

**African Women in Colonial Settler Towns in East and Southern Africa**

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### Summary and Keywords

The first permanent African residents of the new towns established by whites in southern and eastern Africa at the end of the 19th century were female. These towns were new so­ cial spaces, existing where no towns had existed before. The residents had to invent the rules for living: new forms of urban identity emerged over time. For white settlers, the towns were intended to mirror familiar European urban spaces. For Africans, little was recognizable, but there were many opportunities to adapt familiar social relationships to the new contexts.

African women’s lives in the early years of these white settler towns seem paradoxical. They were permanent residents, but officially they had no rights of residence at all. They had very limited economic opportunities, being pushed into prostitution and beer brew­ ing, yet they ended up being powerful property owners with independent wealth. They can appear as both victims and liberated agents. Their lives were complicated. But part of the paradox arises from trying to interpret their lives through European lenses, in which terms such as “prostitute wife” seem oxymoronic. Their lives perhaps made more sense to these women pioneers than they have to the academics who have attempted to recon­ struct them.

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Most towns and cities in Africa have long—and African—histories.1 Notable exceptions are the late 19th-century settler colonial towns in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Kenya. Even in these settler states—at least, in South Africa and Kenya, which had seaboards—ports such as Cape Town and Mombasa had deep pasts, being populated by Indian Ocean traders of Asian, Arab, African, and European origin. But inland, new towns such as Johannesburg, Salisbury (now Harare), and Nairobi emerged during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, built by and for the settlers of the white occupation. Through a combination of legislation, economic structures, and material force, Africans were excluded from these white people’s towns, except as workers with restricted rights to take up jobs, trade, find accommodation, or establish families.

Nairobi, Salisbury, and Johannesburg were each founded in the 1890s by white settlers as part of colonial economic expansion into African hinterlands. The cities were designed as homes for white men and, over time, their white wives, with whom they raised families, established schools, and set up hospitals, businesses, bureaucracies, mines, and other industries. The place of African labor in these cities was initially somewhat uncertain. In addition to the heavy manual work in industry, someone had to prepare the food, stock the larder, clean the floors, wash the sheets, mind the children, chop the wood, fetch the water, tend the gardens, collect the rubbish, deal with the sewerage, and keep the streets clear of animal droppings. White male settlers were on the whole unwilling to do the ser­ vice tasks, and white female settlers were initially in short supply.

African men, both local and distant, took swift advantage of this unmet demand and instituted labor relationships that worked for them. They established patterns of migrant labor, taking on short-term contracts in both industrial and service roles. This enabled them to accumulate cash and other goods without forgoing their rights over land and the labor of wives back home. African men claimed spaces for themselves in town and expected women to stay away. They were to remain at home under the watchful eye of their husbands’ kin and, by continuing to farm, to secure migrants’ rights to their land. Eventually, this system of migrant labor became institutionalized by the white settler occupiers them­ selves and formed the basis for the systematic cruelty of not only forced recruitment but also the compounds and “reserves.”

Once the system of migrant labor was established, African women were not welcomed in­ to town by the white settlers, either. They wanted neither “loose” women nor large families of Africans living in their nice European-modeled towns. But the women came anyway, partly for economic reasons but often to escape oppressive situations in their home villages. Some came to join husbands, but this was hardly welcome to the men, whose crops back home were being neglected if the wife were in town with them. Most women, then, came untrammeled by family or spouses. In the early years of the 20th century, African women made up less than 20 percent of the African population in these cities.

However, unlike local African men, they tended to be permanent residents in town, along­ side men from further afield (“alien natives”) who could not easily return to their places of origin. The local women predominantly worked as beer brewers, traders, and prostitutes, using skills and experiences that they brought with them from the rural areas.

These were new social environments, built from scratch in places where neither Europeans nor Africans had ever built towns before. In the absence of preestablished structures governing economics, politics, and human interactions, residents invented the rules and institutions as they went along. The systems of lineage membership, bridewealth transfers, land allocation, and kinship obligation that framed every aspect of African life could not be enforced in urban cash-based economies. For the first time, single women could survive without being attached to the household of a father or husband.

Not all urban women chose to break their ties with their families or in-laws: some were working there in order to support relatives back home. Nonetheless, an unprecedented

degree of autonomy characterized the lives of these pioneering African women who came to settle in the towns. Their new independence was routinely represented as a form of sexual immorality by both white settlers and African authorities, neither of whom used conceptual frameworks that could easily expand to accommodate autonomous African women.

By the mid-20th century, the African demographics within the white settler towns had begun to change. Men from areas within close reach of town, particularly those with education and skills, began to find opportunities to settle in town with their wives and to raise families there. There were tensions between these new, Westernized, middle-class residents and the older African populations of independent local women and migrant African men from distant places and unfamiliar cultures. The newcomers sought ways to signal that they were different and to distance themselves from the taint of sexual immorality attached to urban women. Especially after World War II, these marriage partnerships of local, educated men and women brought about profound changes in what it meant to be female, African, and urban. Women in towns became more organized in clubs, churches, and mosques but also in political organizations based on national identities and demands. In the second half of the 20th century, urban African women mobilized for national, rather than individual, freedom.

