# MOVING IN AND OUT OF TOWN
## THE MULTI-SPATIAL LIVES AND LABOUR
## OF STREET VENDORS IN PORT SUDAN

**PER VISSERS**
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## The multi-spatial lives and labour of street vendors in Port Sudan

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Image on cover page: edited photo of coffee seller on the *corniche* in downtown Port Sudan, with the southern port in the background.

Map 1. Sudan. Contested or uncertain borders in Abyei, Bir Tawil, Halaib not displayed. Generated in Mapbox.

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## Abstract

Port Sudan is a distinctly multi-ethnic city that houses people from all areas of Sudan and beyond. It has long played a key role for the communities in its hinterlands (particularly Beja and Beni Amer) who have made use of the labour opportunities – in the dockyards, but also in street vending, transport, and elsewhere – that the city offers.

Spatial mobility to and from the city is perpetual. This thesis analyses mobility along the lines of migration systems theory and shows how rural-urban migrants live and work in town whilst maintaining rural lives (households, and/or assets); spatial mobility is used simultaneously to diversify rural and urban incomes, and to maintain multi-spatial life. Labour is a social affair for rural-urban migrants in Port Sudan, which shows both in job acquisition processes and in methods to facilitate rural-urban mobility. As explained by hand of examples from street vendors, some of the social institutions that govern life in the countryside also support rural-urban migrants in town: obligations under *seleef* (customary law) give self-employed migrants (e.g. coffee sellers) and casual or wage labourers (e.g. port labourers) the flexibility to move back and forth between city and countryside, and create opportunities for newcomers on the urban labour market.

All in all, this thesis shows how mobility to and from Port Sudan has come to constitute a way of life and illustrates that the very way in which rural-urban mobility (and vice versa) is practiced challenges dominant (and often normative) conceptions of migration and mobility.

## A note on Arabic, Bedawit and Tigre transliterations

By transliterating Arabic words and phrases, I aim to make this thesis comprehensible for people who do not read Arabic script. My transliterations are largely phonetic, and while I try to accurately capture the pronunciation of relevant words, my knowledge of Arabic language (least of all Sudanese Arabic) is elementary, meaning that not all transliterations might be scientifically correct. Although most of my interviews were conducted in Arabic, many respondents also spoke Bidhaawyeet (Beja language) or Tigre. Even in interviews that were conducted in Arabic, respondents often used words in their native tongue to explain certain mechanisms or phenomena. Many of these words have no equivalent in other languages, let alone a language as distant as English.

At times, I could not find consensus on how to write certain words. For example, while Hudson's 'A Dictionary of Beja' (2012) lists *gelid* as the correct spelling for a term relating to conflict settlement in Beja customary law, one of my respondents spelled it as *gelet,* and another wrote *gallad*. Throughout this thesis I write non-English words phonetically, making use of Hudson's (incomplete) Beja language dictionary for reference, whenever possible.

## Acknowledgements

في ذكرى خوجلي | in memory of Khojali

# Chapter 1. Introduction: mobility and the many contexts of (Port) Sudan

As Port Sudan grew to become the second-largest city of Sudan, and one of the country's main gateways to the outside world, its importance grew for the communities in the Red Sea State (RSS) and nearby areas. Port Sudan's large hinterlands house the traditionally nomadic Beja and Beni Amer – two ethnic groups that are distinct, but culturally very much alike – who, throughout the twentieth century, increasingly made use of the labour opportunities the city had to offer (Ati, Pavanello, Jaspars, Martin, & Mosel, 2011; Hjort af Ornäs & Dahl, 1991; Lewis, 1962). Over the course of decades, they acquired a near-monopoly position on the casual labour opportunities in the port. Nowadays, much of the stevedoring (i.e. the loading and unloading of ships) and of the work in the warehouses is still carried out by Beja or Beni Amer crews, who distribute the labour in a traditional manner, along the lines of customary law (Lewis, 1962; Pantuliano, 2002).

Of the Beja and Beni Amer working in the port of Port Sudan, many have rural roots and are either born in the countryside or are linked to areas outside Port Sudan by direct family connections. As I will show in this thesis, many of these urban workers regularly move back and forth between Port Sudan and their areas of origin or areas where family resides. And those who do not physically move back and forth frequently, nonetheless often maintain close relations with their areas of origin or family grounds: they send remittances, receive (financial) assistance when necessary, and exchange information over long distances. Such rural-urban mobility (and vice versa) was already described in the 1920s during the British colonial rule; it is nothing new in the RSS. But in recent years there have been several developments – both in Port Sudan and in its backcountry – that threatens the future of circular rural-urban mobility, and thus the livelihoods of many rural and urban Beja/Beni Amer in the RSS and beyond. Firstly, while many rural Beja and Beni Amer continue to practice animal husbandry, the material base of pastoralism is shrinking in eastern Sudan, like elsewhere in eastern Africa (Sulieman & Elagib, 2012). This has multiple causes, relating to e.g. environmental change, economic circumstances, social organisation, conflict, as well as the policies of government and (international) non-governmental organisations (Ahmed, 2001). Some of these causes, such as environmental change and the unpredictability of rainfall and river volume, also affect small-scale agriculture, which is widely practiced in the RSS (Hjort af Ornäs & Dahl, 1991; Morton, 1990). Secondly, labour opportunities in the port have been under pressure, because of economic stresses (such as those caused by the trade embargo imposed upon Sudan by the United States), but also because of government efforts to privatise and mechanise parts of the port, and to reorganise traditional methods of casual labour distribution. The decline of port labour opportunities forms an unfortunate combination with the pressures on rural life, as the former offers supplementary income opportunities for people who struggle in the countryside. All in all, a substantial group in the rural RSS and beyond could be trapped between shrinking rural production and declining urban wage labour. This reminds of the paradox observed by Elmekki and Barker (1993, p. 73): for Sudanese peasant communities "there is no way to exit from the market and there is no way to depend fully on it".

The pressures on pastoralism and labour opportunities in the port have sparked the interest of scholars. While it is nowadays difficult to conduct research in the port (as I will explain in chapter 3), studies of pastoral decline and the urban economy in the RSS have been undertaken in recent

decades (Ati et al., 2011; Babiker & Pantuliano, 2006; Pantuliano, 2002). But available literature is quickly ageing, and the studies that exist put emphasis on port labour which, though very important in both urban and rural Beja/Beni Amer spheres, is not the only occupation that sustains rural-urban links in the region. For example, rural Beja have historically been well-represented in the urban services sector. As I will show in the chapters on my findings, people from the countryside move in and out of Port Sudan to work in restaurants and cafes, and some workers even combine work in services and/or informal trade with port labour. This makes the informal sales/services sector in Port Sudan an interesting avenue for research into mobility and rural-urban linkages in the RSS.

The declining opportunities for Beja and Beni Amer in both city and countryside make understanding of rural-urban linkages and the abovementioned mechanisms of spatial mobility/circulation particularly relevant for Sudanese policy makers and for (international) non-governmental organisations ((I)NGOs). Simultaneously, investigation of these links and mechanisms may offer much-needed information to support the development of spatial mobility theory.

In face of the aforementioned challenges, this research focuses on the everyday mobility of eastern Sudanese, particularly in the RSS, and aims to contribute to the academic field that studies intra-national mobility (or migration). It examines the case of migratory workers – those who are self-employed as well as those who work for a wage – and aims to disclose *how* people from the countryside find their way in the city, particularly on the Port Sudanese labour market. It focuses on coffee sellers and other informal traders with Beja/Beni Amer backgrounds in Port Sudan. Coffee sellers and other informal traders form a large, visible and accessible group that retains intricate ties with the countryside.

I position my research at the intersection of multiple fields of study: first and foremost, this thesis examines rural-urban (and vice versa[1]) mobility (of people, but also of goods and ideas) in eastern Sudan, and the role of family and/or kinship ties in sustaining these links. It exhibits the stories of people who live multi-spatial lives and straddle the rural-urban divide, thereby challenging normative conceptions of migration, mobility, and family life.

Secondly, and more specific to the context in which this research took place, this thesis contributes to knowledge on the accessibility of the informal sales/services sector in regional centres such as Port Sudan. Thirdly, my research touches upon the theme of (the alleged decline of) pastoralism and small-scale agriculture in the RSS, and the interrelation of pastoral and urban economies. Leaning on migration systems theory, I focus on the internal dynamics of migration processes instead of employing a "root causes approach" (as will become clear in chapter 2). This implies that instead of solely tracing the external factors that drive mobility, such as

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[1] In literature, rural-urban mobility is often juxtaposed with urban-rural and rural-rural mobility. In these cases, the order of the words indicates the direction of the mobility. As will become clear in the chapters that follow, rural-urban and urban-rural mobility are two sides of the same coin for many rural-urban migrants in Port Sudan. With readability in mind, when I write "rural-urban mobility" I mean multi-directional mobility between countryside and city, unless stated otherwise.

environmental degradation and conflict, I investigate *how* migrants migrate, and how rural-urban mobility has come to constitute a lifestyle, a tradition, or a habit in the RSS.

The abovementioned themes will be examined through the answering of the main research question (large square) and sub-questions (smaller squares) that are listed below.

- To what degree, and how, do existing rural-urban links contribute to work-related mobility to and from Port Sudan?

  - (How) do rural-urban links, especially kinship ties, help people from the countryside find their way to/in Port Sudan, particularly in terms of job acquisition? In this light, what are the limitations of such ties?
  - To what extent, and how, are rural-urban links maintained by urban workers with rural backgrounds in the informal services sector in Port Sudan?

All in all, this study finds that the rural and urban economies in the RSS are intricately tied together by human movement, and that rural-urban mobility in the region hinges on family ties and other kinship links. In fact, the direct family plays a bi-directional role in perpetuating rural-urban mobility. Often, labour opportunities in the city spread through family networks, and often rural-urban mobility is further propelled by a range of family obligations in both countryside and city.

My field work took place in the summer of 2017. Since then, a lot has happened in Sudan. The nation-wide demonstrations that toppled Bashir's Al-Ingaz regime have paved the way for a new political situation. Although it is too early to tell, the events of 2018 and 2019 have the potential to redefine the ways in which the central government engages with peripheries throughout the country (*Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, 2019). The political rupture might lead to the addressing of some of the grievances of, among others, the Beja and Beni Amer. It might result in altering of the developments in the port, for instance with regard to privatisation or mechanisation. For example, in April 2019 the acting governor, or *wali*, of the RSS pledged to grant permanent contracts to the port labourers that worked (more or less) casually on temporary contracts. This happened in response to the port workers' protests against the working conditions, lack of stability, and envisioned changes in the port's manual labour sector. These protests were perhaps invigorated by the spirit of the Sudanese Revolution that empowered the dispossessed Sudanese.

The new situation might also bring risks that need to be monitored and studied: how will the new men in power (the governing Sovereignty Council is particularly unequal in terms of gender) engage with Sudan's neglected border areas and the minorities in its geographical fringes? How will the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA; as described in chapter 4), signed in 2006 to end the political turmoil and conflict that had raged in eastern Sudan from the mid-1990s on, survive political transition? Is there a chance of new insurgency in the East in the foreseeable future? Given the unruly history of eastern Sudan, what is the likelihood of revitalisation of (ethnopolitical) anti-government mobilisation?

Another development worth mentioning is this summer's upsurge of violence between Nuba and Beni Amer in Port Sudan that caused between 16 and 37 deaths and left hundreds wounded according to several media outlets ("Nuba and Bani Amer sign accord in Port Sudan," 2019;

"Sudanese activists say tribal clashes killed 37 in port city," 2019; "Sudanese tribes sign peace deal after deadly clashes in Port Sudan," 2019). Such violence between Nuba and Beni Amer has occurred in the past, such as in the violent urban riots of 1986, and has occurred again in the security vacuum in the wake of the revolution (Morton, 1989). This summer's violence has had political repercussions. For instance, it led to the dismissal of the *wali* in the RSS. Whether the new *wali* is also willing to give in to the demands of (port labour) protesters remains to be seen. In Port Sudan, the outcomes of the revolution, the ethnic tensions that exist under and above the surface, and the ongoing developments of urban (informal) labour are interconnected.

In what follows, I will elaborate on the themes and questions that this introduction raised. In chapter 2, which outlines the theoretical framework, I critically engage with the concepts of migration and mobility and provide a brief overview of the literature. I draw on Mabogunje's (1970) migration systems and Granovetter's (1973; 1985) social networks as lenses through which spatial mobility in the RSS can be examined. Chapter 3 on research methodology lays out the research approach, the practical constraints that I encountered, ethical considerations, and some of the limitations of this thesis. In chapter 4, I outline the historic background and the contemporary socio-economic context of spatial mobility in the RSS (particularly the movement to and from Port Sudan), as well as the recent history of conflict in eastern Sudan. The chapters that follow, chapters 5 and 6, disclose most of the information from interviews with workers (coffee sellers and other street vendors) in Port Sudan. While chapter 5 focuses on the methods used by rural-urban migrants to find income opportunities in Port Sudan, chapter 6 focuses on the maintenance of multi-spatial lives and rural-urban linkages. As such, chapter 5 aligns with the first sub-question on how people from the countryside find their way in the city, and chapter 6 aligns with the second sub-question on the maintenance of rural-urban links by urban workers with rural backgrounds. At the ends of chapters 5 and 6, the theoretical lenses described in chapter 2 will be applied, and their relevance reviewed. In the final chapter, I discuss the findings, review the theoretical approach and how it applies to the case, and conclude by answering the main research question.

## Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I position myself vis a vis the concept of migration, discussing some of the many different theoretical perspectives on migration that have emerged in academic literature, including some semantic issues. The information from interviews in Port Sudan forces me to critically engage with the concept of migration: neoclassical, functionalist conceptions (e.g. push-pull models) and economic behaviour (e.g. the rational, non-social *homo economicus*) fail to explain the social systems that allow labour migrants to dominate certain sectors in the Port Sudanese labour market and enable them to maintain multi-spatial households.

As I will show, processes of circular labour migration to and from Port Sudan take place almost entirely in the social spheres of family and larger kinship networks, and are facilitated by intra-group cooperation and, in some instances, by social rituals. I therefore argue that analysing rural-urban mobility only on the level of the individual does not suffice, and that it is wrong to assume that people who move to the city for work can always be treated analytically as individuals. In the case of Port Sudan, explaining how and why people make the move to the city, and how they sustain multi-spatial lives, instead requires zooming out from the level of the individual to the

level of the household, the wider family, and the *diwab²*. In practice this means that, instead of focusing solely on the individual, one ought to examine the networks that people possess, or in which they are embedded.

While many perspectives on migration emphasise the importance of networks as facilitators and stimulators of human movement³, these networks need to be elaborated upon (which connections matter in the Port Sudan case, and why?). I use Mark Granovetter's classic frame of strong and weak ties for – as will be explained below – interpreting which types of connections drive opportunities on the urban labour market. Although less prominent in this thesis, Pierre Bourdieu's proposition of *habitus* can help to better understand the choices that people make and offers insight in the forces that underlie the connections described by Granovetter.

### 2.1. Studying migration: advancing the mobility-turn?

Many Sudanese people live multi-spatial lives (e.g. by combining different livelihood strategies), and many are not strictly mobile or sedentary and/or strictly rural or urban. In the words of Sudanese scholar Munzoul Assal (2009, p. 165) "mobility, settlement and the combination of various livelihood strategies characterizes both the sedentary and nomadic peoples of Sudan at the present time".

While migration and mobility are not synonymous, both concepts are difficult to define in precise terms and are entangled in many ways. Migration, or spatial mobility, is a defining factor in the lives of many residents of the Republic of Sudan and appears in various forms: firstly, many people are on the move because of violent conflicts in various parts of Sudan and its neighbouring countries. Secondly, many Sudanese work abroad, in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, European countries, or elsewhere, and send remittances to their relatives at home. These remittances emanate from mobility, and in turn also constitute mobility. Thirdly, the Sudanese countryside is characterised by the many (semi-)nomadic groups that move around with their animals. For them, migration, or mobility, is a way of life (Casciarri & Ahmed, 2010; Manger, Abd el Ati, Hariri, Krzuwinski, & Vetaas, 1996).

Any attempt to define migration (and migrants) has to face the problem of how to deal with mobility when it is a lifestyle and not an anomaly (Rain, 1999). Over the years, this point has received much attention. Already in the mid-1960s, Everett Lee published a comprehensive migration theory, claiming that certain categories of mobility should be exempted from definitions of migration. He proposed to exclude groups such as "nomads and migratory workers, for whom there is no long-term residence, and temporary moves [of people] like those to the mountains for the summer" (Lee, 1966, p. 49). Regarding simple conceptualisations of migration (involving "a change of residence"), Van Dijk, Foeken and Van Til (2001, p. 4) identify two

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² The *diwab* is a lineage, and the smallest ethnic category. Although some have different words for it, the Beni Amer and the various sub-ethnicities of Beja (e.g. Bisharyyn or Hadendoa) each have numerous *diwabs*.

³ Emphasis in many studies lies on international migration, such as in a much-cited study by Monica Boyd (1989), but I see no reason to assume that networks are less relevant for movement that does not cross borders.

definitional issues: firstly, how much time needs to pass for residence to "change"? We can expect such temporal aspects to be (culturally and/or socially) context specific. Secondly, what is considered a place of residence might not be easy to pin down, especially for those who have mobile lifestyles and change locations regularly. This is certainly the case for parts of the African continent where lifestyles are (highly) mobile and multi-spatial living is a habit and not an exception (De Bruijn, Van Dijk, & Foeken, 2001). In these contexts the classification of mobility as migration is not always accurate.

Yet, more than half a century after Lee's remarks on the friction between migration and mobility, leading organisations in migration policy are still struggling with the categorisation of (semi-)nomads and migratory workers, especially those traversing the rural-urban divide (which is not a real dichotomy, but rather a heuristic device). Groups of people for whom mobility is the norm are still included in many operational definitions of migration. This means that their status is de facto classified as abnormal, especially in policy arenas. For example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an intergovernmental organisation linked to the United Nations and a leading actor in the field of development and migration policy, admits that no universally accepted definition exists, but uses a working definition that describes a migrant as "a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally-defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students" ("Who is a migrant?," 2019). In a text that outlines the difference between refugees and migrants, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees employs a similarly broad definition (*UNHCR Emergency Handbook*, 2015). The International Rescue Committee (IRC) – an INGO based in New York – defines a migrant as "someone who is moving from place to place (within his or her country or across borders), usually for economic reasons such as seasonal work. Similar to immigrants, they were not forced to leave their native countries because of persecution or violence, but rather are seeking better opportunities" ("Migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants: What's the difference?," 2018).

