Shebeen Queens: Illicit Liquor And The Social Structure of Drinking Dens In Cato Manor

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The African shebeen queens operating in the densely populated shantytowns of Cato Manor rapidly gained prominence and their fair share of notoriety for their key role in the Cato Manor Beerhall Riots of June 1959 and the killing of nine policemen during the course of a liquor raid in Cato Manor in January 1960. These two events, which occurred within the context of municipal attempts to remove the shantytown residents to the newly
constructed Kwa Mashu township and the widespread political mobilization organized and led by the African National Congress clearly pointed to the important role which African women and in particular the shebeen queens were able to play in increasing the level of African political resistance. African women "invaded" the sacrosant male domain of the municipal beerhalls, singing, ululating, haranguing or better still beating any African male occupants, fouling beer containers and chasing the men away with insults about their lack of manliness, their cowardice and failure to support "their women". Dorothy Nyembe, one of the African National Congress stalwarts who assisted in organizing and continuing the beerhall boycotts remembers:

"The women would go the entrance of the Victoria Street Beerhall and then Gladys Manzi and I would take them inside. Anybody there would be given it hard and we chased them all away. Then we would go to Dalton Road Beerhall and then the others. That was the lesson they learnt. We told them not to drink u-Bokweni but they needed the lesson."

At first many men thought of the whole episode as "a big joke. African women must not hit us. In our custom that is not done". Rapidly however men drinkers acquired a greater respect for the assertiveness of the shebeen queens and the political courage of the African women. As Ruth Shabane, an important Congress leader in Cato Manor and an activist during the beerhall boycott, remembers: "The men started to listen. We had frightened them." Stephen Ndlovu, then resident in Cato Manor concurs: "I had been a Zionist, - lots of women but no drink. And then my wife started brew. It was then that the Congress came to me, otherwise there was too much trouble in the home."

The events of those turbulent years are already known and documented (see Luckhardt and Wall, 1980; Walker,1982). However, what requires further study are questions which concern the role of the shebeen queen in the shantytown society and what the lives of shebeen queen can tell us about the broader issues of class, gender and power relations. Since the very term shebeen queen, used in various ways by various people for different reasons, has long been an element of proletarian life, it is as well that one accepts the term, but analyses key elements within shebeen life. What is the relationship between shebeens and other venues for the consumption of liquor? What are the essential elements within the shebeen culture? How do shebeens operate? What are the characteristics of a shebeen queen and how do these women relate to both male customers and the shantytown society as a whole? This study, based almost entirely on the oral evidence provided by both
shebeen queens, and more especially shebeen patrons, can hopefully raise debate around largely unexplored aspects of proletarian life.

This work focusses on the structures of accumulation, the manner in which shebeens became involved in a community network which saw to the redistribution of a portion of wages, and the relationship between entrepreneurs, shacklords, community leaders, drinkers and household dependants of those who frequented the shebeen. The shebeen has for too long been romanticized as the repository of a relatively unambiguously articulated African proletarian culture. As such, all who seem to be outside the shebeen culture are castigated as petite bourgeois, and much radical analysis of the shebeen and the shebeen queen seems to dwell too much on the obvious political qualities of the shebeen culture (La Hausse, 1982). Such images must be dissected and scrutinized.

THE MORALITY OF SHEBEEN DRINKING

The consumption of alcohol as always been a major feature of male working class leisure time activity. The shebeens of Cato Manor, which only really started to develop during the mid 1940s, were thus in many ways merely a natural development from the long existing practise of home brewing. However, as with home brewing, they were by their very nature illegal. Until the early 1960s it was illegal for the vast majority of Africans either to purchase or consume "white man's liquor": spirits, fortified and natural wines and beer produced commercially by major companies.

Apart from purchasing such liquor from the many bootleggers who operated in all South African cities, the only place where one could consume strong liquor was in the shebeens which offered various types of home brewed drink. Buying directly from the bootleggers was a hazardous and often dangerous adventure. Mr Shabalala was witness to the pitfalls:

"One day Mr Khumalo, when he had some money, invited all his friends around and went to buy 2 bottles of brandy and 1 bottle of cane from a Coloured (bootlegger). He came back and we opened the packets and all he had got was 2 teas and 1 water. We all mocked him."

For others, the escapades ended with them being arrested by police posing as bootleggers.

Shebeens, where you could get white man's liquor and other drinks, existed not only in conflict with the law prohibiting African consumption of commercial liquor, and others which prohibited illegal stills and brewing ventures, but ran directly contrary to laws which allowed municipalities sole
monopoly over the production, distribution and sale of sorghum beer to Africans.

Both employers and City Councillors in Durban were never totally against the provision of liquor to the African working class. As with their counterparts in other South African cities they believed that liquor could perform a valuable social role in providing for a happy docile labour force. These desires were offset by a concern over drunkenness and public disorder, declines in labour productivity, and a fear that drunkenness and political militancy could often be too closely related. In the wake of the 1949 Indian - African riots in Durban, many City Councillors called for the opening times of municipal beerhalls to be extended to keep would be rioters off the streets.

