concept in northern Namibia. European trade caravans had brought new goods and changed the local power structure during the nineteenth century, providing chiefs with guns and horses and, by introducing new means of accumulation, had encouraged the use of guns in the accumulation of wealth.⁷ During the 1920s and later, Portuguese traders from Angola frequently crossed the border illegally into South West Africa. So when Ondjodjo opened as the first permanent store in the area and the first that only sold goods for cash, it offered a more convenient way of trading

⁶ was constituted as a Private Limited Company, so no balance sheet had to be submitted (NAN COM 40). The Ondjodjo store opened on 8 January 1925 (NAN NAO SWAA 1056 135/22, Letter NC Hahn to Secretary, 10 May 1938).

⁷ For a more detailed account of the history of white and locally owned trading stores in Ovamboland, see Dobler (2013).

⁸ See Dobler (2013), Siiskonen (1990) and Henrichsen (2011).

through a different institutionalization, but it did not introduce an entirely new concept.

Secondly, the shops had a local monopoly. They offered access to goods that had formerly not been regularly available in Ovamboland, so that acquiring them involved either a long and difficult journey or paying a high premium to those who had bought them in central Namibia or Angola. The catch was that shops were only allowed to sell goods for cash. Until World War II, cash was in very short supply in the area as only a few teachers, catechists and government employees were employed in wage labour. The cash used to purchase goods at stores therefore usually involved the wages of migrant labourers. Through their local acceptance, which in itself was linked to a quest for the consumption of new goods, the monopoly stores contributed to the normalization of migrant labour from Ovamboland.

In the long term, the stores crucially influenced the social, political and physical landscape of twentieth-century Ovamboland, becoming important elements in the local social life, models for a new elite economic activity and nodes of urbanization. In the closed reserve economy, they were the first points of contact with a modernizing colonial society, and images of modern consumption were first developed in relation to them.⁸

Local appropriation and the conditions for its success

The four stores kept their monopoly as far as white traders were concerned but after some years, locals started to open their own stores. From the start, this was actively encouraged by the Native Commissioner who saw it as a means of developing the area and promoting labour migration. The first 'native' to apply for a licence to open a store was Simon Galoua from Ombalantu, a Western chieftaincy far from the monopoly stores. He had worked as a police constable in Oranjemund and decided to open a store after returning in 1937. Due to problems with a local headman and some reluctance on the side of the Acting Native Commissioner, his small store

⁸ A discussion of the role Ondjodjo played in relation to migrant workers in central Namibia or South Africa is not possible here. From early traders' accounts, it is clear that all of them knew at least the Ondjodjo store, visited it on a regular basis and took their ideas of what a store should look like from these experiences and also had knowledge of other stores, which influenced their concepts.

only opened in 1939 and when obtaining supplies became problematic for all stores during the war, he was forced to close his shop in 1942.⁹

Due to the war, it was ten years before the next wave of locally owned shops appeared and started to change Ovamboland's economic landscape. In 1951, a number of individuals applied for permission to open stores. The first application was made by Teofilus Mafita Tueumuna, a teacher at the Olukonda Finnish mission school in Ondonga. He asked the Native Commissioner to allow his wife, Helena Tueumuna, to open a store in Ondobe, and his brother, Moses Tueumuna, to open a *kafée* (a small eating place) in Oshikango.¹⁰ Over the next three years, thirteen applications were made to the Native Commissioner's Office regarding opening trading stores. The administration needed a year to deal with these applications but finally trading was officially allowed, subject to a licence. In the words of the Chief Native Commissioner: 'It is our policy to encourage Natives to trade in their own areas'.¹¹

This was the beginning of a surprising wave of trade entrepreneurship (see Figure 3.1). In the fifteen years between 1956 and 1970, more than 1200 licensed shops were opened by local people in Ovamboland.¹² They were spread fairly evenly across the country (see Map 3.1), with a few clusters developing in the peri-urban centres. Before 1920, reaching a shop had required a journey of one to four weeks. By 1940, people still had to walk or ride for a whole day from most areas to get to one of the monopoly stores but almost every household in Ovamboland had access to a shop within an hour's walk of their home by the end of the 1960s.