These examples show that it remains up for debate whether, and how, people with mobile lifestyles can be labelled as migrants. In large parts of Sudan, movement is highly commonplace due to traditionally mobile lifestyles and methods of production. This mobility coincides with a high prevalence of movement due to violent conflict (displacement). When definitions are used that do not register this difference, the resulting data on migration flows, numbers of refugees, and the rural-urban divide become distorted. The distinction between migration and mobility is therefore more than a semantic discussion. Moreover, designating someone as a migrant – regardless of the definition used – is a normative action. It can classify people's lifestyles as abnormal, deviating from a supposed sedentary norm.

Various authors have highlighted the issues of the dominant migration frame and have advocated for its replacement with a mobility lens. This proposed shift has been dubbed the "mobility turn" or "new mobilities paradigm" by some. Mobility is a broader term that allows for less normative descriptions of movement; it is in itself the result of decades of uncovering of the

complexities of human movement. Still, as concluded by Van Dijk et al. (2001, p. 26) we are "still far from what might be called a general theory of or an approach to population mobility". Furthermore, the concept of mobility is very broad which is part of its potential but also complicates its use.

More work on the concept of mobility, both in practical and theoretical sense, is necessary for it to transcend the phase of "promising perspective". While not providing definitive answers, this thesis makes a contribution by displaying a particularly interesting case of mobility, and by questioning the stubborn cliché that mobility is always the exception, and never the rule. As such, this thesis focuses on contributing to the growing body of academic knowledge that examines mobility as a human condition. Nonetheless, while I am enthusiastic about the development of the concept of mobility, I do regularly use the terms "migration" and "migrant" throughout this thesis for practical purposes, to describe the phenomenon of work-related spatial mobility between countryside and city, and the people who engage in it.

### 2.2. Theoretical perspectives on the movement of people

In 1885, Ravenstein published his now classic article *The Laws of Migration*, which is often referred to as the first modern theory of human spatial movement: it set a paradigm that remained virtually unquestioned until the 1950s and 1960s. Remnants of it can still be discerned in most contemporary thinking about migration (Abreu, 2012). The presumption of Ravenstein and the neoclassical theorists that followed him is that migration is stimulated by wage differentials and other variations in employment conditions between geographic areas. This line of thought is built on the assumption that migration is an individual (*homo economicus*) utility maximising strategy (De Haas, 2011; Wood, 1982). Behaviourists added to the neoclassical frame of profit-seeking migrants that actors' rationality is bounded, and that they "[seize] opportunities rather than (…) target the move that would maximise their utility in absolute terms" (McLeman & Gemenne, 2018, p. 18).

The idea of utility maximising strategies explains why the neoclassical (and behaviourist) approach can be regarded a foundation of push-pull reasoning: human migration is taken to be the sum of "push and pull factors" in a process towards spatial-economic equilibrium. While neoclassical and push-pull reasoning can help visualise the context in which migration takes place, these perspectives have fundamental shortcomings. Push-pull approaches to migration generally overlook the socially and culturally specific aspects of migration that often play central roles in "determining not only the direction but also the composition of the [migration] flows as well as the type of movement" (Tacoli, 2001, p. 146), and they ignore the internal dynamics of migration processes (De Haas, 2011).

The fact that mobility is often *not* an individual strategy, but rather part of the tactics or habits of households and other larger social entities, contradicts traditional neoclassical thought (De Haas, 2011). This point was recognised, and rectified, in the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) which emerged in the 1980s and promoted a more positive view of migration (largely in relation to the development potential of remittances). NELM advocated the idea of migration as strategy employed by households and families, but stuck to the idea of rational decision making, stressing that migration "can often be understood primarily as a way to hedge against

risk and overcome market incompleteness" (Abreu, 2012, p. 56; Taylor, 1999). Thus, NELM continued to rely on economic equilibrium thinking.

A third perspective, distinct from neoclassical approaches and NELM, is the historical-structural approach to migration. This perspective positions itself on the other end of the structure-agency spectrum, arguing that migration must be analysed in the context of broader historic developments. It states that flows of people can be understood by tracing the origins of changing organisation of production (Wood, 1982). While this perspective departs from neoclassicism and NELM, it also emphasises the importance of economic factors in migration processes. However, it is distinctly different in its proposed scale of analysis (as the name reveals), focusing on larger processes instead of individuals. Moreover, while neoclassical explanations are "timeless", the historical-structural approach adds a temporal element, incorporating the history of social-economic conditions into analysis.

Recently, there have been efforts to rework and rekindle *migration systems theory*, a fourth approach in theorising human migration (Bakewell, 2014). As its name suggests, the migration systems metaphor describes migration as occurring in systems in which multi-directional human movement takes place. Thus, migration systems theory deviates from "root causes" approaches. It requires consideration of migrants' networks, while also zooming out to include "material things (commodities, capital) and nonmaterial things (symbols, ideologies) as flowing within a coherent system" (Kyle, 2000, p. 85). In migration systems thinking, "ties, flows, and their attributes and relationships interact to perpetuate and reinforce the system by encouraging migration and other types of exchange along certain pathways and discouraging it along others" (Fussell, Curtis, & DeWaard, 2014, p. 307). This means that the changes caused by human movement in both sending and receiving communities can have self-perpetuating, self-reinforcing or self-undermining effects (Boyd, 1989). These changes, brought about by mobility while in turn influencing mobility, are dubbed *feedback mechanisms* (De Haas, 2011). A main contribution of migration systems thinking, therefore, is that it considers the internal dynamics of migration processes and argues that human mobility occurs in "self-modifying" systems. This is also what really sets it apart from root causes and push-pull reasoning. From a migration systems perspective, various cases of (particularly circular) migration can be regarded as a social custom, while still taking external drivers, such as environmental degradation or conflict, into account.

The potential of the migration systems approach to rural-urban mobility is perhaps best explained by its intellectual father Akin Mabogunje (1970, p. 16), who writes that "[it] enables a consideration of rural-urban migration no longer as a linear, uni-directional, push-and-pull, cause-effect movement but as a circular, interdependent, progressively complex, and self-modifying system in which the effect of changes in one part can be traced through the whole of the system". Bakewell (2014, p. 314) elaborates on the ideas of Mabogunje, arguing that a migration systems approach "forces the researcher to consider both origin and destination contexts and the relationship between them". Such an approach is not only applicable to international, but also to internal mobility, as demonstrated by Parsons, Lawreniuk & Pilgrim (2014) in the case of Cambodian labour migration, by Suckall, Fraser, Forster, & Mkwambisi (2015) in the case of urbanisation and climate change in Malawi, and of course by Mabogunje (1970) himself.

A common critique of migration systems theory is that it is hard to practically employ and that it has not escaped the phase of promising perspective, particularly because it is not well enough tested and experimented with. The reason for this may be that it is difficult to demarcate the boundaries of migration systems as the term "migration system" is rather undefined (Bakewell, 2014). Nevertheless, the comprehensive rural-urban ties that appear to exist in the RSS, might make the migration systems approach a fitting lens for analysis and examination of the ways in which people find and practice urban labour and how this is tied to spatial movement. As I will show in the chapters that follow, flows of people, information and goods are not uni-directional but instead move in all directions in the RSS. In Sudan, entire households can move to the city at the same time, but – apparently much more common – households can also send one or multiple members to the city. In times of scarcity, this effectively reduces household consumption, and if successful allows for supplementing the household income with gains from urban labour (Hjort af Ornäs & Dahl, 1991). This sometimes occurs in an intricate circulation system in which multiple family members participate.

In this study the notion of social networks plays a significant role. The interviews I conducted highlight the importance of social networks in facilitating, or driving, spatial mobility and urban labour. This is in line with migration systems thinking, which also puts emphasis on social networks. Migration systems theory supposes that migration is the cause and consequence of linkages (flows of material and non-material things) between sending and receiving communities. One of the important linkages is, generally, the social network (Boyd, 1989). This acknowledgement of the role of social networks is important, but in itself not enough: in literature on migration systems theory, social networks are barely conceptualised. Yet, there are many different types of social relations, and some relationships are more comprehensive than others. In my attempt to describe and analyse the (potential) migration system in Port Sudan, I will therefore use Mark Granovetter's perspective of strong and weak ties in social networks to distinguish between different types of social relations. As will become clear, the distinction of social relations in categories of strong and weak ties is crude, but offers a good point of departure.

### 2.3. Networks and Habitus: Granovetter and Bourdieu

Starting in the 1930s with experiments in sociometry, but gaining traction especially throughout the 1960s (rising popularity of network perspective in anthropological discipline), the 1970s (rising popularity of network perspective in broader social sciences) and afterwards, social networks thinking has become a cornerstone in social sciences research; an approach utilised for many studies in e.g. (economic) anthropology, development studies, even sociolinguistics (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, & Labiance, 2009; Scott & Carrington, 2011). A central idea in social networks thinking is that material and immaterial things can transfer from node to node (i.e. from person to person), through a network.

One of the most important contributions to this thought was brought forward by Granovetter in his seminal article "The Strength of Weak Ties" (1973), in the remainder of this text abbreviated as SWT. In literature, SWT is regularly described as a network theory. Granovetter himself describes SWT as a model that composes "a very limited step in the linking of levels" or "a fragment of a theory" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1378). Regardless of its label, it has greatly

influenced the study of social networks, and has propelled the emergence of the social network paradigm.

In the article, Granovetter makes a distinction between strong, weak and absent ties between individuals. He proposes that the strength of ties is determined by a combination of "the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). In practice this means that *ego* (the individual in question, or focal node) maintains strong ties with, for example, romantic partners, family and kin, and according to some scholars also with close friends (Grimm, Gubert, Koriko, Lay, & Nordman, 2013). Weak ties are characterised by low frequency of interaction, and/or less meaningful interaction, low levels of emotional engagement and reciprocity (Parks, 2015). Defining absent ties is comparatively easy: Granovetter describes it as a complete lack of ties between an individual, or a connection that has little value, such as a "nodding relationship between people living on the same street" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361).

Although the SWT model is built on this distinction, there are some problems with determining the strength of ties (and finding adequate definitions). For example, Granovetter suggests that strength of ties can be linked to time spent together, or frequency of contact between two persons, or nodes. But when it is applied to nomadic groups, or other groups in which high mobility is an ordinary way of life, it cannot be assumed that the strength of ties is linearly related to time devotion. Besides the challenge of determining tie strength, the definitions of the types of ties could be made much more complex (why are there only three types of ties?). Finally, Granovetter's thought excludes the possibility of a connection between persons A and B that is strong from the perspective of person A and weak from the perspective of person B (Grieco, 1987). Although these empirical objections do not inhibit use of SWT, it is necessary to keep them in mind.

Back to the main proposition of SWT. Granovetter argues that networks of persons with strong ties to one another are bound to overlap, forming cliques of strong ties. Individuals with strong ties to one another presumably see each other frequently, and often have shared traits (e.g. kinship ties, locations, socio-economic characteristics). This implies that information might be disseminated rapidly through strong ties and cliques, but the inflow of new information is limited, as it is "unlikely that such ties can be the bridge between dissimilar information structures" (Grieco, 1987, p. 42). Weak ties, however, can play crucial roles as connecting agents within and between networks, facilitating the transfer of new information. Regarding the labour market, Granovetter argues that weak ties play an essential role in the transfer of job information by facilitating the flow of relevant information to job seekers (hence, the title of his article).

Granovetter's perspective on tie strength is still referenced regularly[4], including in literature in the fields of development studies and migration studies, some of which is relevant to the case presented in this thesis. For example, Berrou and Combarnous (2012) demonstrate the importance of strong ties in the personal networks of self-employed workers in the informal

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[4] Although presently the terminology of "bonding" and "bridging" social capital is often used in lieu of SWT (Grimm et al., 2013).

economy in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. They state that strong ties and solidarity networks have distinct advantages for micro and small enterprises in Bobo-Dioulasso, such as quick access to the financial support, information, and market resources necessary to start and maintain an enterprise, particularly for vulnerable people. At the same time, the constraints that are thought to come with reliance on strong ties (such as hindrance of information transfer) appear to be negligible for these workers. Grimm et al. (2013) use the SWT framework in a study on the influence of tie strength on entrepreneurial activity and success of self-employed migrants in cities in seven West African countries. While they find some positive effects of strong ties, they also find constraints for self-employed migrants, particularly in the maintenance of strong rural-urban ties leading to "redistributive pressure" towards the area of origin (i.e. remittances).

A contribution made by De Haas (2010), on the internal dynamics of migration processes, is especially relevant for this thesis. De Haas links SWT to migration systems theory, stating that SWT can serve as a tool to concretise the explanation of migration systems formation. For migration systems to emerge, or for migration to "gain its own momentum", a certain balance between strong ties and weak ties among a certain group is a fundamental precondition (De Haas, 2010, p. 1610). The following chapters examine how labour migrants find and secure income-generating opportunities, which factors are at play in this process, and particularly, which types of ties they employ.

SWT is relevant to the Port Sudan case in several ways, as I will show in the chapters that follow. First and foremost, it serves as a heuristic tool for understanding which types of connections influence the choices of workers. It offers an analytical frame, namely the distinction between strong and weak ties. Secondly, as will become clear, my empirical findings suggest that the SWT perspective offers (part of) an explanation for the clustering of individuals – that are part of groups that are barely represented in the urban formal labour market – in certain parts of the informal sector.

While SWT provides a lens for observing the diffusion of information, opportunities and ideas, it does not take into account that information, or opportunities, are context-specific instead of absolute. It does not explain which information, opportunities and ideas are deemed useful, and what people choose to do with them. As such, knowledge of networks of strong and weak ties alone is not enough to understand the choices made by rural-urban migrant workers. It is here that Bourdieu's concept of habitus is useful.

At the risk of oversimplifying, Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be described as one's collection of dispositions that stem from structure ("field" or "game"), but that are also acquired through personal life experiences, skills, habits, etcetera (Leander, 2001; Reay, 2004). With his notions of habitus, fields and the forms of capital, Bourdieu offered an alternative to the structure-versus-agency distinction, which he described as the "quite absurd opposition between individual and society, which the notion of habitus, as social life incorporated, and thus individuated, is meant to transcend" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 31). In this respect, Granovetter's work is compatible with Bourdieu's. Granovetter too had taken position in the structure-versus-agency debate, arguing against both oversocialised and undersocialised conceptions of human (economic) action (Granovetter, 1985).

Structured along these lines, agency means that one has freedom in acting, but behaviours and choices are influenced by deep-rooted dispositions that shape one's views on things and determine what is seen as (un)reasonable action. Reasonable actions, then, are recognised as options, e.g. the action of applying to a particular job opening, or the action of helping someone acquire income opportunities. To give an example, the concept of habitus could be employed to analyse the apparent gender difference between coffee sellers in Khartoum and coffee sellers in Port Sudan[5]. Habitus is "a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81). As phrased by Reay, it "predisposes individuals towards certain ways of behaving" (Reay, 2004, p. 433). It is important to keep in mind that habitus is a complex, fluid concept with many definitions and uses (Reay, 2004).

As I will show, rural-urban migrants make – within their frameworks of reasoning (habitus) – deliberate choices that determine how they get by in new environments and changing circumstances. In this sense, the concept of social navigation, proposed by Henrik Vigh (2009), is useful to keep in mind. Social navigation implies that "our lives are set in moving environments and (…) the image of immobility or petrifyingly slow processes of change (…) need to be replaced by 'an image of complex mobility' and 'convergence of waves and currents'" (Vigh, 2009, p. 433). It is Vigh who also takes issue with Bourdieu's undynamic notion of structure, which shows in Bourdieu's use of metaphors of "field" and "game" and his descriptions of habitus as emerging from slow processes.

Summarising, Granovetter's SWT will be used as a heuristic for discerning the types of connections that people use to find employment in the city. In this sense, it helps to specify and clarify the social networks aspect of the migration systems approach. While Bourdieu's concept of the habitus plays a less prominent role in this thesis, it helps to understand why people recognise, and choose, the options that present themselves to them.

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[5] Arguing only from the experience of spending time and walking around in both cities' downtown areas, not from systematic inquiry, the brewing and selling of coffee and tea on the streets of Khartoum is a job typically professed by women, many of which are migrants from Sudan's conflict-ridden areas (such as Darfur and the Nuba Mountains). In Port Sudan, it is a male-dominated sector.

# Chapter 3. Methodology

How to study the means by which rural-urban migrants navigate the urban labour market in Port Sudan? This chapter describes which data I collected during my field work phase, as well as how I collected them and why. While I attempt to avoid "confessional excesses", this chapter contains some of the lessons I drew from these processes and reflects upon the influence of my position in the field, the access restrictions, and working conditions (e.g. the weather circumstances) on my research efforts (Leibing & McLean, 2007, p. 13). The final paragraphs of this chapter outline my research approach and the methods used. Here, the data collection process is explained, alongside a description of some of the ethical considerations and limitations of this thesis.

## 3.1. Gathering data in Sudan: negotiating access in a many-headed bureaucracy

Conducting research in Sudan is challenging. Many factors influence the success of research efforts in Sudan, ranging from the security situation and the political sensitivity of themes and locations of the envisioned research, to individual capacities and merits of the researcher, and the willingness of individual actors within the bureaucratic and security systems to help. Such factors have impact on the methods that are available to the researcher and – as I learned from others as well as from own experience – force researchers to be flexible in their methodological approach towards the phenomena they wish to investigate. I undertook several steps to increase the safety of my research, and to increase the chance of successfully accessing the research field. Most notably, I looked for institutional backing for my research, worked on my personal network, and attempted to acquiring research and travel permissions.

I was hosted in Sudan by the *Centre d'études et de documentation économiques, juridiques et sociales Khartoum* (CEDEJ). While CEDEJ is not represented in Port Sudan, their assistance in Khartoum during the preparations for my field work was indispensable. CEDEJ provided institutional backing and helped me navigate the bureaucracy in Khartoum. This included assistance with e.g. obligatory police registrations, travel permissions, visa issues, and the organising of contact with the University of Khartoum. In some countries or regions the procedures for obtaining research and travel permissions can be unclear or non-existent (Pritchard, 2018). Here, researchers often have to rely on others for help and advice throughout the permission process. Sudan, with its slow and vague bureaucratic apparatus, is such a context.

