'I just ended up here, no job and no health…' – men's outlook on life in the context of economic hardship and HIV/AIDS in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic material from northern and central Namibia, this article provides insight into the views and experiences of primarily unemployed and poor men, and the dilemmas with which they are confronted due to lack of life opportunities. For these men, poverty and lack of agency may lead to loss of meaning and identity. The article brings men's experiences into context by exploring the socio-economic and historical transitions which in powerful ways contribute to shaping men's lives. It argues that HIV/AIDS is but one of many pressing concerns, and therefore information campaigns to promote safe sexual practices have limited meaning and impact. It further argues that men, like women, but in different ways than women, are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. To counter this situation, it is crucial that HIV/AIDS prevention efforts work with men specifically. If prevention programmes are to have any relevance and impact, they should take their starting point in men's experiences of social exclusion and existential doubt.

Keywords: men, masculinity, economic hardship, HIV/AIDS, Namibia.

RÉSUMÉ

Basé sur le matériel ethnographique du nord et du centre de la Namibie, cette communication donne un aperçu des opinions et des expériences des hommes pauvres et essentiellement chômeurs et les dilemmes auxquels ils font face à cause du manque des occasions dans la vie. Pour ces hommes, la pauvreté et le manque d'urgence pourraient les conduire vers la perte d'identité et la raison de vivre. Cette communication met les expériences de ces hommes dans un contexte en examinant les transitions socio-économiques et historiques qui contribuent largement à façonner leurs vies. Cette présente avance un argument en disant que le VIH/SIDA n'est qu'un des soucis pressants. De ce fait, les campagnes qui favorisent des rapports sexuels protégés ont un sens et un impact assez limités. La présente avance aussi le fait que les hommes, comme pour les femmes, mais de maniére différente à celle de femmes, sont également vulnérables au VIH/SIDA. Pour aller à l'encontre de cette situation, il est essentiel que les efforts de prévention contre le VIH/SIDA visent les hommes en particulier. Pour que les programmes de prévention puissent avoir une pertinence et un impact, ils doivent commencer avec les expériences d'exclusion et de doute existentiel des hommes.

Mots clés : hommes, masculinité, détresse économique, VIH/SIDA, Namibie.

INTRODUCTION

In relation to HIV/AIDS prevention efforts, social sciences and international public health have increasingly directed attention to the role of gender identities, including constructions of masculinities and male sexualities. The aim has been to understand better the gender-related dynamics of the pandemic. There is ample documentation of the fact that girls' and women's vulnerability to HIV infection is mediated through their interaction with men or by men's forceful acts towards them (Morrell 2004, Kandirikirira 2002). It is generally agreed that there is a need to know more about local configurations of masculinities and their impact on reproductive health and development (Chant, 2000; Connell, 1995; Morrell 2001). In the field of gender and development research and programming, one prominent discourse perceives men as the main power holders within all spheres of life (private, public, economic, sexual, etc.) and as accountable for the spread of HIV. Men have also been blamed for obstructing prevention efforts through reactionary patriarchal or aggressive attitudes. In contrast, programmes that specifically or exclusively target boys and men are still relatively rare. Likewise, research has not to any significant degree documented successful approaches to male-oriented intervention programmes in specific social contexts.

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Anthropological research has challenged discourses that are based on essentialist perceptions of women and men, calling for more attention to the diverse forms of masculinities and femininities and the complex relationship of power within and between them (Bujra, 2002; Cornwall, 2000). Stereotyping men conceals a complex situation in which some men are victims, as well as women and children (Sweetman, 1998). In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, a discourse on disempowered and disenfranchised men has emerged (Bujra, 2002; Cleaver, 2002; Morrell, 2001; Silberschmidt, 2004). It is argued that social and symbolic exclusion of men has consequences for their management of sexuality, and leads to increased sexual risk taking. In an earlier article I argued that poverty, leading to social and symbolic exclusion of both women and men in Namibia, impacts on relationships and exposes both women and men to HIV and other reproductive health risks (Tersbøl, 2002).

Since HIV/AIDS was first diagnosed in Namibia in 1986, the prevalence rate, measured among pregnant women attending antenatal care, has reached an average of 22% (Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2002). AIDS has been the leading cause of death in Namibia since 1996 and the epidemic has reduced average life expectancy by a decade. The Namibian Government has launched a Third Medium-term Plan (2004 - 2009) under the National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS.[1] It is estimated that 100 000 children will be orphaned by 2005 (National Planning Commission, 2004).

This article, which is based on an anthropological study of gender, sexuality and reproductive health in Namibia, promotes the point that men may not experience themselves as powerful all the time, and that some men feel rather powerless and disenfranchised most of the time. The study focussed on the life worlds and experiences of both women and men, some of them employed but extremely lowly paid, most of them unemployed. However, this article is focussed on men's situations and experiences in particular.

Thus the aim of the present article is first of all to give voice to a group of Namibian men who are either unemployed or in poorly remunerated jobs. This is not to downplay the very difficult situation of disadvantaged women in Namibia, but an attempt to address the essentialist and stereotypical image of men

as powerful and destructive. Apart from the experiences of men, the voice of women is present in this article to critically reflect on men's management of relationships and sexuality in a context of poverty and social transition. A second aim is to situate the experiences of men within the context of historical and socio-economic structures and dynamics pertaining to Namibia to attempt to understand how concerns over HIV/AIDS may be marginalised in relation to concerns over identity and existential doubt. Finally, the article argues that when attempting to promote reproductive health, including safe sexual practices, in a context where both women and men lack hope for the future, efforts need to go beyond information campaigns. Prevention efforts should take their starting point in experiences of social and symbolic exclusion and existential doubt, to promote motivation and agency in the face of socio-economic hardship.

FIELDWORK AND STUDY POPULATION

Fieldwork for this study took place for 9 months in 1998 in the Ohangwena region in central northern Namibia, popularly referred to as 'the north', 'Ovamboland' or 'Ohambo', and for 5 months in 2000 in Kuisebmond, a township outside the central coastal town of Walvis Bay.