Such feelings were opposed by other concerns. In the early 1940s employers along Sydney Road became alarmed at both the scale of lunch time drinking at the nearby Dalton Road Beerhall, and the increasing number of workers being killed in traffic accidents when rushing to and from the beerhall. In the early 1950s employers tried to change pay day from Friday to Wednesday so as to curtail large scale weekend drinking, absenteeism on Mondays, and to ensure that more of the workers' wage went towards food and rent. White citizens were offended by the many groups of Africans leaving the beerhalls who would wander around the streets "singing and shouting". During the 1950s White busdrivers protested about the chaos on the late night busses which went into Cato Manor. Many of the passengers were drunk: shouting garbled phrases of English at the top of their voices and throwing the remains of fish and chip dinners around the bus2.

Despite such feelings, the municipality of Durban was the first local authority to establish such a monopoly, and the beer it produced acquired various names amongst the African population: "diesel", "K B" (Kaffir Beer) and then from the 1950s onwards "u-Bokweni", after the Manager of the municipal Native Administration Department, Mr S B Bourquin. The reasons for starting and maintaining such a municipal monopoly relate not only to the municipality's desire to control the consumption of liquor, but because of the profits which accrued to the municipality from the monopoly. The Durban City Council consistently declared that it would never provide any funds from the general rate funds of the municipality to provide and maintain facilities for Africans living in the city. Funds should either come from loans from the central state, or from profits derived from the sale of sorghum beer. The operation of the shebeens and normal home brewing activities were thus in direct conflict with the financial interests of the
municipality. Within the municipality there were many who felt that the morality of the municipal beer brewing operations certainly placed the municipality in an ambiguous position. Bourquin himself maintains that "whenever I had to attend a conference or present figures on alcohol and the urban African I always felt that we could not get too categorical because we in fact were brewing massive quantities of sorghum beer ourselves." (Swanson, 1976).

Within the African proletariat itself, the consumption of alcohol involved a whole series of further ambiguities and tensions. The shebeen culture existed in direct conflict with ideas of sobriety, cleanliness, respect for the dignity of wage labour and religious observance. While such values have been viewed as being more petite bourgeois than proletarian (Torr, 1987), there was within Cato Manor society during the 1940s and 1950s, a strong feeling amongst many permanently urbanized working class people that such ideas should be fostered against the prevailing shebeen culture. In many cases African women played a major role in articulating such values and in condemning the consumption of alcohol. In Cato Manor there were various independant women's groups, (such as the "Daughters of Africa" and "Health in the Home") which, together with welfare bodies, church societies from both Zionist and Roman Catholic churches, and temperance bodies, continually stressed the role of African women in maintaining or ensuring a "respectable" nuclear family life in opposition to the proliferation of "live in" relationships within the shantytown and the shebeen culture.

During the late 1940s, with the weakness of African trade union organization, such women's groups were key components in enunciating these ideas, and with the growth of trade union structures under the South African Congress of Trade Unions in the later 1950s, such ideas became related to and intermingled with notions of factory floor organization. However there was always an ambiguous relationship between such women's movements or organizations, and the shebeens. As a result of the particular structure of proletarian factory floor and residential life it was impossible to separate the shebeen culture from other ideas of normality and decency (Edwards, 1987).

This level of ambiguity is clearly evident. Both Dorothy Nyembe and other leaders of the African women beer brewers and shebeen queens were also active in church and temperance societies, such as the "Daughters of Africa" and others which appeared during the 1950s. When workers went back to their rural homes, they would wear "the smartest clothes to show our family how we were making money and working hard,".
In the shebeens of the 1950s, such outfits, like the Oxford bags or white flannels
"that have to hide your shoes",
a blackish blazer, two tone shoes, red tie and blazer, pocket hankerchief
and a brown Batersby with a small feather were the uniform of the "swank",
the charmer and the "veteran" gavine drinker. The sobriety and dignity of a
working class ideology also came in extremely useful when police stumbled
upon drinking parties. When you wanted to drink gavine, Kunene
remembers, you could
"sit outside as long as you had a smart white shirt and tie on".
Others took the safety precautions that went further into the disguise of
acceptable dignity. Mzimela recalls that:
"When you had friends and you wanted to drink gavine, then you
sit on the stools outside the room and you put the gavine into a
teaapot. Everyone has their own cups and saucers and you all sit
there drinking. When the police come they do not kick things
around and break things because they see you are doing things
properly."

Other disguises for shimeyana drinking laid stress on "traditional"
stereotypes:
"Instead of keeping maas in the calabash, you fill it with shimeyana
and you sit quietly under the tree with the men and smoke. Then
there is no trouble".

Such optimism aside, despite police harassment, throughout the later
1940s and 1950s the number of shebeens and drinking dens in Cato Manor
increased continually. With life in the formal townships and hostels being
highly controlled and repressive, the shebeens became the hub of an
alternate African proletarian culture. It was in the shebeens that Kunene, a
regular frequenter of Ma Mimela’s shebeen which was located in the
Cabazini area of Cato Manor, felt "free". It was here
"that you drink with the friends, sing and do the jitterbug (dance)".