While my travel permit was easily obtained with help from CEDEJ, getting permission to conduct research proved to be a hurdle. The Government of Sudan (GoS) – particularly the Al-Ingaz regime under Al-Bashir which was still in power during my field visit – is notoriously hostile to (foreign) researchers and journalists. Sudan is structurally placed in the bottom 10 countries in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Repression of voices of dissent affects not only journalists, but also scholars and (I)NGOs. The incarceration of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff in Sudan in 2005, in response to the publication of a report on sexual violence in Darfur, is one of many examples that show how far the GoS was willing to go in order to suppress unwelcome views (Moszynski, 2005). In this light, I tried to take precautions to secure access to the field in responsible manner. Before arriving in Sudan, I already had an introduction letter stamped by CEDEJ-Khartoum and had reached out to the Red Sea University.

As opposed to travel permission, which was relatively easily obtained, acquiring research permission was a less obvious process than I had anticipated on. I expected to reach a moment at which it was clear that I had sufficient permission, but such a moment did not come. In Sudan, research permissions are hardly standardised and are certainly not universally accepted. Obtaining permission in means, in practice, obtaining endorsements (i.e. letters with stamps and signatures) from (individuals at) individual institutions. After weeks of pursuing such permissions in Khartoum, I got an endorsement from the dean of the Faculty of Economic and Social Studies of the University of Khartoum. I dismissed the cliché that "everything is politically sensitive in Sudan", assumed that my research did not touch upon very sensitive themes, hoped (and wrongly assumed) that my endorsement from the University of Khartoum and affiliation with CEDEJ would be sufficiently powerful to negotiate access with local security actors in Port Sudan. In practice, the stamps and signatures I obtained in Khartoum turned out to not mean much in Port Sudan. This exemplifies how the worth of endorsements is determined locally, by actors who operate in a reality that can be different from the reality of offices in the capital city (De Vries, 2014). Local security actors have the power to grant or (partially) refuse access based on their judgement of the validity and relevance of endorsement letters and their signatories. My letter, signed and stamped by a university in Khartoum, meant little to security officers working hundreds of kilometres away in Port Sudan; it insufficiently covered the risks they would take by granting me access.

As described in the paragraph below, I initially planned to conduct research among the port labourers in the port of Port Sudan. The security officers I met in Port Sudan were suspicious of my plans, and the papers I brought with me were not enough to change their minds. This led to access prohibitions for parts of Port Sudan. The fact that I my access was partially refused illustrates how the actual access and security that a permit or endorsement yields differs from context to context. Looking back, obtaining a letter from one of the relevant ministries in Khartoum might have helped my credibility towards the security actors in Port Sudan. Moreover, a permission from the Sea Ports Corporation in Port Sudan, the institution that governs the functioning of the port of Port Sudan, would likely have prevented some of the access constraints.

### 3.2. Reflexivity and access restrictions in Port Sudan

In order to explain the access limitations that I encountered, and how I worked around them, I need to briefly describe the context of my initial research plans. As described in Pantuliano's (2002) account of the rural-urban divide in Port Sudan, as well as in Perkins' (2019) account of the history of Port Sudan, the port has played an important (socio-)economic role in the lives of the Beja and Beni Amer of eastern Sudan throughout the twentieth century. In recent decades, casual labour opportunities have changed due to the sanctions imposed upon Sudan by the United States, but also – perhaps more importantly – due to efforts to increase the port's efficiency. Mechanisation efforts change the availability of work in the port. The gradual privatisation of the port, a process that is pushed through by the RSS governor's office, is dissolving the customary ways of organizing and sharing labour in the port. It has the potential to disrupt the circular migration system and the economic chances for rural Beja and Beni Amer in the city. A reduced demand for low-skilled labour in the port, that has mainly affected "Beja labourers who were left with very little alternatives on the market", has led to tensions in the region, particularly between GoS and (ex-)port labourers (Pantuliano, 2006, pp. 717–718). The

perceived marginalisation and the dissatisfaction with the declining labour opportunities in Port Sudan have contributed to Beja resistance (e.g. strikes and protests), and played a role in the rebellion of the Eastern Front in 2005 (Young, 2007).

I initially set out to investigate the alternatives pursued by circular migrant workers in Port Sudan, as well as the impact of port mechanisation on (rural-urban) linkages between Port Sudan and the migrants' home communities. I aimed to collect data in multiple locations, but most importantly in the port itself (at the *maktab al talimat*, the orders office where casual labour is distributed), as well as in neighbourhoods inhabited by port labourers, the Beja Club (a Beja meeting point in Port Sudan that also plays a role in information distribution and rural-urban migration process facilitation), and in the town of Sinkat. As soon as I spoke to experts in Khartoum and Port Sudan, I found that the distinction between seasonal/circular migrants and more permanent migrants is – at best – hard to make. But there were more substantial obstacles.

When I reached Port Sudan my access was barred in three ways by local security officials:

I.     Restriction of physical movement:

I was explicitly told to stay away from the port area (including the publicly accessible areas), to not conduct research in Deim al Arab, particularly not to visit the Beja Club.

II.     Harassment and control over (professional) network:

From the moment I registered with security (which was a mandatory first step when arriving in Port Sudan), a security officer would regularly contact my interpreter and fixer, to ask for updates on what we were doing and planning to do.

III.     Control over methods used:

I was told to not hand out written surveys, or any other type of paper.

These measures, most notably the geographical restrictions, meant a de facto prohibition of interaction with my research group. As mentioned above, my signed and stamped letters of endorsement were of little use (although I cannot tell whether without them I would have been permitted to carry out research in Port Sudan at all). The labour situation in the port turned out to be a heavily politicised theme in a politicised environment; the port premises are vital infrastructure. Allowing researchers to conduct research on the port premises is a risk that security officers simply do not have to take. But there is more information in the attempts to prohibit interviews with port labourers, and to bar access to Deim al Arab (arguably the heart of Beja ethnic and labour organisation in Port Sudan, where the Beja Club is also located); it illustrates how the authorities perceive port labourers as a security threat, and how subsequently the social and economic centres[6] of Beja (and Beni Amer?) in Port Sudan are managed, monitored and securitised.

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[6] Disregarding the Beja Cultural Center, which does not play much of a role in the daily lives of Beja in Port Sudan, but rather plays a role in knowledge production, as well as a symbolic role.

Trying to spend my time efficiently while working on alternative research plans, I was talking to a diverse group of "experts" (e.g. civil servants, historians, civil society organisations). For conducting these interviews, I had to move around the city a lot. I noticed that many of the coffee sellers in Port Sudan were male – as opposed to the female coffee sellers (*sita chai*) of Khartoum – and that nearly all of them wore dark waistcoats over their *jalabiyas*, a typical way to dress for Beja men from eastern Sudan.

After exploratory discussions with several coffee sellers, I had strong indications that most of the coffee sellers in Port Sudan were of Beja or Beni Amer descent, and that most of them had histories of migration, continued to migrate back and forth, or maintained other forms of contact with family members in "home areas" (for lack of a more fitting word). Moreover, one of the first coffee sellers I talked to mentioned that some coffee sellers also work shifts in the port. I decided to focus my research almost entirely on the coffee sellers of Port Sudan, while also interviewing other types of street vendors whenever I the chance arose. This forced me to adjust my focus, somewhat away from the port and the impacts of mechanisation, privatisation and sanctions, but allowed me to interview urban (migrant) workers about work in the city and about rural-urban ties. It was, eventually, tolerated by the security actors in Port Sudan, who seemed to have seen no threat in my constant interaction with coffee sellers. The flexibility to change my research approach last-minute, without too many concessions, was mostly possible due to my presence in Port Sudan. In Port Sudan, I was far better able to judge the possibilities.

### 3.3. Gathering data: finding a research sample

Field work for this thesis was conducted in Sudan from 26 June until 26 August 2017. The majority of my interviews took place in Port Sudan between August 1 and August 24. My respondents can be divided roughly in two groups: (1) street vendors/workers, and (2) experts on the themes of migration, development, Beja/Beni Amer[7] ethnicity and history (including representatives of United Nations organisations, GoS, and local civil society organisations). While the former group (street vendors/workers) is the main research population, the discussions with experts improved my understanding of the context in which my field work took place, and helped to add perspectives to this research that would have gone unheard if I had only interviewed workers on the streets. Experts' information, quotes, and opinions (e.g. on the history of Port Sudan, on Beja and Beni Amer customs, on the informal labour sector, and on migration to the city and its potential social and cultural implications) are woven throughout the following chapters. But, as mentioned, the first group – the 29 respondents who worked in the streets of Port Sudan – forms the sample on which most descriptions and analyses in chapters 5, 6, and 7 are based.

I got in touch with a diverse group of experts through my extended network, for which I owe thanks to the creativity and perseverance of my interpreter and fixer. In the end, this group of

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[7] It is not always easy to distinguish between Beni Amer and Beja. In our conversations, most Beni Amer leaders considered themselves to be part of the broader Beja ethnicity, while other Beja leaders to whom I spoke considered the Beni Amer to be a distinct ethnicity. This is not a fundamental issue for this thesis, as Beja and Beni Amer tend to work similar professions in similar ways in the Port Sudanese labour market. Nevertheless, I do try to make the distinction where necessary and possible.

experts was selected intuitively. They played a particularly important role in the exploratory phase of my research, because most of the interviews with experts were conducted right after my access to the port was refused, and before I managed to find a new, feasible research focus. The main sample of 29 street vendors/workers was selected through two (some would argue three) sampling methods: (1) convenience sampling and (2) the snowball sampling method (SSM).

The first, convenience sampling, is a popular method for finding respondents in ethnographic research, in which selection of informants is based on criteria such as availability, accessibility and willingness to participate, instead of on random sampling (Duneier, 2011; Russell Bernard, 1995). The second, SSM, relies on respondents that lead the researcher to new respondents, which can be useful to gain access to people who would otherwise be hard-to-reach or overlooked (Russell Bernard, 1995; Spring et al., 2003). This has some ethical objections, as people who are reached through SSM might not want to be reached or might find it hard to reject an interview; I took care to explain my research and my position carefully and tried to give potential respondents – including those reached through SSM – the space to reject an interview in a dignified way. Although my respondents were easy to find in my research areas in Port Sudan, I went along with snowball sampling whenever the chance arose, as I found SMM a suitable, efficient way to build trust with respondents, whilst it also brought be to spaces (e.g. courtyards) that I would have otherwise overlooked. Nevertheless, I only reached a modest number (roughly one fifth) of the sampled street vendors/workers through SSM.

When using non-random sampling methods, such as convenience sampling and SSM, it is necessary to consider in which ways random sampling would have resulted in a different sample (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). For example, convenience sampling methods can cause significant bias in the resulting sample (e.g. when walking through the streets, are all potential respondents equally visible? Which research locations are chosen, and how does this influence the sample?). Similarly, snowball sampling or respondent-driven sampling can lead to homogeneity of the sample in terms of ethnic background, home area, and socio-economic class (Emerson, 2015). In my case, I think that random sampling would have led to a more diverse sample in terms of respondents' home areas and ethnic backgrounds. A larger and more diverse sample would, in turn, be more representative of the entire research population and would support more (spatially) comprehensive analysis. As such, it would allow me to see more of the (dis)similarities between the ways in which different people with different backgrounds from different areas migrate, find work, and maintain (or do not maintain) multi-spatial lives.

While respondents had their urban occupations and migrant histories in common, their areas of origin and reasons for migration were diverse: some had pastoral backgrounds and were from sparsely populated areas, other had more or less sedentary backgrounds and originated in or close to villages and towns. Some had fled conflict, particularly from the Tokar area where the GoS waged war against the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the early 1990s, or environmental degradation, such as irregular rains or infestation of *mesquite* trees (Ati, 2009). Others claimed to have been drawn to the city because of its (labour) opportunities. All respondents, except one cigarette seller with whom I had a relatively brief conversation, were born outside Port Sudan in either the Red Sea State (e.g. around Gebeit, Hayya or Tokar) or in Kassala state (e.g. around Aroma, Hameshkoraib or Kassala

city). All respondents maintained strong connections to areas of origin, although in various ways. This will be explained in detail in chapters 5 and 6.

### 3.4. Conducting interviews

My respondents spoke Arabic, but several interviews were conducted in Bidhaawyeet (Beja language) and in Tigre/Xasa (spoken by Beni Amer). I worked with one interpreter for all interviews. Sometimes we were accompanied by extra interpreters for translating Tigre/Xasa. There were several instances in which I could cross-check my interpreter's translations; I found them to be reliable. One interview, that fortunately turned out to be irrelevant for this study, required translation through two interpreters (Tigri to Arabic, Arabic to English).

I recorded my data in notebooks, instead of making audio recordings. At the end of each day, I worked out my interview notes into detailed field notes, with as many quotes and descriptive information as possible. While there are downsides to this approach (e.g. there is more margin for error, less possibilities to include non-verbal communication), it was a conscious decision to not record audio. Firstly, the access restrictions I encountered made me (perhaps overly) worried about the privacy and safety of my respondents. I was afraid that my recordings would be seized if I was unlucky or if I made a mistake.

My notes were written with pen and paper. I had brought the smallest, thinnest notebooks I could find. Besides the fact that they looked quite harmless, it allowed me to carry only very limited amount of information with me when out on the streets. A second reason to use pen and paper instead of a recording device, is the obtrusiveness of the latter, which I feared would influence my respondents' answers. With pen and paper, I could interview my respondents whilst they continued their work, in the (sometimes) noisy streets. Sometimes, for example, they answered questions from a distance whilst washing cups, emptying tables, or pouring coffee. This flexible style of interviewing, that allowed respondents to carry on with their work whilst answering questions, would have been difficult using a recording device.

### 3.5. Gathering data: talking about labour histories, labour hierarchies, family, and mobility

All interviews that I conducted were semi-structured, although to varying degrees, as some interviews took place in more informal contexts, some respondents steered the conversation more than others. While the first group of respondents (street vendors/workers) were asked to share information about their personal lives, the questions asked to experts were less uniform (because the different experts I spoke to had various backgrounds and positions) and less personal. For the interviews with street vendors/workers, which was a relatively homogenous group, I used a short sequence of open-ended questions. I asked respondents to explain:

- Where they were born and – if applicable – which ethnicity and/or *diwab* (lineage) they identified with.
- If applicable: when they first migrated to Port Sudan, and whether they had family or friends there (both when they first came to Port Sudan and in the present).
- Whether their move to the city coincided with, or was a result of, labour opportunities in Port Sudan (e.g. "did you already know which job you would profess when you came to Port Sudan?").

- What their job histories looked like ("which jobs have you professed in Port Sudan?") and – if applicable – why and how they changed professions in Port Sudan.
- If they continued to look for extra income-generation opportunities in Port Sudan, and if so, how they approached this (e.g. "do you find work by asking around on the streets, among acquaintances, or among family?").
- Whether they were married and in turn whether they had multi-spatial households or lived in the same location.
- How and how often they moved back and forth between areas of origin (or family grounds) and Port Sudan.
- If applicable: whether they had sources of income in their areas of origin, and/or owned assets in their area of origin.
- Whether, and how, they sent remittances to family members elsewhere and whether they, besides sending, also received support from family members elsewhere.

This set of questions/themes would generally be enough for conversations of 15 minutes or more. Often, respondents would bring up other themes to discuss (such as cultural change, or environmental degradation) and if necessary, I would spontaneously add questions for clarification, or to collect a respondent's individual opinions, perceptions and other experiential information. Not in all cases was I able to finish the question sequence. Sometimes I deemed questions as inappropriate in the context of the interview (depending e.g. on the privacy we had during the interviews), sometimes respondents chose not to answer certain questions. In addition, sometimes interviews ended abruptly when respondents wanted to leave, to pray or for other reasons.

I interviewed coffee sellers and other street vendors while they were practicing their jobs. This gave me the chance to observe respondents as they carried out their jobs, along the lines of the techniques described by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) in their elaborate guide on participant observation. Besides the information gathered verbally, through interviews, these visual observations provided contextual insights, especially into the practice of selling coffee on the streets (e.g. the equipment and the skills it takes), and coffee sellers' interactions on the streets of Port Sudan (e.g. with customers, apprentices, and each other).

Finally, I worked all the data collected in interviews on the streets of Port Sudan out in field notes that form the base for the analysis, anecdotes, and quotations in this thesis. I worked intuitively on the coding and analysis processes, but was inspired by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) – particularly their emphasis on coding as an iterative process – and by the many suggestions and examples in Russell Bernard's (1995) introduction to research methods in anthropology. I first coded with a priori coding themes, with pen and paper, and later refined the codes, in data analysis software (NVivo 12), during consecutive readings of my field notes.