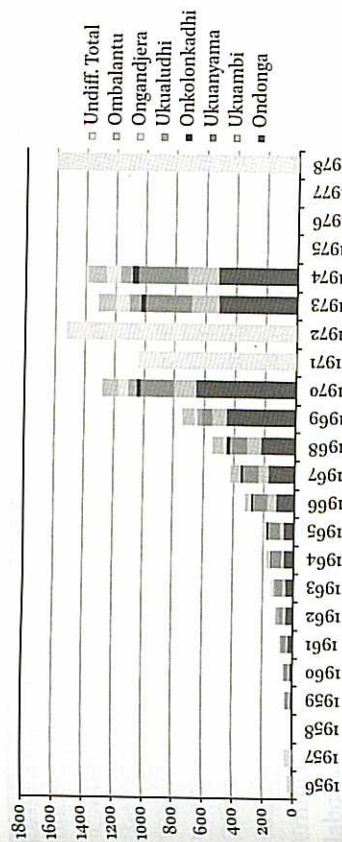
Local stores came in different shapes and sizes. The smallest consisted of a shelf in a thatched hut in a homestead, undistinguishable from others and only known to the neighbours by word of mouth, while the largest were huge supermarket chains owned by millionaires. Different as they were, they all had a novel way of organizing the exchange of goods that the monopoly stores had introduced into the region (and migrant workers already knew from their time in central Namibian or South Africa). Before

⁹ Simon Galoua first opened his store in Ukuahudhi and moved to Ombalantu after problems with Chief Mulua. NAN NAO 25 17/2, Letter NC to CNC, 28 August 1941; NAN SWAA 1056 135/22, Letter Acting CNC to NC, 20 January 1938; NAN NAO 20 11/1 Vol. 11 Annual Report 1938; SWAA 1057 135/22 Telegram NC to CNC, 26 July 1939.

¹⁰ NAN NAO 64 17/7, Letter Teofilus Tueumuna to NC Eedes, 3 February 1951.

¹¹ NAN NAO 64 17/7, Letter CNC to NC, 8 August 1952.

¹² In 1978, the number of unlicensed shops was officially put at 6075, most of which were 'coca shops' selling beer. This, however, was after the sale of beer was officially legalized in 1973 and boosted the number of unlicensed liquor outlets.



Source: Author's own statistics NAN OVE 11 9/2/5/2, Nominative list of traders.

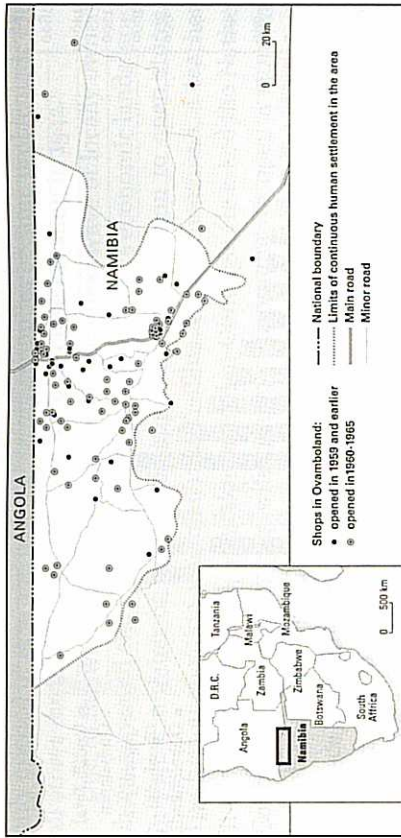
Figure 3.1 Number of licensed shops in Ovamboland, 1956-1978

the establishment of trading stores, trade had been sporadic, decentralized and embedded in other activities. There are no sources about specialized resident or market traders in the area in pre-colonial times. No 'shops', i.e. fixed venues where private individuals stored goods to sell them on, had existed. Markets had been temporary, mostly developing around important meetings or feasts or when long-distance traders arrived in the area.

Trading stores did not only change the spatial organization of economic exchange, they also introduced a specialized occupation: the career path of the trader. Becoming a trader involved learning a variety of new techniques including bookkeeping, writing applications for a permit, knowledge about a variety of products, and not least the ability to disembed market transactions from everyday reciprocity. It also involved a new degree of regular outside interaction, namely organizing supplies, establishing credit relations and applying for an annual licence renewal. The institutional framework introduced by trading stores thus reached much farther than the few shelves of goods in a local homestead might suggest to the casual observer, and successful traders had to combine local knowledge with knowledge of institutions foreign to most of their customers.