The histories of African women in these nascent cities are histories of profound paradox. Their lives seem unsettlingly oxymoronic: “prostitute wives” lived alongside “alien natives.” Historians have concluded, based on both archival and oral sources, that African women were oppressed within the new social environments of the white people’s towns, and also that they were freed by them. Local women were the permanent African residents in town, the bedrock of the African presence, and yet they were also invisible.

African women provided the essential preconditions of urban life, meeting the everyday needs of workers, and yet both white and African authorities treated them as interlopers who should not be there at all. Their lack of economic opportunities forced them into prostitution and beer brewing, yet they were also rich property owners. African women in towns were sexually vulnerable, and they were sexually powerful (but, whatever else, they were sexual).

Some, but not all, of these paradoxes are rooted in the heterogeneity of the urban com­ munities. There were fault lines and contradictions within and between the interests of white occupiers; African men and women; middle class, working class, and underclass; and the small numbers of other residents, mostly Indian, who also lived more or less permanently, in Nairobi, Salisbury, and Johannesburg. Any gross generalizations about African women in these nascent cities will necessarily end up with internal contradictions.

But these paradoxes cannot simply be explained away as representing different ends of various spectra. Studies of African women in early white occupancy towns do not just tell us about their lives and how they shaped the settler colonial city. They also tell us about how academics in the Western academy write history. Looking at these histories forces us to rethink many of the ideas and words that are used to describe African women’s lives, and to question how far the Western academy’s use of concepts arising from European history distorts its ability to represent these women’s experiences. What may be oxy­ moronic in one language and culture may simply be an everyday lived experience in an­ other, in which the words signify slightly different things. Terms such as “prostitute,” “wife,” “beer brewing,” and even “urban” may perhaps confuse rather than assist our at­ tempts to represent these lives and unravel these paradoxes. Until the majority of African history is written in vernacular languages, scholars should remain alert to the dangers of representing women’s lives using European words that make its subjects seem more, rather than less, difficult to understand.

# Origins of Salisbury, Johannesburg, and Nairobi

Salisbury, Johannesburg, and Nairobi were each founded in the 1890s, and each became the largest city in its respective white-delineated state. However, the cities had slightly different origins. Fort Salisbury was founded in 1890 by Cecil Rhodes’s “Pioneer Column,” an invading force that crossed the Limpopo River into African territory, in search of mineral deposits to claim for Rhodes’s British South Africa Company and its hangers-on. On high ground (the kopje) and with fresh water, Salisbury was the defensible final point of a long supply chain stretching through a string of forts established during the march inland. By contrast, Johannesburg, which became a municipality in 1897, had very little water, defensible ground, or other attractions for settlement, but it had enormous de­ posits of gold, first discovered in the mid-1880s. Huge numbers of white adventurers rushed to make their fortunes there, as miners or as suppliers of goods and entertainment to those digging and registering claims. Nairobi, by contrast, had a comparatively staid beginning. The site had long been a stopping point for the caravan trade carrying Indian Ocean goods inland, but in 1899 the town was founded as a bridgehead on the Uganda Railways then under construction. Nairobi was initially a much more African settlement than a home for whites, providing labor and trading opportunities at a time of economic crisis in the surrounding rural areas. The 1890s throughout east and southern Africa had been characterized by cattle epidemics, notably rinderpest (possibly caused by British imports of Indian oxen), which depleted families’ wealth holdings. Around Nairobi, drought and locusts had tipped communities over into famine, white invaders were seizing large swathes of land, and refugees seeking food had also spread smallpox. The new railway settlement attracted more African residents than white, initially, but it was still controlled by the colonial settlers.

The three settlements displayed similar geographies of white settlement, with the richer white residents building upriver and in the cooler hills, looking down on the sunbaked towns below. Initially there were no “locations,” but simply collections of huts and a few brick buildings, where whites, Africans, and others lived according to their wealth rather than their “race.” In Johannesburg, traders and service workers could be found in the town center, whereas miners built huts in compounds attached to the mines, which the mining companies gradually replaced with concrete buildings. In Salisbury, incomers of all sorts initially built or rented huts and brick houses around the kopje and the track that the whites called Pioneer Street, where the shops and hotels were also found. Gradually, the whites moved further north, while the Africans were pushed further south. In Nairobi, the Indian bazaar and the railway workshops formed a commercial core. Africans built huts in the central Pangani village, while whites built brick buildings further uphill and upriver.

In all three cities, whites, and Indians came as long-term/permanent residents. This gave them conceptual as well as economic ownership of the urban spaces. The whites, in particular, defined the nature of these towns. Unlike African towns and cities in West Africa, or the ports on the Indian Ocean, these urban spaces did not have existing systems of government based on African authority. The layout and political geography of the invading occupiers’ towns were modeled on European urban principles, with public buildings, churches, residential streets, and shops (even if these buildings were initially only built of mud and grass).

