‘Culture and conflicts: Witbank colliery life, 1900-1950’.

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Paper to be presented at 16h00, Wednesday, 14 May 2008, in the Anthropology and Development Studies Seminar Room (D Ring 506)

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Culture and Conflicts – Witbank Colliery Life, 1900-1950

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This paper is part of a bigger project on the labour history of coal mining in South Africa, specifically in Witbank, the country’s premier coal-producing district. My particular angle, what makes the work interesting perhaps, is a series of comparisons that the study has entailed: an early one on Alabama, examining racial division in the two areas; one on China reflecting on migration and pass laws; another that highlighted similarities between the labour history of coal mining in Natal and the Transvaal, the province where Witbank is located; a recognition of linkages to, yet differences from, gold mining on the Witwatersrand; and a recent analysis of the employment of women in underground mining, especially in India.² Hopefully this paper will eventually draw on British connections and contrasts.

What this approach is revealing, for me at least, is the limitation of social history, especially its now mainstream cultural variant. Cultural studies are good at describing phenomena, and sometimes at providing explanations based on the internal dynamics of culture. Where they fail is in providing a wider sense of historical change, and in particular of structural constraints and the kind of contradictions that provide new openings for historical actors, whether individual or collective.

To a considerable degree the earlier social history, that of E. P. Thompson and others, can be absolved of this criticism. Also, I sympathise with Geoff Eley and Keith Neld for wanting to bring a class analysis back to the discipline.³ But they do not go far enough. For many early practitioners, social history was a reaction against economic history, so they were aware of the importance of economics even if it did not figure strongly in their accounts. The main trend in cultural history has, however, been to ignore economics altogether. This muting, if not silencing, is not the only problem, and my own studies reveal two others. Both of these emerge from its comparative character, the essence of which is to probe for deeper levels of analysis in order to explain significant differences and similarities.

¹ This is a lightly revised version of a paper presented to the London Socialist Historians Seminar, Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and to the European Social Science History Conference, Lisbon, both held this year. I am grateful for the help I received from the following research assistants: Rudzani Mudau, Lauren Basson, Nomawazi Ngwane, Rachel Fanyani, Analize Naidoo, Pinky Nkete and Mantsoe Tsatsi.


The first of these problems is specific to the labour history of mining. Social history skims the surface, literally, ignoring the importance of geology in shaping events. A critical difference between the Transvaal and Natal coal industries was that coal in the former was easier to mine and located closer to the Witwatersrand. This had implications for the speed and extent of mechanisation, for the numbers and confidence of those employed, and for their origins and thus the culture they brought with them (with implications for forms of protest for instance).

The second has broader significance, at least for South African history. My research has underlined the importance of politics, though less in the sense of parties and more in terms of the state and its legislation. The differences between segregation in Alabama and the Transvaal were ultimately a consequence of the different outcomes of the U.S Civil War and the Anglo-South African War, the two great modernising revolutions. Pass laws were possible in South Africa and China, but not elsewhere, because of the strength and reach of the state in those two countries. One reason why black miners in the Witbank district went on strike more frequently than other South African workers is that the collieries employed large numbers of workers but were also located far from significant numbers of police.

One can underline this critique by reference to key South African texts. The seminal work, influenced by Thompson, was Charles van Onselen’s *Chibaro* (published in 1976). This was actually a study of mine workers in Zimbabwe, but the conditions there were similar to those in South Africa. Van Onselen’s work can be seen as reaction against the structuralist Marxism that was then dominant in left social science, and Harold Wolpe, the mostly widely cited structuralist, was highly critical of van Onselen. Still rooted in a sense of class dynamics, van Onselen emphasised the misery of mining and the labour control aspects of its culture. ‘The compounds served to isolate, regiment and exploit the most vulnerable section of the working class’, he wrote. ‘It provided the framework for the total exploitation of the black working class’.4 Working-class culture existed, but very largely as resistance.5

The clearest reaction to this approach was provided by Patrick Harries, notably in his 1994 book detailing the history of Mozambican migrants working in Kimberley and on the Witwatersrand.6 This is a work of considerable scholarship, though one that drew on post-modernism and cultural anthropology for inspiration. ‘Culture is seen as a system of symbols’, with history an interpretation of their meanings and the discourses of which they were part, and this is achieved with ‘little regard for material factors’.7 One conclusion that Harries draws is that ‘workers … exhibited a distinct unwillingness to join an uprooted proletariat and looked backward to what they knew rather than forward to a new social order.’8 As I have shown elsewhere, at best this was an over-generalisation.9

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5 Van Onselen’s subsequent work was, however, a good deal more subtle in its handling of culture.


A 2004 work by Eddy Maloka, a student of Harries, returns chronology and material structures as active ingredients to the story. In providing a rich account of the life cycle of Sotho migrants, he achieves the kind of synthesis of cultural and socio-economic history called for by Eley and Neld. In the process he reveals rural influences on mining culture, but also demonstrates that rural culture was not static; rather it was in turn shaped by the mines, partly through the direct intervention of returning mineworkers, but also through the colonial capitalism of which Lesotho, the mines and the migrants were all part. Maloka adds new depth to our understanding of mine labour, doing so in a way that is particularly sensitive to indigenous African influences. In the process, however, he minimises the impact of capitalists, engineers, politicians, white workers, and the new resistance identity of the workers themselves. One writer who avoids this trap is Carolyn Brown, whose 2003 account of Nigerian coal miners broke new ground in melding African and labour history.

My own work takes matters further. In highlighting behaviour that was the product of mining and the period in which this was performed, international comparison allows us to disaggregate influences that were colonial and global from those which were local and national. It also enables us to ask some new, counterfactual, relative and sociological questions. Why were there no women working on the South African mines? How important was migrant labour for capital accumulation? What was the cause of racial division? For me, this approach has underlined, time and again, the centrality of the state in South African history, thus posing a question: are social scientists paying enough to politics?