Ndlovu, then a domestic servant with a Berea household recalls that he
went to the shebeens because
"you live in the kia at the bottom of the garden next to the compost
and the madam and boss tell you this and that. You cannot do
anything. No radio, no women, no shouting. If you want to stamp
your feet and dance you have to be quiet. On your day off you must
run away to Cato Manor."
Over the weekend the population of the Cato Manor shantytowns would normally double as thousands of people from other areas in the city flocked into the shebeens and shacks.

Shebeen culture has often been romanticized under a broad rubric which refers to the apparent freedom experienced within the shebeen. While it is true that the shebeen offered a venue for the proletariat to create and sustain cultural forms of expression which could not be so easily developed in other areas of the city, there was still a particular set of social structures within the shebeen culture.

COMMUNITY NEEDS, THE SHEBEEN AND PROFIT

Shebeens were a part of the system which served to redistribute money within the society as a whole. Together with the co-operatives, stokfels, shackshops, roadside vendors and many other types of entrepreneurial ventures, shebeens formed part of a redistributive cycle of capital referred to by the residents of Cato Manor as "robbing Peter to pay Paul". Within a tightly knit community almost totally reliant upon the weekly wage packets of the formally employed workers and having no capital assets, it was necessary for money to be kept within a particular community and for parts of that wage to circulate within the community as fast as possible, so that dependants and those either unemployed or seeking work could subsist.

With such a social structure, elements of a populist community feeling could easily develop within a localized environment. This was even more the case in Durban where, because of the seasonal tourist trade and the fluctuating economic activity centred around the harbour, employers required that a casual, incrementally employed reserve army of labour which could be employed at various times, lived in the city. With such casually employed persons unable to live continually in the formal hostels and finding space in the shantytowns, the need for the redistributive networks was clear. Without their being able to intervene in the market cycle of capital, they would be unable to provide for the costs of their own subsistence. Faced with these particular circumstances, the "robbing Peter to pay Paul" system was believed to be a viable way of coping with the needs of both employed and unemployed within a particular community.

With the meagreness of African workers' wages and the increasing number of dependants living in the city, various groups would often call for Africans in Cato Manor to trade only with other Africans in the area. Shackshop
traders consistently called for boycotts of Indian stores, many of the women's groups called for boycotts of Indian stores until they employed African shop assistants, and shebeen queens continually called for boycotts of the municipal beerhalls, their major trading competitor (Ibid.; Santos, 1979; Iliffe, 1987).

However such calls, made in the name of the general good of all people in the shantytowns, continually revealed the process of class differentiation within the African population of Durban. Shackshop traders, shebeen owners, rackrenters and other entrepreneurs thrived in such communities, and in their everyday activities revealed an ambivalent attitude towards notions of community spirit and personal need. As with shackshop traders so with shebeen queens: both were faced with the contradictions inherent in the idea that personal accumulation could be aligned with the redistribution of capital and the circulation of profits. For example, a shebeen queen would gleefully listen to hardluck stories which related to the duplicity of bootleggers. One shebeen queen recalls:

"That is alright that they get tea. That is not their job to get the beer and the gologo. We know the people and then they must come to us. If they want to be cheeky then they get destroyed. How do they know what is going on?"

Another example concerns the difficulties which many families or single male residents of the shantytown found in either providing the time to distill gavine or preserving their gavine supplies from municipal and police foraging and raiding sorties. Thus, if you wanted to drink gavine in the home and needed to buy it from the shebeen, it was always more expensive than if you purchased and drank it in the shebeen. A shebeen queen explains:

"If you need to talk in the shack then we must pay a runner, a boy to take it to them. That is dangerous and it costs more. Everybody understood this".

As shall be seen, it was rare that such shebeen helpers were paid in cash. Whilst it was difficult to refute the argument that young or unemployed persons should be provided for, such additional costs bore heavily on meagre wage packets.

SHEBEEN QUEENS AND RELATIONS OF POWER

For African women, the need to become involved in such entrepreneurial activities was greatly enhanced by the fact that there were virtually no job opportunities available in formal wage labour. Those jobs which were
available outside the shantytown were either incremental clothes washing laundry work, prostitution or domestic labour as "Shelias": cook "girls" or temporarily employed child care. Many African women were thus able to avoid full proletarianization and through entrepreneurial activities gain both increased social influence in the community, and avoid being relegated to domestic subservience.

Unlike more recent developments which have seen taverns and shebeens both owned and operated by men, the shebeens of Cato Manor were always run and sometimes owned, by women. With the need for extra sources of income, women's time-old task of brewing beer, the demand for drinking dens, and the time which women had available to conduct household brewing and fermenting, women gained control of the production and sale of liquor in Cato Manor. There was, however, another reason rarely mentioned. As Charles Ndluvu explains,

"you could not have men as the operator because the drinkers have nothing to look at and brag to".

Shebeens were male drinking houses where certain ideas about alcohol, sex and gender became interrelated in particular ways with men as clients or patrons and women as shebeen queens or serving assistants.

