Aspects of hawking in the Transkei, 1920-1945 *

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As economic conditions in South Africa have deteriorated over the last few years, the attention of local academics has focussed increasingly on the informal sector to which many of the impoverished turn for survival. Geographers, economists, historians and social scientists have investigated aspects of the informal sector which range from Johannesburg coffee cart traders and flower sellers to Umtata's fruit and vegetable vendors.[1]

Not surprisingly, studies have tended to concentrate on the activities of those marginalized peoples who at present continue to resort to the informal sector and who are almost exclusively black. The emphasis of informal sector literature therefore gives the impression that this pursuit historically has been monopolized by blacks. This is, however, not true. Itinerant white hawkers, like the ubiquitous smous, were for example an established part of the late 19th and early 20th century Transvaal economy. And in Umtata, Transkei, white hawkers dominated until the 1940s. This is surprising, not least because they were operating in a 'black' area which was itself already home for a large, increasingly impoverished African population.

To make sense of its changing racial character, it is necessary to note the changing nature of hawking itself. In the early 20th century hawking in South Africa was a livelihood practised by people at the lower end of the social scale. This included East European immigrants, proletarianized Afrikaners and, in Natal, former indentured Indian labourers. This group was not socially or economically homogeneous. Some had greater resources and were able to use hawking as the first step to economic fortune, while others lived a hand to mouth existence. With the development of the South African economy, access to capital increasingly became a prerequisite for accumulation. Changes of upward economic mobility via hawking declined. At the same time Africans, hitherto self-sufficient on the land, began to move to cities and turned to hawking. During the period under discussion, therefore, hawking was becoming though had not yet entirely become a strategy for survival rather than a path to profit. In addition it was beginning to attract African participation.

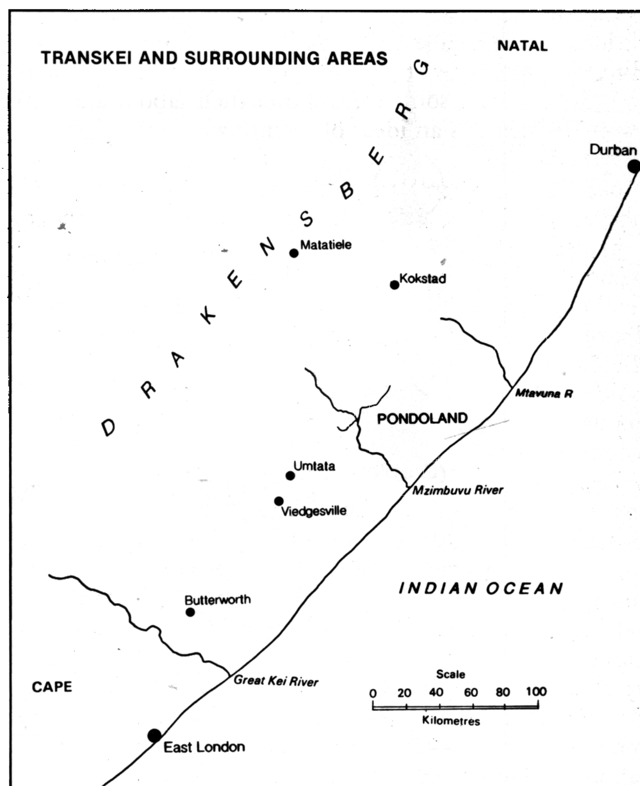
This article sets out to document the existence of white hawking in Umtata, but also attempts to reveal the historical conditions under which hawking in the Transkeian countryside developed. In the process it discusses the way in which the state navigated between conflicting local demands and the dictates of national policy.

HAWKING IN UMTATA

From 1916 onward, the occupation of hawking in the Cape and Transkei was controlled by law (Ordinance 14 of 1916). A hawker was defined as

> any person who carries on the trade, or business of selling or offering or exposing for sale, barter or exchange, any goods, wares or merchandise, and for that purpose travels about from place to place carrying his goods with him.[2]

Hawkers were required to buy licences which entitled them to trade either in municipal areas or in rural areas. Licence



fees and the conditions of trading were frequently revised, but this basic distinction between urban and rural hawking was retained.[3]

Of the 56 hawker licences issued in Umtata between 1922 and 1939, 80% were issued to whites.[4] This level of white participation was probably unique in South Africa. Elsewhere, particularly in Natal and parts of the Transvaal, petty

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NB: All archival references are to materials in the Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town.