Like most politicians, this paper promises much, but delivers little. It is very much work in progress, an attempt to set down some potentially relevant facts in a reasonably intelligible manner without yet analysing these in a comparative framework. Hopefully, though, these introductory comments, combined with the description that now follows, will provoke some helpful discussion.

In the period under consideration, 1900 to 1950, South Africa was a relatively minor coal producer, though in these 50 years output doubled to just under 28 million tons a year. Of this total, nearly half came from around Witbank, which is located about 150 km from Johannesburg, the heart of South Africa’s gold mining industry. The Witbank collieries had a close relationship with the gold mines, which provided its major market and were a dominant influence, especially with regard to the supply of labour. Most of this labour supply, most of which came from Mozambique.

Sleep, Sex and Food

At four in the afternoon, or thereabouts, miners emerged from the ground to what was often the first natural light they had seen all day. They were tired, filthy, hungry and thirsty, and possibly bruised as well. This was a scene played out daily, not only on the collieries around Witbank, but on mines around the world. Here, though, the seams were close to the surface, and it was usual for men to trudge up a slope rather than ascend in a cage. According to industry-wide agreements, men normally worked at the face for nine hours from Mondays to Fridays; two hours less on Saturdays. But it took time to get to the face, maybe 30 minutes, and perhaps there was a brief rest during the day, so men went down at six in the morning, often earlier. Hours of employment were one area of life – one of the very few – that were the same for black workers as their...

10 Maloka, Basotho and the Mines.
white supervisors (the latter being expected to carry out safety checks before work could start). Early in the century the hours were longer, but they had been improved and regularised through struggles – sometimes involving blacks, sometimes whites - that took place between 1913 and the mid-1920s. 

For most black miners, the centre of their social world was a ‘room’, which they shared with other men. 16-20 in a room was common, but there were smaller rooms, sometimes for clerks or senior workers, and I have come across one designed for 30. The regulations stipulated ‘200 cubic feet of air for each labourer occupying the premises’, but this rule was sometimes flouted. Two-tier bunk beds, made of concrete and covered with a blanket, were standard. In each room there was an izibonda, a man chosen by his room mates to resolve petty disputes, represent them to colliery authorities, and ensure that basic tasks, such as fire making and cleaning were undertaken. He would be selected for his wisdom and fairness, so was often older than his peers. The occupants of a room generally came from the same ethnic group – Shangaans, Sotho, etc. – but alternative arrangements were made on a temporary basis. Frans Nkomo, who was working at South Witbank Colliery from 1953, recalled that rooms were also distinguished according to religion, with one room for Shangaan Methodists, like him, one for Shangaan Catholics and so forth. Rooms were normally contained within single-storey blocks. They had only one door and this opened into the courtyard of a compound, usually rectangular in design, which had restricted access from the world beyond.
The sociology of colliery housing was, however, more complicated than this account suggests, not least because many of the black mine workers were married, not single. In 1903 workers at Cornelia Colliery in the Free State were living in ‘huts [that] were dotted about the veld without any semblance of order or symmetry.’\(^{19}\) Around Witbank, compounds were initially the norm, but from 1907 ‘married miners’ were staying in ‘locations’ that were developing nearby. This process was generally encouraged by the mine owners, who saw it as a means of attracting and retaining labour, and by 1924 about one in five of the adults living on the collieries was a woman. In 1925, the government, concerned about disorder, imposed new regulations that limited the employment of married miners to 15 percent of the total black labour force (significantly more than the three percent cap introduced on the gold mines in 1908).\(^{20}\) At the same time, it decreed that all married and single quarters had to be owned by the employer, that all single natives had to live in approved compounds, and that married quarters had to be fenced (thus halting the sprawl associated with locations).\(^{21}\) They wanted everything neat and tidy.

In defending the 1925 regulations, H. S. Cooke, the Director of Native Labour argued that the ‘natural sequel’ to the erection of huts for individual miners was ‘cohabitation . . . with loose women,’ and he added that government policy ‘was entirely opposed to the multiplication of detribalised families in industrial areas.’\(^{22}\) His policy may have reduced cohabitation and slowed the pace of ‘detribalisation’ but it could not halt them. By 1939 the Witbank magistrate was complaining that ‘[a]round all the mine properties are congregated collections of native huts, occupied mostly by native women.’\(^{23}\) Moreover, in 1941, because of the need for increased production to meet war needs coupled with a shortage of building materials, the government was forced to suspend the regulations.\(^{24}\) Albert Similane, a Witbank mine clerk, later recalled (‘with gusto’) that colliery workers ‘enjoyed themselves on these farms [adjacent to the collieries] – women there, beer there, lovers there.’\(^{25}\) John Buti Mashiame - who was born on a colliery (Minaar, where his father worked), and began working at New Largo Colliery in 1954 – explained:

\(^{19}\) See also Amcoal, Vereenigeng Estates, Minutes of Directors, 14 December 1903, report by Emrys Evans, a director.
\(^{20}\) The new rules were promulgated in terms of the Native Labour Regulation Act 1911 as Government Notice 840 of 16 May 1925. See Alexander, Oscillating Migrants p 13 for a discussion of this change.
\(^{21}\) GNLB 261 433/16/94, Cooke (Director of Native Labour) to the Magistrate, Witbank, ‘Native Mine Married Quarters: Oogies Colliery,’ particularly blueprint dated 3 July 1925. Wattle and daub houses were banned, at least as single quarters, but rondavals made of other materials were permitted and did exist, certainly as married quarters.
\(^{22}\) SAB, NTS (Department of Native Affairs) box 9831 file 2/408 vol. 1, ‘Minutes of Meeting with Deputation from Collieries Committee,’ 4 March 1926.
\(^{23}\) NTS box 4163 file 24/313, Magistrate, Witbank, to D. L. Smit, Secretary for Native Affairs, 13 July 1939.
\(^{24}\) NTS box 10002 file 1119/408D, E. W. Lowe, Director of Native Labour, ‘Circular Minute No. “D” 1 of 1941,’ 2 January 1941. In 1947, the Fagan Commission reported that the ‘East Coast boys have pseudo families in the huts adjoining their compound’, adding ‘when their term of service is over they hand the women onto their successors.’ Quoted in Lauren Segal, ‘Mines, Migrants and Women: Strike Action and Labour Unrest on the Witbank Collieries 1940-1950’ (Honours, University of the Witwatersrand, 1989), p 140.
\(^{25}\) Quoted in Segal, ibid, p 139.
If you wanted a lady, you’d just go outside the hostel. Maybe some ladies working at the gate. They were not allowed into the hostels. There were women in the [married] quarters as well. … Even if they come to the hostel, they will wait at the gate, ask for the policeman to come, call this or that person for them. The police will come fetch you up. Go to her, talk, exchange whatever you like, and then come back. She will sleep.26

Inevitably, cohabitation led to the birth of children, so that many miners developed two families, one close to the mine and one in their rural area.27

A sizeable number of mine workers gained pleasure from sex with other men. According to a 1907 commission of enquiry, actual sodomy was rare, but thigh sex, izinkotshane, was relatively common.28 Typically, a senior man – such as a police boy or izibonda – would take a young recruit as his wife, expecting ‘her’ to share his bed and undertake wifely duties, such as cleaning. The younger man would often wear women’s clothes, and received gifts or money from the ‘husband’. Other writers have described and analysed these ‘mine marriages’ for the Witwatersrand, but they also occurred in Witbank.29 However, in 1911, the Director of Native Labour informed a superior that ‘in Districts such as Witbank … where women occupy locations, [izinkotshane] is practically non-existent’.30 In 1916, in response to a panic and a new enquiry, the Witbank Inspector of Native Affairs reported: ‘Prevalent only among E.C. Natives [those from the East Coast, i.e. Mozambique]. Principally Boss Boys and in some cases Police Boys. Nothing to show that practices are increasing.’31 Perhaps there was something to the idea that there was less ‘unnatural vice’, as it was termed, than on the gold mines, and that this was because of the relatively greater availability of women.32 Nevertheless, like his fellow inspectors on the Witwatersrand, the Witbank official proposed measures for suppressing the practice, and, like many of them, he recommended that curtains around men’s bunks should be banned. Whilst the officials wanted visibility, the miners struggled for some measure of privacy.33

From time to time, managers and mine police would raid rooms and occasionally miners would be arrested, but izinkotshane persisted, even in Witbank. Wilberforce Nhlapo who worked on Landau Colliery, where he was promoted to

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26 Mashiame interviewed by Mudau.
27 Nhlapo interviewed by Mudau. Nhlapo joined Landau Colliery as a clerk in 1962.
30 NTS 10203 file 1/422, ‘Copy of Telegram from the Director, Native Labour Department’, 21 March 1911.
31 GNLB 229 583/15/D145, ‘Confidential. Summary of Replies to Circular “583/15/145”. Unnatural Vice in Compounds’. Other documents in this file which contain detailed responses to a circular from Cooke, then Acting Director of Native Labour, dated 9 February 1916. There was also some concern about Chinese workers, for which see documents from 1906 in GOV 210 CON 52/06, ‘Unnatural Vice – Chinese.’
32 Moodie, *Going for Gold*, pp 123-4, has an interesting quote from an old gold miner who explained his affair in the following terms: ‘miners were not allowed to go and visit women in the township. … I felt very lonely for all the long period without meeting a woman. Because of boredom I need someone to be with me.’ ‘Boredom’ is a recurring theme in miners’ account of their lives on mines.
33 One miner is recorded by Moodie, ibid, p 125, as explaining: ‘people would not make love when others were still conversing in the evening – they would wait for everybody to “sleep”.’
Welfare Officer in 1965, recalled: ‘It was common ... I think mostly the East Coasters
and Souths. It wasn’t common with the local guys. ... [It was linked with] a dance,
where elderly men can come and pick younger males for their girlfriends, and it is done
at night. That is the one we couldn’t control.’ 34 Whilst the state was opposed to
izinkotshane and managers probably found it abhorrent, it was not eradicated. It is not
just that it did not impinge on profitability, it is also that managers feared resistance
from workers, a realistic fear based partly on the recognition that suppression
threatened the interests of boss boys and other powerful figures, who had the ability to
mobilise effectively and whose support was necessary to maintain order on the mine.35
The room remained a space that belonged to the workers, one they could defend against
outside attack.