In the same way as many groups of women moved to Durban to set up shackshops, so many groups of women would move permanently to the city with the express intention of becoming shebeen queens. Such was the intention behind that large group of Mpondo women who moved into Cato Manor during the late 1940s and settled in the Draaihoek area. Even after the municipality established a beerhall on the ground immediately below Draaihoek, the women defiantly continued to operate, and with the increasing numbers of Mpondo men working in Durban, the area became well known as the nexus for the Mpondo male drinking, stokfel and womanizing groups.

However, the vast majority of women who became shebeen queens had no such specific intentions, and only established shebeens after living in Durban for many years, and then only with the direct assistance of African men living in the particular localized regions within the Cato Manor shantytowns. Most of the premises in which shebeens operated were not owned by the shebeen queen herself. "Memela's" shebeen operated from rooms owned by the shebeen queen's husband who was a major shacklord in the area. Similarly with "Sis Dorcas" shebeen, which operated in the Cabazini area. Calling the shebeen after the "mama" did not imply ownership. As Joshua Mzimela says:
"You never called it by the man who owned or rented the place ..., but by the mama's name".

Even if such agreements to operate a shebeen could be concluded between the shacklord and the aspirant shebeen queen, it was crucial that the consent of the local leader or "mayor" be gained and sustained. For various reasons, shack society was dominated by local leaders, who were either leaders of shack movements (as was Sydney Myeza), local landlords (as was Fohloane in the Newtown area), or block representatives of the Cato Manor Welfare and Development Board, which was the officially sanctioned advisory board.

Without the patronage of such persons, operating shebeens, or even large scale brewing of illicit liquor, was often well nigh impossible. As Shabalala, a resident of Newtown says:

"If you ever resisted Fohloane you would be taken to the police. He was the self-appointed impimpi; he was the general impimpi who had his own impi and would report you even if you brewed shimeyana without telling him".

For the consent of Esau le Fleur, the self-styled leader of Cato Manor, and well-known for "liking lots of women", shebeen queens were believed to have had to "provide services to keep their premises". Although evidence is scanty, it would be surprising if such considerations did not include material or sexual favours and general obedience. Many shebeen patrons remember how shebeen queens would often associate with the leaders and the "classy" prostitutes who, whilst living in Cato Manor plied their trade solely within the docklands and city centre. Shabalala says that:

"When you are walking home there is the shebeen mama with J J (surname deleted) and the swanky girls with stockings and high heels. You greet them, 'Ubaba, hello mama' and they look at you like (you were) this (cigarette butts) and turn away and talk English to themselves. Then you know that they are amongst themselves and you are not to be there."

The very manner in which shebeen ventures depended upon patronage and, broadly speaking, a level of protectionism, served to re-integrate individual entrepreneurial activities within the "robbing Peter to pay Paul" system: the appropriation of surplus provided continued legitimation for the existing leaders within the shantytown and impressed upon ordinary male drinkers that the shebeen queen both "wore the pants in her home" and "was looked upon as wealthy and powerful". While being close to the centre of power within the shantytown did not imply absolute influence, with decisions being ultimately in the hands of the local leaders, the very way in
which shebeen queens associated with the leader element provided them with significant power within Cato Manor.

Within the shebeen and the household the shebeen queen was always acknowledged as the "master". Kunene believes that "it was very tough on the husband of a shebeen queen" because "when you have a shebeen you were rich and the shebeen queen would then imagine she was someone in society - not the man".

With the profits from running a good shebeen very often outstripping the profits from modest rackrenting ventures, relations between shebeen queen and husband or domiciled male associate could be overturned in favour of the woman. The shebeen queen would "start dictating the terms within the family" and, because of the need to encourage custom, give drinkers preferential sexual and platonic treatment over her husband.

Such a situation gave rise to the stereotypes of a "large and fat" auntie looming over the thin and timid husband, which were commonly accepted and appeared in many of cartoons published during the 1950s. Khumalo recalls that "The woman seemed to be in the power: all the money and all the influence - she was the kraal head. She would tell the man what to do. Build shacks, get drums and all these things and soon the man would be unemployed and a help".

OPERATING A SHEBEEN

During the course of the day to day running of a shebeen, the shebeen queen's role would be that of general supervisor, organizing various tasks and overseeing the brewing and distillation operations. The shebeen queen would "employ" various young women, who would be responsible for serving, encouraging the purchase of liquor, and the sexual enticement of customers. Such young women could often either be sisters of the shebeen queen or the current "girlfriends" of regular customers. Wages were mostly paid in kind: food, accommodation and liquor. One of the main criteria for being a woman helper in a shebeen, was that you had to be "nice looking and sophisticated". While some of these people were local prostitutes, the vast majority viewed working in the shebeen as the ideal place to establish either temporary or permanent relationships with "well off" men (Callinicos, 1987).

Male assistants were responsible for the menial tasks centred around the the production of the liquor itself: getting wood and water, digging holes for the shimeyana drums, and so forth. In addition, the male helpers constituted a shebeen "impi". Ndlovu remembers that the men
"were also the main impi. Whenever there was a quarrel, however slight, the shebeen queen would give a cry and the impi would quickly destroy the offender".