Indian urban life used different spatial organization, based on household compounds and street markets, which Africans found familiar and also adopted. This disrupted the white settlers’ narrative that they were making European-based urban spaces for themselves in their new land. Over time, the white settlers adapted their familiar European-model residential patterns and the nature of their public spaces to incorporate the unwanted but necessary African presence alongside them. These adaptations were frequently framed in terms of concerns about “sanitation.” This is, of course, a problem that all cities need to solve. But in the new occupied territories, built where no towns had existed before, “sanitation” regulations were increasingly used to justify marginalizing and restricting African urban residents. In Salisbury in 1908, the Native Urban Locations Ordinance ended the free market in accommodation, so it was no longer permitted that anyone who wished could build or rent a home in the city center. Africans were forced into a curfewed “location” called Harare (renamed “Mbare” in 1982) or into accommodation/compounds pro­ vided by employers. Johannesburg adopted a similar pattern, with the mining compounds providing most of the accommodations, which were only designed to house single men. In Nairobi, traders and residents were driven out of the town center in the 1920s on the grounds that the settlements were spreading disease (including venereal disease). The land was redeveloped to house Indian traders and artisans serving the white community, and African residents soon returned. Pangani continued to provide a central space of in­ dependent African urban residence, until 1938, when it was destroyed. African residents were removed to the established municipal location of Pumwani, which was similarly characterized by high levels of female residence and property ownership.

# African Women in the Nascent Towns

These were cities of strangers. Almost no one in these towns, including the whites, had been born there or came from near there. This was an alien form of community for local Africans. As John Lonsdale observed about Nairobi, “Few Kenyans had seen a town before the twentieth century.”2 There was a persistent African presence in the towns in the early 20th century, with Africans providing labor and services and selling essential agricultural produce. Yet local African men were unlikely to become permanent urban residents. They had vested interests in their rural homes, which were within a few days’ walking distance. There was no reason for them to settle in town. Even in the labor-hungry mining compounds in Johannesburg, men tended to come for short-term contracts to raise cash. Men from further away, however, sometimes gave up the idea of the long and dangerous journey home and made a permanent home for themselves in the settler colonial towns.

Many of these permanent male residents came from beyond the lines that the Europeans had drawn on their maps to define their colonial states, and were known by the oxy­ moronic term “alien natives.” But of all the people resident in town, the ones most likely to be relatively local, and relatively permanent, were the African women.

This is ironic, because African women were not supposed to be in the urban areas at all. Indeed, most of them *were* elsewhere. In societies without traditions of female urban trading, African economics required women to be growing essential crops, as well as pro­ viding the routine tasks of social reproduction (cooking, childbearing, pot making, basket weaving, beer brewing, midwifery, and so on). They were not restricted from movement: women could offer specialist services such as midwifery, or trade surplus or cash crops, over large areas, and they were expected to visit and provide some services for cognate kin (that is, their birth-lineage family) during slow times in the agricultural cycle. But if they abandoned the land they farmed while their husbands were away on migrant labor contracts, then usufruct rights would lapse and another woman’s husband or father from within the patrilineage could take over the land. African authorities, both male and female, wanted women to stay at home, in the rural areas.

For the white authorities in Salisbury and Johannesburg, women’s presence in town was not inherently a problem, as long as they were there as part of a proletarianized labor force. Around the start of the 20th century, mining interests in particular were keen for men to bring their wives and children to the compounds. Family men were less likely to leave after a short contract, which ensured labor-force stability and skilled workers for the employers. The wives, it was hoped, could also provide the kinds of services tradition­ ally performed by women in European towns as maids, cooks, nursemaids. But African men, whether local or “alien,” had no incentives to bring their wives with them nor to cede lucrative service jobs to them.

Consequently, the women who came to town tended to be single women, often with burned bridges behind them. Although it is meaningful in English to observe that these were “single women,” it is harder to pin down what this meant at the time to Africans. Whereas marriage in European culture was an event, in which a woman was either married or unmarried, in local African marriage systems, marriage was a process in which both men and women could be less or more married over time. A woman who had been pledged in a bridewealth relationship but was not yet living with the husband, and a woman who was living at the husband’s home but had no children, were both “a bit married,” in local terms, but one was entirely single and the other entirely married in European terms. Similarly, a widow with children who was unwilling to become wife to another man in the husband’s family was still “very married” in local terms but not in European culture.

There were both push and pull factors bringing these women to town. The push factors in the early 20th century have attracted most attention from historians. Some of these push factors were economic. In Kenya, for example, the combination of drought, cattle disease, and colonial demands for cash-crop production put significant stresses on rural areas.