Most interviews with workers took place in the Souq Kabir area, which includes the corniche (the busy boardwalk that lies opposite both the northern and southern port areas); this region is highlighted in map 1. This was a suitable location because of its accessibility, its vibrance, and the high density of coffee shops. In addition, some interviews with coffee sellers were conducted in Deim Madina, Transit (southeast of Shati) and Walia (northwest of Deim an-Nur).
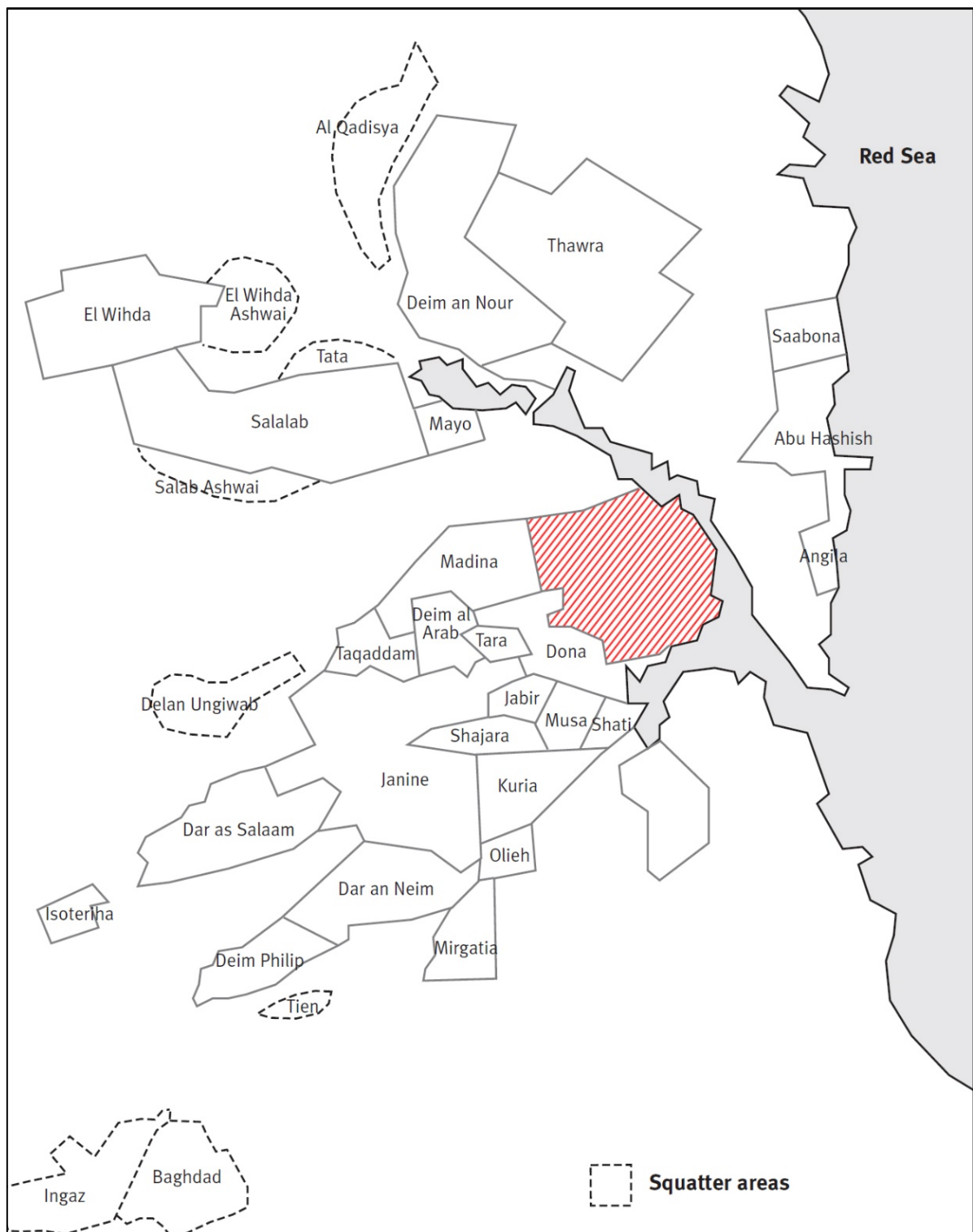
Map 2. Main research area, the Souq Kabir including the corniche, highlighted on reproduction of Port Sudan map originally published by Ati, Pavanello, Jaspars, Martin, and Mosel (2011), which is itself a retouched version of the Port Sudan neighbourhoods map drawn by Pantuliano (2002).

### 3.6. Shifting position in the field and ethical considerations

Not many expats work and/or live in Port Sudan. Due to funding stops as well as GoS policies, the amount of Official Development Assistance (ODA) directed towards the Red Sea State dropped from USD 800 million in 1990 to USD 50 million in 1996. With time, the number of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in the Red Sea State has plummeted as well. In 1988 there were 34 INGOs active in the state, in 1995 there were only 7 (Ati, 2009). In 2012, GoS expelled four large INGOs from the Red Sea State. Access to this region is problematic, which is exemplified by the fact that Port Sudan no longer houses INGO offices. The United Nations are represented – I visited the World Food Programme (WFP) office and the small United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) mission in Port Sudan – but there are little to no expatriates stationed in the city.

I stood out because of my physical appearance, especially in the absence of an expatriate community, and generated attention whilst walking around town and conducting interviews. I noticed this particularly in the peripheral neighbourhoods. I generally introduced myself as a master's student, not as a researcher. Regardless, among the actors I interacted with in Port Sudan as well as in Khartoum, there were various perspectives on who I was and what I was doing. Some coffee sellers I spoke to greeted me with suspicion. One of my respondents asked if I was involved with the port authorities. Security officers, by contrast, viewed me as a threat to these authorities. Some of the experts and government workers I interviewed also saw opportunities. I had the feeling that some tried to use the interview as a method to spread a certain political message – either highlighting or downplaying the marginalisation of Beja ethnicity in eastern Sudan – resembling what Russell Bernard cynically labelled "the CNN effect" (Russell Bernard, 1995). But of the coffee sellers and other informal traders who commented on my research efforts, most gave positive feedback, stating for example that "it is good to ask questions" (Ali, personal communication, August 18, 2017).

All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of respondents. Before each interview, a brief overview of the research goals was shared with (potential) interviewees. I also explained about myself and my affiliations and answered questions about the research and the interview procedure. Several people refused to participate, I never asked them to explain why.

Engaging with (potential) informants is not a one-sided process of information extraction: it is an intrusive action that can affect the respondent in multiple ways (Block, Warr, Gibbs, & Riggs, 2012). Working towards informed consent is not the only ethical responsibility for researchers in the field, researchers must also attempt to avoid potential negative (social and/or psychological) effects that the interview event might have on the respondent. In case of my research, I attempted to avoid approaching coffee sellers at times when they had many customers, as my presence could have a negative effect on their income generation; most interviews were carried out at relatively quiet times of the day (such as the afternoon). Generally, I tried to conduct the interviews in a low-profile manner. Interviewing coffee vendors while they were on the job, for example, helped to attract as little attention as possible. This was useful, as I also feared that my presence would draw attention from police and other security actors with whom some street vendors had ambiguous relationships. Presently, the legality of street vending is contested at best, and while the police does not actively chase street vendors, some of the older street vendors remember how their possessions used to be confiscated in police raids (as one

street vendor stated jokingly: "in the past we ran into the sea if the police came" (Ohaj, personal communication, August 16, 2017).

Still, risks cannot always be avoided. For example, some coffee sellers I spoke to turned out to work for middlemen, which I only found out during the interviews. I wondered afterwards if I had put these respondents at risk: would the middlemen mind if I interviewed their leaseholders?

### 3.7. Conducting research in the Sudanese summer

I did not plan my field work to take place in the Sudanese summer. In fact, during preparations for my field work I spoke to several researchers with experience in eastern Sudan, and they urged me to avoid the hottest months, arguing that the high temperatures posed health risks and would inhibit my research efforts. I therefore planned to avoid most of the summer by commencing research in the spring months. However, preparing my research took longer than I had anticipated (particularly the visa application procedure). I ended up staying in Sudan during the hottest months of the year, conducting interviews in Port Sudan during the heatwave that struck the Red Sea State in August 2017. The extreme heat in late August and its consequences formed a recurrent theme in the (Port) Sudanese media. The temperatures had an effect on life in Port Sudan, and influenced my data collection (both negatively and positively) in two ways:

I.   The heat reduced possibilities to roam around the city during daytime, and negatively impacted possibilities to interview people on the streets. There were less people working during the day, and I was not eager to bother people who were working in the daytime heat. Furthermore, it took time to physically get used to the temperatures.

II.  It gave me valuable insights in seasonal changes in the city, which I probably would have overlooked if I had visited Port Sudan in a different season. During the hot season, the population of Port Sudan changes, as some of its inhabitants temporarily move away from the city, escaping the heat, and others come from the countryside to work in the relatively empty city. To a degree, those who work on the streets in the city during the summer months change their preferred working hours and locations, as well as their preferred types of work.

### 3.8. Limitations.

In an article on the pitfalls of sample biases in ethnographic studies, Duneier (2011) places Clifford Geertz in an imaginary court where his famous study on Balinese cockfights is reviewed. In this metaphor or thought game (which Duneier calls an ethnographic trial) Geertz is questioned on his sample and whether it represents all relevant perspectives, how his method of entrée into the field has influenced his observations, and whether – in turn – his results are as generalisable as they are presented to be. While there are various opinions in literature on the level of self-reflection that is necessary in ethnographic studies, there is consensus on the idea that limitations must be discussed, particularly sample biases that can come with participant observation and other non-random sampling techniques (Duneier, 2011; Leibing & McLean, 2007; Russell Bernard, 1995). It is therefore necessary to ask: if my work in Port Sudan were to be scrutinised in an ethnographic trial, which limitations would be discussed?

Firstly, an obvious limitation is that I gathered data only in some areas of the city of Port Sudan. The neighbourhoods in which I conducted research were selected intuitively, on the basis of visible presence of coffee sellers as well as accessibility for me and my interpreter. Choosing other neighbourhoods might have led to a sample of people with different geographic or even socio-economic backgrounds. This potential bias is somewhat negated by the fact that respondents only rarely lived in the neighbourhoods where the interviews took place, and often commuted from the more peripheral neighbourhoods to the city centre.

Secondly, besides the issue of neighbourhood selection in Port Sudan, I also did not conduct research in the countryside or sending communities. This affects my information on multi-spatial households (seeing only one perspective) and brings about a bias that is perhaps best described as a "success bias". What this entails, is that my respondents were all successfully generating incomes (operating their own businesses or working for others) at the time of the interview. Evidently, those who did not manage to move to Port Sudan, who could not sustain self-employment in Port Sudan, who were unemployed, or perhaps had to move back to their areas of origin, were invisible in the streets of Port Sudan. In this light, future research with more respondents, both in the different neighbourhoods of Port Sudan and in the sending communities, would be fruitful. For such structured research endeavours to be feasible, the Sudanese security apparatus will have to reduce its grip on research in Sudan. Simultaneously, the harassment of researchers by individual security officers must reduce. Perhaps the new political situation in Sudan will open doors for researchers, both Sudanese and foreign.

Thirdly, my focus on the practice of street vending practices give my sample a gender bias. While coffee selling is female-dominated sector in Khartoum, the coffee sellers in the streets of Port Sudan are largely male, as many Beja and Beni Amer women seem to be discouraged, or barred, from selling goods on the streets (Hanan, personal communication, August 10, 2017). The gendered division of labour is entrenched by the gendered perceptions of mobility, which is often perceived as a masculine feature (Larsen & Hassan, 2003). At the time of my field work, only relatively few women seemed to sell coffee on the streets of Port Sudan, and many of them had crossed the border from Ethiopia or Eritrea. The fact that I barely got to speak with female street vendors/workers means that I cannot make convincing statements on women's livelihoods in the city, nor say anything about whether (and how) social capital is gendered in the context of Beja labourers in Port Sudan.

Fourthly, in terms of perspectives, my research would have benefited from more conversations with political actors, such as the Sea Ports Corporation, other Sudanese government representatives (I only formally interviewed one civil servant), and representatives of Beja Congress. I did plan such interviews but did not get to executing them. This was partially because I avoided the more explicitly political aspects of this theme; I wished to prevent additional access restrictions and did not want to cause trouble for my respondents (e.g. Beja Congress contacts). Hearing these perspectives would certainly have allowed for better analysis of the politics of mobility and (informal) urban labour in the RSS, which is especially relevant in the current context of political rupture at federal and state levels, persistent protests against modernisation and regulation of port labour, as well as ethnic violence between some of the ethnic groups that are well-represented in the street workers' scene.

But it is also a delicate balance, because I would likely not have been able to get in touch with some of these political actors, such as the Sea Ports Corporation, but also because engaging with the Sea Ports Corporation and others might have impacted my perceived neutrality and trustworthiness in the field. Because the Sea Ports Corporation is a political actor, it might have made me a political actor. I would have risked becoming a disruptive actor in the delicate context of the port labourers' protests against the Sea Ports Corporation over unfavourable working conditions and unwanted changes in the port ("Port Sudan strikers block all roads to port," 2019).

Retrospectively, some of the limitations of this study are the result of misjudgements. For example, I underestimated the amount of time it would take to obtain sufficient access, to get accustomed with new social and physical environments, and to move to the data collection phase in the research area. I came to Port Sudan on my own, with little experience and time, and had to quickly grow into the role of researcher. I have learnt a great amount in the process, and while this thesis has limitations, it also offers new and relevant perspectives on Beja and Beni Amer mobility: an ill-researched theme in a geographical area that is, undeservedly, ignored and overlooked.

# Chapter 4. Between Prosperity and Fragility: The Contexts of Port Sudan

"The Beni Amer and Beja love their land. We write poems about it."

– Sheikh Hamid, personal communication, August 13, 2017

As a city that is both centre (by far the largest city in the region) and periphery (isolated and distant from the political heart of Sudan), Port Sudan has a multifaceted history. As I will explain in the paragraphs below, it played a role of increasing importance in the Sudanese national economy throughout the past century, and simultaneously became a safety valve for struggling rural households. In order to understand why and how mobility to and from Port Sudan occurs nowadays, and to be able to recognise continuities, it is important to know the historic background as well as the contemporary (socio-economic) context of rural-urban mobility in the RSS. Furthermore, I will explain that eastern Sudan has been the centre stage of low-intensity conflict in recent decades has been; in this light, the intersection of labour (mobility) and proneness to conflict is worth investigating.

## 4.1. Establishment of the port and city

At the turn of the twentieth century, before Port Sudan was established, exports from Sudan (under colonial rule) were increasing. In fact, in the period from 1901 and 1914, exports from Sudan increased 282% as the area under cultivation grew substantially, and were expected to further grow due to the introduction of new agricultural schemes that intensified agricultural production of cotton and other commodities[8] (Mollan, 2008). The centuries-old city of Suakin, one of the only port settlements on the Sudanese Red Sea, was the main port of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Suakin played an important role for the Condominium government[9], but its isolation from central Sudan (around 650 kilometres in a straight line from Suakin to Khartoum with the Red Sea Hills posing a serious barrier) meant its transport capacity was limited. For transport capacity to match the envisioned increase of international trade, the infrastructure between Khartoum and Suakin had to be improved. As such, the condominium government planned to build a new railroad that would greatly improve the connection between the southern Nile Valley and the Red Sea (Perkins, 2019).

According to Perkins' (2019) history of the establishment of Port Sudan, the costly railroad construction project gave the British director of public works the chance to express his concern with the future suitability of Suakin as the main port in Sudan. Large ships could not enter the port because of the coral reefs in the harbour entrance channel, and the fact that Suakin was located on a small island where most space was occupied by historic Ottoman constructions, was likely seen as problematic (Salim, 1997). There was little room for new buildings on the island,

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[8] The Land Settlement Ordinance of 1905 codified that government could use land for agricultural schemes regardless of claims to ownership (Yahya & Mohammed, 2016).
[9] The joint rule (which was in fact not quite equal) of Egypt and the United Kingdom, that was established after the (re)occupation of Sudan by Anglo-Egyptian forces in 1898, is referred to as the Condominium government (Daly, 1991).

nor on the nearby mainland where the many mosques complicated any future expansion of the harbour.

Roughly 60 kilometres north, the area around a location named either Sheikh Barghouth (or Sheikh Marghoub) was suitable for the establishment of a new harbour that could correspond with the colonisers' ambitions. In 1905, the site of Sheikh Barghouth became the location for a new main trading port, named Port Sudan, which would become the terminal station of the envisioned railroad. The establishment of Port Sudan caused the slow and unintended decay of Suakin (Hjort af Ornäs & Dahl, 1991; Perkins, 2019; Salim, 1997).

From its inception, Port Sudan housed people from diverse backgrounds; in early years the economic activity at the port drew labourers from the Arabian Peninsula as well as from European countries, most notably from Greece. As the demand for labour grew during the first decade of its existence, workers from outside Sudan received contracts to work in the port. Although Port Sudan was located in Beja domains (on the border of Amar'ar Beja territory), not many Beja worked in the docks in the years following 1909 when the port was officially opened. This might have been because not many wanted to work in the port, but probably also because they were unwanted by racist port exploiters (Perkins, 2019). Beja stevedores (concerned with the loading and unloading in the dockyards) often travelled back and forth between their homelands and Port Sudan, which made the English to conclude that they were an unreliable workforce. As such, they did not receive contracts like the Yemeni workers and others. Those who did work in the port mostly did casual work (Pantuliano, 2002).

During World War I and in the interbellum – certainly until the Great Depression that started in 1929 – economic activity boomed in Port Sudan, largely due to the successful cotton industry. According to Perkins (2019, p. 111), by the interbellum the port had become "absolutely essential for the country's survival". During these years, the Beja also started to make more use of the labour opportunities the city offered, especially after the dismissal of Yemeni labourers in 1931 (Lewis, 1962). Besides working in the port, they opened shops and sold goods on the streets. Business registrations from 1937 show how the influx of labourers into the port led to a thriving services sector. There were, for example, 226 registered milk or water sellers, 75 restaurants, and more than 100 coffee shops (Perkins, 2019). The Beni Amer, like the Beja, also owned coffee shops and other businesses in town (Lewis, 1962). This shows that the prominence of Beja and Beni Amer street vendors is nothing new in the streets of Port Sudan.

While Port Sudan was relatively unharmed by World War I, and things were going up in the interbellum, the port and its workers were seriously affected by World War II. In the first years of the conflict, especially the period between the Italian declaration of war and the Allied conquest of Italian Eritrea, commercial trade was disrupted, and Port Sudan became a strategic military location, for logistical support of the military activities in the Horn of Africa. Its key position meant it was also a key military target; air raids in the fall and winter of 1940/41 killed, injured and traumatised many Beja workers (Perkins, 2019).

Despite the volatility of business in Port Sudan, in the first half century of its existence the Beja, most notably Amar'ar Beja but also Bisharyyn and Hadendoa, became the main labour force of the port. Until the early 1950s, the Beja stevedores were almost exclusively recruited through contractors. This practice seems to have ended with the establishment of a labour office in 1951

that was charged with the arrangement of all matters concerning the stevedores, most notably the responsibility to ensure the presence of a (Beja) labour force (Perkins, 2019). Soon after its instalment, it began to register active stevedores. It also facilitated the rotation of labour through the organisation of labourers in gangs that were ordered by ethnicity (Lewis, 1962).

Throughout its history, availability of work at the port has been strongly affected by political confrontations and violent conflict in Sudan, which illustrated by abovementioned example from World War II. But geopolitics and conflicts further away (in which Sudan was not directly involved) also had dire consequences for Port Sudan and for the livelihoods of Beja stevedores and refugees from elsewhere. A telling example is the 1967 Six Day War that led to the closure of the Suez Canal until 1975, which had negative consequences for business in the port and its labourers (Perkins, 2019). A more recent example is the trade embargo imposed upon Sudan by the US in the 1990s, meant to put pressure on Sudan's leaders in Khartoum, but simultaneously/instead economically affecting the workers of Port Sudan (personal communication, group interview Deim an-Nur, August 20, 2017).