Violence was thus rarely a feature of shebeen life, even in a community living in marginalized conditions within the city and having the highest assault and murder rate in Durban. The drinking rituals of the customers fitted easily into this virtually absolute constraint against violence within the shebeen. A shebeen queen believes that:

"There was no fighting in my joint. Nothing. If there was, then there was too much trouble. The women shout at you and no-one comes back. And the police come around and want to talk to you about bodies. So you have to move away. That is the very reason why we have men to help us and to stop the fighting between the men."

However, particularly over weekends, there were regular outbreaks of violence in streets and homes in Cato Manor. Fights between drunken drinkers were exceedingly common, as were incidences of gavine-induced madness, and physical conflict between men and women, with battle honours for fatalities being shared equally. In addition there were frequent reported incidents where women would commit suicide after their husband or 'live-in' male had crippled the household budget through excessive drinking or through establishing a relationship with a woman shebeen helper. In some reported cases, such suicides would occur through the woman dousing both herself and the shack in paraffin and setting it alight.

As with the relations between the shebeen queen and the shantytown leaders and shacklords, here in the shebeen itself were a set of hierarchical social relations between the shebeen queen and her helpers, both men and women. Faced with both the illegality of the operations, the competition from the municipal beerhalls, and the fragility of the redistributive cycle of capital within the shantytowns, the shebeens endeavoured to emulate that notion of the relationship between leisure time, alcohol, respectability and normality, albeit within a proletarian setting, that many could see as being accepted within the rest of the city.

The shebeen culture attempted to straddle both aspects of a local lumpenproletarian culture and the various, and often contradictory, strands within an African working class culture. While the African working class was never really to ever totally accept the prevailing hegemonic concepts within the city as to what constituted legality, decency and what many whites referred to as moral uprightness, views of alcohol, sobriety and male association became mixed in their own particular way.
In most shebeens the most popular types of alcohol were gavine and shimeyana. While other sorts of home brews, such as a pineapple based drink, could be available, gavine and shimeyana would most often be supplemented by stocks of "white man's liquor" obtained through the various bootleggers operating in Cato Manor.

The shebeen helpers would make two types of shimeyana: one for sale to customers, and the other as the base ingredient for the distillation of gavine. In making shimeyana to drink, brown bread, yeast, malt, brown sugar and warm water would be mixed together, placed in a 44 gallon drum and buried in a hole in the ground for around two weeks. The practice of burying the fermenting liquid, undertaken so as to prevent its easy detection by municipal officials and police, gave rise to the term used to denote the drinking of shimeyana: "if you drink shimeyana you go underground". After this fermenting is complete, the liquid would then be strained through a sack and sold in jam tin quantities for around a tickey a shot, or in larger communal tins.

For shimeyana needed to make gavine, 200 lbs of sugar is mixed with a bag of wheat, preferably with the husks left on, and water. This is then left for a week, then another bag of sugar is added and left for a further week to ferment fully. This fermented mixture is then placed at the bottom of a 44 gallon drum on top of which is balanced a enamel basin small enough to leave a space between the drum sides and the basin. A large enamel basin
or bowl is secured around the open top of the drum, with a wet rag or cloth positioned tightly between the drum and the lip of the basin.

A fire is then made underneath the drum and cold water, which must be continually replaced, poured into the top enamel basin. As the fermented shimeyana base heats it vaporizes, rises, condenses against the cold water basin, and the distilled drops of liquid fall into the bottom basin, with the complete distillation producing gavine in the bottom basin. Not only were both shimeyana and gavine time consuming operations, but "the most one could expect from 20 litres of shimeyana was 10 litres of gavine". Gavine would then be poured into empty "white man's liquor" nips or pint bottles, which the shebeen queen would either buy from "the urchins" who would collect them to make "some money", or exchange for a quantity of shimeyana. These youths would never be given gavine; that was for "the men". Just as you "went underground" when drinking shimeyana, the drinking of gavine was referred to as "i-log", or getting "something that drips" or, for those more reticent or speechless, visually demonstrated by making as if to carry a large log over one shoulder.

While some shebeens sold cooked food this was rare. As Phewa explains: "if you were hungry and you wanted dronk kos, then you just shouted outside and you get it".

Invariably, outside the shebeens in the streets and pathways women would sit cooking meat on braziers and selling pieces for around a tickey each. Intestines were popular food among frequenters of the shebeens because they were "fatty and helped you to drink". While the various names given to different pieces of meat seemed to imply an active role to the seller: "selling the way it walks" referred to chicken legs with "selling the crowing" meaning the head, the relationship between drinker and seller was more complex and overlaid with the sexual innuendo of the shebeen. In advertizing their food the women would "jokingly" call out "come to the hot one", with men going "up to her and saying 'come let me see' and waving your hands in front of her skirt." Within the shebeen, the relationships between customer and server, alcohol and sex were often even more overt.