Most traders started small. The first wave of early-1950s traders invested income earned from migrant labour or from one of the few jobs on the reserve (as a catechist, a teacher or a government clerk)¹³ but apart from these pioneers, most of the prospective traders gained their first experiences at a very young age. As schoolchildren, they bought sweets in bulk

¹³ Government clerks were not allowed to trade while they were in employment, but at least two gave up their jobs and started trading stores.



Map 3.1 Shops in Ovamboland opened in 1959 and earlier and 1960-1965

and sold them to classmates, with the more economical soon able to reinvest their profits and move on to slightly more expensive goods like sugar, soap or cooking oil. When they left school and went to the south to work, they did not stop trading but found customers in the labour compounds or the townships. By the time they came back home, some of them had saved enough to invest in a small stock of goods that they brought back home for barter or sale. The risk was lower than the starting capital, since they knew well the goods that were scarce in their villages, and what prices people would be willing to pay if they could avoid having to travel to the next store. People started their businesses as a side-line, trading from a room in their homestead, with most of them only constructing specialized buildings once they had become professional full-time traders.

By the late 1960s, the average, moderately successful trader owned a concrete store with a porch where drinks could be served. These stores were mostly close to the owner's homestead but at the most central place available where different footpaths met or next to a water hole, a local gathering place or the chief's homestead. Entering the store, customers stood in front of a counter that separated the public room from the private space and the goods were stored on shelves behind the counter and handed to the customers by the shopkeeper or an assistant. On the counter were glass cases with smaller goods, scales and weights, and sometimes a cash box. The stores usually served drinks and were often village meeting points.

The shops thus reproduced a function the monopoly stores had gained soon after opening: they became central places in an area formerly shaped by scattered homesteads. No central structures had existed in the villages

prior to European influence. The chiefly courts were social centres, and once a person became a chief, his/her homestead grew to accommodate an often sizeable entourage. However they reverted to a normal size after the chief's death and did not result in the formation of permanent centres. The first permanent, larger buildings were the mission stations that were established after the 1870s, followed by the Native Commissioner's Office in today's Ondangwa in the 1920s and, a short time later, the four white-owned shops. As three of the shops were also built close to government posts, mission stations and, in the case of On-djodjo, the native labour compound, the European structures became central places that were functionally differentiated from the remaining parts of the villages. They were the first core areas around which the region's new towns were to develop.

On a much smaller scale, the growing number of specialized village stores embodied a similar functional differentiation. Meeting places had so far either been in somebody's homestead or 'under a tree' in areas designated for public gatherings. The village stores were the first houses exclusively constructed for public use. In this too, they mirrored the white-owned stores. They were often the first 'modern' structures in the vicinity, built not of wood, clay and thatch but of concrete and with roof sheeting. From 1969 onwards, a specialized modern building with a concrete floor and solid walls was no longer optional but was defined as a precondition for a store licence.¹⁴

Locally owned shops thus relied heavily on the model of 'imported' white-owned stores that were channelled partly (and probably more importantly) through the local appropriation of a Western model and partly due to a favourable administrative policy. Traders and local society, however, modified the institution in important dimensions wherever it did not fit local needs. This concerned changes to size, stock and capital expenditure outlined above and the more flexible transitions between formal and informal businesses. One of the most crucial changes, however, was in the social role shop owners gained locally. Unlike the white managers of the big stores, local shop owners had to make sure they did not appear as greedy outsiders when trading with their neighbours, friends and relatives.

¹⁴ Not all store owners applied for a licence but a surprising number did – mostly because a valid licence was a precondition for buying in bulk at white-owned stores and for applying for a permit to travel to the south to get supplies.