[1] See for example C.A. Rogerson, 'The rise and fall of the coffee cart trading in Johannesburg, 1930-1965' (unpublished paper presented to the Economic History Conference, University of Natal, Durban, 1984); P. Wilkinson and D. Webster, 'Living in the interstices of capitalism: towards a reformulation of the "informal sector", *Social Dynamics* 8(2), 1982; 'A small matter of survival: official and unofficial views on the street traders of Umtata', *Transkei Development Review* 3(1-2), 1984; R. Tomaselli, 'Indian flower sellers of Johannesburg: a history of the People of the Street', in B. Bozzoli (ed.), *Town and countryside in the Transvaal* (Johannesburg, 1983); N.J. Nattrass, *Street trading in the Transkei: a struggle against poverty, persecution and prosecution* (Development Studies Unit, University of Natal, Durban, 1984).

[2] Licences Act, No. 16 of 1920 (printed in T.G. Duncan and C. Wyndham, *Juta's revised Cape Ordinances*, 1911-1929 (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1930), p. 469, qualified this definition with a number of important exceptions, including street vendors, market traders and Africans selling their own produce in reserves.

[3] Licences Consolidation Act, No. 32 of 1925; Licences (Amendment) Act, No. 26 of 1927.

[4] Calculations made from information contained in CMT (Chief Magistrate Transkei) (Vol.) 487, 16/24/9.

trading was all but monopolized by Indian traders. In the Transkei a policy to prevent Indian emigration from Natal probably ensured that the territory's petty trading situation would differ from that in the white provinces, allowing both whites and Africans a rare chance to participate. The white hawker presence in Umtata needs to be seen as part of a broader poor white response to the pressures of capitalism.[5] These pressures had begun to press heavily on whites after the mineral revolution, though the phenomenon of poor white poverty in the Cape predated these discoveries.[6] As I have argued elsewhere, one of the responses to the onset of difficult economic circumstances was to seek 'pioneer conditions'.[7] This involved poor whites migrating to areas less directly affected by the encroachment of capitalist forces, in order to retain some control over their labour and their lives. Transkei was an ideal place into which to migrate — it was close to the hard-hit areas of the Eastern Cape, and though state control was steadily being tightened, it still offered some of the advantages that had attracted the gun runners in the Xhosa-Cape frontier wars, some hundred years before. Land ownership was not a likely outcome of trekking to the Transkei, but trading opportunities were present. Transport networks were poorly developed and had inhibited the establishment of extensive and powerful trading concerns. Indeed there was little to attract local capital to Transkei. For these reasons, an inviting gap in the area's trading structure existed.

As against the predominance of whites in Umtata hawking, there were relatively few Africans involved. This is surprising because by the 1930s the Transkei economy was in tatters. Many Transkeians were no longer able to survive off the land and thus became migrant labourers. Within Transkei itself migrations also began and from the mid-1920s, Umtata's African population began to grow. In 1928 it stood at 2 020, but this was an increase of over 600 since 1925. By 1938 the numbers had risen to 2 696. Umtata, however, remained a predominantly white town, offering domestic labour opportunities, but not really conducive to African entrepreneurial initiative.[9] There are a number of reasons for this. Umtata's white town council which issued the hawking licences was not well disposed towards African hawkers. Obstacles were placed in their way. African applicants for pedlar licences, for instance, were subjected to a medical check to test for 'communicable diseases'.[10]

In general the Africans who applied for hawker licences were males. Although detail is scanty, it is possible that they were trying to avoid the migrancy option in order to continue heading their households. They may well have come from households which still remained coherent social units while, all around them, familial disruption was occurring.[11] Women hawkers, on the other hand, did not generally bother about licences. If conditions in the 1980s are anything to go by, they were probably unable to afford these licences, being destitute, without male financial support and with children to feed.