Families lost both cattle and land. Sending their daughters to the new urban environment to take advantage of opportunities to sell crops or sexual services was an innovative and effective response to those pressures. In South Africa, economic depression, drought, conflict in Natal, and further outbreaks of rinderpest similarly began to push African women out of rural areas and into Johannesburg. Evidence from all three cities indicates that African women moving to town at the start of the 20th century were often destitute, without rural homes to provide them with material support. However, as Janet Bujra observes of women in Nairobi, “while this may have been true, it would surely not have been normal for traditional society, but would suggest and unusual degree of social dislocation existing in some areas at this period.”3 The focus on push factors such as these has tended to reinforce a narrative of urban women as victims, reluctantly washed up in town as the consequence of personal or family destitution.

Other push factors were more personal. White authorities during the early 20th century were constantly worried about the numbers of women who were running away to town because they did not want to be forced into marriage, or found their husbands intolerable in some way, or did not want to live alongside a newly introduced second wife. The authorities’ worries were partly motivated by concern for the women but also by the disruption caused when the men turned up at their offices and demanded help in getting the women back. These scenarios reinforce an analysis that women were pushed into town because things were not right at home, but they also suggest a degree of female agency that a focus only on economic hardship and destitution obscures.

Once we begin to acknowledge female agency, then pull factors begin to emerge, as well. Women weren’t just forced into town. Many women went into town looking for husbands (or possibly girlfriends), love, adventure, autonomy. White authorities were unsure whether to regard these women as victims or insubordinates but tended toward the latter. In Nairobi, for example, “women were regarded either as wives who properly belonged upcountry, or as prostitutes who had escaped male control and should be returned by and to male elders.”4 In Salisbury, the Native Affairs Department was unsympathetic to runaway wives, who “assume a very arrogant, independent and indifferent attitude towards their husbands.”5 Female agency was a problem for urban authorities, which further discouraged a victim analysis.

In subsequent scholarly analysis, however, there is generally less ambiguity. Urban women have been presented as victims: first as victims of patriarchal families and rural exploitation, and then as victims of colonial racism and sexism. But even if the historical data suggest that there were more, and greater, push factors forcing women into town than pull factors drawing them there, that does not necessarily mean that the women so pushed were simply victims. As the Zimbabwean literary critic Maurice Vambe observed, “African migrants were oppressed by a system that they often took advantage of.”6

These women, whether through choice or necessity, had independence and autonomy. On the one hand, that made them very vulnerable, but on the other hand, it disrupted established systems of gender power. It is striking that both white and African authorities attributed negative values to single African women in towns. Drawing on entrenched concepts about women who lived outside established protocol or respectability, urban women were stigmatized. There were cultural differences in how these negative values were ex­ pressed, but whether in English, Afrikaans, Sesotho, Shona, Kikuyu or some other tongue, the fundamental normative value of the tropes were broadly the same: impure, unclean, outside, sexually transgressive.

# Reinventing Prostitution

There were prostitutes in the new towns almost as soon as there were towns. This was “prostitution” in the classic sense, brought by white women continuing a practice that was deeply embedded in European culture. Sex workers had been a feature of the port of Cape Town since the 17th century. However, when Johannesburg emerged as an urban area, most of its prostitutes were recent immigrants coming from Europe rather than re­ locating internally from the Cape. Nonetheless, prostitution was a familiar service industry for these white women pioneers in the new inland towns. They engaged in commercial exchanges of sex for money, often negotiated by a pimp. There was a ready demand: men initially outnumbered women in the towns by huge ratios. In Johannesburg, it has been estimated that in the mid-1890s, men may have outnumbered women by as much as twenty-five to one, and 10 percent of all white women over the age of fifteen worked as prostitutes.7 In Salisbury, Nairobi, and other new settler towns, white women similarly worked in brothels, selling brief sexual encounters and accepting clients from all ethnic groups until this was made illegal by settler authorities keen to keep the towns as racially distinct islands of whiteness.

There was a well-established European model of prostitution for African women to follow, then, when they arrived in Johannesburg, or found a home on the kopje in Salisbury, or settled into Pangani village in Nairobi. But it was alien to the worlds they knew, where no one could survive outside the web of lineage-based agricultural production, held together by marriage alliances, and so no one, male or female, was “unattached” and free to sell sex for personal gain. All sexual relationships had implications for a much wider interest group, vested in bridewealth, children, ancestors, and compensation payments. Although African women soon discovered that, in the monetized, proletarianized economy of the towns, sex was a saleable commodity, they did not adopt the European model. Instead, drawing on what they knew and what they wanted, and shaped by the demography of the clients and the physical infrastructure of the new towns, African women developed new and distinctive forms of exchange, in which access to their bodies was one element, but not necessarily the defining element, in the transaction.

These were new social relationships, which needed their own words. In the vernacular languages, such new words quickly emerged (*mapoto* marriages in Salisbury; *watembezi, malaya*, and *wazi-wazi* in Nairobi; *nongogo*, *intombi*, and *ishweshwe* in Johannesburg).