In most peasant societies and frequently in other Southern African reserve economies with white-owned trading stations, traders are seen as leeches that earn money by exploiting their monopoly on the necessary capital to buy and stockpile goods. In colonial Ovamboland, traders seem to have avoided this pitfall by gaining access to elite status and accepting the obligations linked to this role. As owners of new meeting places, they began to play a central role in local political discussions that created the conditions for resistance to colonial rule. Many became community organizers, and quite a number of the early traders left the country to become full-time politicians in exile. Others stayed and took up important functions in the village or local parishes organizing feasts, paying the school fees of protégés, using their cars to provide transport for villagers and generally contributing to the material basis of village social life. Through credit networks that extended all over the homeland, traders functioned as local banks for migrant workers wanting to keep their money in a safe place. Trade was almost the only local alternative to wages earned as a contract worker and traders became the core of this new modernizing elite that was neither oriented towards the local subsistence economy nor towards wage labour in the mines. They found an economic basis in the monetary economy supplied by the wages of migrant workers, and often opposed local headmen linked to a village society that relied on subsistence farming. The increased consumption opportunities the new shops provided shifted the balance of power away from the agricultural elites and towards groups that could command a monetary income. The new trading stores contributed to the conceptual division between the 'homeland', in which families lived and consumed, and the central Namibian towns in which young men went to work. The new villages and towns that emerged around the clusters of shops were the visible expression of this re-centring of the local economy and, in them, novel forms of sociability gained increasing importance. The structural conditions of this appropriation of an outside innovation are traced below and some of the unintended consequences it had for the local society are discussed.

The first precondition of a successful appropriation of the institution of the trading store was the spread of a monetary economy. The shops fed into it without creating it. It had its origins in the mission stations, which paid their employees in cash and sold clothing or Bibles more cheaply for cash than in kind. In migrant labour, cash had the function of being a temporary stash that could be transformed into tradable goods one could take to the village, and the pay of native soldiers during World War II was important in this respect too. These activities brought cash into the area

and fuelled demand as soon as local shops offered a way of spending it at home. The years between 1940 and 1950 were the watershed and by 1950, there was enough money on the native reserve of Ovamboland to make locally owned shops profitable. The new shops then offered an incentive to returning migrant workers to bring cash instead of goods back home.

Secondly, anyone who wanted to open a store needed the capital to do so. This rather banal point is rarely analysed in the literature on appropriation but, short of stealing them, one can only appropriate things one can afford to buy (see Beck 1990). The concept may be there for the taking but the actual store is not. And material innovations, like trading stores, often necessitate savings. They change people's aims and thus affect how they frame their own agency. Appropriating an innovation by, for example, buying a car, might involve years of wage labour and might mean not buying a donkey cart, and necessitates acquiring an entirely new set of competences. In the same way, opening a store meant altering one's life choices and neglecting other possible aims.

Necessary investments and changing aims are both clearly visible in the trading stores. In a society in which money was rare, the capital to open a store was not easy to come by. The first local people to open shops in Ovamboland were employees with a regular monthly income, mainly teachers, preachers or nurses working on the mission stations, or returning migrant workers who had put aside several years' wages. From the mid-1950s onwards, when money became more widely used, future traders often started their career by trading small amounts of goods as children, selling units individually and reinvesting the small profit, as already mentioned above. Both strategies involved long-term planning, discipline and foresight but, above all, a re-orientation of one's life plans towards the cash (and often wage) economy. In the 1960s and 1970s, being a farmer and being rich in land and cattle lost its appeal for many young men, to be replaced by the model of a migrant worker who reinvested his wages in trade and became rich through trade.

A third precondition of the success the trading store concept had was the lack of alternative ways to earn a living at home outside subsistence agriculture. Employment was still reserved for the few well-educated teachers, catechists or nurses (who often had their own shops, as well) and all the other men looking for employment had to leave the area as contract workers. Almost no manufacturing took place on the reserve due initially to a lack of money locally to pay for manufactured goods and the comparatively competitive wages in the mining sector. This was later reinforced by the easy availability of industrially produced goods on the reserve. The

very presence of a high number of shops in an economy fuelled by outside transfers prevented the emergence of a more sustainable manufacturing industry. Entrepreneurs who had the money and energy to build up a successful company were sure to benefit from trade. Due to the pass laws, which eliminated all outside competition, profit rates remained high and due to the migrant labour system, which geographically decoupled labour markets from consumption, demand remained stable. Stores became even more lucrative when South Africa deployed increasing numbers of soldiers in the area during the guerrilla liberation war that started in 1966. The recruits received wages, a good part of which ended up in the pockets of the owners of local bars and shops.

This led to the fourth precondition of the successful appropriation of shops. The 'homeland' was conceptually perceived as a sphere of agricultural production, consumption and later services, whereas industrial employment and manufacturing took place in the central areas of Namibia. This is where ordinary people went to earn money. At home, they produced food, lived with their families and spent the money they had earned elsewhere. Shops could easily be integrated into this separation of economic spheres but commercial agriculture and manufacturing were far from people's minds. This separation of the world into two spheres shaped by wage labour on the one hand and a combination of subsistence production and consumption on the other is often found in areas with strong outgoing labour migration. It is a crucial, though often overlooked, element in the articulation of domestic and industrial modes of production that have famously been described by Wolpe (1972), Meillassoux (1975) and Evers (1987).