As Perkins notes, in the decades following the 1956 Sudanese independence, the population of Port Sudan grew substantially. Around independence Port Sudan had almost 50.000[10] inhabitants. The city grew to 80.000 people (of which 50% had Beja backgrounds) within a decade following independence. In 1973, the population had reached an approximated 132,632, and in 1983 it was estimated to be between 206,727 and 350,000 (Perkins, 2019). Different official and unofficial estimates for the population size in the 1990s ranged from 320,000 to 1,2 million (Abu Sin, 2009; Ati et al., 2011). According to the vice chancellor of the Red Sea University the population estimate from 2017 counted roughly 1,6 million people (personal communication, August 3, 2017). The enormous disparity between estimates reflects the difficulty of determining the population size of Port Sudan, not only because of the large informal settlements on the fringes of the city where population counts are complicated, but also because of the difficulty of determining who should be counted as the population of Port Sudan; how to count people who move back and forth regularly?

### 4.2. Changing mobility and rural-urban ties in the Red Sea State

In the countryside of RSS, mobile production strategies (e.g. pastoralism) have been historically dominant, and multi-spatiality has long been the norm. Even now, a large percentage of the people in rural areas are, to varying degrees, engaged in mobile animal rearing[11].

In literature, rural-urban migration in the RSS is often explicitly linked to dwindling opportunities in the countryside. Two drivers of rural-urban migration are often mentioned by scholars: (1) environmental shocks (drought) that have caused dearth in the RSS countryside, and (2) a general decline of pastoralism as a method of production (Abu Sin, 2009; Ati et al., 2011; Babiker & Pantuliano, 2006; Casciarri & Ahmed, 2010; Pantuliano, 2002; Perkins, 2019).

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[10] The accuracy of such estimates, or even of government-led census, is questionable.
[11] The numbers I managed to find describe a rural population that consists of 52% nomadic pastoralists and 32% agro-pastoralists (Abu Sin, 2009). These figures need checking and updating but give an indication of the prevalence of pastoralism.

A third factor that is less present in literature but that was repeatedly mentioned by respondents (from first-hand experience by street vendors and others, but also in analysis of experts), is the element of (3) violent conflict in the region, particularly in the areas such as Tokar and Agig, near the Sudanese-Eritrean border.

Concerning environmental shocks, there is consensus on the idea that famine and near-famine conditions in the countryside have played a major role in driving rural-urban migration in the pre-independence as well as the post-independence era. The periods of famine listed in table 1 coincided with increased rural-urban movement. Famine and other conditions of acute scarcity were triggered by recurring periods of drought. Such droughts, and subsequent famines, have severe and long-term consequences for pastoralists and their production capacities because it can take years before livestock reproduction and milk production are in balance again. Moreover, pastoralists sometimes resort to selling their animals in situations of acute need, which decreases their possibilities in subsequent years (De Waal, 1991). The harsh conditions in the early 1940s, for example, forced many Atmaan Beja to sell their animals. This "squeezed [Atmaan Beja] out of their traditional niche of camel rearing" (Hjort af Ornäs & Dahl, 1991, p. 8). Similarly, the Hadendoa Beja habit of selling animals during harsh times has led to longer-term impoverishment of many, and the enrichment of some (Manger et al., 1996). When livestock is sold, or when animals die because of droughts, pastoralists must at least partially change their methods and/or locations of production (Gaafar Bamkar, personal communication, August 9, 2017). In these cases, supplementing income from (agro-)pastoralism with urban labour, perhaps hoping to rebuild family herds with money earned in the city, is common practice (Hjort af Ornäs & Dahl, 1991; Pantuliano, 2002).

| Year | Local name | Meaning |
|---|---|---|
| 1890-94 | Sanat Sitta | Term from the Muslim Calendar. |
| 1920-21 | Kurbajet | Because authorities used "Kurbaj" (Whip) to organize queues for aid distribution. |
| 1940-41 | Fouliya | Named after the "Egyptian Beans" (Ful Masri) which were distributed to be crushed and used instead of local "dhura". |
| 1949-50 | Sirar Hoyokiya "El Najma Um-Danab" | Named after the appearance of a "shooting star". |
| 1959-62 | Americani | The American Government provided relief to the Beja. |
| 1969-72 | Kiloiate | The relief is distributed by kilograms, per family. |
| 1984-85 | Khawajda (Adaroub) | Refers to the foreign aid workers. |

Table 1. Famine periods in the Red Sea Hills area as identified by Manger, Abd el Ati, Hariri, Krzuwinski, and Vetaas (1996, p. 138)

In addition to the factor of environmental shock and famine, the weakened base of pastoralism seems to form a cause for rural-urban movement (Casciarri & Ahmed, 2010). In academic literature, this weakened base is generally ascribed to a combination of unfavourable political

decisions, economic processes, and/or (slow-onset) environmental stresses (Assal, 2009; Casciarri & Ahmed, 2010; Morton, 1993). In short, the idea is that unfavourable political decisions and economic conditions cause reduced availability of land for pastoralists, while environmental stresses simultaneously reduce productivity on available lands.

The last factor is violent conflict and its impact on pastoralists. Casciarri and Ghaffar Ahmed (2010, p. 16) emphasise that "war and armed conflicts notably altered pastoral transhumance routes and access to resources, which together with the inter- and intra-tribal relationship[s] of nomadic groups, must be taken into account in understanding the current situation of these groups".

I discussed the development of rural-urban mobility in the RSS with a representative of the (small) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) office in Port Sudan, who stated that the circulation of people in the RSS slowed in the 1990s in favour of sedentarisation and longer stays in the city. Presently, people move back and forth less often than they used to, spend more time in the city than they used to, or even completely resettle to Port Sudan or other urban centres such as Sinkat. This goes hand in hand with reduced rural productivity due to many households' declining numbers of livestock, reduction of grazeable lands, and difficulties relating to irrigation (Elmotalib Ibrahim, personal communication, August 7, 2017). In accordance, Babiker and Pantuliano (2006, p. 14) write that "there seems to be a more permanent shift to alternative sources of livelihoods as opposed to seasonal or crisis-related moves to increase family incomes". Such alternative sources of livelihood are often sought in Port Sudan: as Abu Sin (2009) cites from UNDP sources, the percentage of the RSS "living in" urban areas (of which a great majority in Port Sudan) rose from 38% in 1993 to 61% in 2003.

The pressures on pastoralism played an important part in the growth of a group of mobile people who continuously move to and from Port Sudan, who combine agricultural or pastoralist production with urban labour (Morton, 1993). It is worth noting that this general development, of increased mobility, is not unique to Sudan, despite its environmental and socio-economic idiosyncrasies (such as the high prevalence of pastoralism). Parallels can be drawn with present seasonal labour mobility in other locations, such as in Europe, in Southeast Asia, and in other countries and regions in Africa. As Bah et al. (2003, p. 13) conclude from evidence from Mali, Nigeria and Tanzania, changing livelihood strategies can be observed among rural and urban African populations, which takes shape of "a widespread increase in mobility accompanied by strong social and economic links with home areas, which depend on migrants' remittances but also provide them with safety nets and social identity" and "high levels of multi-activity, which most households and individuals combining farming with non-farm activities". Rural-urban mobility in the RSS can be considered against this backdrop.

### 4.3. The throat of Sudan: politics, conflict and labour in Port Sudan

Port Sudan in Red Sea State is the region's only outlet to the sea, making the area strategically important to the country. Yet, the region remains among the poorest in Sudan. Even some of its positive attributes work against the interests of its residents. The mechanisation of Port Sudan effectively excludes many of them from employment, because they lack the appropriate skills. Similarly, the gold mine and oil well projects

that exist do not benefit residents; many complained of discriminatory hiring practices against local labour, who are viewed as less qualified.

–Bekoe & Kiplagat (2006), *Peacemaking and Peacebuilding in Eastern Sudan*, pp. 1–2

Port Sudan has – as the prime sea port and a transport hub for oil and other goods – developed and maintained a position of fundamental importance for the Sudanese economy (Perkins, 2019). Because of its strategic location and economic role, the Sudanese authorities have an interest in maintaining firm control and stability in the port. A Beja historian whom I interviewed in Port Sudan explained why this has led to tight control over the port and the city: "Port Sudan is the throat of Sudan. They cannot afford conflict here. In Darfur, conflict can rage forever, but here, a short conflict can cause the collapse of Sudan" (Gaafar Bamkar, personal communication, August 9, 2017). Yet, eastern Sudan (Red Sea, Kassala and Gedaref states) has been the site of a persistent low-intensity conflict[12] between the GoS and a range of adversaries (Baas, 2013). It is important to note that the conflict in eastern Sudan, that lasted from approximately 1994 until the signing of a peace agreement (ESPA) in 2006, developed in the context of inequality, impoverishment and "regional favouritism in Sudan's governance structures" (Baas, 2013, p. 519). This recent past, as explained below, shows the political aspect of urban labour in Port Sudan: dwindling income opportunities in city and countryside, exacerbated by government policies, fostered anti-government sentiments and created fertile ground for ethnopolitical mobilisation.

The history of post-independence anti-marginalisation opposition in the eastern states can be roughly divided in three phases. The first phase, the emergence and almost immediate suppression of ethnopolitical opposition in the East, started right after the independence of Sudan with the establishment of ethnopolitical organisation Beja Congress (BC) in 1957, which was created specifically to address economic and political marginalisation of the eastern provinces and its indigenous populations (Assal, 2013; Niblock, 1987). The BC was suppressed, starting in 1960 during the military junta government of Abboud, and from 1969 until 1985 under the reign of Nimeiry. During these periods, political opposition parties were outlawed. While Nimeiry's removal from power opened a brief window of political opportunity, the BC did not do well in the democratic elections, winning only one seat in parliament, before being banned again after the coup of Al-Bashir (Young, 2007).

The second phase, of pre-conflict mobilisations and conflict, commenced in the 1990s and was stimulated by the Eritrean government's support of rebelling groups in eastern Sudan[13], in retaliation of Sudanese support of Islamist groups in Eritrea, as well as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement's (SPLM/A) efforts to involve the northern regions in their struggle (Baas, 2013). In the mid-1990s, several groups rebelled more or less simultaneously against the central government[14] and launched armed campaigns, e.g. in 1995 in the Port Sudan area. In 1999, the

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[12] A looming yet volatile conflict with constant tensions and incidental violence, but also with periods of intensified armed struggle.

[13] In the mid-1990s, (ethno-)political opposition party BC established an armed wing.

[14] Sudan remained highly centralised, even after federal system was established in 1994 (Assal, 2013).

Rashaayda Free Lions (RFL, or *Al-Usud Al-Hurra*) were formed, taking up arms against the central authorities in response to the government's tightening of controls on cross-border smuggling, which negatively affected income-generation for some Rashaayda households (Baas, 2013; Young, 2007). While these years saw a significant build-up of opposition groups' military power in the eastern states, and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) – a Darfuri rebel organisation – pledged cooperation with the Eastern Front in 2004, the BC and RFL never grew large enough to really challenge the power Khartoum held over the eastern states (Young, 2007). Their reliance on military support from Eritrea and the SPLM/A became problematic when in January 2005 the SPLM/A signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the GoS; the eastern opposition now had to depend on each other and on Eritrean support (Assal, 2013; Young, 2007). In the same month, a peaceful Beja demonstration that sought to protect labour opportunities (through demanding reforms in the port administration) and asked for "recognition of the BC as the legal representative of the people", was attacked by government forces. In this attack, an estimated 22 protesters were killed and hundreds were injured[15] (Young, 2007, p. 24). This second phase culminated in the formation of the Eastern Front, an alliance of the RFL and BC, in March 2005 (Assal, 2013). Baas (2013, p. 523) describes that for young Rashaayda men the membership of RFL was almost mandatory in these years, while the Beja motivation to join the armed struggle "often emerged from a combination of a strong identification with the movement's political goals and a lack of alternative opportunities available in society".

The Eastern Front period of the conflict was short-lived; after increasing military activities in the east for a short while after the signing of the CPA, the Eastern Front could not sustain the insurgency. The BC, RFL and JEM suffered from "weak organisation, a leadership not closely connected to its support base or armed wing, the lack of a clear political programme, a failure to implement reforms in its liberated territories, and dependence on Eritrea" (Young, 2007, p. 31). But, perhaps more importantly, the Eritrean government – at this point the main guarantor of the rebellion – faced political isolation and economic hardships and was keen to arrange a peace deal. The Eastern Front opened negotiations with the GoS, and struck a deal in October 2006: the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) (Assal, 2013; Baas, 2013). This marks the start of the post-conflict phase, in which violence suspended but in which the deals struck under ESPA, which were supposed to bring an end to the marginalisation of the eastern region, would show to be insufficient and inadequately implemented.

The ESPA sought to address the demands of the opposition in several ways. Firstly, several arrangements were made on the sharing of wealth and power and, to address some of the grievances caused by economic disbalance and marginalisation, the creation of a fund for the development and reconstruction of eastern Sudan paved the way for increased investments in the region. Secondly, the BC and RFL leadership were to get positions in the regional and federal governments, thus increasing their representation on the state level and in Khartoum (Baas, 2013; Young, 2007). But while the violence stopped with the ESPA, and an escalation towards a more destructive conflict was prevented, there has been plenty of critique on the execution of

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[15] The annual commemoration of this event in Port Sudan was often blocked during the reign of the Al-Bashir regime.

the provisions of ESPA. Particularly the process of demobilisation and reintegration, which would e.g. integrate ex-fighters into the regular army, or help them reintegrate in civilian life through financial help, was at best poorly executed (Baas, 2013). Another perspective is that the ESPA has "failed to address the serious cause of conflict in the region which is over land" (Elhadary & Samat, 2011, p. 88). All in all, as noted by Assal (2013, p. 155), "six years after the ESPA, eastern Sudan still faces the same problems that led to the armed struggles in 1994".

After the ESPA, the BC has continued to attempt to put political pressure on Khartoum, for example when they spoke out against the privatisation of the port, which is perceived to have been initiated by the GoS without taking the interests of the workers into account ("'Privatisation of Sudanese ports a disaster': Beja Congress," 2015). The Sudanese Revolution that began in December 2018 has further reignited outcries in the East, including about the theme of urban labour and privatisation of the port. In February 2019, more than 1800 workers went on strike in response to plans to let a Philippine company operate and develop a part of the port in a decades-long lease. Port workers fear that the parties interested in taking over (parts of) the port, Philippine and others, would dissolve the traditional ways of organising labour (*kalla* groups with freedom to rotate labour; this will be further explained in chapters 5 and 6) and that the amount of work would reduce dramatically in case of privatisation, particularly a foreign takeover ("Striking workers reject privatisation in Port Sudan," 2019).

### 4.4. Concluding remarks

Summing up this chapter, three points are essential for understanding the historical and political context of rural-urban mobility to and from Port Sudan. First and foremost, the port has a history of more than a century, during which it has become intricately and increasingly tied, socially, economically, and politically, to the lives of the Beja and Beni Amer in its hinterlands. Secondly, circular rural-urban mobility, to and from Port Sudan, takes place in a context of the demise of pastoralism[16] and small-scale agricultural production as modes of production. Circular mobility allows rural households to compensate for deprivation, but if opportunities in the countryside continue to decline, this seems likely to propel more permanent settlement in the city. Thirdly, the causes of the conflict and tensions in eastern Sudan have never been adequately addressed, which means a fertile base for armed groups and insurgency continues to exist (Bekoe & Kiplagat, 2006). While the political rupture of the Sudanese Revolution can perhaps bring new chances for the BC and other ethnopolitical organisations to reshape the power disbalance in the country, failure to address the long-standing grievances in the East – of political and economic marginalisation, inequality, dwindling opportunities for many in both city and countryside (particularly when urban labour can no longer sufficiently complement rural incomes) – could reignite regional revolutionary sentiments in the East.

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[16] I must note this theme requires caution, as pastoralists have in recent decades consequently been regarded as a problem by policy makers, scholars, and development workers, who have often highlighted the inherent incompatibility of pastoralism with settled agriculture, which is contested by Sudanese scholar Munzoul Assal (Assal, 2009). In addition, the end of pastoralism has been predicted many times, but it continues to be one of the most important methods of production in the Sudanese countryside (Casciarri & Ahmed, 2010).

# Chapter 5. Finding Work in the City: Beja/Beni Amer Migrants in Port Sudan

This chapter tells the stories of the working lives of rural-urban Beja and Beni Amer migrants in Port Sudan and highlights the numerous ways in which they acquire, practice, and think about urban labour. Like their reasons for migrating to the city, the methods used by rural-urban migrants to find income opportunities in the city are diverse. Methods of finding work depend on the individual backgrounds of migrants, but also on the type of work they are trying to access. As will show, the process of acquiring wage labour differs from the process of earning income through self-employment, but there are also similarities in methods used, and certainly in the types of networks employed.

An important first observation, before going into detail, is the apparent importance of family and kinship networks in the job acquiring processes of rural-urban migrants. This shows in table 2, which is constructed from answers to the open question "how do migrants find work in Port Sudan", allowing respondents to refer to their own experiences as well as their perceptions of how others find work. The idea (or inspiration) to work a particular job in the city often travels through family links, and in many cases newcomers can rely on family members to help them get started in the city (e.g. by helping them obtain a job position, or by teaching them certain skills). Besides family links, rural-urban migrants often use their kinship links (in other words, they leverage their ethnic/geographic-specific capital) to find and obtain work in the city.

| Method of finding work in Port Sudan mentioned by rural-urban migrants (multiple answers per respondent possible) | N (mentions) |
| ---: | :---: |
| Asking around | 2 |
| Durareet (see paragraph 5.2) | 2 |
| Family, brother | 4 |
| Family, father | 2 |
| Family, uncle | 1 |
| Family, unspecified | 5 |
| Kinship network (ethnic/geographic-specific capital) | 4 |
| Received no help; relied on self | 3 |
| Sakanab (see paragraph 5.1 and 5.2) | 2 |
| Through a broker | 2 |
| Through exchanging labour information with acquaintances in home community | 1 |
| No answer/inconclusive answer | 11 respondents |

Table 2. Methods of finding work in Port Sudan, as mentioned by rural-urban migrants in Port Sudan.