The study was based on qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation and essays by school children. Interviews sought to enquire broadly about women's and men's life situations, to gain insight into how they consider love, sexuality and health within the wider context of post-colonial Namibia. To gain as comprehensive an understanding of women and men's different experiences and perceptions as possible, the research team sought to interview different age groups in different life circumstances, maintaining emphasis on a disadvantaged section of the population.

The research team (three male and two female assistants and the author) interviewed 123 persons. In the Ohangwena region, 68 persons were interviewed (42 women and 26 men in the age group 15 – 60+). In Kuisebmond (Walvis Bay), 55 persons were interviewed (20 women and 35 men in the age group 20 – 50). Of the 123 informants, 15 had formal training beyond secondary schooling (teachers, nurses, bank personnel, police officers or military personnel, and pastors). Apart from these, 11 persons had reached or passed grade 12. Most of the informants were

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unemployed or underemployed, working only a few hours per week. In addition, school children in grade 9 were asked to write realistic stories about fictitious young persons' experiences and outlook on life (Turner 1994). Eight groups of children (four boys' and four girls' groups) wrote stories for the study.

In the Ohangwena region, the majority of the population are Kwanyama, the largest ethnic subgroup within the Ovambo population. All the ethnic subgroups of the Ovambo population are matrilineal and, in a rural environment, patrilocal, centering on the homestead of the husband or the husband's father. Almost all informants participating in the study were Kwanyama who are involved in or originate from subsistence farming, an undertaking that in Northern Namibia offers limited opportunities for cash earnings. Cultivating and processing crops, mainly pearl millet, sorghum and beans are labour intensive in the extreme, particularly for girls and women. The level of temporary or permanent labour migration from the north to central and southern parts of the country is high.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Anthropological research and analysis directs its attention towards individuals in the context of the collective. The focus is on experiences and activities of people within the framework of wider scale structures and processes of society (Hastrup, 2003; Prus, 1996). Individuals are neither passive enactors of culture nor autonomous agents (Hastrup, 1994). Rather, experience, meaning and action arise and are processed inter-subjectively within specific social realities. This article directs attention particularly to the life worlds of poor men in contemporary Namibia, assessing their lived experience in relation to normative expectations, and historical, economic and social transitions that have contributed to conditioning current notions of ideal masculinity. Shared notions of what constitutes the good life, and what assigns status to men, contribute to directing the motivation of men in certain directions. The material shows that men are encouraged to aspire to certain definitions of ideal livelihood and masculinity. Involvement in both rural and urban spheres is central in men's life worlds.

Gaining anthropological insight often includes challenging cultural categories that have been taken for granted and finding ways of learning how others see the world (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994). One

undertaking of the study was to understand local perceptions of masculinity and femininity, the historical and socio-economic context that influences such constructions, as well as social experience in general. Men are generally portrayed as power-holders in relation to women, and as reactionary and resistant to change, as they draw on ideologies of male supremacy over women. As Moore (1988) wrote about 'women', no single feminism can speak equally for all women. Instead, it should be acknowledged that different social situations lead to the production and articulation of different experiences. This applies to men too. Differentiations should be considered across age, class, ethnicity and cultures. Furthermore, power distribution between women and men is relationally negotiated, as is power distribution between men.

Connell (1995) promotes an understanding of masculinity and femininity as processes of gendered practices over time. Gendered social practice is shaped by and in turn shapes political, social and cultural dynamics. Furthermore, gender identities are internally complex structures that may include contradictions. Some notions of masculinity and femininity are more dominant than others and determine the standards against which other constructions are evaluated. Dominant constructions of masculinity have been referred to as 'hegemonic masculinity (ies)' and are successful ways of 'being a man', which render other masculine styles inferior (Carrigan, 1985 in Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994). Both women and men take part in confirming and altering ideals of masculinity and femininity, and women's and men's enactment of gender in social practice happens in a continuous dialogue with social context.

A growing proportion of literature has described and analysed the situation of men in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of labour migration and unemployment, and social and economic as well as cultural exclusion of men. Research has also sought to document how social exclusion affects men's sexuality and their relationship with women, and the consequences this may have for reproductive health and HIV/AIDS (Campbell 2003; Kandirikirira 2002; Morrell 2003 & 1998; Setel 1999; Silberschmidt, 2004). It is argued that when men experience redundancy and lack of life opportunities, they face a crisis in their perception of what it means to be a man (Silberschmidt, 2001; Sweetman, 1998). Kandirikirira (2002) discusses how masculine identities are distorted through lack of agency, racism,

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discrimination and a normative culture of violence that emerges as a result hereof.

The constraints (and opportunities) that poor women and men may encounter stem from the particular social, cultural and political constellations of disadvantage. Lack of educational and economic opportunities, exposure to racism, discrimination and humiliation give shape to particular forms of social exclusion and suffering (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1997). Campbell (2003) presents two forms of social disadvantage: poverty and lack of income-generating opportunities, termed material social exclusion; and the lack of respect and recognition that follows from material social exclusion, termed symbolic social exclusion. Material and symbolic exclusion can be experienced by people directly as, for example, unemployment, lack of access to food and commodities. However, the force of wider social structures and processes that shape specific forms of material and symbolic exclusion cannot be deciphered by people directly. Such force is discussed in recent literature as structural violence (Farmer, 2004; Scherper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Bourgois (2004, p. 426) defines structural violence as 'chronic, historically entrenched political-economic oppression and social inequality'. Structural violence is also enacted through racism, sexism, political violence, and most importantly poverty (Farmer, 2004). Structural violence may deny women and men resources and opportunities to attain the capacities and practices that are valued in specific communities, rendering it difficult for individuals to be recognised and to have a place in the world (Dolan, 2002; Kandirikirira, 2002). Structural violence comes across to the individual as normal, legitimate and justified routine, and therefore also silences its victims (Farmer, 2004; Scherper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). The causes of such violence are diffuse, and difficult to identify. Instead, the blame and frustration may be projected onto other people, or turned inwards, resulting in self-destruction and lack of self-esteem.