As should already be apparent, life on the Witbank Collieries, like that on the
gold mines, was highly regulated, at least after 1911. This applied, in particular, to the
kind of food that workers could expect. A 1902 report shows coal miners receiving
mealie meal (i.e. maize) and not much else. In terms of cost to the owners this
represented 96.3% of the total expenditure on food, compared to 2.6% on meat and
0.7% on vegetables (by contrast, gold miners, who also received more food in total, had
a less unbalanced diet: 72.6% mealie meal, 24.9% meat and 2.2% vegetables).36 By
1910, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (Wenela), which recruited
Mozambican workers on behalf of the Chamber of Mines, was expressing concern
about the diet of black workers, and this may have contributed to the inclusion of a
‘Minimum Ration Scale for Native Labourers’ in the 1911 Native Labour Regulations
Act.37 This wide-ranging statute was also responsible, among other things, for setting
the basic standards for mine accommodation. Without enforceable regulations mining
companies undercut each other, worsening the problem of labour recruitment, and by
introducing legislation the government acted in the interest of the industry as a whole.
According to the act, mines and collieries were expected to provide the following for
each worker per day (all measures in ounces, an amount that equals 28.4 grams): mealie
meal - 24 oz (about 680 grams), bread – 6 oz, beans or peas – 3 oz, meat (including
soup meat) – 8.6 oz, peanuts – 2 oz, fresh vegetables – 5 oz, plus coffee or cocoa and
salt. If workers preferred fish to meat, and many Mozambicans did, this was provided.38
After a near ‘mutiny’ in 1913 by Mozambican workers protesting against being
sent to the coal rather than gold mines, Wenela forced the collieries to negotiate an
agreement on conditions of employment for their recruits (who then comprised about
80 percent of the colliery workforce). This mainly concerned pay and hours of work,
but it also affirmed the need to abide by the 1911 regulations. Wenela then enforced the
agreement by means of mine inspections and the threat that supplies of labour could be
terminated. Sometimes mines provided insufficient or poor quality food, and if their

34 Nhlapo interviewed by Mudau. He added: ‘If the Indunas are coming from different mines, the first
thing they will ask the Induna there is “where is your what-you-call-it?”’. Later, the National Union of
Mine Workers, which developed in the early 1980s, frequently spoke against the practice, and probably
had some success. See Mashiame interviewed by Mudau.
35 Moodie, Going for Gold, p 240, which is reflected in the archival evidence and the interview with
Nhlapo
36 Transvaal Mines Department, Yearly Report of the Government Mining Engineer, Year Ending June
30 1902, p.7.
37 WNLA, Minutes Book 6, pp 196-7, 21 July 1910. The WNLA Minutes Books are part of the TEBA
Archives held at the University of Johannesburg.
38 WNLA 2C, ‘Extract From Native Labour Regulation Act Annexure B.’ There were further rules about
quality of meat, vegetables to be used and much else. See also, for instance, Chamber of Mines Reel
2341 p. 0008, WNLA to Collieries Committee, 15 June 1918.
transgression was egregious they could expect workers to strike. Indeed, food issues were the second most commonly cited cause of colliery stoppages in the period 1925-1950 (after assaults). Post-Second World War food shortages contributed both to a series of colliery strikes and also to the 1946 general strike by black gold miners.  

For breakfast, workers generally received soft mealie porridge and a hot drink. For sustenance underground they took marewu, a thick drink made from finely-ground mealies and water that was fermented but not alcoholic. Benjamin Nhlabathi, who had been born on Landau Colliery in 1937 and started work at Navigation in 1956, remembered carrying marewu ‘in a pan with a lid and handle’. They also took some bread, sometimes mponyani, which Mashiame described as ‘something delicious … like scones or buns’. After work, according to Nhlabathi, a bell would summons everyone to the kitchen for supper, a meal that was supposed to include some meat. Mashiami, who was a cook, recalled his training with some pride: ‘How long would cabbage take? How long would porridge take? You would measure everything. Let it simmer. All this you would learn.’ Whilst single men had their meals cooked for them, the married ones or their wives collected food from the kitchen. ‘On Monday you are given maize meal. They count your children - how many do you have? Then maybe you have four children and they give you 30 kilograms of maize meal; maybe 12kg of meat; carrots as well.’ In addition to food provided by the mine, workers could make purchases in stores outside the compound or in town.

White miners and Witbank

Lest we lose sight of the fact that Nhlabathi and Mashiami were living and working in a racially divided society of an extreme kind, it is worth pausing to take a glimpse at the culture of white mine employees in Witbank. The whites all had different jobs to the blacks - ones higher in status. With few exceptions, they either worked as miners (i.e. underground supervisors of maybe 50 black workers), or as mechanics, or they were staff. Importantly, the worst paid whites were paid less than the best paid blacks, and in June 1921, for example, the average white received eleven times as much pay as the average African worker (even allowing for food and accommodation received by the latter). There were some single men who stayed in hostels, where they were provided with meals. However, by 1915 the ‘vast majority’ were married, with three or four children on average, and, typically, they lived in a five-roomed house. These houses were not very different to ones then being built for miners in Britain, from where most of the whites originated, but in South Africa there was usually provision for a domestic

40 Nhlabathi interviewed by Alexander and Xulu. Nkomo, interviewed by Alexander and Mudau, recalled: ‘They will bring a barrow with water [to miners working underground].’
41 Mashiame interviewed by Mudau. Mashiame added this interesting story: ‘Underground there were rats, and if you found that a rat had eaten your mponyani you were not allowed to kill it. Take that mponyani back to the policeman at the surface. He’d take it to your induna, and you’d get compensation – one rand. [Why?] Rats were guarding against any danger underground. If you see rats running away, you must run away as well, because the roof might collapse and you might die underground.’
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid. Mashiame added: ‘Yes there were women [employed], but they worked in the kitchen. They peeled what needed to be peeled, and cleaned. They wouldn’t take any women from any area far away. They would only take women who were wives of people who worked for the mines.’
worker. Unlike the black workers, whites consumed lots of potatoes and little mealie meal, and they also ate eggs and milk.\footnote{Alexander, Race, Class Loyalty, pp 123-4; H. F. Bulman, Coal Mining and the Coal Miner (Methuen & Co., London, 1920), pp 242-321. In the Transvaal, whites represented about six percent of the total colliery workforce in 1921.}