MASCUINITY AND SHEBEEN RITUALS

Sexual connotations entered the shebeen environment in particular ways. Many would comment on the way in which those people who consistently sat at the municipal beerhalls and drank u-Bokweni would grow "fat and pregnant", so that they were unable to sustain sexual relationships. While such reasoning might provide solace to the habitues of shebeens and serve as a partial justification of their frequenting shebeens where money could
be kept out of the municipal treasury, such people were equally aware of
the pitfalls of drunkenness. Popular ballads in the community warned about
the fate of those who "slept by the road unwarmed". In the musical
"Mkhumbane", an eligible woman who is looking for "a home down Mashu
way and perhaps a car one day", spurns the advances of suitors who "go to
bed in their boots".

Within the shebeen, the shebeen queen would set the level at which sexual
stimulation and expression could develop. It was rare that customers could
talk to and buy a drink from and for the shebeen queen. Women servers
were encouraged to flaunt themselves at customers as a way of charming
them into buying more alcohol. Some shebeen queens would be relatively
circumspect in controlling the activities of their women helpers, but it was
important that the women helpers fraternize with customers and encourage
drinking.

Whenever the shebeen queen appeared everyone addressed her as "my
love", and competition for her "favour" was at "a high level". The shebeen
queen herself would play various "valued" customers off against each other,
and sometimes sustain close friendships with them. Among the male
drinkers various stereotypes developed as to how one could attract the
attentions of shebeen queens, and discussion ranged over the physical
attractions of various shebeen queens.

While such sexual images, whether overt or fantacized, were always
prevalent within the shebeen, they were continually juxtaposed with various
other rituals which developed in the shebeen.

Shebeen drinkers would rapidly discern which shebeens were offering a
high quality drink. When tasting shimeyana, one could clearly taste when
"the madam was not generous with the recipe", and so you had to "be careful"
about which shebeen you chose to drink at. Likewise with gavine, "people
would have a way of judging the best". Grade 1 was "proper moonshine",
which cost around 1 shilling and threepence a nip. Grade 2 was "a little
cloudy" and sold for around 8 pence a nip. Grade 3 was "very bad ... it was
too cloudy" and sometimes sold for 5 pence but "often they just gave it to you,
it was so bad."

Mere knowledge as to the existence of a good shebeen did not necessarily
mean that such a venue was accessible to anybody. With most of the streets
in the shantytown being without electric lighting, the complex housing
clusters and the prevalence of "tsotsis" waiting to prey on those returning
home, shebeens became drinking spots for locals: those nearby residents
and their friends. Also, shebeen queens were reluctant to allow total strangers entrance in view of their caution over the illegality of the operations and the possibility that such patrons could be informers.

Men would either visit their local and meet friends there, or get together with friends from various diverse places and then select a shebeen which one in the group knew. Here again, an element of caution limited the range of choice. Kunene recalls:

"Say the group was composed of couples or small groups from different sections and one person alone from another section, then you always went to his section, asked him to select a shebeen with good shimeyan and gavine. ... It is for safety. One person cannot walk the streets alone and drunk."

Within the shebeens, various rituals would sustain particular images of manliness, camaraderie and wealth. "Veterans" could prove their power by being able to down a nip of gavine in "one action" without too much gasping for breath afterwards, "maybe just a quick shake of the head and a pat of the chest". This "was the way people would qualify to be called a veteran". Such drinking "must be in front of your friends", so as to prove your strength. Those who could not accomplish this feat, the "abantu aba cabuzelwayo", were viewed as "rookies" or slow with their drink. Apart from the obvious boldness of drinking such a quantity of gavine in one gulp, there was often a more serious imperative behind such actions. With the continual fear of police raiding, it was generally accepted that "it was better in you than on you". Kunene again:

"You always had to keep one ear sharpened for the police. I was never caught. I was just like a hare, you have to keep one ear cocked. And drink all your nip down one time".

For veterans, it was only once you had accomplished this feat that you became "a real man".

The fellowship of the drinkers came through clearly in the rituals of communal drinking. Buying say 20 gallons of shimeyan in a drinking den, a group would sit together sharing one cup. With 20 gallons and one cup "time could pass and you could talk", with the bonds of male friendship sustained through particular rituals. When it was their turn, each person put the mug into the can and drew "what you wanted. You had to drink it. You could not put it back". While thus providing opportunities for those who wished to drink less, the group was "all together", and it was deemed unsocialable for people to attempt to pass a yet unemptied mug on or pour liquor back into the communal container.
Such acts were viewed as unhygienic and implying that the person wanted to stop the party, thereby forcing everybody to leave for safety's sake. Parties like this could last "all through the night", but through careful individual discretion as to how much was personally consumed no-one would get too cross. However, in such convivial company, "if you did put back, you were fined": the spurious rationale here being that if you put the mug back into the container before it was empty, you were trying to get "more and so cheating" the other drinkers.

Within the shebeen, the understood rituals of the "one time" gavine drinker and the common loyalty of the drinking party incorporated a concern over safety, whether that be from the illegality of the shebeen itself or through fear of bandits. While the "veteran" gavine drinker could appear to have little sympathy for the more moderate drinker, within the camaraderie of the men's drinking group of albeit often hardened and committed shebeen customers, there was a real awareness of the different drinking patterns of group members.