Bourgois (2004, p. 432) writes 'that political, economic and institutional forces shape micro-interpersonal and emotional interactions in all kinds of ways by supporting or suppressing modes of feeling and manifestations of love or aggression, definitions of respect and achievement, and patterns of insecurity and competition'. Individual agents in turn act on these forces as they devise strategies to cope or negotiate

their impact, in order to improve specific social conditions. Sexual practice cannot be distinguished from our general social existence and practice, and while sexuality can be meaning-oriented and intentional (Merleau-Ponty, 1995 in Gammeltoft, 2002), it may not always be deliberate or rationally calculated, but perhaps pre-reflexive in character (Gammeltoft, 2002).

It is within these complex scenarios that prevention approaches should seek to assist women and men in finding ways to live safer sexual lives. Prevention approaches have so far not been able to make any significant progress in motivating or enabling women and men to protect their health. Inadequate attention has been paid to the multiple factors that impact on people's lives and sexualities. If HIV/AIDS programmes are to make any difference to their target groups, including men as a particular but diverse target group, such programmes must first of all make sense to them, and take their starting point in people's life worlds and experiences.

MEN'S OUTLOOK ON LIFE

This article exemplifies a number of the dilemmas and conflicts that men within a particular social context may experience due to material and symbolic social exclusion. Other conflicts arise from men's management of their sexuality and relationships with women. The dilemmas concern management of material or financial problems, problems of social or cultural obligations, and problems associated with identity and meaning.

A nostalgic account of rural livelihood and ideal masculinity

Among the young people who wrote stories for this study, there were four boys (aged approximately 15 - 20) going to school in the Ohangwena region, who worked together to write the following story of a young man's transition into adulthood:

In our village there was a boy. His name is Haimbondi ya Shifidi. He was born in 1968 on 05.08. His father's house was made from sticks and there were many huts. Father Shifidi had many cattle, goats, donkeys, horses and chicken and pigs. When Haimbondi turned six years, he started school [in the village] *in grade 1. He attended school until grade 4 and his father decided to take him out of school to go and look after the cattle. He went to ohambo* [the cattle post] *when he was nine years old.*

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Haimbondi stayed at ohambo looking after the cattle until he turned 20 years. During the rainy season, he decided to go home. He went with his cattle. When he reached near his house, he started to sing his song. When his father heard him singing, he recognised his voice. He took his spear, arrow and bow and ran to meet his son. When he reached his son, he started shouting with joy and his mother Mukwanangobe [from the 'cattle clan'] *came saying 'kwililii' to her son and shouted 'God protected you so you could come back'. He stayed home for a few days and decided to go to Oushimba* [central and southern Namibia]. *He talked with his father and his father agreed with him. The day he went to Oushimba, he went directly to Windhoek. He slept there only one day, and the next day he found a job. After three months, he wrote a letter to his parents to ask them to find a girl for him, he would like to marry. This letter made his parents very happy because they would like him to marry. They found a girl for him, that girl's name is Ndapandula. She was a teacher. Haimbondi was happy to hear that. He worked for one year and one month and he came to Ovambo to marry. He found everything prepared because he sent money before he came. The wedding day was announced and the neighbours made omalovu* [millet dish]. *They cooked the food and ate. Many people were there. After the wedding they stayed at Omunghandja* [husband's room] *until they gave birth to their first born baby. After one year, they found their own place in his father's field because his father's field was big.*

This story presents an imagined harmonious tale of a young boy's voyage into adulthood. It is a fairy tale of prosperity and recognition surrounding a young man, his willingness to do what was expected of him, and his ability to do so successfully. The boys made use of their knowledge of normative expectations of boys and men, and of local ideas about successful manhood as they jointly constructed their perception of ideal masculinity.

Holding this story up against informants' accounts of what is important and what they perceive as their successes and disappointments in life, it stands out as an exponent of central values and practices associated with manhood; commitment to the rural homestead and cattle, and the ability to manage the skills associated with rural livelihood, for instance ploughing and building houses. Also central to successful manhood is the ability to bridge rural and urban spheres; employment in urban settings should ideally provide resources for rural clan members and households, not only for an individual and his family. The story of

Haimbondi plays out against a collective idea of the good life and what it takes to achieve it as far as men are concerned. As such, Haimbondi represents central aspects of hegemonic masculinity.

Embodiment of structural and symbolic violence

In contrast to the imaginary story about the successful Haimbondi, stand the narratives of informants who experience themselves as less successful. Jonas[2], an unmarried male informant, aged 30, who has three children and lives in Kuisebmond, told us the following:

I was sent to ohambo for 10 years. From age 10 till 20, I never attended school. I take part in literacy courses now to learn to read and write, and I would like to continue with English. I left Ovamboland in 1989, and went to Windhoek. While staying in Windhoek, I didn't find a job, so I decided to return to Ohambo [here meaning 'Ovamboland'] *to help my parents. I didn't stay long. I decided to go to Walvis Bay. I chose Walvis Bay, because I have an uncle who works in the harbour. He tried to find a job for me but he didn't manage. I have been here for 9 years. My uncle tried his best to find me a job, but he couldn't. Then he bought me a shaving machine and I set up a small business, as a barber, inside the single quarters. In the beginning it was going well, but now business is slow. Even though it is slow, it is ok, because I do not want to steal other people's things. I want to generate an income myself. I didn't find any other employment. When I grew up, I was a very good person physically and mentally. If I compare myself now, my body disappears. I do not understand this. I worry a lot and I can't sleep. Staying in Walvis Bay most of the time, I think about the children, how I can provide for their needs, and share love with them. I worry about what I can contribute to their support and needs: clothes, money for food. Because of* [my] *low income ... I cannot find an income ... funds to support other members of the family. I worry about support to family members. To think about those things gave me chest pain, and the heart ... it feels like someone stabs me in the heart. This is caused by thinking too much. I still feel these emotions. I realise that for the Namibians, this causes physical suffering. Later on I visited the doctor. He discovered that I have tuberculosis. It is caused by the stabbing feeling. This kind of suffering causes me to cough up blood.*

With these powerful words Jonas expressed his experience of suffering and powerlessness. Jonas articulates his awareness of the presence of both

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internal and external forces which cause him pain. His emotions 'stab him in the heart'. At the same time, he is aware that it is an experience of suffering that he has in common with other Namibians: external forces cause social suffering among Namibians. Jonas' account is an emotional articulation of his embodiment of structural and symbolic violence.

