Review: Inge Tvedten, “As long as they don’t bury me here”: Social relations of poverty in a Namibian Shantytown, Basel, Schlettwein, 2011.

Very little research exists on urban poverty in the social, political, and economic context of Namibia. Inge Tvedten’s “As long as they don’t bury me here”: Social relations of poverty in a Namibian Shantytown broadens the understanding of urban poverty today and makes a valuable contribution to Southern African urban poverty scholarship. The book focuses on Southern Africans living in impoverished conditions in urban shantytowns and their experiences of poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion. Based on research carried out over a period of many years, the author provides rich, historical, and ethnographic insights about peoples’ experiences of urban poverty and marginality in four shantytowns (Evululuku, Oneshila, Oshoopala, and Uupindi) in Namibia’s northern town of Oshakati. By drawing on and extending some of the anthropological scholarship on urbanization and modernity, and providing original field research analysis, Tvedten offers a unique contribution to regional anthropology and urban poverty in the Southern African context.

The book comprises ten chapters, including one chapter that addresses the apartheid history of Oshakati and its shantytowns which sets the political and social context for the study. In this regard, the readers learn that the town was initially founded mainly for military purposes by the colonial South African government and, during the war, relied on the relocation of soldiers mainly from Angola and who were of Angolan decent. After Namibia’s independence in 1990, Oshakati became a critical network hub for trading between Namibia and Angola, a site for the development of female-headed households, and a place for understanding the breadth and depth of living in poverty through intra-household relations. The ethnographic focus on Oshakati and its shantytowns lends itself well to anthropological insights on poverty and the vulnerability of the poor.

In the analysis, Inge Tvedten’s invokes a notion of shantytown that emphasizes its constitution by and contribution to the reproduction of relations of inequality which forms part of the larger society. In contradistinction to homogeneous understandings of community or shantytown, the author demonstrates how many Southern Africans live in urban poverty in the four shantytowns which in turn opens up an analysis of structural oppression and highlights insurmountable high levels of unemployment, the lack of income-generating opportunities, the commodification of social relationships, and restricted social networks especially for those who are ‘overwhelmed’ by poverty. In line with Hannerz’s (1992) view of the micro-culture of destitution, the author stresses how such poor people may believe they are the victims of power and economic forces and thus may become ‘trapped in their poverty’. The mixture of political and economic

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oppression, low levels of income and property, and marginalization through social relations can, Tvedten reveals, entangle people in ‘abject poverty’ (see especially Chapters 2, 3, and 4). The author importantly recognizes that there is room for transformations in that poor people can be agents of social change. Economically better off people living in the shantytowns were, for example, able to establish stronger ties and relations with both rural and urban settings, as discussed in great depth in Chapters 5, 6, 8, and others were able to engage in feminized networks and informal employment. Such an analysis provides critical insight into the inequalities of the shantytown population, the ensuing differences that are informed by economic positions and gender relations, and the understandings of lives and conditions of living represented by the voices of the people inhabiting urban shantytowns. Following the work of Bourdieu (1990), Hannerz (1992), and others on extreme poverty, vulnerability, and oppression, the author reveals the influential aspects of rural and urban connections and intra-household workings that underscore relations of poverty and exclusion in Namibia’s northern town of Oshakati.2 There is, however, an increasing wealth of field-based research analyses and critically engaged scholarship on poverty in the Global South that would complement this study’s empirical insights and add an important dimension to future studies on urban poverty in Southern Africa, particularly recent work on the governance of urban poverty, the role of contestations by the urban poor, and on poverty, human rights, and citizenship.

Poverty remains one of the most crucial issues of our time. In this thought-provoking book, Inge Tvedten offers a detailed account of the diverse relations and challenges facing the urban poor in Namibia’s northern town of Oshakati. This work provides a valuable, anthropological contribution to the study of poverty and social exclusion in the context of the making and remaking of shantytowns in Southern Africa. This book will be essential reading for students in the social sciences, as well as researchers and policy-makers, who are interested in urban poverty studies.

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