Today Witbank is a thriving city at the hub of the fourth largest coal industry in the world. Its origins, though, were as a sleepy appendage to Witbank Colliery, which began operations in 1898, and the settlement only gained municipal status in 1910.\footnote{Witbank station was a stopping point for coal and water on the railway line between Pretoria and Maputo, which was completed in 1894. Witbank Colliery Ltd was registered in September 1896, and a township was laid out by the company in 1903. Witbank had a Health Committee in 1906, a Village Council in 1910 and a Town Council in 1914. Paul Botes, possibly entitled ‘A History of Witbank,’ dated about 1999, manuscript available in Witbank Library, pp 47-67; Witbank Colliery, Witbank Colliery Limited (Witbank Colliery, n.p., c1961), available at Barlow Rand library, pp 1-2; H. J. Erasmus, ‘Witbank Town Council: Minute by the Mayor’ (Town Council, Witbank, c. 1979), copy with author, pp 1-2.} By this latter date there were about 20 collieries operating within a radius of 25 miles, and Witbank was the main shopping, education and cultural centre for most of these.\footnote{For schools, see Langa interviewed by Mudau.} For the period until 1952 very few of the mayors and town clerks had names that suggested an Afrikaner background, but there was a clear shift after this date.\footnote{Middelburg Observer, 7 October 1921} The early ‘Britishness’ is confirmed by ‘Rex’ a regular columnist in one of the two local newspapers, who wrote: ‘If there is one place in the whole of the Union … which should rightly return a loyalist as its representative … that place, assuredly, is Witbank … so essentially a British community.’\footnote{Witbank Advertiser and/or Middelburg News, 9 September 1920, 21 January, 25 March, 13 May, 12 August, 23 December 1921; Middelburg Observer, 7, 28 October 1921, 20 January, 12 February, 3, 10, 17, 24 March, 23, 30 June, 23 September 1922.}

I have surveyed the two local newspapers for 1920-22, and these provide some taste of life in and around the town. This was a world where people played cricket (between colliery and town), golf, soccer and chess; where there was interest in rifles, girl guides, dancing and fancy dress balls; where Constable Grobler’s team was beaten by Mr Rawlings team in ‘wrestling on horseback’ at the Police sports day; where readers were told about the opening of the Polana Hotel in Lourenco Marques and the departure of Union Castle liners; where there was a poultry club and orchestral recitals, and Virtuous Wives showed at the movie theatre; and where the press debated foul play in rugby, carried advertorials for Pink Pills (good for adolescent girls who grew tall too quickly), and told awful jokes (‘Customer: “So you sell these watches at twelve shillings? It must cost you that much to make them.” Watchmaker: “It does”. Customer: “Then how do you make a living.” Watchmaker: “Repairing them”). There were churches for Anglicans, Presbyterians and Wesleyans, and a synagogue as well, and in neighbouring Middelburg - an old administrative and farming town situated within the mining area – there were three Dutch Reformed churches and one German Lutheran church. From here, a correspondent known as ‘Bourgeoisie’ would complain about white housewives having to ‘Rub shoulders’ with Indians and natives in the local market; concluding that tables should be arranged in rows with market staff at the head of each, and Europeans on one side and Indians and natives on the other.\footnote{For the schools see Langa interviewed by Mudau.}

1922 was the year of the general strike and Rand Revolt by white miners, which in fact started a week earlier on the collieries than on the gold mines. In Witbank there was widespread support for the strike. The local trade union movement was well
organised, and there was even a branch of the SAIF (South African Industrial Federation) Co-operative Stores. A few days prior to the start of the strike, Rex joked that the Schoongezicht Colliery should be renamed ‘Soon-get-sacked’. A week later he would report on a big meeting in support of the struggle, concluding: ‘there wasn’t the faintest doubt but that Witbank to a man, aye, and to a woman too – for there were crowds of women at the meeting – had made up its mind most loyally to support their men on strike’. The Strike Relief Committee included the Mayor, the Town Clerk, the Chairman of the Nationalist Party and the Vicar of St Margaret’s Church. For all this local support, the strike was resolutely opposed by the government as well as the owners, and it went down to defeat, leaving the miners’ unions in tatters.⁵₀

Rooms and the Day of Rest

It is highly likely that trade unionism, and to some extent party affiliation, was an important part of the culture and identity of white coal miners, as it was on the gold mines and in Britain. In contrast, black colliery workers had neither unions nor parties of any substance. There were fleeting attempts to organise unions, but unlike the position on the Witwatersrand, where the 1946 strike was a consequence of union mobilisation, there was nothing effective until after the formation of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1982. A possible partial exception was the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, which had popular support in Witbank around 1927. Nevertheless, coal miners were probably the most militant black workers in South Africa during our period, and their actions were often successful, despite strikes being illegal. A range of factors help explain this achievement, including the character of demands raised, which were virtually all couched in terms of established regulations and rights (including those set out in the 1911 act). Although the evidence is scanty, it seems likely that ethnic mobilisation through the rooms was generally a pivotal part of the process, as it was on the gold mines, where the izibonda were central to the organisation of the 1946 strike.⁵₁

As we have seen, the rooms were a space where black miners generally felt safe and could relax. This was reflected in other cultural practices. Foremost among these was drinking beer. The supply of beer to Africans was prohibited, but, as Dunbar Moodie has shown: ‘black miners tenaciously clung to alcohol as a necessary accompaniment of informal sociability. Even those who otherwise insisted on faithful adherence to mine rules, cheerfully admitted to illegal drinking.’⁵² Supplying alcohol to Africans was prohibited, but miners still drank beer in the locations and on the farms, and a 1902 Ordinance made it possible for larger employers to provide beer for their workers. In 1904, a ‘Kaffir Beer’ licence was obtained by Coronation Colliery, and in subsequent years most other collieries secured similar permits.⁵³ Mashiame recalled: ‘25 litres would be given to different rooms, every Saturday and Sunday. We would drink that beer over the weekend. If you like, you would go to your neighbour; go