Jonas' experience is shared by many of the men interviewed. Their frustration stems from discrepancies between what they as men in this particular social setting aspire to, their social obligations towards their clan and conjugal relations, and their actual life situation. Common for most male informants is that they would like to have a rural home which forms the base of their authority as adult males in the community. They also aim to find wage employment or a business opportunity that can provide cash income to consolidate the rural household and supplement agricultural production. Neither is easily achieved for this group of men. Finding cash employment or running a business opportunity in rural areas is a difficult task. Labour migration to urban areas, commercial farming areas or mines in central and southern Namibia have been central to men's lives for almost a century. Due to high unemployment rates and lack of opportunities to acquire arable land, it is difficult for men to settle as farmers. Young men acquire land either through parents or relatives who may assign a piece from their own fields, or buy land from the headman with cattle or money. Without a rural homestead, it is difficult for men to marry, and as a result, they remain 'youth' in the eyes of other community members.

Poor health is further aggravating men's situation. In Kuisebmond, as in many other migrant receiving locations, poor nutrition and crowded housing conditions promote both communicable and non-communicable diseases. Alcohol abuse is widespread (UNDP, 1999) and contributes further to poor health in the community.

Cattle or school: 'cultural' competence and educational disadvantage

Cattle have immense importance, both in a monetary and symbolic sense, and cattle husbandry and other agricultural practices are closely intertwined. In the Ohangwena region, young boys are often, like Jonas above, withdrawn from school after 1 - 3 years of primary school and sent to herd goats and cattle in grazing areas far from their villages. Learning to herd cattle provides the boys with valued skills but also robs them of education in those important formative years. The following is an extract from an interview with Moses, a 27-year-old man:

I went to school until grade 2. Then I was sent to my grandfather in the far east. He needed help with his cattle. From there I was sent to ohambo [the cattle post]. *I was at ohambo for three years. Then I went home and waited one year. Then I went back to school. I continued until grade 10. I didn't pass all subjects. I did not attend further studies.*

Some boys go back to school after having been at cattle posts for a number of years, but they may find it difficult to fit into school when most of the classmates are much younger. Moses' comment was:

When a boy starts to grow, it becomes difficult. To compare with girls – the girls are sent to school while the boys are looking after cattle. If you are lucky, you are not sent to ohambo but can look after the cattle at home. When you are fifteen, you can go to school. You don't have to be at ohambo. [It] *is a waste of time at this age. It is too late. It will be difficult for him to understand the persons at school. Sometimes the children are younger and they laugh at him. He is 15 and they are in grade 1 or 2. It will make him leave school and go back to ohambo because they are laughing … If you grow up as someone who looks after cattle, when you get a family and children, your children will also not go to school. The father does not know why the school is important. He is an 'Omunahambo'* [a man of the cattle posts, a peasant].

Moses understands the local rationale for withdrawing boys from school to herd cattle, but he also objects to it because he has realised that it disadvantages boys and men in relation to their future opportunities. The importance of cattle, but perhaps also the boys' expected futures as migrant workers, influence parents' decisions to pull out boys while the girls continue their schooling (Sweetman, 1998). With hardly any education, the boys are poorly equipped for the future, particularly since economic recession has resulted in fewer jobs for unskilled workers (Mufune, 2002).

In contrast to this, those boys who are given the opportunity to attend school and professional careers may be faced with a different dilemma, particularly if they have close ties to rural areas, but have not been

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raised there. Amos, aged 21, was brought up by his older brother in a small town in central Namibia. During Amos' childhood, his mother taught at a school in Windhoek, and his father was a migrant worker in a third town, but had a homestead in Ohambo. Amos' father gave him a section of his field to cultivate. Since Amos did not grow up in Ohambo, he never learned to plough. Instead, Amos attended school and later started a career in banking. Amos has money, so he paid someone to plough for him. He said:

> I am not able to plough. I feel that cultural skills have passed me by. The elderly people will think that I am ill brought up.

Amos' ability to support his family compensates for his 'cultural' shortcomings:

> At home people will look at my father's house and say 'Look how Amos is looking after his father' … if I built a brick house… I have many goats and cattle. They are mine but people will say that I am looking after my parents. I send cash every month, I send clothes and blankets.

There is not always a choice to be made between school and cattle herding. Some boys are able to herd cattle close to their villages and can attend school in-between. Boys who are not sent to ohambo may give up school due to lack of motivation and parental support or for other reasons. However, the practice of sending boys away from school to herd cattle does make them more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion in the future. A grade 12 certificate significantly enhances boys' chances of employment, not least because their English skills are better, and English is the national language of Namibia (Mufune, 2002). I asked Jonas whether he was going to send his own son to ohambo. He answered:

> No, definitely not. The development of the past is not ok for now. I cannot have my kids do the same as I. I did not gain education. If I send them to ohambo, they will also be uneducated. I will never tolerate that. If the cattle are still there, I will look after it myself.

While more and more parents are convinced about the importance of school, and hope that their sons will support them with professional careers, like Amos, elders in the community may continue to pressurise parents to send boys to ohambo.