All four structural conditions were necessary for the successful transformation of the trading store and its appropriation into local society. But they did not remain unaffected by the appropriation itself: the presence of trading stores led to feedback effects reinforcing the conditions under which they could blossom. By reinforcing certain trends and weakening others, the appropriation of the trading store had unintended but important structural consequences.

Consequences of the stores' appropriation

Of the many consequences the proliferation of trading stores had, let us first consider the way in which the appropriation of trading stores affected the local economy. As already noted, for those who had saved sufficient capital, opening a trading store was a very promising investment. Running a store allowed the owner to settle down but still earn a regular cash

income. The steady flow of outside resources into the region secured demand. Wages for migrant work were relatively low but even low wages provided significant purchasing power in an economy that relied on household farming for everyday subsistence.

For many people in Ovamboland, trade thus provided a way to better their own personal situation. A successful store gave access to a cash income, higher social status and the chance to extend one's social networks, in addition to the comparative freedom that self-employment offers. Trade was attractive as a permanent profession in much the same way migrant labour had been attractive as temporary employment, and it had fewer negative aspects than contract labour. But in both cases, the sum of individual emancipatory decisions set conditions that narrowed the scope of future agency. Once migrant labour and trade had become the normal economic activity for a specific social group, that normality was not only reproduced in social practices and societal structures of relevance but also in concrete institutions, in spatial organization, roads, passports and tax laws.

As long as stores were successful, this did not matter. But stores did not create sustainable economic growth at the local level. Their structural consequences for northern Namibia's economy were negative in the long run, simply because the trade boom that the area experienced in the 1950s and 1960 was nothing but the reverse side of its integration into the global economy through the export of labour power. This stood in the way of other forms of development by absorbing all potential entrepreneurs but did not create the same self-sustainability that small-scale industrial development would have. Owning a shop was hard work but seen from the level of the homeland's integration into the Namibian economy, shops lived on outside rents and on a perversely protected environment.

After independence in 1990, Namibia did away with its homeland boundaries and virtually none of the local shops could compete with mainstream South African, Lebanese or Cape Malay companies that opened branches there. A few richer traders managed to diversify, mostly by investing in real estate but most local shops and supermarkets slowly crumbled. In retrospect, a development path that looked comparatively successful during the homeland era can be seen as having failed and as preventing other, more sustainable forms of development.¹⁵

¹⁵ The structural consequences of Namibia's independence in 1990 for local entrepreneurship were similar to those experienced in Senegal and Ghana thirty years earlier. The established local business elite could only benefit from independence in a limited

Appropriation

What does the above show us about the appropriation of outside innovations? To come to conclusions on a more abstract level, it is helpful to take a step back from the stores and look at different types of objects that can be appropriated.

The consequences of the innovation of trading stores were mostly grounded in the institutional framework that came with it, and from which it could not be separated. This is not always the case. Literature on appropriation often looks at material objects that are not as strongly defined by institutions, thus leaving greater scope for social creativity. If I had not looked at stores as such, but at the scales, coins, shelves or counters attached to them, I could have presented much greater differences in the ways different people use them.

Why should this be so? Or, to put it more generally, can we discern typical ways in which different classes of objects shape the relative freedom of social appropriation? As a preliminary suggestion that builds on my earlier work in France (Dobler 2002: 359–369), I would like to differentiate between four types of objects: objects used for their sign value, objects used as tools, objects used as tools with a much higher degree of efficiency and, finally, objects linked to a larger set of institutions.