## 5.1. The street vendors of Port Sudan: finding work in self-employment

I interviewed a variety of street vendors, ranging from cigarette vendors to toothbrush sellers. I also spoke to some migrants who worked as security guards, who often combined their security work with street vending or other types of jobs. But the majority of my sample, 22 out of 29 street

vendors, were coffee sellers. A detailed look into their work, and how they acquire the necessary skills and capital to make a profit from it, gives insight in the practice of street vending in Port Sudan and how it is entwined with mobility to and from Port Sudan.

Drinking coffee or tea on the streets is an important aspect of social life in (eastern) Sudan. While I cannot make estimations on the number of coffee sellers in Port Sudan, the Beja and Beni Amer coffee sellers – who can be recognized by their dress and language – are omnipresent in the streets. Like port labour, this practice – of street vending in general, but coffee selling in particular – has a long history, as is exemplified by the following quote from an article from the early 1960s.

> The 15 coffee shops clearly play a most important part in Deim El Arab. Four belonged to Hadendowa, two to Beni Amer and the remaining nine to Amarar. At all times of the day groups of labourers may be seen sitting gossiping and playing cards in the coffee shops. The Beja love coffee, exchanging the news of the day and gambling; many of them go to the same coffee shop almost every day of their lives (Lewis, 1962, p. 38).

As mentioned earlier, becoming a coffee seller requires skills as well as financial investments. These skills include the roasting, brewing and pouring of the coffee, as well as serving and dealing with customers. While these might not sound like the most complex of tasks, the quality of the coffee and quality of service are likely to influence whether a customer will come back or not. Learning how to do it well is of importance and learning to do it well requires – to some degree – help from others.

There are several ways in which coffee sellers learn the trade. The method of apprenticeship is fairly common. Obtaining a position as apprentice, or assistant, in someone else's coffee shop can occur in multiple ways: through apprenticeships or through mirroring. Some of my informants had direct family (e.g. cousins or siblings) working for them; one, for example, employed a young cousin who migrated from the countryside specifically to work at his uncle´s coffee shop. It concerned a small, simple spot without chairs, with space for a maximum of about ten customers; the coffee seller was only able to afford having an assistant because he did not have to provide substantial payment for his cousin. Another coffee seller explained how he helped family members learn the art of coffee selling. He was the first in his family to start selling coffee in Port Sudan. When he started renting his own space for selling coffee, he also started employing siblings and cousins who came over from the countryside to work for him. He taught them how to brew coffee and how to run a coffee business. Several of his apprentices now have their own coffee businesses in Port Sudan. Not all apprentices are direct family of the shop owners. I noticed that it is not unusual for coffee sellers to employ assistants who belong to the same *diwab* (lineage, i.e. the demarcation for the smallest ethnic unit) and geographical background, instead of the direct family. This is because Beja are, through customary law, obliged to help their kin when necessary, e.g. through supplying work, especially but not exclusively within their own *diwab*. One respondent explained how coffee sellers are similar to the *kalla* groups in the port (*kalla* groups are organised bands of port labourers, as further explained below in paragraph 5.2), adhering to a system of supporting newcomers and others who are in need of work: "when someone says 'I need dinner', everyone will try to help him by allowing him to work, as prescribed in *seleef* [i.e. Beja customary law]" (Abdelkarim and Idriss, personal communication, August 20, 2017).

Image 1. Coffee on the streets of Port Sudan: served in a metal *jabana* pot on a small plastic table, in this case without *bakhoor* incense (photographed in Haya Souq in Port Sudan on August 18, 2017).

Regardless of these social security institutions, some get little to no assistance in acquiring skills. I spoke to a young coffee seller who rented a coffee spot in the Sea Land area, who stated that he learned how to sell coffee by watching others do it. When he was looking for work, he was approached by an entrepreneur (a fruit seller in the Wahda neighbourhood who owned and rented out four coffee spots) who gave him the chance to "rent" a coffee business. I asked him to explain this rental arrangement: the broker (the fruit seller) charged half of the profits made at the coffee spot. While this young coffee seller obtained the necessary skills with time, and he did not have to make an investment to start selling coffee, his financial arrangements with the "broker" were far from ideal. Nevertheless, the practice of renting of a shop instead of starting an independent business is not uncommon. In fact, the coffee sellers I interviewed can be divided in roughly two categories regarding how they begin their careers as coffee sellers, but also in terms of their profits from selling coffee: the first group "rents" coffee businesses from brokers. These brokers are generally acquaintances, distant relatives, and/or people from the same ethnic and/or geographical background. They can also be strangers. People who rent a coffee business from such a broker might get some certainties in return for their work, such as fixed pay, and do not have to make the initial investment necessary to start a business. Yet, the people I met who rented their location and equipment often worked under unfavourable terms. The second group of coffee sellers consists of migrants who are either fully self-employed (i.e. individually owned

businesses) or who work in shops that they run together with (urban or rural) family members. I found the second group to be the most prevalent (at least in the Haya Souq area) and I encountered only a few coffee sellers who rented a business, but differences in incomes and ways of working were significant; when one does not have the capital, network or knowledge necessary to start a coffee business, he or she might have to rely on brokers and borrowed equipment which has grave implications for profitability. Similar arrangements exist in other sectors: to name an example, rickshaw drivers – many of whom are displaced within Sudan or migrants from other countries such as Eritrea and Ethiopia – often do not own their vehicles (Assal, 2007).

While the self-employed can keep most of their revenue, a financial investment is a prerequisite for becoming a self-employed street vendor. This goes particularly for coffee sellers who have relatively expensive equipment compared to other traders on the streets. When I asked a Hadendoa Beja (one of the main Beja subdivisions) coffee seller from the Aroma area to describe the equipment needed to run a successful coffee business, he explained that an aspiring coffee seller would have to think about acquiring: kettles for roasting and brewing (*kaloma* in Bidhaawyeet), coffee pots for serving (*tu-jabana* in Bidhaawyeet), glass cups for drinking, metal trays, storage containers, an oil drum or other type of vessel to contain a fire in, and chairs or rugs. It is a big investment, "maybe up to 4000 SDG" he guessed, "although one can also rent the chairs" (at time of interview the exchange rate was around 21 Sudanese Pound (SDG) for 1 United States Dollar (USD) on the black market, which means about 190 USD for all the equipment). Another Hadendoa coffee seller, a man from Arkawit, acknowledged that 4000 SDG would be a realistic investment for a well-equipped coffee spot but also stated that his family had helped him make the investment. This illustrates how family ties and reciprocity can play roles of importance in backing migrants with the required financial capital to start their own businesses.

In practice, coffee businesses often do not start out with full equipment. A coffee seller who built an elaborate coffee business in a courtyard explained how he gathered his equipment *"habba habba"*, bit by bit (or literally, grain by grain). I saw this in practice, meeting an 18-year-old coffee seller from Tokar, who had started his business only five days before. Throughout our conversation he was brewing coffee, sitting in a constant squat next to his kettles while I was sitting on a thin carpet (see image 2). While he owned enough equipment to receive customers, he was saving money to buy a larger kettle, containers, and chairs to make himself and his customers more comfortable. During my stay in Port Sudan I saw him several times, and although his coffee was fine (my humble opinion) I never saw customers at his shop. Maybe his location in a quiet street was not ideal or, perhaps, building a customer base takes time.

Image 2. Newly opened coffee spot with, so far, only minimal equipment (photographed in Haya Souq in Port Sudan on August 22, 2017).



Image 3. Medium-sized coffee spot with – outside the picture frame – several sitting mats and some chairs (photographed in Haya Souq in Port Sudan on August 5, 2017).

Self-employed coffee sellers and other types of street vendors can face expenses besides the investments in equipment and the daily operational costs (such as coffee and fuel in the case of coffee sellers). Several street vendors claimed to pay "taxes" or "rent" to the police and/or local government, while others stated that their spots were free to use. Those who paid mentioned

that the amount depended on their location and the size of the area they occupied; the amounts can vary substantially. A coffee seller in the outskirts of the Deim an-Nur neighbourhood shared that he had to pay 30 SDG monthly to "the government" for his spot, while a respondent on the central corniche claimed the "local government" collected about 300 SDG every month ("if you need a larger area, you pay more"). The location picked by a coffee seller not only determines monthly costs, but also income, and thus the general profitability of the enterprise. Central, busy locations seemed to be favoured for setting up shop. Another important factor – for daytime coffee sellers in particular – is the opportunity for customers to sit in the shade, as Port Sudan gets notoriously hot during summer.

As I will show in chapter 6, family and kinship networks play an important role in the job acquisition process for street vendors and others. For some, it also influences the location they choose for their business. For example, a coffee seller explained to me that he came to Port Sudan by himself but was soon joined by several of his brothers. One of his brothers started a coffee business 50 meters down the road. A cigarette seller, too, was accompanied by his brother who opened a coffee shop right next to him. I saw various of such examples. Obviously, family members can cluster for social reasons. But it can also serve a practical purpose, when they can profit from each other's presence. For example, the aforementioned cigarette vendor explained that he was happy with the extra pair of eyes, because people sometimes tried to steal from his shop. His brother's presence helped protect his business against theft.

I found that street vendors often cluster, operating shops close to family and/or people with shared ethnic/geographic backgrounds. Still, some respondents claimed that such connections did not play a role in choosing a location. On the corniche in Haya Souq, a man from Wagar (Kassala state) was selling coffee in close proximity to two other coffee sellers from Wagar. Although they were not closely related, they knew each other from their home area. One of these coffee sellers called their proximity "a coincidence" and denied that the presence of the other coffee sellers from Wagar influenced his choice of location. He stated that he had relied on himself in starting a business and had not received help from family or friends. It is important to take this into account, also in order to not fall into a network determinism: despite rural-urban migrants' networks and ethnic/geographic-specific capital in the city, they make their own decisions. Several respondents referred explicitly to their autonomy, denying any help from family, acquaintances, or others (see table 2).

A coffee seller at a prominent spot on the busy corniche explained how information about labour opportunities, including opportunities for coffee sellers (e.g. good and unoccupied locations), can be shared through *sakanab*, a social institution of ritualised greetings used for sharing useful information such as news and information on labour opportunities with one another (Morton, 1988; Pantuliano, 2002). Not all coffee sellers have the same mobility and possibilities to find new locations: they might not own the businesses they work in, might not be able to afford municipal taxes, or might be disadvantaged because of size or relevance of their social networks in the city.

There are other problems that rural-urban migrants have to face. Many of the people I spoke to have only limited knowledge of Arabic language, which makes it difficult to find work in more formal sectors, outside their social networks and outside the informal labour spheres of the Beja and Beni Amer. Some respondents claimed that Beni Amer have an advantage over Beja, as they

generally speak better Arabic. This advantage is ascribed to their scholastic traditions, in which Quranic schools play an important role. Besides the issue of language barriers, the generally low levels of education among rural populations inhibit access to the (more) formal job market.

### 5.2. *Shughl aharriiw:* the social embeddedness of port labour

The port of Port Sudan has been, and continues to be, one of the most important, obvious and visible sources of work opportunities for Beja, Beni Amer and others in Port Sudan and beyond. As touched upon in the previous chapters, there are several accounts of the declining availability of work in the port of Port Sudan; the decline is believed to be fuelled by the ongoing automation of tasks that previously required manual labour, by the U.S. trade embargo, and perhaps most importantly by the privatisation of the port which gives (foreign) companies influence over the regulation and distribution of port labour.

Port labour is organised in *kallaat* (the plural for *kalla*) groups of 13 workers and a leader). There are around 125 *kalla* groups that work on the ships and more than 1000 *kalla* groups operating on the mainland, in warehouses and the like (M. Talib, personal communication, August 6, 2017). At the time of my visit to Port Sudan, the demand for manual labour in the port was low. When I spoke to the leader of a *kalla*[17] (the *rais*) he explained how most of the workers have different jobs besides *kalla* work. This seemed partially due to the fact that the number of shifts the *kalla* could work had declined. The *rais* believed that most of the *kalla* workers had secondary jobs in restaurants, worked as coffee sellers, or try their luck in the gold mines of the Red Sea State. Regardless of the low demand for manual labour, the number of *kallas* seems to not have declined in recent years. Since each of the *kalla* labour positions can be shared with relatives from the city or the countryside, the number of rural and urban Beja households that to some extent depend on the port seems to remain large. As highlighted by Pantuliano (2002), when it comes to stevedoring and other types of work in the port, the methods of labour distribution are highly institutionalised and the aforementioned practice of labour sharing plays a crucial role in this.

The way in which port labour is organised and distributed reflects both Beja and Beni Amer traditions (although Beni Amer often use different words for similar cultural phenomena, e.g. referring to *sakanab* as *achbar*) and exemplifies the social aspect of working life of Beja and Beni Amer. For most Beja, the *kalla* system is inseparable from *seleef*, i.e. Beja customary law. *Seleef* dictates Beja to share labour opportunities whenever a relative is in need. This practice of sharing one's labour position is referred to by my respondents – experts, native administration leaders, and the migrant workers themselves – as *durareet*. One of my respondents, from Hadendoa Beja descent, worked primarily as guard of a primary school. Although he had no fixed position in the *kalla*, he travelled to the port regularly, walking around asking "*shughl aharriiw*": "I am looking for work" (Hamid, personal communication, August 17, 2017). He generally approached the heads of the Hadendoa *kallas*. When he would be granted a labour shift in the

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[17] I did not make efforts to meet port workers or *kalla* leaders. In this case, the *rais* walked into a courtyard where I was interviewing a group of security guards and sat with us, which allowed me to ask him some questions.

port, at the cost of someone else's shift, this would be *durareet*; he described *durareet* as "placing yourself below another". *Durareet* is not restricted to the act of sharing labour. Instead, it might best be explained as the virtuous act of sacrificing something to help relatives (mostly members of the *diwab*, persons of common lineage). My respondent explained that *durareet* can be something as mundane as standing up to allow someone to sit on a chair, while it can also be applied to e.g. politics, for example if Beja Congress politicians were to give up their seats to grant others the chance to be in parliament (Hamid, personal communication, August 17, 2017). The habit of *durareet* makes it easier for newcomers to find work in the port and the rest of the city and makes it common and sensible for Beja migrants to look for casual labour opportunities within their own ethnic networks.

For Beja without fixed *kalla* positions, the abovementioned method of moving to the dockyards to ask for work, hoping to encounter a *kalla* that has a temporary shortage of workers or relying on *durareet*, seems to be the most common method to acquire shifts. Their efforts to find shifts, walking around town or the ports, can be considered in the context of the *sakanab* through which Beja are compelled, along the lines of *seleef*, to share trustworthy information about availability of labour in the port and elsewhere with one another (Pantuliano, 2002). These acts of exchanging information on labour opportunities (*sakanab*), the rotation and sharing of labour positions to help relatives (*durareet*), all in line with the law and rules that all Beja are expected to abide by (*seleef*), illustrate the social embeddedness of labour distribution in (the port of) Port Sudan.

Regardless of its importance, not all Beja migrants have the option, or the ambition, to work in the port. A certain social capital, i.e. belonging to a Beja community and knowing the language as well as the habits of the *sakanab* (i.e. a long sequence of greetings), is a prerequisite for profiting from information exchanges as mentioned above. A self-employed coffee seller explained how his "tribe" did not work in the port: his kin had no *kalla* of their own, and he had insufficient relevant connections in the port to acquire shifts. It was needless to say that he had never worked in the port. This exemplifies how some migrants simply do not belong to the groups that work in the port, which makes casual port labour much less accessible.

Membership of the right *diwab* is an enabling factor for obtaining access to shifts, but not everyone who has such access actually works in the port. I met two migrants who did not work *kalla* shifts despite having the right family links. One of them, a Beni Amer coffee seller in his early twenties from Agig, had a family member who was the *rais* of a *kalla*. Such a family connection would in most instances mean, however irregular, access to *kalla* shifts. But he had never worked in the port, as he claimed to be "physically not strong enough" (Omer, personal communication, August 19, 2017). Just as having the right connections seems to be a necessity for obtaining *kalla* work, possessing certain physical capacities is essential for carrying out the physically demanding labour in the port. Another Beni Amer coffee seller, from Tokar area, explained how he had many family members that worked in the port. Nevertheless, he claimed to have refused the opportunity to work in the port and stated that "trading work is nicer". This shows that not all types of work are equally desirable, and illustrates how the networks, physical traits or the financial gains (the information I gathered suggests that an eight-hour *kalla* shift pays about as well as two to five days of work as a self-employed coffee seller, depending on the

*kalla* and on the success of the coffee enterprise) are not the sole determinants of which jobs people choose to profess.

### 5.3. Job preferences and self-employment

Although many rural-urban migrants rely on family members and kinship links for finding work in the city, there is a certain hierarchy of labour types in Port Sudan; obviously, rural-urban migrants have preferred types of work, and types of work that they dislike. This theme of desirability of jobs is another important aspect for understanding how and why migrants get to profess certain types of work. In order to find out how and why migrant workers move from one job to another, I asked 20 respondents to outline their personal job histories, specifically which jobs they had professed since first moving to the city. From these stories, I made a table that gives insight in some of the possible labour trajectories for rural-urban migrants in Port Sudan (see table 3). None of the people I interviewed left the trade of coffee selling for another occupation, and most respondents were working as coffee sellers at the time of the interview. This means that this information applies mostly to coffee sellers. Still, it is worth examining, especially when put in context with the explanations offered by my respondents on why they quit or took on certain jobs.

Looking at the different job histories listed in table 3, a few points stand out. Firstly, most of the people I interviewed started out doing other jobs, e.g. in wage labour. Secondly, it is common to have multiple jobs at the same time. Thirdly, while it is quite common to work as an assistant coffee seller before operating a coffee business by oneself, it is not a prerequisite. Finally, working in restaurants and cafeterias was one of the more easily accessible jobs for new migrants (labour trajectories 1, 3, 9 and 10).

| FREQUENCY OF LABOUR TRAJECTORY | INITIAL OCCUPATION(S) | SECOND OCCUPATION(S) if applicable | CURRENT OCCUPATION(S) if applicable |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3x | Restaurant worker | Assistant coffee seller | Coffee seller |
| 2x | Other | Port labourer AND restaurant worker | Coffee seller |
| 2x | Restaurant worker | | Coffee seller |
| | Coffee seller AND retailer – small goods | | See initial occupation(s) |
| 2x | Coffee seller | | See initial occupation(s) |
| 1x | Other | | Coffee seller |
| 1x | Other AND animal herder | | Coffee seller |
| 1x | Port labourer | | Coffee seller AND port labourer |
| 1x | Restaurant worker | Retailer – small goods AND animal herder | Coffee seller |
| 1x | Restaurant worker | Transport sector worker | Coffee seller |

| 1x | Retailer – small goods | | Coffee seller AND transport sector worker |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1x | Retailer – small goods | Retailer – small goods | Retailer – small goods |
| 1x | Retailer – small goods | | Security guard AND retailer – phones |
| 1x | Transport sector worker | Port labourer | Security guard |
| 1x | Transport sector worker | | Retailer – small goods |

Table 3. Respondents' labour trajectories, or personal histories of urban work.