⁵₀ Witbank Advertiser and/or Middelburg News, 11 November 1921; Middelburg Observer, 30 December 1921, 6, 27 January, 10 February 1922. In the 13 January 1922 issue of the latter paper, there is an item by ‘Rex’ on a meeting of the Witbank branch of the Shop Assistants Association, at which ‘a bevy of beautiful damsels’ outvoted the ‘few men present’ in response to a proposed strike. ‘Rex’ suggested that their position was partly because of ‘the fact that they much preferred their regular daily avocations to staying at home minding their baby brothers and sisters, and lighting the kitchen fires!’


⁵² Moodie, Migrancy and Male Sexuality, p 162.

there, come back. That beer was not for sale, it was just given. It was umgombothi. It was malt and mabela [Sorghum]. It was nice beer, nice stuff. He added: ‘People just drink beer. They don’t worship it.’ In addition, workers sometimes brewed or distilled their own liquor, including a spirit they called ‘mainstay’. According to Moodie, who was writing about the gold miners, but the same would have applied to the collieries: ‘Compounds that turned a blind eye to brewing were more popular with workers, so management had to walk a delicate line between the advantages of attracting employees and the risks of high absenteeism and Native Affairs department revocation of compound managers’ licenses.’

Similarly, dagga was banned but widely smoked, often in the rooms, and again managers generally turned a blind eye. In an interview with Daniel Langa, who was born in Witbank town in 1934 and began work at Navigation Colliery in 1951, for which I was accompanied by Nini Xulu, a colliery nursing sister, I commented: ‘In the documents of the whites they say “when Africans smoke dagga it makes them go wild.”’ Xulu responded: “Old people say that “liquor makes white people rich while dagga makes black people rich”.’

Except for essential maintenance, workers were free to take Sunday as a day of rest. It was a day for drinking, visiting friends on other mines, attending church, dancing, and playing sports. We know far too little about these important activities, particularly religion. A 1928 plan for Clydesdale Colliery shows an intention to build a church next to the married quarters. According to Nhlabathi there were four mud-built churches at Landau Colliery, all of which were already old when he was born. ‘The churches,’ he said, ‘were just standing there – one, two, three, four … Sundays was very busy, because people were still attending church, not like now.’ Also people were married in church, and they were buried by a priest (‘any priest could bury you’). The Catholic church was, apparently, the most popular because the ‘East Coasters went … too much.’ However, Nhlabathi’s own father, who, though he hailed from Mozambique, was a ‘bit fluent’ in Zulu, attended the American Methodist Episcopal, where Zulu was the main language. Then there was a ‘Gaza church’, presumably named after the southern part of Mozambique, which was also for ‘East Coasters.’ Finally, there was the ‘donkey church’, so called, according to Nhlabathi, ‘because it came from where there are camels [sic].’ Langa said that at Navigation Colliery ‘there was a church – even now people go there – it was Methodist. Shangaans, Zulus, everybody used to go there. They used Zulu in the church. Whenever people of different tribes come together they opt for Zulu.’ There was also the Salvation Army at the mine, and Methodists, Catholics and Romans.

At New Largo, remembered Mashiame, ‘There were priests inside the hostel. They had their own room, where no beer was allowed. Around nine o’clock on Sunday the church would start, until eleven, and people could go to their own place. … Wesleyan, Dutch and African Tranvaal churches. Any one could choose which church on a weekly basis. No restriction. Just open the bible, sing, speaking. [Attendance] would reduce boredom. The Mozambicans liked the Salvation Army. They really like

54 Mashiame interviewed by Mudau.
55 Daniel Langa interviewed by Peter Alexander and Nini Xulu, 16 December 1997.
56 Moodie, Migrancy and Male Sexuality, p 165.
57 Langa interviewed by Alexander and Xulu.
58 GNLB 261 433/16/94, blueprints for Clydesdale Colliery.
59 Nhlabathi interviewed by Alexander and Xulu.
60 Langa interviewed by Alexander and Xulu.
61 Langa interviewed by Mudau.
that one, and Catholic and Roman.\textsuperscript{62} Nkomo was a Methodist evangelist. At Bank Colliery and at Phoenix Colliery, where he worked at different times, he held services in compound rooms, because there were no church buildings. This meant that women were excluded, and if the men wanted to attended services where women were present they had to go to French [i.e. Transvaal Navigation Colliery]. There was a white priest, Gillette Alexson from America.\textsuperscript{63} Maloka argues that on the Witwatersrand one of the attractions of churches is that they helped promote literacy, ‘which could result in a better, higher-paid job.’\textsuperscript{64} In Witbank, where there was a higher proportion of married miners and hence children, the churches also played a role in developing schools. In 1926 the American Board Mission proposed establishing a church and school in a small reed and daub building on Clydesdale Colliery.\textsuperscript{65} Nhlabathi recalled that at Landau there was a school for ‘the little ones’ inside the church.\textsuperscript{66}