These covered different forms of transaction. *Mapoto*, a Karanga neologism drawing on English, meant “marriage of the cooking pot,” and defined short-term liaisons in which women offered food, sex, and companionship in exchange for township accommodation (linked to men’s work contracts) and protection. As the men in the relationships were mi­ grant workers, these were temporary liaisons, and the women kept their independence. In Johannesburg, T. Dunbar Moodie identified three kinds of relationship: “Whereas one pays a fixed rate for a *nongogo*, he gives gifts to an *intombi*, and actually maintains an *ishweshwe*.”8 Luise White described a similar division in Nairobi. *Watembezi were* women who went to men’s rooms to provide sex and perhaps some cooking and cleaning. Typically, *watembezi* were not accumulating for themselves but remitting back to family. *Malaya*, on the other hand, owned their properties and provided “the comforts of home,” including bathing facilities and meals. *Malaya* women were likely to be accumulating for them­ selves, with slow and steady investment. *Wazi-wazi* was a red-light-district system, typically aimed at African soldiers mobilized around the 1914–1918 war. Women working this system took men to their own rooms, but typically these were rented on an hourly basis, and the transaction was a much briefer liaison, focused on sex alone, and thereby much closer to the European models of prostitution.

However, in English, all of these systems were subsumed under the term “prostitution.” The women were assumed to be transacting sex as a commodity in the European tradition. White officials assumed that African women, like their white counterparts, had pimps and worked from brothels. But they did neither. As Luise White points out, “There were no pimps in Kenya’s history.”9 African women did not need men to find clients for them: there was a huge pool of prospective clients. In Nairobi, rental rooms in Pangani were relatively cheap. In Salisbury and Johannesburg, women invested earnings in buying their own properties, from which they could also sell beer. Nonetheless, gradually both the English words and the associated European concepts came to dominate, because the white founders of the towns had the power to shape everyone’s urban environment in­ to forms that made sense to them.

Consequently, much of the academic literature reflects a European assumption that, for the women involved, sexual immorality and exploitation must have been at the heart of these transactions, and the women must have been diminished by that. Even Charles van Onselen, the great chronicler of the political economy of early Johannesburg society, seemed to struggle with writing about relationships he defined as primarily economic, without using the term “vice.” Yet, as Mary H. Moran put it in a different context, “African women might have different understandings of how their sexuality might be deployed, [and] to have sex with someone who makes no monetary acknowledgment might make one feel used, exploited, and dishonored rather than the other way around.”10 In a society where the payment of bridewealth was the mark of respectability and men were expected to acknowledge a woman’s productive and reproductive work over time through payments of goods and livestock to her and her family, it may well have seemed more exploitative to a woman if she had sex with a man and did not take payment. To see their urban arrangements as evidence of “vice,” and to imagine a payment-less cohabitation as free of “vice,” is to misunderstand African gender relationships at the time. The payment might, rather, be seen as confirmation of the respectability and moral nature of the arrangement, within the inherently unsettling context of lineage-free, bridewealth-free liaisons.

But in any event, these arrangements were a source of income. “Sex workers” is the term commonly used in academic literature to write about prostitution as an economic role and to avoid the stigma of “vice.” But the term puts all the emphasis on the sexual element of these women’s lives. For African families, the “morality” of the women’s lives was defined not so much by *how* they were generating income but by what they were doing with the money. Rural patriarchs in all three territories had found themselves without either cattle or women as a result of political upheaval, brutal appropriation by the white settlers, new economic opportunities for young people, and ecological disaster. Women who used their incomes to support families back home were regarded as dutiful and virtuous. Women who broke with lineage obligations and used their incomes to invest in properties and businesses for their own benefit were condemned by African authorities as promiscuous and unrespectable. Urban prostitution changed the relationships between senior men and junior women, and the connections between women and cattle as forms of rural accumulation. As Anne McClintock vividly put it, “If marriage was a source of fathers’ accumulation, prostitution became the source of daughters’ accumulation.”11

It is important to recognize that these women, as permanent urban residents, were creating the *preconditions* for a successful migrant labor system. Sex was only a small element of what they provided. Their permanence and stability provided the infrastructure that ensured that men ate, drank, bathed, had sex, and deliberated together as they would at home. “Prostitutes” maintained forms of household that mirrored those in the villages.

Migrant labor systems did not destroy rural household production systems, because those systems were reproduced in temporary liaisons in town. Men did not need to become something wholly different in the alien white environment, because urban women enabled the social reproduction of those gender identities that underpinned power and production relationships back home.

These women, then, created the conditions that made life for the whites in the towns possible. They were the permanent residents sharing this new social space with the whites. Without them, the migrant labor system would potentially have collapsed, as would many rural hinterlands dependent on them for remittances. Yet, for the white residents, these urban African women did not officially exist. And, insofar as they did exist, all they were doing was selling their bodies for sex. Their vital contribution to the political economy of the towns was unrecognized in the colonial pioneer narrative. For both African rural patriarchs and white officials, these independent women in town, exercising their own agency, were demonstrating defiance against patriarchal controls. The fact that one of the services included in the package that they offered was sex reinforced a colonial narrative that insubordination by women was synonymous with sexual immorality. “Whore” be­ came the defining identity of urban African women, even though it was an identity so alien to local culture that an English word had to be used to express it.