There were many customers whose behavior displayed neither a concern for safety, group identity, nor careful drinking. People behaving in such a way could be "all kinds of people, the rich and the poor". Or put another way, Kunene, himself often culpable says that

"When you put you suit on you were by yourself. You could show off and brag. You were free".

Straddling a range of class distinctions within the African urban population, behavior could be the result of numerous experiences. Such braggars were "easy meat" to the many "hangers on that frequented the shebeen. Such people, normally unemployed, would "loiter around trying to drink your liquor. ...start telling stories and act like ... your friend. They always looked smart and addressed you as "Ubaba". the bragger would invariably spend his money rapidly and get very drunk quickly and after a while "it was difficult to see the bragger from the beggars ... because they never knew where the next drink was coming from".

In an illegal shebeen environment, always constrained by the possibility of ravaging official raids, competing with other more institutionalized sources for the consumption of alcohol, and existing within a community comprising various contradictory class elements and social norms, the amalgam of rituals which became known as the shebeen culture could only be ambiguous in its social function. Such ambiguities were clearly realized by the shebeen queens themselves, many of whom tried to reduce the effects of these tensions and contradictions.
Ever aware of how the municipality and the police considered the shebeen operations illegal, shebeen owners resorted to various tactics. It was often the case that the African policemen and the tsoti informers for the police could be bought off with either liquor or sexual favours. In other cases the problem was more easily solved. When a shebeen queen knew that a policeman was himself conducting illicit operations, often using confiscated liquor and food, then collusion in silence could be easily gained. There were, however, other policemen who persistently used to harass and arrest shebeen runners, and during a large scale "crime prevention raid" there was little chance of operating shebeens escaping through such measures. However, the police were never in full control of the situation, as a White policeman stationed at the Cato Manor police station during the late 1940s and early 1950s recalls:

"You would go on the large raids in the evenings looking for booze and shebeens. You could hear them a mile away, what with all the racket. But people got smart. We surrounded this one place where the gramaphone was blazing to hell and gone. All the lanterns are swinging and people are dancing around. So we send this one guy up to the door while we wait. He kicks the door down, everyone screams and shouts, and then the other side wall must of got pushed down and everyone runs away into the darkness. It was a real game."

Other strategies were certainly less prosaic but equally effective. Shebeen queens and their helpers would keep a close lookout for "new customers because we could not be sure who they were. If the man was a regular or if we knew him from the area then he can come in". Unfamiliar people would have to undergo effective, lucrative but subtle scrutinizing. The newcomers offered a rare harvest for financial gain. As Matiwane remembers:

"You would have just arrived in the place and so you go to the shebeen to see people. It would often happen as people were moved around (by the municipality mainly). You walk in and the girl comes up to you, sits on your lap and asks you what you want to drink. Then she comes back with two glasses and if you give her a note - not pennies - then you are finished. You do not know what is going on and the wife is cross back home."
As a shebeen queen recalls, newcomers "were a gift" and were often fleeced, particularly if they were clearly "rookies".

Other attempts to evade detection were less popular with locals and newcomers alike. With the police often raiding Cato Manor in search of illegal stills and underground drums of shimeyane, during the middle of the week it was often impossible to provide sufficient quantities of properly distilled or fermented liquor. Faced with this harassment and the possible loss of trade, many shebeen queens would make "quick brews". Kunene, ever the expert, recalls:

"Instead of leaving (shimeyane) for say two weeks, they would make it on the Thursday and sell it on the Friday. They would add sugar to the mixture of Zulu beer so as to make it ferment quickly. This was terrible stuff. When you went to pass water it was like pouring coal, it was just black and you had a splitting headache in the morning and a sick stomach. Or if you went to pass water where you relieved yourself the grass did not grow.

Shebeens were easily detected and would constantly remain one of the key targets of police action. While the shantytown was very difficult to police regularly, many shebeen drinkers remember that "when the police came, they came - they were terrible."
Quite apart from the police and the municipality, shebeen queens had constantly to both protect and legitimize their operations within the shantytowns. While the very establishment of the shebeen entailed certain compromises and alliances with the shacklords and community leaders, the shebeen queen still had to confront the ordinary people themselves.

On festival days, such as Zulu Hlanganani celebrations and the annual Mkhumbane Xmas Tree day, celebrated every year from 1951 onwards on the anniversary of the outbreak of the January 1949 Indian African Riots, shebeen owners would supply the festive crowd with free liquor, both home brewed and "white man's liquor". Supplies of liquor would be available to passersby on such occasions. Even the municipal officials were co-opted on such days. Colin Shum, then superintendent of the Cato Manor Emergency Camp, recalls that

"I would arrive at the office and there would be this large and very varied assortment of good booze all waiting. We knew where it came from from and it was damm good. We could take lots home."