One scholar, Hugh Tracey, estimated that over 30 percent of African miners entertained themselves with so-called ‘tribal dancing’ in the 1950s, and Langa argued that it was ‘the main thing’ in terms if colliery recreation.\textsuperscript{67} There were regular dancing contests that were backed by the mines and enjoyed by tourists, and these emphasised different ethnically-defined styles of performance. It would be wrong, however, to assume that such dancing always buttressed the status quo. In the early twentieth century it was perceived as ‘war dancing’ and probably drew on genuine rural traditions. In December 1912, the police condemned ‘the system of having Kaffir War Dances during the Christmas and New Year Holidays … supporting instead sports that will appeal to the native mind, at which a liberal meat ration and a limited ration of kaffir beer will be supplied.’\textsuperscript{68} According to Maloka, missionaries and some mine managers associated ‘war dances’ with ‘savage’ rituals.\textsuperscript{69} In 1919, Wenela responded by supporting a competition, initially just for Mozambican workers, that rewarded the best dancers with ‘floating’ trophies and medals. In February 1921 there were finals for the best Inhambane, best Shangaan and best Mchopi team.\textsuperscript{70} All of the contestants were from gold mines, but, in December of the same year, the \textit{Witbank Advertiser} commented:

Considerable interest is being evinced in the Mines Native Dancing Competition which is now in progress. Some of the teams have given quite unique and smart exhibitions in the past contests, each company endeavouring to secure the coveted laurel. The innovation is commendable as it tends to keep the ‘boys’ occupied in a healthy pastime. A satisfied and contented servant always makes the best workman.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{62} Mashiane interviewed by Mudau.
\textsuperscript{63} Nkomo interviewed by Alexander and Mudau.
\textsuperscript{64} Maloka, \textit{Basotho and the Mines}, p 145.
\textsuperscript{65} GNLB 216 150/15/317, Native Sub-Commissioner, Witbank to Director of Native Labour, 18 November 1926.
\textsuperscript{66} Nhlabathi interviewed by Alexander and Xulu.
\textsuperscript{67} Maloka, \textit{Basotho and the Mines} p 127; \textit{Langa interviewed by Alexander and Xulu}.
\textsuperscript{68} Chamber of Mines Reel 2341 p. 0051, ‘Control of Compounds’, Cowie, Secretary; Transvaal Chamber of Mines to mine managers, 17 December 1912. This followed a letter from the police to the mines urging that ‘the usual raids … be made on the Compounds for sticks and dangerous weapons before the Christmas holidays.’
\textsuperscript{69} Maloka, \textit{Basotho and the Mines} p 127.
\textsuperscript{70} WNLA, Minutes Book 10, p 108, meeting before 12 May 1919, and p 218, 21 January 1921.
\textsuperscript{71} Alpha and Omega, ‘Witbank News’, \textit{Witbank Advertiser and Middelburg News}, 23 December 1921.
‘Native dancing’ continued to be a source of contention. In part, this was because it took place on Sundays, provoking the ire of some churches. In February 1926 Wenela responded to complaints by missionary societies by agreeing ‘that little or no publicity be made of native dances to be held on a Sunday.’\footnote{WNLA, Minutes Book 11, p 171, 27 April 1926.} By late 1927, dancing was associated with the possibility of serious disorder, and Wenela agreed that ‘large parties leaving the compounds with the object of attending native dances [will be] placed under adequate police control, and … all natives leaving the mine property on Sundays for the purposes of visiting be searched on leaving compounds and disarmed of serious weapons.’\footnote{WNLA, Minutes Book 11, p 218, 24 November 1927.} At Oogies Colliery in 1945, in the course of a rare ethnic conflict between Shangaans and Sothos, the notion of a ‘war dance’ re-emerged’, with the latter making use of kerries, sticks, assegais, pieces of iron and some bricks, stones and coal, and drums that they used to maintain the beat.\footnote{Alexander, Paternalised Migrants, pp 54, 74.} It is no wonder that the authorities were sometimes uneasy about such dances.

After the 1946 strike, there was a concerted attempt to ‘re-ethnicise’ mine culture, and native dancing was central to this move.\footnote{Cecile Badenhorst & Charles Mather. ‘Tribal Recreation and Recreating Tribalism: Culture, Leisure and Social Culture on South Africa’s Gold Mines 1940-1950,’ Journal of Southern African Studies 23(3), 1997. See also Transvaal Chamber of Mines, The Native Workers on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines (Transvaal Chamber of Mines, Johannesburg, 1947).} There had probably been changes in style since the early part of the century. In 1918, one US missionary recorded seeing ‘a perspiring line of Basutos, almost naked, writhing, stamping and grunting through a snake-like dance’. By the late-1940s, according to Maloka, the preferred Basotho uniform was khaki or black trousers, a headdress, shoes, and a short black ostrich feather.\footnote{Maloka, Basotho and the Mines p 129. See Mashiane interviewed by Mudau.} Nkomo remembered that ‘Choppies and Pondos played ‘pianos’, Xhosas shook their shoulders, and Sothos made funny sounds, shhhh.’ ‘So that was the division, the dividing line,’ he said. Mashiane recalled: ‘There were judges, adjudicators, so that you can tell which mine has won. The trophy belonged to the mine. Get a trophy, put it in the manager’s office. He would boast: “my team …”.’\footnote{Mashiane interviewed by Mudau.} Nhlapo explained that ‘the Union [i.e. NUM] sort of discouraged tribal dancing, because they felt [it] was like separating people.’\footnote{Nhlapo interviewed by Mudau.} Whilst this was an understandable and justifiable response, there is also an indigenous, athletic and artistic side to mine dancing that, arguably, is worthy of development.