# Urban Identity and Belonging

Although women’s sexual relationships in town attracted so much attention and censure, their roles as property owners and beer brewers were probably more economically, politically, and culturally significant. Unlike in old, established West African towns such as Old Oyo or Benin, in these new towns there were no important roles for women as traders and food suppliers. But they could still brew beer. Beer brewing was women’s work throughout southern and eastern Africa. It was important work partly because it provided a safe and sociable drink that bonded communities, partly because the beer produced was nutritionally rich (being a form of fermented porridge, rather than the clear beer of European culture) and helped to compensate for other dietary deficiencies, and significantly because beer libation played a central role in spiritual gatherings and rituals, which continued to take place even in town. Even women who did not want to commit to sexual partnerships could brew beer and make a living in town, provided that they could find accommodation independent of a man and his job-linked housing. The work was potentially lucrative, and gave rise in time to the “shebeen queens” (as they were dubbed in Johannesburg) who exerted informal authority and power in most white settler towns by the 1950s.

The white settlers on the whole did not like the beer brewers. Mine owners recognized the nutritional value of “kaffir beer,” but these benefits were offset by their mistrust of the women who brewed it. White authorities did not like that beer brewing gave women independent agency; they did not like that men could get too drunk to work, and they did not like to see a good income stream disappearing into African hands. A temperance legacy—robustly mocked by white settlers as a rule—provided a further link between women and immorality, and underpinned continuing efforts to dislodge women from town. There were regular efforts to limit or outlaw beer brewing, particularly in towns, and to control beer drinking. In many towns and cities, municipal breweries were supposed to have a monopoly over the brewing and supply of kaffir beer. In Nairobi, African women were employed in the municipal brewery in the 1920s, and, as Bujra observed, “it seems probable that this constituted the first wage labor for women on any scale in Nairobi.”12 Nonetheless, in practice women continued to brew illegally, creating the foundations for the underworld power of the shebeen or skokiaan queens/busaa brewers in white urban spaces.

Urban women’s economic options were limited, but this does not mean they were dismal. Beer brewing and liaisons with men could generate significant income. Restrictions on African housing made it very difficult for women to rent (hence the need for *mapoto* marriages in Salisbury, for example), but money opens many doors, especially in a free- booting, free-market pioneer economy. Once they had enough cash, it was relatively easy for women to *buy* property in town. As the permanent residents, they knew where to buy and how to invest successfully in property. In the African townships of Nairobi, Salisbury, and other white settler towns, women became significant players in rental markets, which were often linked to beer brewing and shebeens. This did not go unnoticed by the white authorities. By the 1920s, expressions of concern about immorality and sanitary conditions in towns were objections less to women’s sexuality and prostitution and more to their accumulation of wealth and houses.

A major problem with wealthy, independent African women in town was that they did not fit into the “tribal” systems of rule that white authorities had, by the 1910s, come to depend upon. In these systems, all Africans, whether urban or rural, were formally under the authority of a chief, who was in turn answerable to a white official. As part of these hierarchies, all African women were under the authority of fathers and husbands. It was desirable, from the perspective of the occupying white authorities, for men to leave their rural lands in search of waged labor. Their “tribal” identity was guaranteed by the wives who remained behind to farm the (shrinking, increasingly white-appropriated) ancestral lands to care for the children and elders and to define the household units against which tax was levied. But wealthy and independent women who lived in town without the authority of husbands or fathers fell through institutional gaps. They were not citizens governed by the laws and authority systems applicable to white women, but neither were they subject to the chiefly laws and authorities that were supposed to apply to them as African women. This sense that urban women were “out of control” reinforced the representation of them as “immoral.”

Urban women lived beyond the boundaries within which identity had been constructed in the past. They forged new forms of identity. In part, they began to blur the boundaries of ethnic and religious identities. In Nairobi, urban women from all backgrounds tended to adopt Islam as a neutral identity with a strong support network. However, both Christian and Muslim women took male clients across ethnic and religious lines, even though uncircumcised Luo men were deemed “unclean.” They were protected by other women, who denied that they had carried out these transgressions. Despite such creative responses to the new social environments of European-style towns, urban women still defaulted to working within the cultural structures that made sense to them. As well as reproducing many of the essentials of familiar marriage relationships in *mapoto*, *malaya*, and *ishweshwe* relationships, women also constructed pseudo-kinship relationships between themselves. They recreated those familiar structures in new ways. They shifted from a patrilineal to a matrilineal system of inheritance, in which property stayed in female hands, with succession going from mother to daughter. A childless woman might designate another woman as her heir, treating her and any children she might have as family, thereby creating matrilineal lines of inheritance and ensuring that a kin network would provide sup­ port in sickness and age. Some women used female–female marriage (originally intended to ensure that patrilineal property could be passed down in the absence of heirs) to ensure that their property passed down through matrilineal lines. Women in Nairobi were using familiar forms of kinship in radically new ways “to disguise in the language of traditionalism a radical departure from established ‘tribal’ practice.”13 Of course, many women simply married and lived with their husbands as they would have done at home.