1. If members of a society take over outside goods and use them for their sign value, they are free to change the practices and ideas connected to them. This may need some clarification. I see the sign value of an object not as opposed to, but as an integral part of its use value, which Marx (1973: 49; 1974: 194) defined as the capacity of an object to satisfy societal

way. They either continued with petty trade or moved their business interests into other sectors, often drawing on connections with the new political class (see Nugent 2004: 63f.). There is at least one important structural difference, however. If we follow Samir Amin's analysis of underdevelopment in Senegal (Amin 1977), well-placed local businesspeople managed to benefit from independence by connecting national markets to former colonial centres in a way that served their own and the centres' interests. Instead of developing into such a 'comprador bourgeoisie', well-placed Namibian businesspeople were able to transform political connections into economic gain by taking shares in Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) deals and by taking over positions in parastatals. This has the same structural effect as a comprador bourgeoisie's share in external resources: it enables the best-placed potential entrepreneurs to reap rents of political connections, not of independent economic activities, and decreases the chances of success for those entrepreneurs who are not part of the elite circles. In Namibia however, BEE policies favoured former, exiled politicians who had the best connections to the new political leaders and were convinced of their right to reap the fruits of decades of political struggle.

needs, whatever their nature. The sign value is that part of the use value that rests on an object's capacity to change the social world: to influence or redefine the social relations between the object's user and other people. Western goods placed on a Mami Wata shrine, African masks put on the wall of an upmarket Amsterdam apartment, refrigerators positioned in savannah homes without electricity – all these appropriations can use objects differently from their original context, thereby leaving a wide scope for social creativity that is only limited in the materiality of the object itself and *local* conventions regarding its meaning.

2. The second type is the appropriation of an object to be used as a tool (by which I understand a use primarily intended to change the material world). This comes in two varieties: there are new tools that serve the same ends (a petroleum lamp replaces a candle) and there are new tools that come with a new practice (the mobile phone enables us to engage in conversations over longer distances). In both cases, the new tools are linked to new practices. We might use electric lighting to shine on the same activities as a candle but the actions involved in lighting it, and generally the corporeal habitus connected to it, differ. Still, if objects are only used as tools embedded in local practices, two societies using the same tools typically differ more than the same society after the innovation differs from its state prior to the innovation.

3. This is no longer true for the third variant. These are tools that, even though they serve the same aim, are so much more efficient than the old ones that they transform social institutions adapted to old tools. The introduction of guns into northern Namibia in the nineteenth century made both war and domination more efficient than they had been when using bows and arrows – so much more so that kingdoms became more centralized, taxation rose and raids became more frequent. This encouraged people to build larger and stronger homesteads and to reconsider the relationship between domination and territory, resulting in changing gender relations in the household and a stronger role for the household head. Such changes were not intended but were logical consequences of a more efficient tool. Automobiles, diesel pumps or machine-drilled wells have had similar consequences.

4. This is all the more pronounced for the fourth type: objects that can only be used in a meaningful way after introducing new practices and institutions that affect the society at large. For example, it is impossible to use a conveyor belt for manufacturing without introducing a division of labour first; and paper money only makes sense if people accept an abstract measure of the value of goods. Of course one can always use

paper money to sniff cocaine, light cigars or decorate one's walls and not every object linked to social institutions in one society has to be linked to the same institutions in another society. But these cases would fall under Types 1 or 2. Marx's (1978, Ch. 2) aphorism that 'the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist' uses the wrong example but aptly symbolizes the degree to which some innovations are linked to wider social change. Such institutions frequently develop in stages and an innovation that originates in one society might be adopted into a second society as a new tool, and only there lead to the establishment of a new institution. A third society may then adopt either the original tool or the new institution, with very different consequences.

The trading store is an example of the fourth type of appropriation of an innovation. If you steal a gun and ammunition and have the know-how to shoot, you can use it without any prior social change. Your appropriation of an outside innovation will change your society but will do so within the limits of your use. If you want to use a trading store in a society that has no use for money, you can only do so by changing your society first by introducing new practices. This will set in motion changes with far greater consequences than you intended or were able to foresee.

In the case of the trading store (and this might merit a fifth type), individual agency integrated an ever-wider array of fields of social action into institutions controlled from the outside – or at least connected to the outside and no longer controllable from within. The printing of money, paid jobs, sanitary laws, pass laws, road building and tax regimes are all direct links to social fields beyond local control. Outside innovation was taken over by local actors in a creative, energetic and entrepreneurial way, but through their agency, the conditions for local action were changed in a way that was quickly beyond their control.

This is, of course, what society is all about. Individual actions add up to institutions and to new conditions for agency. When analysing how outside innovations are taken over, it is worth bearing this in mind and not casting one's web too narrowly by concentrating on individual appropriation alone. In appropriation, societies all too often have the same experience as Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*: 'In the first we are free, in the second slaves to the act' (Scene II).

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