Umteteli wa Bantu, which was owned by the Chamber of Mines but styled itself ‘Voice of the People’, sustained an argument against strict Sunday observance. It favoured time for sport as well as church, arguing, in 1926: ‘there is a definite moral enlargement in the observance of the rules of football, cricket, hockey and other healthy outdoor games. … Religion and recreation go hand in hand towards civilisation. … religion without recreation is a dull thing.’\footnote{Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 5, 9 August 1924, p. 2. According to Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 17, 9 May 1936, the Transvaal Chamber of Mines ‘recognise[d] the importance of healthy recreation in Native Life.’ So far, I have looked at copies of Umteteli housed at the University of Johannesburg and the Chamber of Mines. Volumes 24-28 are missing from these collections.} In its first volume, published in 1920, Umteteli reported on the Witwatersrand District Native Football Association, and it carried regular reports of soccer thereafter.\footnote{The names of the teams in the two Johannesburg soccer leagues make for interesting reading in terms of identity; see Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 17, 18 April 1936, p 13. See also Maloka, Basotho and the
Football Association (WBFA).81 In 1940 a Collieries Association was formed with the aim of developing colliery sports. Initially, it concentrated on dancing and soccer.82 Rugby and cricket were being played by black mineworkers from the early 1920s, and by the mid-1930s tennis and golf were also popular.83 We do not yet know whether these sports were being played on the collieries by black workers prior to the 1940s, but Witbank had a well-known black tennis club, Welkyn, from 1933 if not earlier.84 On New Year’s Day 1937 there was a ‘Bantu annual athletic sports day’ held in Witbank, and this was reported to have attracted large crowds.85 In terms of South African mines, the game of skittles originated in Witbank, in 1946, and then spread to elsewhere.86

As Rudzani Mudau has shown, by the 1950s the collieries recruited people just because they were good at soccer, and then they provided them with preferential treatment so that they had time to train and were fit for games at the weekend.87 Mashiame spoke about soccer games reducing boredom, and of being given a truck to travel to away games on the grounds of another colliery. Significantly, selection was purely on merit, ethnicity was not an issue, though Xhosas generally preferred rugby to soccer, and whites were living separately so played in different teams. The mining industry encouraged soccer as a healthy activity that would fill non-working hours on Saturday and Sunday. In so doing it provided a space where workers enjoyed themselves in large numbers and across ethnic boundaries. In the process they gained organisational abilities, and a common identity as back colliery workers was reinforced.

Conclusion

What emerges from this account is the importance of the compound room as a pivotal component in colliery culture. When NUM began organising in the 1980s it rejected key aspects of this culture, and understandably so. It campaigned against male/male sex, against ethnic selection (and ethnically based dancing), and, indeed, against the migrant labour system generally (and thus single quarters and the rooms themselves). In achieving its goals, the union was able to draw on other aspects of colliery culture, including some associated with the compound room. These included the ability to organise within the relatively safe space the room provided and utilising the ethnic contacts with which it was associated; the credibility and leadership of the izibonda; the

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81 Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 17, 23 May 1936, reported that the general meeting of the WBFA has not met so there had been no matches, and it commented: ‘What’s the matter? The best thing is to sink differences and make a start.’ See also Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 18, 8 May 1937.
82 Rudzani Mudau, ‘Sport and the Development of New Mining Communities’ (MA, University of Johannesburg, 2006), p 33.
83 Maloka, Basotho and the Mines pp 131-32, Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 3, 8 July 1922. By 1936 the Transvaal Bantu Cricket Union had 65 clubs; Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 17, 9 May 1936.
84 Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 14, 6 May 1933. The club was still functioning in 1937; Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 18, 8 May 1937.
85 Umteteli wa Bantu, Volume 17, 9 January 1937. The same issue reported a house cleanliness competition that had been held in the location. This was organised by the Joint Council of Europeans and Bantu, which also participated in the sports day.
87 Mudau, Sport, p 31.
greater dignity of the married quarters; disrespect for laws associated with drinking and smoking dagga; large scale organisation associated with dancing; and the critique of tribalism implicit in sport, especially soccer.

The creation and maintenance of this culture was a complex process. In part it was the product of state intervention. The 1911 Act was a key factor in determining the food the miners ate and the rooms in which they slept, socialised, had sex, and organised. The act is worthy of further study. The 1925 regulations reinforced the migrant labour system and the distinction, which had important cultural implications, between the compound and the married quarters. But the state was not omnipotent. It could not stop male/male sex, or the illicit drinking of alcohol and smoking of dagga. In part this was because of low level day-to-day to resistance by workers attempting to preserve some integrity in a hostile environment. But workers also mobilised through collective action, sometimes successfully, and it was this that ensured that progressive aspects of the 1911 Act were enforced; influenced the working hours and hence time available for recreation; and ensured that the rooms remained an area of relative autonomy, subject to raids by the authorities, but not to their complete control. There were also aspects of culture that reflected policies aimed at encouraging traditions regarded as less dangerous than some other practice. This was true, for instance, of the provision of free beer and the encouragement given to sport, though both of these could also be problematic for the mine and state police. It is also important, however, to recognise that the mine owners and the state did not necessarily have the same short-term interests. The latter’s concern to act on behalf of broader interests and to maintain order outside the mine, was sometimes at odds with the owners’ needs to secure a regular supply of labour and a compliant workforce. Not that the state was always the enemy and the owners the ally. When workers went on strike they usually turned to the Department of Native Affairs, which would often broker a compromise in the interests of defending established rules and maintaining order.

To conclude, we cannot adequately understand colliery culture in its own terms, as ‘thick description’. It was the product of complex interactions, which included the state as well as the owners and the workers themselves. Black miners created their own culture, not in circumstances of their own choosing, but under conditions they influenced and would eventually transform through working-class mobilisation.

1. **General outline.** This shows, from left to right (west to east): native hospital, compound (with cook and wash house), trading store, mealie store, location (fenced with 30 rondavels, wash house and a male and female toilet), native church, and dump. The main shaft is the building furthest to the north, and close to it there are two water tanks, a fan and a wash house.

2. **Compound rooms.** Each bed is a double-deck bunk. The space between beds is 18 inches wide. Note the hopper in the centre of each room.