The difference, however, and it was a significant difference, was that their husbands were not local. For decades, African urban marriages were typically between local women and men from far away. There is a simple reason for this. Local men may have entered into fairly stable liaisons with urban women, but the relationships were temporary. Local men were not permanently resident in town. They went home to the wives farming their land, or to use the bridewealth they had earned to marry local wives and reinforce local lineage alliances. By contrast, men from far away tended to settle in town. They were permanent residents, as were the local women who had made a home in town. When possible, these men negotiated bridewealth payments with their in-laws, and many took their local women back home with them when they finally retired from working in town.

There were costs to women in making a town marriage. It was difficult to raise children in town. Wages for most men were not intended to provide food for more than a single man. There were few safe spaces for children to play and fewer schools. White landlords were likely to evict if they saw children on properties rented officially to a single man, and extended kin networks providing help with childcare were back in the rural areas.

Motherhood, the key experience that defined women as adult, was immensely challenging. Urban fertility rates were low. This was partly because one of the push factors driving women to town in the first place was rejection as a result of infertility. But also, children born in town did not properly “belong” to their ancestral homes, and so did not have a proper identity at all. Many women giving birth felt obliged to travel to the husband’s home, or, if unmarried, to their own rural home, in order to confer a sense of identity on the child. Some women followed rural practices by burying the child’s umbilical cord at the entrance to their town dwelling, as they would have buried it at the hut’s entrance back home. In this way, their children became more “of town” than of anywhere else. Women who lost all ties with their rural origins also lost personhood, as did their children. In Salisbury, children born in town were referred to as *mabhonirokisheni* (born in locations), using the noun prefix *ma*-, denoting things, rather than the noun prefix *va*-, denoting persons.14

There were no preexisting African identities for women to inhabit, nor to be constrained by, in these European-origin towns at the turn of the 20th century. They were not primari­ly identified as farmers, traders, mothers, or wives, which were the roles that conferred status and meaning in women’s lives. Instead, they were identified as beer brewers, prostitutes, and property owners. These identities were paradoxical—permanent property owners but marginal and illicit town dwellers. If they were wives, they were likely to be married to men from far away, with consequences for their identities in their own lineages and for their children’s identity. They shaped the new cities and a new set of social institutions to go with them. But in all of this, they were represented as an absence, with­ out roots, without morals, and without any right to exist. Women played a very significant role in *creating* African urban spaces, because of their continuity as residents. But they were denied space by African men, as well as by white administrators. They were the bedrock of the communities, but they lost meaningful identities in the process.

# New Urban Demographics, “Respectability,”

**and Politics**

The lives of women in the white settler towns changed significantly in the mid-20th century. In Johannesburg, the rise of apartheid meant that women’s lives in town became more precarious than ever. Meanwhile, there was some movement in the opposite direction in Nairobi and Salisbury. A new African middle class abandoned migrant labor and became permanently urbanized, salaried workers. Respectable Christian and, in Nairobi, also the Muslim families from within the territories came to town, lived together, and raised their children there. The early 20th-century strategy, shared by rural patriarchs and white administrators, of tightening control over women to keep them in rural areas, gave way to greater acceptance of women living permanently with their local husbands in towns.

The perceived dichotomy between moral women who remitted their earnings back to rural areas and immoral women who invested in their own business interests remained strong into the middle of the century. In Salisbury, the radical Anglican missionary Arthur Shearly Cripps observed in 1936 that complaints about women having no one to control them were not aimed at those who came to town to trade but those “who come and stay and make their homes in the locations without proper husbands.”15 But those with “proper” husbands were permitted by both African and white authorities to stay in town, as long as they could demonstrate respectability, or what Teresa Barnes has called “righteousness.”16

In another paradox, the respectable married women, whom the authorities permitted to live permanently in town, were the ones whose respectability required that they return regularly to the rural areas. To demonstrate their status as good wives and daughters, these urban middle-class women not only endorsed their husbands’ remittances back home but regularly migrated between urban and rural areas, supporting their own families and their in-laws in agricultural tasks such as harvesting, helping to market their pro­ duce in town, and participating in ritual ceremonies. The women without “proper husbands” were under no such obligations.

The newcomers were anxious to distance themselves from the reputation for immorality that had become firmly attached to urban women. They were openly hostile to women who lived independently on various forms of “vice,” and reinforced the discourses that associated independent women with “dirt” and sexual immorality. Once again, women

played a major role in creating urban environments. They made ostentatious use of soap, founded clubs, and invented the “club woman,” who signaled her respectability, and therefore her right to be free of harassment by the authorities, through her busy engagement with good works, domestic-science and hygiene classes, and church- or mosque-going. Uniforms became a popular way of indicating membership of these groups and there­ by nurturing white approval, upon which safe and secure occupation of urban spaces de­ pended.