Reflections of hegemonic and troubled masculinities

Some of the more successful men are at risk of becoming the targets of other men's aggression (Kandirikirira, 2002). One male informant was in just this situation. He has a full-time job, a good relationship with his employer and he was saving up for marriage and for establishing his house in Ohambo. He lived in 'single quarters' in Kuisebmond, a housing complex for migrant workers in which six or more men would share one room. One of his room mates, an unemployed man, who was supported mainly by his brother who also lived in the same room, was harassing him. This is Martin's story about his room mate:

> I have a situation that worries me. I live at single quarters, and there is a guy that shares the room with me. He says things that worry me a lot. At the beginning, we had a good relationship. Later on when I received gifts from my employer, like shoes … I used to sell those shoes … my room mate would say that I am very fast in getting an income. He would say that I am a Koevoet soldier.[3] This is not true. The room mate would say that I am a very dangerous person, and that I have been spending time in prison. I have never beaten up anybody. Such allegations have disappointed me. Now I am at a loss. I don't know what to do.

I asked Martin how the room mate spends his day:

> He gets up to look for a job. Otherwise, he just spends time with his girlfriend or goes to the otombo places [bars selling home-made alcohol]. One day I was working at Atlantic Fish Factory. We were levelling the floor. I happened to hit my thumb with a hammer. The sister at the factory, a Damara nurse, she gave me medication to take, and advised me how to take the medication. I brought the medication to the room. The room mate saw that and he thought that I was keeping special herbs or poison. He accused me of being a witch. He also accused me of not going to Ohambo (Ovamboland), just staying in Walvis Bay, sometimes going halfway to Swakopmund [a town 40 kilometres north of Walvis Bay] pretending to go home, but then going back to Walvis Bay. He says that I buy spinach cakes, pretending they are for my wife [fiancé], but [that] I don't really go to Ohambo … I went home three times this year'.

From the relationship between Martin and the room mate, we get an idea of what is locally perceived as unwanted or discrediting male conduct. Obviously,

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being a witch or having been to prison are negative traits, and allegations of this nature are serious. However, the act of pretending to go to the north but not really going there is equated to these other stigmatising traits, and in our conversation it was imperative for Martin to object to exactly this claim, emphasising that '*I went home three times this year*'. Going back to visit Ohambo is a sign of commitment to social relationships in rural areas, and of respect for the rural livelihood. Martin comes across as a person who embodies the central aspect of what is locally perceived to be a hegemonic masculinity. This does not render Martin powerful relative to the room mate, because the aggressive envy of the room mate intimidates him.

CONTEXT OF MALE EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC EXCLUSION

> *We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me.* (Taylor, 1989, p. 34).

To adequately understand the story of Haimbondi and the perils of Jonas, Moses and Martin's room mate, we need to turn our attention to the meaning of rural agricultural livelihoods and the emergence of altered livelihoods in the course of social and economic changes in Namibia.

Homestead and cattle: encompassing power and 'cultural skills'

In the social organisation of matrilineal clans in patrilocal Kwanyama society, men are designated the 'ownership' of the homestead. With reference to Tswana men in Botswana, Townsend (1997) notes that men become acknowledged as adults when they have married and settled in their own homes. Informants of this study emphasised that a man would continue to be referred to as a boy, until he was married and *his wife* was fully settled in his house with her own fireplace for cooking. The term for her fireplace and the area around it is 'epata', which is also the local term for 'clan', indicating the symbolic value of this space for women.[4] It may also indicate the symbolic presence of the clan of the wife in the homestead belonging to the husband. In marriage, the homestead thus encloses and unites his matrilineal clan and that of his wife. On this basis, the rural homestead is particularly central, as it constitutes the basis of male power and social coherence. Therefore, ownership of a homestead has

great symbolic significance for male identity and impacts on his status in the community.

The ability of men to handle cattle, to plough and construct and maintain houses, and the ability of women to work the land, process the crops and to cook are fundamental to survival. They are not only perceived to be 'productive' skills, they are also 'cultural' competences that define the virtues of Kwanyama men and women, as Amos said above.[5]

The following section looks into some of the major historical and socio-economic changes that have influenced rural livelihood in Northern Namibia in significant ways since the arrival of missionaries, traders and colonial forces.

Meanings of the north and the south

The central traits of current perceptions of masculinity are closely entangled with socio-economic changes that have occurred in Namibia in the past century. Subsistence agriculture, and the livelihood associated herewith, has changed dramatically since the late 19th century. McKittrick (1996) writes that both external and internal processes promoted the gradual institutionalisation of large-scale labour migration in the 20th century. Long-distance trade, intensive raiding, and pressure applied by the colonial administration led to general impoverishment which affected subsistence agriculture, and increased generational conflicts: 'Parental permission was required for girls to undergo initiation and then to marry, and young men were dependent on their fathers and matriclans for access to stock which would enable them to marry and establish their own households' (McKittrick, 1996, p. 117). New forms of property introduced by European traders and missionaries in the late 19th century affected inter-generational power structures, and modes of constructing masculinities. Christianity, colonial rule, labour migration, apartheid, and ethnic conflicts presented new constraints and opportunities, which were gradually incorporated into the way in which identity and personhood were constructed (Becker, 2000; Kandirikirira, 2002; McKittrick, 1996). Involvement with Christian missionary stations and labour migration were alternative means of access to cash or commodities and to moving beyond the status of youth and into adulthood. With cash, young men could establish and consolidate their own homesteads and herds of cattle.

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During the 20th century, it became increasingly difficult to sustain a family on subsistence agricultural production, and from the 1940s labour migration became a dominating feature in most male Ovambo farmers' lives (Winterfeldt, 2002). While engagement in subsistence agriculture in the north may provide food, it is only through cash earnings that young people can really make a life for themselves (Mufune, 2002).

The growing importance of cash economy meant that particularly men's life worlds became stretched between the rural north and the urban industrial areas, commercial farms and mines in the south. In this process, local constructions of masculinities became closely entangled with social and productive practice in and perceptions of the 'north' and the 'south' of Namibia, and hegemonic masculinities presuppose activities in and relations to both the rural and the urban sphere.