By 1934 it had become common practice for Transkeian women to sell goods to train passengers at Kei Bridge. Their customers were migrant labourers heading south for the Cape labour markets. This competition enraged rival (white) hawkers. In an effort to end their competition the owner of a store near Butterworth, P.J. du Preez, complained to the Native Affairs Department (NAD) and eventually to the Minister himself — but to no avail.[12] (the attitude of the NAD is discussed further on in this article, but for the

*All photographs by R. Morrell.

*The modern face of hawking in Transkei: a widow sorts vegetables into convenient packages prior to displaying for sale. (Umtata hawkers are all women and many are the sole breadwinners).**

[5] Those whites who obtained hawking licences were not always poor. The Wyatt family, for example, clearly made a good and reliable living out of hawking. But most of the white hawkers went in for hawking as a temporary, stop-gap measure, indicating an insecure existence.

[6] See e.g. R. Ross, 'The origins of capitalist agriculture in the Cape Colony: a survey', and C. Bundy, 'Vagabond Hollanders and runaway Englishmen: white poverty in the Cape before Poor Whiteism', in W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido (eds), *Putting a plough to the ground: accumulation and dispossession in rural South Africa, 1850-1930* (Johannesburg, 1986).

[7] R. Morrell, 'A community in conflict. The Poor Whites of Middelburg, Transvaal, 1900-1930' (unpublished paper presented to the History Workshop conference, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984).

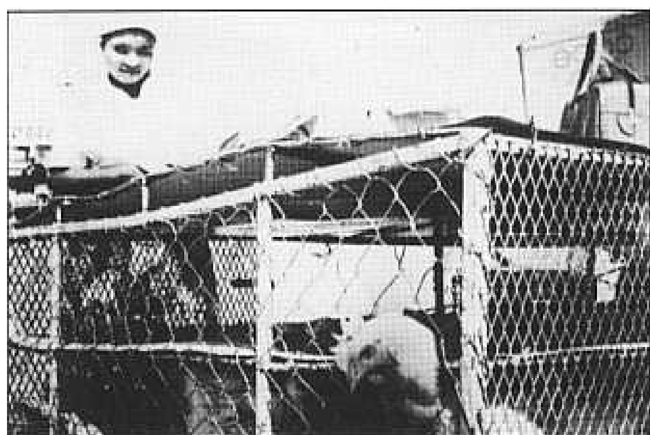
[8] A. Mabin, 'The making of colonial capitalism: intensification and expansion in the economic geography of the Cape Colony, South Africa, 1854-1899' (Ph.D., Simon Fraser University, 1984), argues that the economic development of the area was slowed down by the export of local (Eastern Cape) investment capital to the Witwatersrand.

[9] *Official South African municipal year book, 1927-1928* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1928), p. 130; *Official South African municipal year book, 1938-1939* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1939). Many have attested to the decline of agricultural productivity in Transkei, e.g. C. Bundy, *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry* (London, 1979), and F.W. Fox and D. Back, *A preliminary survey of the agricultural and nutritional problems of the Ciskei and Transkei territories, with special reference to their bearing upon the recruiting of labourers for the gold mining industry* (Johannesburg, 1938). By the early 1930s between 60% and 70% of Transkei men worked on the mines, 30 000 tax payers had no land, 50% owned no cattle and infant mortality was in the order of 60-70 per 1 000. See A. Stadler, 'Food crisis in the thirties: a sketch' (unpublished paper presented to the History Workshop conference, University of the Witwatersrand, 1981), pp. 3-6. In his work, The political economy of Pondoland, 1860-1930 (Johannesburg, 1982), William Beinart however argues that in Pondoland things were better and surpluses continued to be produced until the 1930s.