Many of my respondents, experts and migrant workers alike, refer to working in restaurants as a common occupation for rural-urban Beja migrants, and an easy entrance job. As I encountered several migrants with past experience working in restaurants, it is worthwhile to examine their reasons for moving on to different occupations; this gives insight into the practicalities and values that underlie the efforts of finding work and income.

Restaurant work might be common among rural-urban migrants in Port Sudan, but the work itself was described as undesirable – or even a bad experience – by my respondents. They gave several reasons: firstly, the payment of restaurant work was subpar. One respondent listed poor payment of restaurant work as one of the reasons to move towards self-employment. Poor payment in restaurant work is also listed by another respondent as the main reason for switching professions. Secondly, circumstances and working conditions in restaurants were unpleasant. Although these conditions are bound to differ from business to business, one respondent stated that restaurant work is physically demanding, stressful, and that working days are long. Thirdly, working in the services sector, under a (non-Beja) boss, might be problematic for some. My informant at the United Nations Development Programme stated that Beja do not like working in the service sector, for example in restaurants, because they value "their independence"; he explained that working for family members was seen as much less problematic than working for a boss to whom the worker is not related. The thought that independence, or ethnicity, plays a role in the labour-finding exercise is emphasised by a Beja historian with whom I had a lengthy discussion in Port Sudan. He explained to that "work as servants (…) is culturally not good. But [Beja migrants] are sometimes forced to accept any job" (Gaafar Bamkar, personal communication, August 9, 2017). This resonates with the job history as described by two brothers, who were self-employed coffee sellers. Looking for work opportunities outside their home village, they first worked in Port Sudan's restaurants: "in these times, we did not speak Arabic. We had no idea how to make coffee. We were servants." Another coffee seller, who used to work in a restaurant, stated that he did not want to work as a restaurant worker anymore because he wanted to be his own boss. How much this value of independence influences the job-finding exercise, and how it weighs against other factors such as one's network, height of income and the (physical) demands associated with the type of work, requires further exploration; discussing these points with workers who have left the restaurant industry, such as in my sample, offers only one-sided view.

Besides inquiring after personal job histories, I asked coffee sellers and small goods retailers about the upsides and downsides of their current trade. The diversity of answers stems from the

fact that I did not explain the question and gave no examples (some did not answer at all or answered unintelligibly). The benefits and disadvantages listed by the labourers can be categorised roughly along the same lines as the reasons for dislike of restaurant labour. Considering the financial (dis)advantages, three coffee sellers mentioned good pay as an upside, while one mentioned the chance to sell a lot of coffee during the Eid festivities; he also mentioned that in general summer is a bad time for coffee sellers, because there are less customers. One coffee seller stated that he did not earn enough to get by, especially since he had to give half of his income to the broker he was renting from. The circumstances and working conditions were mentioned less. One of the coffee sellers listed the opportunity to drink a lot of coffee as one of the perks of the job, while a cigarette seller praised the social aspect of the job, and the possibility to meet friends and others throughout the day. To sell goods on the streets is to work hard without rest (unlike farming work); it requires constant focus, as customers will try to steal from you, as argued by both a coffee seller and a cigarette vendor. Two informants explained that life in the city is worse than life in the countryside. Regarding the aspect of independence, 5 of 11 coffee sellers who commented on this theme listed the benefit of being own boss, or not having a boss, and being able to determine how and which hours to work.

## 5.4. Concluding remarks

"The situation is not good. Most of the people you see here [people with rural backgrounds], in the cafes of Deim al Arab, are unemployed. And their culture, it is disappearing. Although many people in this neighbourhood still carry daggers under their jalabiyas, traditions like this are vanishing. People do not need these in the city."

– Owner of gold mines in the RSS, personal communication, August 15, 2017

This quote paints a bleak picture of the labour market in Port Sudan. While reliable unemployment figures are hard to find or non-existent, it is certainly true that finding labour in Port Sudan is not easy for many rural-urban migrants. Still, many people manage to make ends meet; how they do this is at the core of the first of my two sub-questions (posed in chapter 1). It asks: *(how) do rural-urban links, especially kinship ties, help people from the countryside find their way to/in Port Sudan, particularly in terms of job acquisition? In this light, what are the limitations of such ties?*

Many people from the countryside face obstacles when trying to find work in the city. Factors such as language barriers and low levels of education make parts of the urban labour market, particularly more formal jobs, inaccessible to them. In this light, their focus on work within their own social networks, particularly family networks, and their leveraging of ethnic/geographic-specific social capital, is not surprising. In doing so, they circumvent the aforementioned limitations. They cluster in specific sectors, such as street vending, port labour, transport, and

restaurant work, where they have connections. Needless to say, many of the jobs in these accessible sectors are very demanding or poorly paid, or both.

Arguing from the perspective of Granovetter's SWT, the clustering of Beja and Beni Amer in certain job sectors makes sense. Information on labour and opportunities spreads through strong and weak ties. Groups that are barely represented in the urban formal labour market have a comparative disadvantage and are not likely to "break into" such sectors. On the other hand, the fact that Beja and Beni Amer are so firmly rooted in other types of work gives newcomers crucial advantages. This is a simple explanation of the apparent path dependency in the labour exercised by rural-urban migrants. A caveat is that, in the case of Beja and Beni Amer, it is at times difficult to distinguish between strong and weak ties. For example, what characterises strong, weak, or absent ties when diffusion of information takes place between people who sometimes do not, or only barely, know each other *(sakanab)*? This marks a limitation of Granovetter's frame: in eastern Sudan, like elsewhere, there are many types and gradations of ties.

For the case of port labour, membership of the right *diwab* is an important factor for generating chances to acquire work shifts. Such kinship links also play a role in coffee selling, for example in facilitating apprentice employment. While not all coffee sellers employ assistants, and while apprenticeship is not a prerequisite for becoming a coffee seller, it is commonplace. With the practice of hiring assistants, my respondents engaged with their ethnic networks or reinforced ties with their direct families, providing incentive for family members to learn the trade of coffee selling. The practice of apprenticeship provides cheap labour, while teaching newcomers the necessary skills to operate a well-functioning business. All in all, many of the urban workers I spoke to are highly aware that they inspire their family or kin in the countryside (although they would phrase it differently, and not speak of "inspiration").

In terms of urban labour, the agency of Beja and Beni Amer migrants is bounded. Yet, as can be concluded from the statements of respondents as well as from the job trajectory table (see table 3), individuals do make specific choices in the types of work they wish to profess. There is also variation in their ways of carrying out certain jobs: this certainly goes for street vending, for example in terms of choosing locations and methods of getting started (e.g. renting a business or becoming self-employed). As expected, certain types of labour (e.g. coffee selling) are deemed more desirable than others (e.g. restaurant work). Some respondents ascribed differences in desirability to the idea that Beja do not like to work for a boss, particularly a non-Beja boss who does not respect or understand the Beja way of working (including multi-spatiality and labour sharing practices, which is further explained in the following chapter).

## Chapter 6: Mobility and Rural-Urban Links: Transcending the Rural-Urban Divide

Many of the migrant labourers of Port Sudan have immediate family members living in the city. My respondents, coffee sellers as well as others, often made mention of siblings, cousins or uncles that lived in Port Sudan. Of the 22 coffee sellers I interviewed, 15 answered the question: do you have family members that are also coffee sellers? Of these 15 people, 11 said "yes", while 4 said "no". Labour runs in the family: family members inspire each other, and in some cases enable each other to work in the same sector, for example in the case of the earlier mentioned apprenticeships.

For some of the migrants from the Tokar area (mostly Beni Amer), the violent conflict was a reason to migrate to Port Sudan. According to the heads of a Beni Amer civil society organisation focusing on healthcare in Port Sudan, many Beni Amer moved to Port Sudan around 1997, when conflict made life in their home region difficult. Households moving into town because of conflict in their home areas often do not send just one or two household members to town. Instead, it seems that households often relocate in their entirety when the home area is deemed unsafe or the conditions are deteriorating rapidly. My interviews with street vendors who fled the Tokar region during the conflict also show that these households often retain strong connections with family members that remained in the conflict-ridden countryside. As such, rural-urban ties can be forged in the context of conflict.

Many people I interviewed had households that were spatially spread out. They would work in the city, and often stayed in the city for periods of months or longer while their partners, children, and/or other household members would remain in the countryside. Several unmarried rural-urban migrants told me about their plans to marry in their home areas. For example, one of my respondents, who had spent most of his time in the city in the past eight years, discussed his upcoming marriage in rural Arkawit. Upon marrying he would receive a number of goats, but since he would continue to spend most of his time in Port Sudan his new livestock would remain with his family in Arkawit. Several experts and native administration leaders explained how marriage culture transforms due to urbanisation. While they stated that urban marriage and intermarriage between different ethnic groups is becoming more prevalent, the habit of marrying in the home area also seems to endure among rural-urban migrants. This persistence of rural-urban family links, for example through marriage, is an important link in the self-sustaining rural-urban migration system in the RSS.

### 6.1. Multi-spatial households and remittances

In traditional "push-pull" explanations of migration, the financial drivers behind peoples' mobility can be overemphasised. Nevertheless, for circular migrants, the reasons for migration are often financial, or at least have financial aspects. Circular migrants generate flows of money that move in and out of Port Sudan. Analysis of the remittances that urban dwellers send to their relatives, as well as migrants' perspectives on the importance of urban labour for their immediate families, exposes some of the financial links between Port Sudan and its hinterlands and gives insight into how multi-spatiality works for households.

It is common for rural-urban migrant workers in Port Sudan to live in multi-spatial households with close family living in separate locations, at least for part of the year. This means that circular migrants (the people who moved back and forth frequently, earning incomes or owning assets in multiple locations) do not necessarily bring their families with them, even if they spend most of their time in Port Sudan. One respondent told me that he first started working in Port Sudan in 1970 and had throughout the years spent most of his time working in Port Sudan. Yet, his wife and children still lived in Tokar. This example suggests that multi-spatiality is (or can be) a way of living instead of a temporary arrangement.

In the 15 interviews in which the theme of remittances was discussed, all respondents reported sending money to their families in their home areas. Not only "new" migrants sent remittances: one respondent continued sending remittances to (unspecified) family in Hameshkoreib despite having lived mostly in Port Sudan since 1991, another respondent had been sending remittances to his wife and children in Tokar since he first came to Port Sudan in the 1970s.

Their method of sending remittances was largely uniform. Of 11 respondents that explained their method of sending remittances, eight mentioned use of mobile phones for transferring money. Four of them mentioned the possibility to send remittances physically as a backup method, which could also be used in case of transfer of large sums of money, or for reaching areas that had no cellular network coverage. The remaining three respondents preferred to bring or send remittances physically, either doing it themselves or using acquaintances that frequently travelled back and forth to the home area (e.g. truck drivers).

All respondents reported sending remittances that benefitted their families (mostly close family or household, i.e. spouses, children, parents and grandparents), and there was no mention of remittances to acquaintances or organisations that were not related to the family, neither was there mention of sending money to distant relatives. Some respondents also explained how their families in the countryside are dependent on the inflow of money from Port Sudan. This illustrates how (for some) urban labour is a necessary and everyday aspect of rural incomes. This everyday aspect is well illustrated by the example of a coffee seller from Tokar town who made arrangements with a supermarket in Tokar so that his household (wife, four sons and three daughters) could do groceries on credit. Every now and then the outstanding balance would be paid directly from Port Sudan.

### 6.2. Frequency of movement

There are many forms and gradations of mobility for rural-urban migrant workers in Port Sudan. Some live (more or less) permanently in Port Sudan, others circulate frequently (often on a seasonal basis). The theme of mobility frequency and reasons for spatial movement was discussed in 17 of my interviews. Although frequency of migration to and from Port Sudan and length of stay in Port Sudan or home area varied from person to person, most respondents were residing in Port Sudan for at least a large share of the year.

Judging from my interviews, the social maintenance of multi-spatial households and/or relations with other close family provided incentive to periodically move back and forth between Port Sudan and the home area. This was a factor of importance particularly for those who were residing more permanently in Port Sudan. One respondent, whose wife and four children lived in Arkawit, mentioned that his wife and children never travelled to visit him in Port Sudan.

Instead, he went to them periodically: "when my pockets are full of money, I go visit them" (Adam, personal communication, August 18, 2017). Another respondent also reported visiting his family whenever he had earned enough money, stating that in practice it allowed him to travel back and forth every two months; during his visits to his family, he also worked in Kassala city. Besides such visits, most respondents reported traveling for certain family occasions, such as weddings, births and burials, as well as for the annual religious events of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

Besides the social needs and obligations in the household/family sphere, these visits served another practical purpose when combined with the maintenance of rural assets such as livestock or crops. The maintenance of rural assets, and rural demands for labour, act as a driver for mobility. The possession of rural assets (i.e. livestock or crops) brings about responsibilities (labour demand in the home area) and might have an effect on the frequency of migration to and from Port Sudan. In maintaining a multi-spatial lifestyle, with social and labour responsibilities in both city and countryside, the common practice of labour rotation played a key role.

### 6.3. Multi-spatiality and workers' mobility: the practice of business sharing

Many migrants rotate work among family members or members from the same *diwab* or geographical area. For example, many businesses are not run by individuals alone, but by groups of family members; in these groups, labour positions are continuously rotated, with rotational speed varying from fast (e.g. daily rotation) to very slow (e.g. seasonal or incidental rotation). I found examples of such a labour rotation mechanism among coffee sellers and other self-employed vendors, as well as among security guards. Morton (1990) already described instances of rotational labour migration among his respondents in Sufayya, a small Beja settlement approximately 200 kilometres north/northwest of Port Sudan. My interviews show that labour sharing, or rotational labour migration, is a widespread and common practice, certainly among rural people from the RSS and the northern part of Kassala state. In this sense, the family plays a crucial role in facilitating mobility and income diversification. As will show, how it is practiced varies from case to case.

Some rural-urban migrants explained that they rotated labour with family members periodically, which allowed them to move back and forth between the countryside and the city to visit family and tend to rural assets. Others used the flexibility gained from having reserve labourers in their social circles to take up extra jobs in Port Sudan, asking family members or acquaintances to take their positions in their absence. As many jobs in Port Sudan are either on an ad-hoc basis or allow only limited working hours, having the option to e.g. let someone take over your shop gave migrants and other labourers the ability to diversify/maximise their incomes. I encountered several examples of fast, everyday labour rotation; the following examples give more insight into income diversification and maximisation strategies among rural-urban Beja migrants.

One of my respondents, who worked primarily as security guard of a school when I interviewed him, supplemented his income by selling phones on the market. His income as a security guard was insufficient to cover his expenses. By spending part of his income from his security job on mobile phones which he could sell on the market, he boosted his overall income. The buying and selling of phones required a level of mobility (within the city) that was irreconcilable with working as a security guard. Therefore, he made arrangements with his brothers, who took over

his guarding duties every day when he set out to buy or sell phones on the market; this flexibility allowed him to get by.

In another example, I met three men from the desert town of Hayya, several hundred kilometres southwest of Port Sudan. While we reclined on a rug in the courtyard of a primary school in Haya Souq, they told me that they were no (close) relatives of each other, although they came from the same town. They did, however, help each other find jobs and maintain incomes in Port Sudan. One of the men was responsible for the guarding of the primary school building that we were sitting next to; although he had no fixed labour position in the port, he possessed an official access card for the port area, issued by the Sea Ports Corporation, that allowed him to enter the port premises and ask around for casual labour opportunities. He did this regularly, and whenever he did, one of the others would take his position guarding the school. Their explanation of this way of sharing work was that the guarding job required only one person to be present and rotating it between the three of them allowed all of them to also work elsewhere in town (i.e. diversifying their incomes).

Another respondent, who mentioned that he lived in a village in the northern region of Kassala state, worked as a coffee seller in Port Sudan mostly when there was no water in Aroma ("we have small ponds that are full a certain time of the year" (Ohaj, personal communication, August 18, 2017)). In his home area, he grew sorghum and watermelons, but his family also owned animals (goats, sheep and cows) that served as a buffer for difficult times ("if we need money, we sell animals"). He had been moving back and forth between his home area and Port Sudan for more than 15 years. Normally, either him or his brother would stay in Port Sudan to work, while the other would stay in the home area to spend time with family and to take care of rural assets. Whenever they switched positions, they turned their mobility into an income-generating activity by selling fruit and vegetables from Kassala in Port Sudan. Such efforts, that make movement profitable, were also practiced by some other respondents. Rotating positions in city and countryside, and sharing their incomes and assets, allowed both brothers to spend time with their families in the countryside, and to practice multiple types of labour.

Another example is offered by another coffee business operated by two brothers. They had an arrangement with a family member who owned a coffee business on the corniche, where they could work whenever the owner of the coffee spot travelled to his home area to take care of his animals, to harvest crops, and to see his family. They would stay in Port Sudan for as long as the owner was gone, in total about a month: "we own it until he returns, we do not pay rent" (Humad, personal communication, August 16, 2017). However, during their stay in Port Sudan, the two brothers covered the expenses of the location, i.e. around 300 SDG in taxes to "local government".

Harvesting can indeed be a reason for migrant workers to return to their home areas, if they have (or their families have) crops that need to be harvested. A cigarette seller on the Souq Kabir explained that he sometimes returned home to the Gash delta area when his family started the harvest. When he was gone, his brother took his place selling cigarettes at his booth. Even migrants who do not own rural assets (crops or livestock) make use of the harvesting season: a coffee seller who rotated work in Port Sudan with his brother, did not grow crops but returned to his home area in Kassala state periodically to assist other farmers in the harvest of sorghum. This earned him an additional income. In Beja society, paid labour (traditionally in-kind, but more recently also in cash) in weeding and harvesting, but interestingly enough also in crops

cultivation and animal rearing (where much more is at stake, and which thus requires extensive bonds of trust), is common and approved by tradition (Morton, 1990). Whether this works similarly in Beni Amer society is unclear to me.