The 'north' is synonymous with Ovamboland, and is in Oshikwanyama called 'Ohambo'. The same term is used for 'cattle posts' – areas to which the cattle are taken when grazing is scarce near the villages. The 'south' is referred to as 'Oushimba' and largely constitutes the rest of the country. Oushimba was formerly viewed as the country of the Himba/Herero peoples,[6] but since the late 19th century, Oushimba had also been inhabited by European and South African settlers and controlled by colonial forces. To many migrants, Oushimba, in the past and currently, is a foreign country to which men travel to earn cash in order to consolidate their positions in 'Ohambo'. Speaking about Oushimba, a 70-year-old male informant said:

> *No, I never liked to be there. I like to be in my own land. I went there to work and came back to my father's house, because that time I was in my father's house. I went to Oushimba and came back home. I left in 1943 and I went to Walvis Bay for canning. I stayed there for many years. I came back, and I went back again and when I came back, I got married and my father died and I replaced him to be in his house.*

Referring to Taylor (1989), Hastrup (1994) writes that whenever we orientate ourselves in place, we actively constitute a moral space, and the formation and negotiation of identity is intimately linked to orientations towards moral space. When talking about Ohambo and Oushimba, informants often make use of either of these two places to define the other, but also to define self and others. Ohambo and Oushimba are not only geographical places, but also moral and symbolic spaces that informants associate with different values, norms and practices. The 'nature' of these two spaces is to a certain degree contested, as informants explain the attributes of Ohambo and Oushimba respectively, their motivation for being in one place/space or the other, or why engagement in both places is necessary to mould a meaningful and good life. There is, at the same time, a clear awareness of the fact that other people's perceptions of them depend on their ability to show loyalty to people and practices in Ohambo.

Their chances of doing this are constrained by a number of factors, as we saw from the examples above. The constraints that Namibian women and men face stem from particular social, cultural and political constellations of disadvantage. Fifteen years after independence in 1990, Namibia still carries significant markers of German and South African colonisation, and the economic structures established during this era (Winterfeldt & Fox, 2002). The South African minority rule in particular implemented highly unequal social and economic structures, disadvantaging black population groups in relation to the white minority, in terms of education, employment, access to health care, and basic civil and human rights. Significant lasting effects include the structure and dynamics of the labour market, with a high level of labour migration from the rural northern regions to the central and southern parts of the country. At independence, the national liberation movement, SWAPO, was elected as the leading political party and took over government. According to Melber (2003), the political climate has since independence gradually changed from the positive enthusiasm of a new democracy to a tendency to autocratic rule and the subordination of the state to the party. No significant redistribution of wealth has taken place since independence and Namibia remains a country with extreme income disparities. Black employees continue to work in low-skilled, poorly paid jobs with little influence on their work environment (Klerck, Murrey & Sycholt, 1997; Melber 2000). Many men and women are underemployed as casual day-labourers or in the informal sector, working only a few hours a week. A large proportion of women and men find no employment opportunities at all (Mufune, 2002).

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Younger people, particularly, expected more from independent Namibia than has materialised. Independence promised 'freedom', and the expectations of post-colonial Namibia were high regarding civil rights, equity and improvements in living conditions and economic opportunities for the majority of the population. The youth constitute a vast majority of the population[7] and are, furthermore, the cohort that embodies the social changes resulting from the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism (Mufune, 2002). The learner-to-teacher ratio in Ohangwena Region is an average of 39 in primary schools. Even though education expenditures currently make up approximately 22% of the national budget, the education system still suffers deficiencies from the colonial era, when mainly urban 'white' schools were favoured, while rural 'black' schools were under-resourced. Poverty, social problems and ill health in the community infringe on learning aptitudes and school attendance. Many girls leave school prematurely due to pregnancy.

Local hegemonic masculinities

The composition of the imaginary Haimbondi as a constellation of masculine achievement encompasses not only certain capacities but also a cluster of ideal conduct and conditions, and as such becomes a moral construction held up to direct and motivate agency. There are different co-existing hegemonic masculinities among this social group and new ones are emerging as new social and economic constraints and opportunities emerge and social agents adapt. Both women and men take part in constructing and altering ideals of masculinity and femininity, and women and men's enactment of gender in their social practices happens in a continuous dialogue with social contexts. Different elements of masculinity are weighed differently by informants depending on their own situation, experiences and capacities. Some informants underline the need for education as an advantage or even a prerequisite for managing well in an urban sphere, an aspect which is absent in the story of Haimbondi. However, other competing perceptions of masculinity are emerging, which include those men who have tertiary education or training, and combine this with a rural homestead and associated skills and practices. A few educated male Kwanyama-speaking informants who did not grow up in Ohambo, de-emphasised the rural livelihood and the skills required to manage there. Instead, they underlined urban life and urban professional careers as more important. These men, however, have to legitimise themselves in relation to the 'Haimbondi version' of hegemonic masculinity with its rural associations, when other men and women confront them, jokingly or in earnest, with their lack of interest and capacity in the rural sphere.

Social relationships and dilemmas of reciprocity

The issue of support to relatives, partners and children is one that causes particular conflict and pain. While Jonas emphasised a dilemma of inability to support children and family members, the abdication of responsibility to support is notable in this social context. Townsend (1997) notes, on the basis of research in Botswana, that rural men's transition through life is a process of negotiating a way through a series of overlapping and competing claims. This is also the case for Kwanyama men, and their management of these claims impacts on their positions within households, clans and communities. Most men have to negotiate this space of contest and potential conflict, as their maternal clan members may oppose support to partners and children. Wives or other partners complain when men support their sisters and sisters' children more than their own. Wives and girlfriends will also object when men prioritise and divide their means between them. However contested this field is, men have to comply to a certain extent, as Townsend (1997, Turner (1994), p. 419) writes: 'Social life is based on reciprocity and mutual interdependence, and a life in isolation is economically precarious and psychically costly'. The problem of multiple claims also applies to men within the growing black middle class which has emerged in Namibia since independence. Representatives of this middle class are often sought after by their rural and urban relatives who have not been able to defeat poverty. A 24-year-old man working as a clerk in a bank said:

> I have fifty family members, and only three are working. I have to pay school fees and so forth. I gave up the culture, when I left for Windhoek, but it is catching up with me now because the rest of the family is still under the influence of culture.