[10] A pedlar was, unlike the hawker, required to move continuously. This licence was cheaper than the hawker's licence and attracted poor Africans rather than poor whites. See CMT 487, 16/24/9: CMT — Resident Magistrate (RM), Umtata, 9.12.1937. Also M.W. Swanson, 'The "sanitation syndrome": bubonic plague and urban native policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909' *Journal of African History* 18(3), 1977, pp. 387-394. For a clear illustration of the way in which the Durban Town Council protected white commercial interests against Indian traders, see C.H. Wyley, 'The Natal Dealers' Licences Act of 1897 and the conflict between Indian and white capital in the borough of Durban' (B.A.(Hons), University of Natal (Durban), 1986).

[11] Pule Phoofolo of the University of Transkei has been doing interesting work on this subject and is shortly to publish an article in *Past and Present*. See also D. Wylie, 'The changing face of hunger in Southern African history, 1880-1980', *Past and Present* 122, 1989.

[12] CMT 487, 16/J, Part 1: P.J. du Preez — CMT, 27.5.1934.



Selling chickens in Umtata.

moment one should avoid jumping to the conclusion that it was always able and willing to defend African hawker interests from local pressure.)

Eight years after Du Preez's complaint, a far more formidable opponent of African hawkers joined the fray. A representative of United Tobacco Company (UTC), fast achieving a monopoly of the South African tobacco trade at the expense of white and black producers, objected to the sale of 'native-grown tobacco (for which natives have an inherent liking) at 3d. per saucerful. In consequence of this disturbing practice', it continued, 'the various retailers ... are experiencing a positive slump'.[13] The NAD refused to take any action but in due course the UTC succeeded in capturing the African smokers' market as African tobacco production declined and the state began to tighten its control over the dagga trade.[14]

Up until the Second World War (1939) whites dominated Umtata hawking, but thereafter they appear to have faded out. At the same time African hawking began to increase[15] as pressure on the Transkeian peasantry rose. The new hawking differed from the old in that participants seem increasingly to have been drawn from those unable to get migrant labour (women and the infirm). Hawking had thus been transformed from a relatively comfortable option into a matter of dire necessity.

HAWKING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The sale and purchase of grain was the single most important trading activity in the Transkeian countryside. White traders were quick to capitalize on this trade and by the 1860s were buying large amounts from Mfengu producers in the south. By the 1880s large grain surpluses were being produced in Pondoland and white traders were making handsome profits by buying cheaply at harvest time and selling it back at inflated prices in times of shortage.[16]

Given the importance of the grain trade, the white traders were very sensitive to any inroads that were made into their hold over that trade. Any competitor was thus regarded with suspicion that verged on hostility. The African licenced hawkers who temporarily established themselves as grain traders each season and 'so interfere(d) with a trader's livelihood' was one group that raised the ire of traders, while another was the 'exempted' African grain producer, who was allowed to trade in grain in the locations without a licence.[17]

Though neither group conducted a volume of trade that seriously threatened trader power, the traders were constantly active in bolstering their positions. They attempted to preserve their grip on the grain trade by approaching the Chief Magistrate of Transkei (CMT) through the Transkeian Civic Association. A request made in June 1928, for example, urged the CMT

> to make it illegal for a hawker to sell within three miles of a trading station, to remain longer in one place than 24 hours, to return to a place where he had pitched before within five days and to hand over commodities for sale to anyone but a licenced dealer, that exemption certificates be no longer issued, as they provide an easy means of evading the regulations, and that a hawker's licence be five pounds per vehicle per district.[18]

The rival African organization, the United Natives Agricultural and Industrial Society, likewise appealed to the CMT who found in their favour and rejected the trader request. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s traders petitioned their local Members of Parliament and the CMT on the same subject, only meeting with success when their requests coincided with NAD policy as it did when Alfred Bowker's request for a hawker's licence for Viedgesville was refused because it was contrary to policy to allow whites to 'hawk in Native locations'.[19]

William Beinart has shown, with respect to cattle advances, that traders and Africans often shared an interest and were thus able to influence the NAD and the implementation of state policy.[20] In the case of grain trading where there seems to have been less agreement, the allegiance and position of the NAD were more problematic since it was the focus of pressures pulling in opposite directions. In the last section of this article, the way in which the NAD attempted to steer a course between the conflicting demands of white trader and African hawker is investigated.