Another example of labour rotation came from a coffee seller who at the time of the interview just arrived back in Port Sudan after visiting his home area. He made use of the fact that his brother lived more or less permanently in Port Sudan and worked as a self-employed charcoal seller on the market (which offered flexibility). The owner of the coffee shop, whose business was well-established and located at a busy spot on the corniche, could count on his brother to fill in for him whenever he moved to his home area. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement, as it offered his brother, the charcoal seller, a chance to temporarily improve his income.

Differences between respondents in mobility patterns seemed significant, although a number of commonalities can also be identified. Rural-urban migrant workers' mobility occurs in periodic patterns that are (1) synchronous in context of the recurring events of Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr for which many migrant workers return to home areas at the same time (especially relevant for those residing semi-permanently or permanently in Port Sudan), (2) less synchronous in context of seasonal labour demand in the home area which varies from crop to crop and from region to region (Abu Sin, 2009; Hjort af Ornäs & Dahl, 1991), and (3) non-synchronous in case of family events such as marriage, burials or births, events that differ per individual, and from family to family.

### 6.4. A seasonal city in summer

Income-generating tasks and economic chances in the rural areas of eastern Sudan change with the seasons. In the city of Port Sudan seasons change as well, and the scorching heat of summer influences opportunities for income-generation, working conditions, and job preferences.

I discussed the summer circumstances with 6 of my respondents. Each of them mentioned explicitly that it was harder to get by in summer (without me asking, as the theme of city seasonality had yet to occur to me). Two different reasons were given. Firstly, a factor that affects nearly all informal vendors and retailers in the city, is the fact that the city is relatively empty in summer, as many people move away to cooler areas such as the village of Arkawit (which is famous for its humid microclimate) or the city of Kassala (which is warmer than Port Sudan in winter but significantly cooler during some of the summer months). A coffee seller on the Souq Kabir explained that he receives very little customers, and that he is almost fully dependent on the merchants in the market and their coffee needs during the hot summer months. While there are generally few customers in summer, one of my respondents, a coffee seller, made clear that it is possible to sell a lot of coffee during the Eid festivities. This might suggest that whenever Eid al-Fitr and/or Eid al-Adha fall in the summer months, they can mark highs in an otherwise poor period of the year.

Secondly, for coffee sellers some locations become especially unprofitable in summer. A sunny location with little or no shade is a disadvantage: customers will refuse to sit in the sun as several respondents explained. For other street vendors too, having a spot in the shade is a necessity during the hottest periods of the day. Besides the issue of the sun and the shade, some locations are emptier in summer than others. One coffee seller I interviewed normally operated a business

on the Red Sea University campus, but as the campus is more or less deserted in summer he, and other street vendors on the university premises, had to find new locations for their businesses.

There are other ways in which income-generating activities for migrant workers in Port Sudan are influenced during the summer months. Besides the absolute reduction of customers and the comparative disadvantages suffered by some coffee sellers due to their unfavourable locations, the casual port labour – which is already heavy in the cooler seasons – becomes undesirable due to the harsh working conditions in the storehouses. A coffee seller who occasionally worked *kalla* shifts in the port mentioned: "in the summer I prefer to not work in the *kallaat*. The storehouses are very hot and there is no air-conditioning" (Ali, personal communication, August 18, 2017).

### 6.5. Concluding remarks

My second sub-question concerns how rural-urban migrant workers stay in touch with their home areas while working in the city. It asks: *to what extent, and how, are rural-urban links maintained by urban workers with rural backgrounds in the informal services sector in Port Sudan?*

Most Beja and Beni Amer workers retain intricate links with their home areas whilst working in the city. In this chapter, two crucial linkages have been discussed; these linkages can perhaps best be described as "flows".

Firstly, the countryside and the city are linked by financial flows that move from city to countryside (and less commonly, vice versa). Many rural households have come to depend on urban incomes. This is a logical consequence of the multi-spatiality that characterises the families of many rural-urban migrants: income-generation occurs in multiple locations, but in the face of stresses on agricultural production and livestock rearing, urban occupation has come to play an increasingly important role. Although some respondents explained how Beja and Beni Amer culture changes in the face of city life, in a sense multi-spatiality and rural-urban mobility also allow people in the countryside to continue their preferred or traditional ways of living.

Secondly, the urban and rural domains are connected by continuous flows of people to and from the city. People move back and forth for various reasons: besides moving to home areas for family and religious events, some migrant workers in Port Sudan travel back and forth for maintenance of rural assets, herding of animals, and assistance during the harvesting process. This can go hand in hand with a parallel migration by a family member, or an acquaintance from the same home area, to the city. In other cases, a temporary replacement is found in the city. This labour rotation system makes it possible for workers in the city to maintain their lives in the countryside, whilst ensuring that the urban business can continue to be operated.

We can conclude that multi-local arrangements, i.e. households that are often or almost permanently geographically separated, spur rural-urban and urban-rural movement. In this sense, the multi-spatial lifestyle, and the movement back-and-forth between city and countryside, is self-sustaining. The spatial mobility of people also drives flows of material and non-material goods: it sparks the diffusion of ideas (e.g. the idea to work in the city, but also changing values, as mentioned by several respondents), the transport of goods to and from the city (e.g. phones, fruit and vegetables or other products), and financial flows (remittances have come to play a key role for households in the countryside).

# Chapter 7. Conclusions

This thesis set out to discuss the ways in which the people in Port Sudan's backcountry make use of labour opportunities in the city, and how rural-urban links relate to spatial movement to and from Port Sudan. It aimed at showing the social dimensions of urban labour and rural-urban mobility, and the ways in which rural-urban migrants in the city find, practice, and think about their income-generating activities. The main research question therefore asked: *to what degree, and how, do existing rural-urban links contribute to work-related mobility to and from Port Sudan?*

Work-related mobility in eastern Sudan is a practice with a long history. In fact, the pastoralism on which rural populations have relied for centuries, or millennia, can be regarded as a form of work-related mobility. It is true that people have increasingly started to make use of the city due to pressures on their old lifestyles, but as mentioned, the rural-urban mobility to and from Port Sudan has itself already a history spanning roughly a century. Rural-urban mobility is therefore not an anomaly. For decades, many Beja and Beni Amer households, and probably also others in the RSS and Kassala, have used rural-urban mobility as a method to diversify livelihood strategies by complementing rural incomes with urban incomes, particularly in times of dearth. Work-related mobility is spurred by rural-urban links, and rural-urban links are sustained by, and emanate from, work-related mobility. Like in earlier times, multi-spatiality is the norm rather than the exception.

Much like Parsons, Lawreniuk & Pilgrim (2014, p. 1364) in their use of the migration systems lens in conceptualising Cambodian labour migration, I consider social factors as determinants of rural-urban mobility and its self-perpetuation. The pushes of environmental pressures, economic concerns, and conflict (or its remnants, such as landmines) in the countryside, and the pulls of income opportunities in the city, provide the context in which spatial mobility takes place. In this context, a circular flow of information, ideas, money and people has grown that evolved into self-sustaining practice. This shows, again, in the persistence of circular mobility: circular mobility to and from Port Sudan throughout the 20th century is well documented, and most of the older people I met in Port Sudan had been traveling back and forth for decades, even if they had the ambition to one day live more permanently in their home areas again (Lewis, 1962; Morton, 1990; Perkins, 2019).

Looking back at my findings, it is safe to say that many of the classic approaches to migration – that are still dominant in policy making and to a lesser degree in academics – do not really apply for the case of mobility to and from Port Sudan. Push-pull reasoning and root causes approaches can show the context in which migration takes place, but these perspectives are individualistic and regard migration as "linear, uni-directional (…) cause-effect movement" (Mabogunje, 1970, p. 16). The migration systems approach, instead, emphasises spatial mobility as a continuous process. As explained, in a migration system, places are linked by flows and counterflows of people and political and economic relations. In other words, not only people move, but also material and non-material things – such as money and ideas – move back and forth between places. As a result, multiple places are tied together in a migration system which, one could argue, signifies a mutual dependency.

In the theoretical framework in chapter 4, I reflected on problems with use of the terms "migration" and "migrant". While spatial movement can also be viewed from the broader

perspective of "mobility", it remains difficult to cast the vocabulary of migration studies aside. For example, throughout this thesis I speak of rural-urban migrants, which besides the term "migrant" also implies a rural-urban dichotomy (which is only a heuristic device). Avoiding these words made my text incomprehensible. This is because no terms have been coined that better describe the actors in rural-urban migration systems. Having said that, I do not believe that use of these terms is irreconcilable with a critique of the oversimplifications that they often bring about. Concerning the notions of centre and periphery, and rural and urban, the very ways in which mobility is practiced challenge the thought of a rural-urban dichotomy, or centre and periphery as polar opposites in a dichotomy or continuum. I believe the stories and analyses I shared in this thesis make this clear.

On the theme of finding income opportunities in the city, I found that there are multiple methods that people from the countryside employ to find or generate urban work. My findings show that job acquisition for Beja and Beni Amer in Port Sudan is hinged on social networks and the leveraging of kinship and ethnic/geographic backgrounds. Newcomers in Port Sudan can have difficulties in finding jobs they like (or finding jobs at all) and starting businesses. They face numerous challenges, such as high starting capital requirements for self-employment, insufficient networks and knowledge to acquire casual work in the port or elsewhere, language barriers, or exploitative forms of labour and undesirable jobs. Here, the importance of strong ties in the job acquisition and (initial) migration processes cannot be overstated: many people move to the city to work at businesses operated by parents, uncles, and the like, and thus already know which job(s) they will profess when they move into town. The coffee sellers' apprentices provide a telling example. At the same time, some migrants are inspired to move to the city by their family members' jobs or enterprises but do not get to work with/for their relatives. The idea to move to the city for work, or to start a street vending practice, travels across the rural-urban divide, but is not always accompanied by concrete chances offered through family connections.

Some migrants move to the city without specific plans (or their plans end up not working out) and have to figure out their ways at arrival. Often they, too, mobilise their networks and strong ties. However, some also make use of weaker ties to overcome obstacles that lie in the way of job acquisition or entrepreneurship in the city. This is exemplified, for example, by the brokers who rent out coffee businesses: judging from what respondents told me they often have no family/kinship links to their leaseholders and meet only through (newly forged) urban networks.

No less important is the idea of active network construction by migrant workers. In Port Sudan, they leverage their ethnic backgrounds and/or areas of origin to forge new ties and to find (casual) labour opportunities; this should perhaps be labelled ethnic/geographic-specific social capital. Normally, they do this simply by walking around town and asking people with whom they share a common background, who are e.g. from the same home area, *diwab*, or broader ethnicity for work. Some people reported walking the same route every day; they visited people whom they included in their urban networks. This illustrates that the network is not only a social given but is also actively modified. As mentioned by Schapendonk (2014), such observations of active networking help us to avoid the trap of network determinism. Having the right connections helps, particularly when it concerns family members (strong ties), but constructing ties with people from the same home area with similar backgrounds (improving weak ties or

forging new ties) also increases peoples' chances to secure incomes in Port Sudan. That being said, the frame that helped me interpret the types of connections that people employ to find and maintain work in the city – Granovetter's strong and weak ties – is not detailed enough, certainly not for the case of the Beja/Beni Amer in the Red Sea State (as mentioned in the concluding remarks to chapter 5). The *diwab,* for example, is of central importance in job acquiring and entrepreneurship processes. Yet, the *diwab* includes strong ties (direct family), weak ties (e.g. distant acquaintances and distant family), and absent ties (in most cases, it is fair to assume that not all members of a *diwab* know each other).

As my fieldwork demonstrated, institutions that govern life and work in the countryside also have a purpose in the city: access to the urban labour market is made more accessible through the social customs of *durareet* (labour sharing and the virtue of sacrifice) and *sakanab* (information sharing), which are mandatory under *seleef* (customary law). *Durareet* makes the sharing of labour opportunities habitual, or virtuous, and *sakanab* helps some people – particularly newcomers – navigate the urban labour market by giving them access to vital information on job openings and other opportunities. For example, port workers let others work their shifts so that they can travel home, or they sacrifice shifts out of virtue, and street vendors allow relatives and non-relatives to work for them in apprenticeships or in rotating labour arrangements (examples of *durareet*, as explained in chapter 6). Newcomers looking for a place to set up a coffee shop can receive advice in the streets (particularly from people with similar backgrounds), e.g. on suitable locations or on shops that might be able to use assistance. Such customs of mutual assistance are key to understanding the social attitude that many Beja and Beni Amer have towards the labour market: work is not regarded as merely an individual affair. It takes place in the social domain and is, to an extent, a common good within families and *diwabs*, and to lesser extent within the broader ethnic identities (such as Bisharyyn, Hadendoa, etc.). Referring to Bourdieu's notion of habitus, the sharing of labour is an ingrained habit that jobseekers employ on a daily basis. The fact that a specific word, *durareet,* is given to the custom underlines this point.

Spatial mobility occurs mainly for three reasons: firstly, it is important, to a degree, for the maintenance of multi-spatial households. Secondly, other social and religious obligations (religious events, but also births, deaths, and marriages) force urban workers from rural backgrounds to move to the countryside frequently. Thirdly, many rural-urban migrants, including more settled urban workers, have rural assets (such as livestock or crops) or family members with rural assets, which brings about a labour demand in the countryside at certain times of the year. In practice, these three reasons require urban workers from rural backgrounds to move frequently, at least several times per year. Such mobility can be difficult for people who have jobs or businesses in the city: how can one leave a coffee business or another street vending enterprise unattended? Who helps the *kalla* in the ships and warehouses when one or multiple *kalla* members are not in town? In this sense, it is important to note that not just the newcomers and/or people without work profit from *durareet* and labour rotation. Street vendors with their own shops, port labourers with fixed *kalla* positions, and others who are relatively well-

established in the city also benefit from the deep-rooted flexibility[18] of informal urban labour. For them, too, the ease of sharing labour makes it possible to frequently move back-and-forth between city and countryside.

It is true that mobility to and from Port Sudan occurs throughout the year. This is because the seasons and fluctuations in labour demand in the countryside are not synchronous: the patterns of rainfall, vegetation, and river volume differ from place to place within eastern Sudan, even within the RSS (Babiker & Pantuliano, 2006; Hjort af Ornäs & Dahl, 1991; Morton, 1990). Moreover, some rural households depend on crops (and different crops are sowed and harvested at different times of the year), others depend more on livestock. This means that people in the city have rural obligations at slightly or wholly different times of the year. Yet, looking at the seasons and the economic fluctuations in Port Sudan, the city is emptier in the summer, and earning incomes is harder for rural-urban workers in the hottest summer months. Concerning this point, of seasonal change, I wish to make a remark on a fallacy, or misunderstanding, that reappears often in literature on development and migration, namely the association of seasons merely with rural production and not with urban production (except in certain academic niches, such as literature on tourism). This leads to a portrayal of cities as centres of stable economic opportunities, which Port Sudan is not. In summer, the city and the street are emptier and quieter than in other seasons. This also means that there is less money to be made from selling goods on the streets. Simultaneously, working conditions deteriorate, particularly in the port. While many people move elsewhere to escape the heat or to temporarily pursue more profitable work, the system of labour rotation continues. There seem to always be people who are willing to work in Port Sudan, even in the heat of summer. Such multi-layered seasonal dynamics in the urban context might also be found in other cities and migration systems in, for instance, the Sahel region, which offers a relevant consideration for future research.

## For further research:

To improve substantiation of my conclusions, similar research in different contexts would be useful. All in all, the results of this study indicate that there are more relevant avenues to further our understanding of rural-urban mobility in Sudan and beyond. For example, an interesting point for departure could be the (perceived) changing role of women in Beja and Beni Amer societies, and other cultural changes induced by rural-urban mobility. In Beja and Beni Amer communities it is widely recognised that the growing number of Beja and Beni Amer in the city, and the increasing permanence of city life, has changed certain cultural practices and traditional

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[18] While many people are forced to approach their work flexibly, as they have to move back and forth between countryside and city at fixed times (the lengths and frequencies of which vary greatly from person to person) and at unexpected moments, the Beja/Beni Amer cultural habits paired with urban networks grant a certainty that someone else can fill in, that labour can be rotated even for the urban self-employed. In this case, flexibility leads to certainty. This allows for the continuation of multi-spatial living.

values. As mentioned by multiple respondents, the gender balance is changing as women play increasingly prominent economic roles, more and more publicly. This is largely ascribed to improving levels of education (particularly for women and particularly in the city, but also in the countryside where women might take up new roles as a consequence of rural-urban mobility). Other cultural practices and values, things that seem more mundane such as eating patterns, also change over time[19]. Such cultural changes, induced by urban life, could form an interesting theme for further exploration.

Further research could also help to further deepen Granovetter's framework of strong and weak ties, adding gradations of ties that can be employed for research inquiries that involve Beja and/or Beni Amer in eastern Sudan, as well as for other cases. A similar remark can be made about migration systems theory. Besides the components and actors of the Port Sudan migration system that I have taken into account in this thesis, there are more aspects to analyse. To name a few examples, interviews with those who stay in the countryside, inquiries into the legal context of land use degradation, and detailed analysis of (local) politics would enlarge our understanding of rural-urban mobility in eastern Sudan, and could help explain the (potential) effects of disruptions (disturbances such as environmental degradation, port privatisation, etc.) in more detail.

Following up on this last point, of disruptions in the migration system, I wish to restate that labour opportunities in the port supply thousands of rural and urban households with supplemental incomes (of varying amounts). The threats that loom over port labour can have immensely detrimental effects for both rural and urban populations, for Beja and Beni Amer that rely on the labour opportunities offered by the port, particularly those that have received little education and have only limited chances elsewhere in the urban job market. Developments in the port are particularly interesting and important in the face of the December Revolution and the subsequent political rupture in Sudan. Eastern Sudan is prone to conflict, as recent history shows. This makes the availability of income opportunities in countryside and city, the general wellbeing of the rural and urban populations, and their perception of political change and representation, a particularly relevant theme for future academic inquiries.

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[19] For example, older Beja in the countryside avoid eating eggs or products from the sea; younger generations that have spent more time in the city or grew up in urban environments have abandoned such nutritional preferences.

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