Many informants emphasised that men should take responsibility for supporting family members, partners and children, and boys learn that they are expected to be leaders in the family, as outlined by a 25-year-old informant:

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The most important person in the family, of all the people of both mother's and father's clan is the father because the father is seen as a leader of the house and is accountable for any problem. If there is no food in the house, he is the one who must do something to solve this … According to culture, a boy should be born first so that the father can teach him about the culture and leadership of a man. If having a girl first and a boy after, then there will be no guidelines from the father, you need to have a boy first and teach him. Then the son can guide his younger sisters. In the culture, the boy is the leader.

This is a normative expectation, but not necessarily a lived experience, as the following excerpt from an interview with a female informant, aged 34, shows:

Informant: *In our culture, the boy is the head of the family. He is strong compared to the girls. If there is a problem that the women cannot solve, they can call the boy to assist.*
Interviewer: *Do the boys actually help solve problems in your experience?*
Respondent: *At this stage, boys don't really solve problems, some do, and some don't. If you look back in time, the men were very important to the family. They were always there to solve problems.*
Interviewer: *What is the difference between then and now?*
Respondent: *The difference is that then the parents would send the boy to Oushimba to work so that he could support the family. Today, if he gets a job, when he is paid, he just goes to the bar or looks up girls. They don't think about where they come from.*

This contradiction is the experience of many women in this social context. While men are noticeably quiet about their management of sexual relationships, women are very articulate about their experiences of informal love relationships with men: a common experience among women is that early in relationships boyfriends promise to marry them, they are caring and support them financially, but they tend to pressurise women to become pregnant. Women often agree to this, not only because fertility and children are highly valued, but also because they hope their chances of marriage will increase by having a child. If they decline, the boyfriend may refuse to provide support (Tersbøl, 2002). After giving birth, women often experience that men become less committed to the relationship, or simply disappear without notice. A 34-year-old woman summarises her experience as follows:

If you have a man and you tell him that we can be together but we must use a condom, the man may say no, he will not use a condom. He will say that AIDS was sent to men, not to animals. They say that they are 'men', they don't want to die from any other disease, they want to die from AIDS to show that they have had many women; they have played around. Men don't want to use condoms because they want to have babies. A man doesn't want to waste time with me if I won't give him a baby. If you sleep with him with a condom, it is like you didn't have sex, so why should he support you. One problem I would like to mention is that when women get children, then the father of that child disappears. There is no money for that child. If it gets sick, then the nurse may refuse to help that child because there is no money. There is no food to give to the child.

Men's alleged abdication of responsibility towards children and partners conflicts in some respect with the normative expectations of boys and men, and this has been explained in terms of disempowerment of men in those spheres that normally assign status and power to men. Thus, while men face powerlessness and lack of recognition, they exaggerate other aspects of their identities, for example their sexuality, to manifest and confirm their masculinity (Courtenay, 2000; Kandirikirira, 2002; Silberschmidt 2004). This is a plausible explanation since among this social group, sexual conquests and fatherhood are among the few avenues open to men to boost their self-esteem, and their status among other men. A 27-year-old man said:

Yes, culturally, if you don't …. our fathers used to have more than ten or twenty, let's just say he had 3 - 4 women in the house. There is stigma attached to being satisfied by one woman. You are a coward. 'The ladies don't like you'. Rather you should be doing what your friends think you should be doing. Socialise, drinking and talking about women.

It is, however, also important to note that while disempowerment and social exclusion may provide part of an explanation, mobility and the relative anonymity afforded to men and youth living outside their rural communities permit them sexual freedom (Kandirikirira, 2002). Penalties of traditional authorities

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used to be severe on men who impregnated women to whom they were not married. These authorities may still function in some rural communities, but they have difficulty exercising their power in migrant communities. Therefore, perhaps another explanation for men's management of their sexuality and the abdication of responsibility towards partners and children is that they do it because they can. Men may aspire to satisfy their sexual desire when in a position to do so, as argued by Doyle (2002) and in the case of these informal love relationships, men have nothing to lose, but may gain recognition from other men by having many girlfriends and children.

Hastrup notes that the body has been curiously absent in anthropology, in spite of the fact that the people we study invariably have bodies. The fact that the bodies of those under study are taken for granted has made them disappear from analysis: 'The biological bodies are everywhere alike, and their self-evidence has paradoxically obstructed our view of the centrality of the body in social experience' (Hastrup, 1995, p. 81). Furthermore, Doyle suggests that if we seek out only social explanations of sexual practices, there is a danger that 'sex' itself may be lost among all the theory. 'Desire' needs to be included in the analysis of male sexuality: '… the fate of men and their sexed bodies are inextricably linked' (Doyle, 2002, p. 188). Representations of male and female sexual desire are conspicuously absent in both research and programmes on HIV/AIDS, and this is an issue that social sciences have had difficulty in addressing adequately.

Daily lives of unemployed migrant workers

Masculinities of poor men in contemporary Namibia are troubled by poverty, conflicting expectation, social and symbolic exclusion, as well as poor health. The experiences of Jonas, Moses, Martin and his room mate, in particular, represent some of the dilemmas that men face. The unemployment rate is approximately 35%, but both women and men who work may earn very low salaries on which a number of relatives and children rely. Work in the informal sector, casual labour and domestic jobs are particularly poorly remunerated, while mining and factory wages are better. The latter are also among the few sectors in which wages have been regulated through the intervention of unions.

To earn a living, some women and men buy cheap scrap meat from the abattoirs, and cook and sell it outside their homes or in conjunction with *cuca* shops

[alcohol outlets]. Others produce and sell dumplings or alcohol. Moses quoted above said about unemployed men:

> If he is not selling anything, he can just sleep, stay quietly, relaxing … just wasting time until next morning. He can go to the boys' hostel [single quarters] and play cards. [He] can meet many people there, and they can drink until the sun sets, and then they go to sleep… Some people give up looking for a job. They just sell otombo full time.