THE NATIVE AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT AND HAWKING POLICY

The policy of the NAD towards hawking was affected by local considerations and pressures and 'bore the imprint of these forces'.[21] Yet it was also deeply affected by prevailing notions of segregation which held that preservation of 'the traditional African way of life' was inherently good. In the NAD there were also officials who believed in the need to

[13] CMT 487, 16/3: F. Quinn — Secretary, Border Cigarette and Tobacco Distributors, 9.7.1942.

[14] African tobacco production was dealt a heavy blow by the Tobacco Excise Act of 1921. See Beinart, *Political economy of Pondoland*, pp. 91-92. Act No. 5 of 1890 (The Sale of Foods and Drugs and Seeds Act) and Act No. 13 of 1929 (Food, Drugs and Disinfectants Act) both referred to the sale of native tobacco though neither specifically mentioned dagga. It is not clear when legislation differentiated between the two products. It is nevertheless clear that regionally uneven police action was taken against dagga growers and sellers. Such action was frequently related to police efforts to tackle other criminal activities. A fascinating contemporary history of the Transkei dagga trade is contained in Barry Streek and Richard Wickstead, *Render unto kaiser* (Johannesburg, 1981), Chapter 8, but an historical study of dagga trading is awaited.

[15] Six hawker/pedlar licences were issued between 1945 and 1948. All were granted to Africans. CMT 506, 16/24/9.

[16] See Beinart, *Political economy of Pondoland*, Chapter 2.

[17] African producers who obtained written permission from the local magistrate were entitled to trade in grain in their own areas without a licence. CMT 487, 16/3, Part 1: CMT — Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA), 22.3.1927; also T.J. and H. Jarman — Minister of Native Affairs, 11.2.1927.

[18] CMT 487, 16/24/9, RM Umtata — CMT, 12.2.1935.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] W. Beinart, 'Joyini Inkomo: cattle advances and the origins of migrancy from Pondoland', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 5(2), April 1979.

[21] Beinart, *Political economy of Pondoland*, p. 94.

allow private enterprise to develop.[22] In terms of this policy, only a limited white trader presence was to be allowed in the locations. Wandering white hawkers raised problems for this policy, and though they were initially allowed to operate, the joint complaints of white traders and African hawkers convinced the CMT that a peripatetic white presence was not desirable. During the 1920s a fixed policy of not granting rural hawker licences to whites seems to have developed. There were a number of reasons for this decision which the Resident Magistrate of Umtata outlined in September 1924:

> I do not favour the idea of Europeans plying the trade of hawker in rural native locations ... there is always the danger that persons whose business permits their moving about freely from place to place may indulge in undesirable and illicit practices under the cloak of their normal trading activities.[23]

Trader objections to the privileged position accorded to African hawkers only received sympathetic hearing from a few magistrates. In 1928, for example, the Resident Magistrate of Matatiele tried (but failed) to get the magisterial conference to support punitive legislation measures against hawkers. For the most part, complaints met with bland rejoinders such as 'the policy of the Department is to allow Natives reasonable facilities to trade in their own areas and hawking is one of the few avenues by which they are able to do so'.[24]

The policy of the CMT in this regard thus favoured African traders and sought to protect them from undue white trader challenges. In 1932 the Secretary of Native Affairs directed the CMT to issue no new rural hawking licences other than to Africans and so made official a policy that had already been followed in the Transkei for a number of years.[25]

In the urban area policy was more ambivalent. Relatively few African hawkers were licenced to operate in Umtata before 1945 and even these were subjected to the weight of white prejudice in the form of strict checks by police and health officials.[26]

There were a large number of unlicenced African hawkers, mostly women, who operated on the edges of town selling tobacco and foodstuffs. The attention of the authorities was drawn to this growing body of people by a store-owner near Butterworth, who believed he was losing custom. He claimed in 1934 that unlicenced hawking was 'the cause of trouble to police and railway authorities', and furthermore that the women conducting the hawking 'sit in the road and trade those (goods) to travellers and neglect their lands, etc.'[27]. There was little substance to the argument and the Butterworth magistrate defended the women: 'This is a perfectly legitimate practice and provides a much needed source of income in the case of widows and other women who lack other means of support'[28]. The CMT in Umtata, however, felt bound by legislation to demand that these women buy licences and it was only after an extended debate resolved in favour of the women hawkers.[29] The fruits of victory were, however, limited, and unlicenced hawking was vigilantly monitored and prevented.