These processes created new political fault lines and mobilizations. As the urban space became more “respectable,” and as rural patriarchs developed different strategies to hold onto their power, so it became more possible for young women to leave the rural areas to take up waged work in the towns. A few elite women were able to become nurses and teachers. Hostels were built by the authorities so that employed single women could live respectably in town. In Salisbury and Nairobi, middle-class African men began to demand some form of segregation from working-class Africans, protecting their wives’ respectability. In Nairobi, this glided smoothly into a demand for political power. In Salisbury, it fueled a demand for gender-segregated drinking places and, later, when the construction of new communities for elite families away from the vice dens of the old town­ ships assuaged that anxiety, a civil-disobedience campaign to open up elite spaces such as restaurants, libraries, and hotels to “respectable” Africans.

Class and gender divisions cut across anticolonial struggles. Working-class male hostility toward relatively well-paid women in hostels in Salisbury led to the rapes of women in Harare Township’s Carter House hostel, for their perceived refusal to support a 1956 bus boycott. By contrast, in Johannesburg the same year, women began to mobilize for the right to family life in town and against pass laws, famously declaring that “now you have touched the women, you have struck a rock.” Meanwhile, shebeen queens had come to dominate working-class life in the townships and used their underground networks to facilitate both political and armed resistance. In Nairobi, women as well as men took the Mau Mau oaths and, unlike women of earlier generations, were encouraged to take on leadership roles in the struggle, not least because they had fewer restrictions on their mobility than men. The paradoxes of the early 20th century had settled into an established African modernity, in which women had as much a role to play as men.

# Discussion of the Literature

There is a body of good academic literature on African women’s urban histories across the continent, which throws a useful spotlight on the distinctive experiences of women in the new-settler colonial towns. Women’s lives in towns developed by Africans rather than Europeans followed different trajectories. An excellent overview of these histories can be found in the Kathleen Sheldon’s [1996](#_bookmark18) edited collection *Courtyards, Markets, City Streets: Urban Women in Africa*.

The academic literature on African women in these three settler colonial towns at the turn of the 20th century does not tell a single story. Different historiographic traditions lead to different emphases. The literature on Johannesburg is large and rich, but its focus on women has been quite narrow. Women feature predominantly in work on political mobilization, particularly around segregation and the right to live in town. The literature on Nairobi highlights women’s economic roles, although Luise White’s immensely influential 1990 book on prostitution, *The Comforts of Home*, brought women’s relationships with men into center stage. The literature on Harare has mostly focused on class and respectability, and the social conditions forging urban identity, expertly encapsulated in the text, *We Women Worked So* *Hard*17.

It is striking how Eurocentric gender roles are taken as given in much of this literature. There is an explicit assumption in the academic literature, as well as from the white settlers at the time, that African women would have taken up domestic service work in town had men not laid claim to those jobs first. But not only were African men vigorously protecting their jobs as cooks, childcarers, or cleaners; African women were taking up opportunities for beer brewing, trading, or informal marriage, which were all significantly less alien roles for them than working in a white household was. Similarly, insights about urban life being predicated on women’s roles in social reproduction assume that women are needed in order to provide men with cooking, cleaning, and sexual services, despite Moodie’s clear evidence that men on the mine compounds would and could provide these services in the absence of women.

It also seems that the background of writers influences what they see. For example, Claire C. Robertson, coming from studying female market traders in West Africa, does not see urban women in Nairobi exerting the kind of trading power that she had come to expect of urban African women. And so she sees urban women in Nairobi as profoundly eco­ nomically marginalized and oppressed. However, other commentators, such as Terence Ranger, whose previous experience focused on rural women in southern Rhodesia, tend to write about urban women as powerful by comparison.

## Primary Sources

Archival information about African women in the early decades of these new towns comes overwhelmingly from white administrators who were grappling with women’s presence as a problem. The relevant material is scattered across files in the respective National Archives in Nairobi, Harare, and Pretoria, particularly in those dealing with housing, education, transport, tax, crime, and laws on marriage and inheritance. For Harare, some da­ta is also held in the British South Africa Company files that are part of the Rhodes House Collection in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Missionary sources are also valuable, with Methodist records being particularly rich for these urban centers. Some of these missionary materials are held in respective National Archives, some in the headquarters of the missions in the United Kingdom, the United States, South Africa, and others in academic collections such as those of the London Missionary Society in the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

Women appear most frequently as the topic of complaints by African men, rather than in their own right or as the subject of white attention. The best evidence comes from court records, in which women’s testimonies and accounts of their everyday lives can be found. Most other archival sources follow the perceptions and discourses of the time and disregard women’s urban presence entirely. The richest evidence comes not from the archives but from oral histories. Teresa Barnes with Everjoyce Win, and Luise White transformed the depth and extent of our knowledge of women’s lives in Salisbury and Nairobi. However, the reach of oral history is limited, and it is hard to obtain full accounts of lives from the early 20th century.

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