Selling alcohol plays a significant economic role for many Namibians attempting to cope with poverty (UNDP, 1999). Many informants both in the village and in Kuisebmond store alcohol, either commercially or home brewed, in their homes to sell when opportunities arise. Some young men experience that being unemployed invites other problems. A 21-year-old man said that when other men found out that he was unemployed, they might try to convince him to smoke dagga, '*so I will forget that I am unemployed*'. On the other hand, women who found out that he was unemployed would try to avoid him.

Men are not passive victims undergoing suffering. They undertake to steer through constraints and uncertainties with the means they have at hand (Whyte, 2005). Men and women alike negotiate and utilise clan contacts. They seek employment as they assemble outside factories and on street corners, hoping to be the one to be picked out for a better future. They engage in trade and in crime, they go for adult literacy and training courses, they attend church and different forms of spiritual healing and hope in their communities, or they engage in less constructive pastimes: they drink, and drug themselves and they exert violence upon others.

While traditional means of power and control are slipping away due to societal transition and social deprivation, men use their power over women to affirm their masculinity in their expression of their sexuality and in violent manifestations (Dolan, 2002; Kandirikirira, 2002; Morrell, 2003; Setel, 1999; Silberschmidt, 2004). There is thus a contradiction between the expectations and roles that boys and men are raised to fulfill, and the realities that they experience in their own lives. This contradiction lies behind the strange combination of power and privilege, pain and powerlessness experienced by men

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(Kaufman, 2003). Anthropology has shown a general existential imperative: our need to experience that we have some influence on our own lives (Jackson, 1998). The lack of this basic influence may promote apathy (Sweetman, 1998) and meaninglessness. Chaos threatens when experience overwhelms our analytical capacities, power of endurance, and moral insight (Whyte, 2005).

A male informant aged 31, earning the equivalent of one US$ per hour, and working between 1 and 3 hours a day, said:

> *Presently, I am living like a bird, because I do not have a good job, so that I can plan my future. Job opportunities are lacking in this country. Therefore, I am worried about the future, that it may not be good. You can not know whether the plans will be successful, whether there will be a business chance or maybe work for the government. One doesn't know. Because of unemployment, there is no hope.*

Another male informant said:

> *I left school in grade 9. Then I went to Walvis Bay. The work was nice. I didn't have any suffering in my life. I have never before been staying in a hospital. Now I have pain in my feet, I can't walk very well. They say it is caused by TB. I attended* [school] *until grade 8. I went to Oushimba to work in Walvis Bay in the fishing industry. Then I developed health problems, and was advised to go to Ohambo. As a youth, I would also like to have my own house but I just ended up here, no health and no job.*

In the midst of men's experiences of powerlessness and social suffering, their aspirations and desires, HIV/AIDS prevention programmes must seek to create a space of attention and collaboration with men. There is a dire need to learn more about how people who are more or less chronically exposed to structural violence may be motivated and empowered to lead safer sexual lives in an unsafe and unhealthy environment, and in a social reality that holds no hope and no meaning. An important entry point to planning of prevention efforts among men is men's own experience of their lives, and the construction and re-construction of identity in the process (Kirumira, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Some advocates of women's rights and empowerment find it very provocative that resources should be channeled to concerns for men's roles and participation in reproductive health programmes and development (Cleaver, 2002; Sweetman, 1998). Feminist social activists have fought a long hard battle to have women's needs and perspectives included on the development agenda. However, the prime purpose of involving men is to enhance more equitable gender relations, and to promote possibilities for women and men to protect their health in general, and their sexual and reproductive health in particular.

Narrow and one-dimensional images of men are fruitless, both in a theoretical sense and as an entry point for HIV/AIDS interventions initiatives working with men. Programmes need to take as a starting point the fact that men are a diverse group and, like women but in different ways than women, they can be considered vulnerable. Listening to men's concerns in HIV/AIDS programming approaches may promote openness to change. The intention is not to appropriate men's suffering as we are cautioned against (Bourgois, 2004; Kleinman & Kleinman, 1997), but to encourage HIV/AIDS intervention programmes to meet men where they are, exposed through structural violence and therefore partly unaware of the structures and dynamics that keep them from attaining a dignified existence. HIV/AIDS programme approaches need to assist men in analysing their individual situations and their assumptions about themselves and about women.

Diagnosis may in specific contexts be considered not only a gateway to therapy but part of the therapeutic process itself (Csordas & Kleinman, 1990). HIV/AIDS programmes can assist in 'diagnosing' the experiences of men by affording them opportunities to critically review their own situation in the context of structural violence. The therapeutic effect arises as men's lived experience of contradictions of power, identity and pain is, in a dialogical intervention process, acknowledged as a collective social phenomenon rather than individual failure. It has been acknowledged that strong emotional and motivational powers may be released through increased consciousness and empowerment (Campbell, 2003). Needless to say, such comprehensive processes should also include women as participants.

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Footnotes

[1] The Third Mediumterm Plan has 5 components: *(i)* to create an enabling environment; *(ii)* prevention interventions targeted at service providers, young people, vulnerable populations and the general public; *(iii)* access to treatment, care and support services including antiretroviral treatment; *(iv)* impact mitigation to strengthen community capacities; *(v)* effective coordination and management, capacity development, monitoring and evaluation, surveillance and research.

[2] Names of informants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

[3] Former South African military force fighting against the military wing of SWAPO, the PLAN fighters.

[4] In a rural context, women gain significant status when they obtain their own kitchen in a husband's house. They are only then perceived to have the authority to ask younger women and children to carry out work for them.

[5] This may in part be due to the ethnic differentiation between Ovambo groups 'that have traditionally been permanently settled agrarians and other ethnic groups that are or have been semi-nomadic hunters' (Becker, 2000).

[6] The Himba/Herero peoples are pastoralists who dominated the central plains of Namibia until they, after a series of violent conflicts with German colonial powers in 1904, were forced to give way to German settlers (Jakobsen, 2000). The Hereros were killed in large numbers by German troops and the remaining population was assigned to a restricted homeland.

[7] In 1995, 61.8% of females and 63.8% of males were aged 24 years and under (Mufune, 2002).

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