Perhaps the most important and inflammable issue which exercised the minds of Transkei administrators was the question of relief. In terms of natural disaster, especially drought, the NAD was called upon to help the starving population. Its policy of trusteeship prompted it to view such requests favourably, but on the other hand, its commitment to free enterprise and its sensitivity to trader and labour recruiter objections restrained it from providing aid. During 1919-1920 a serious drought hit Transkei. Calls for relief were tempered by arguments that the drought was useful in forcing out labour and that the provision of aid would upset established trading patterns (and profit).[30]

General Jan Smuts, Prime Minister at the time, steered a middle course by allowing increased advances, the sale of seed on credit and the use of mechanized government transport to ferry supplies into Transkei but refused to distribute grain supplies to the starving people. He pointed out that 'intervention by Government in such manner as to hamper legitimate trade is felt to be undesirable'.[31]

Sixteen years later (in 1936), when another devastating drought hit Transkei, there was little to indicate a shift in native policy. The amount spent on relief works was greater, indicating the spread of poverty, but the thrust of aid was the same. Government transport ferried supplies into Transkei but the interests of the white trader establishment were not jeopardized.[32]

CONCLUSION

In this article it has been attempted to shed some light on the informal sector by investigating the historical development of hawking in Transkei in the inter-war years. In the absence of a substantial number of Indian traders, whites dominated hawking in Umtata. Many of these white hawkers were poor and had few other job options. During this period African involvement in urban hawking gradually rose as increasing numbers of Africans lost their land or their family support and slipped below the breadline.

In the countryside, by contrast, more fortunate Africans still produced a grain surplus and some exercised their right to trade their crop. Here they met the resolute opposition of white traders who zealously defended their interests against both the African hawker and the NAD. African hawkers appear not to have shaken white trader hegemony even though they were favoured by the CMT. Their inability to make a real impact rested paradoxically on the NAD's sensitivity to trader and mining pressure and their consequent refusal to grant aid unequivocably.

Hawking in the Transkei thus remained a fringe activity, sometimes discretionary, but increasingly a necessary pursuit — a place of refuge for the jobless.

22 Saul Dubow describes the development of segregationist discourse within the NAD, paying particular attention to the benevolent paternalism of the 'Transkei tradition' which combined 'timely political accommodation from above to pressures from below'. See S. Dubow, 'Holding 'A just balance between white and black': the Native Affairs Department in South Africa c. 1920-1933', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12(2), 1986, p. 224; see also P. Rich, 'The origins of apartheid: the case of Ernest Stubbs and the Transvaal Native Administration, 1903-1932', *African Affairs* 79, April 1980.
23 CMT 506, 16/24/9, RM Umtata — CMT, 8.9.1924.
24 CMT 487, 16/3: CMT — L.D. Gilson, 17.6.1931; also CMT 487, 16/3, Part 1: Seymour & Seymour — CMT, 20.2.1928.
25 CMT 487, 16/5: SNA — CMT, 26.1.1932.
26 CMT 506, 16/24/7: CMT — RM Umtata, 22.12.1937.
27 CMT 487, 16/J, Part 1: P.J. du Preez — CMT, 27.5.1934.
28 *Ibid.*: RM Butterworth — CMT, 6.6.1934.
29 *Ibid.*: RM Umtata — CMT, 12.6.1934.
30 *The Star*, 14.8.1919, 6.9.1919 and 27-28.1.1920; *Farmer's Weekly*, 4.2.1920.
31 Farmer's Weekly, 23.6.1920.
32 U.G. 41-1937 Union of South Africa, *Report of the Native Affairs Department for the years 1935 to 1936*, p. 72.