However, the duties of the shebeen queen ran deeper than merely providing free liquor during celebrations, and making a defiant but pleasant and mutually enjoyable gesture to officialdom. The shebeens were providing a facility for male drinking within a society rapidly growing increasingly dependent upon the men's wages, and desiring to create the conditions for a settled permanent urban nuclear family structure. To deflect criticism from within the shantyown, shebeen queens would often give money "quietly" to "our wives". A shebeen queen tells a similar story:

"If you knew that a man was not good to the wife and was keeping too much money away from the children, then you would give some money to her so that she can do what the man should do - buy food".

Another way in which the shebeen queen asserted her role as protector of the family household and thereby pay her dues to those within the working class which saw the shebeen as antithetical to a proper city life, was simply by "shouting at the man and chasing him out of my joint". When this happened the images of sexuality, manliness and free spending sustained in the shebeen became overturned.

There was still the need to pay liquor debts. While being cognisant of the animosity which many ordinary women bore towards the shebeen queen, the pursuit of private accumulation created its own dynamics. Come Fridays, and thus paydays, all the debts for the past week would be slated up, plus more: "If you were drunk on an evening, she would test you to find out how
much you remembered, and then slate lots up". If payment was forthcoming, then the customer often received a free nip of "white man's stuff". If payment was delayed for too long, the shebeen queen "could be seen talking to your children asking them to give you a message that you still owed her such and such".

Conflict over a shebeen queen's awareness of the prevailing morality of family bonds, women's difficulties in managing the family budget, the shebeen queens' own need for profit and the prevailing redistributive cycle of capital, led to endemic crises, and resulted in many dilemmas for the shebeen queen, male drinker and proletarian woman, whether married or not.

CONCLUSION

Shebeens and the culture of drinking which surrounded such drinking dens have often been romanticized and stressed as a central site for the development of an African proletarian culture. Of course the shebeens of the Doornfontien yards, Sophiatown, and places in Durban like Cato Manor, did allow for a crucial element of expression denied in other places within the industrializing landscape. However, this did not necessarily confer on the shebeen life a political quality, or imply an unstructured social environment. The shebeen queens themselves existed within a very tenuous material environment: both as women marginalized within formal wage labour, and as entrepreneurs reliant on local patronage, and seeking to sustain themselves within a redistributive system that was ultimately totally dependant on the wages of men employed in industry and commerce.

These shebeen queens rapidly became militant and politically active only once the prospect of removal to the formal township of Kwa Mashu really loomed large. Until the late 1950s, most shebeen queens had remained relatively a-political, being more interested in the day-to-day issues of producing and selling liquor. Even during the late 1950s, many shebeen queens interpreted politics in a very narrow fashion. With the declining real wages of the African working class, less and less could be redistributed within the shantytown society growing ever more reliant on the redistribution of wages.

Prior to the very recent rent boycotts prevalent in some urban townships, the beer boycott of the Durban beerhalls was certainly the most successful campaign waged against urban social structures. With a local authority totally determined not to spend any amount from the general rate fund on African urban facilities, within a couple of months of the beer boycott starting, the municipal funds for African urban development were bankrupt,
putting the future of the Kwa Mashu building programme in jeopardy. Whilst this was clearly seen by the leaders of the African National Congress, what many shebeen queens wanted was an exclusivity of trade and the lucrative sales which would accrue through their long desired destruction of the municipal monopoly. Many drinkers recall similar experiences to Brutus Mthethwe: "when the marches started, we were going to free Luthuli, I was safe underground in the shebeens".

The widespread political mobilization during the late 1950s and the threat of removal to Kwa Mashu occurred at the same time and added the voice of the shebeen queen to the general level of political anger. For the shebeen queen, it became impossible to delineate between a beerhall boycott and the destruction of the Cato Manor shantytowns. The very building of Kwa Mashu implied an absolute threat to their shebeen activities, a consequent destruction of their own social influence, and a transformation in their relations with males, who in Kwa Mashu would be seen as the formally employed tenants and thus sole breadwinners in a position to exercise increased power within the household.

It would be facile to deny the influence of the shebeen queen, or the importance of the shebeen amongst male drinkers. However, it is crucial to note how various structures constrained and determined the shebeen queens' powers, and how the social structure of male drinking had as much to do with constraints and bonds sustained outside of the shebeen. Shebeen culture was a convoluted mixture of various very contradictory strands within the life experiences of the African proletariat.

The shebeen queens of the Cato Manor shantytowns would ultimately be virtually obliterated by the destruction of the Cato Manor shantytowns and the resettlement of the residents in both Kwa Mashu and Umlazi townships. While new and often very different shebeens would soon arise, the shebeen queens of Cato Manor clearly reveal the difficulties which faced those who, by force of circumstance and design, became involved in the illicit distribution of liquor amongst a largely impoverished community endeavouring to provide the means of its own reproduction. While questions of sexuality, wealth, the marginality of the African proletariat, the role of women and the role of entrepreneurship could easily be discussed within shebeens and reflected or deflected in a particular way by shebeen queens, the shebeen would never be the sole site of any proletarian culture.

NOTES
1. See for example Themba (1972) and the very clear glorification of shebeen culture evident in works such as Schadeberg (1987).
2. For analysis of this contradiction see van Onselen (1982).
REFERENCES