

## Illicit Liquor, Prohibition and Women Resistance: A Case Study of Cato Manor, and Urhoboland, 1950 – 1960

Kabir Abdulkareem<sup>1</sup>, Dee Khosa<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

*The colonial and apartheid periods in South Africa reflect a history of racial discriminations and inequalities which had a debilitating impact on the social lives of the Black people in particular. The institutionalisation of Apartheid systematically restricted the rights of the indigenous people of South Africa, as did the colonial period in Nigeria, from gaining access to social, economic and political institutions, which had a severe impact on African peoples. This paper compares the nexus between the colonial laws enacted by the colonial administrators towards prohibiting the sale and the consumption of locally brewed beer and subsequent resistance by Black South Africans in Cato Manor and the Urhobo of Nigeria's Niger Delta region as case studies. The paper equally highlights the apartheid government's attempt to control Black women's occupational livelihood on beer trade, and also reveals how civil disobedience was used as resistance mechanism against colonial authorities. It also analyses the impact of beer consumption and the trade on local peoples. The study relies on both primary and secondary materials to theorise the beer trade in terms of resistance to the racial and class hegemony of settlers.*

**Keywords:** Alcohol, Apartheid, Colonialism, Gender, Law, Resistance, Women

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most African colonies were subjected to racialized rule in which Blacks were placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Legal discrimination prevented or restricted the display and expression of their fundamental human rights to the fullest. At the same time, African patriarchal systems ensured that the gender divide among Africans was pronounced. Colonial laws prevented Blacks from participating fully in society. This included, for example, beer consumption which was controlled by the white minority rule as a means to control consumption and maintain social order while proceeds from it were used for administrative and governance purposes on Africans. In other words, Africans were forced to pay for their own rule. The production of alcohol from fermented sorghum, corn, millet, palm wine and other crops by Africans dated to pre-colonial times. However, following the prohibition of alcohol production under colonial regimes, some Blacks began to engage in local production as a means to earn an income while others view it as an act of resistance to colonial laws. Locally produced beer was the social drink at most ceremonies and special occasions such as weddings and traditional chieftaincy coronations. The establishment of illicit beer halls and club houses took place in many African countries during colonial times, including Namibia, Ghana, Lesotho and in South Africa. Black South African women in the peri-urban area of Cato Manor as well as other so-called townships established for Africans set up liquor outlets known as shebeens. The outlets were prohibited from operating as the white municipal authorities considered them illegal since they were not licenced. The locally brewed beverage prompted the apartheid government to maintain its monopoly over beer production whose profits were used to exercise control over the African people in Durban.

In southern Nigeria, Urhoboland was a site of the production of home brewed beer before the advent of European made spirit or alcohol. In time the colonial authority in Nigeria eventually placed a ban on locally brewed liquor and thus declared further production of it illegal. The prohibition of Urhobo people from brewing, selling and consuming locally made ethanol witnessed a monopoly being established on the business by the colonial authority in which they profited themselves against the local producers. They destroyed the local

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Law, Safety, Security Management, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa. E-mail: [AbdulkareemKO@tut.ac.za](mailto:AbdulkareemKO@tut.ac.za)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Law, Safety, Security Management, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa. E-mail: [Khosad@tut.ac.za](mailto:Khosad@tut.ac.za)

production of liquor by spreading fear in the minds of local consumers claiming that it was unsafe to consume alcohol that were brewed locally owing to its health risks.

### **Justification for the Study**

There is limited research and data on the production and consumption of alcohol in pre-colonial, and post-colonial Africa. The authors are interested in researching and understanding issues of gender and women's history in Africa during the colonial era as it is a branch of African history yet to be fully explored. The authors followed the anti-apartheid movement, and in particular the figure of Nelson Mandela closely, and when the opportunity arose to do research on gender and alcohol in South Africa, it seemed the perfect opportunity to combine both our interests and do a comparative study of women in Nigeria and South Africa. Both countries were part of the British Empire; English-speaking and Nigeria was a staunch supporter of the liberation struggle against apartheid. In the post-independence and post-apartheid era, each of them has emerged as regional powers in Africa with the aim of serving as economic as well as political "models" to neighbouring countries.

In Nigeria, using the instrumentality of the colonial laws, the colonial administrators banned women from drinking beer and brewing locally made alcohol such as distilled liquor from fermented sorghum, corn, locally called *burukutu*, or ordinary natural palm wine known as *Emu Oguro* and local gin known as *Ogogoro* or *sapele* water made from palm wine in Urhoboland in southern Nigeria. In the course of my readings, I came across the women's protests in Cato Manor and became interested in discovering the similarities and differences therein the experiences of the two areas in terms of gender, indigenous production, patterns of alcohol consumption, and strategies to resist the colonial authorities. The decision to study Cato Manor rather than other shebeens in places like Cape Town or Johannesburg is connected to the uniqueness of the women's resistance to the apartheid police that drew national and international attention as it followed in the period of women's anti-apartheid women's protests against the laws banning them. This was also a period that women were involved in the anti-colonial movement, a few decades after the imposition of colonial tax on *Aba* women which resulted in violent protest against the colonial laws and policies. Against background of understanding their rights which they were determined to defend, the *Aba Women Riot* was followed by protests in Lagos and Abeokuta in the mid-1940s and late 1950s against gender bias and racial inequality.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is a growing literature on beer brewing and consumption in colonial Africa. Fredrick Cooper's *Struggle for the City* focuses on issues of class struggle between the ruler and the ruled, upper and middle class, and of course the bourgeoisie and proletarians over space and settlements, labour and economic opportunities of Africans in the African cities such as Nairobi, Accra, Sophiatown and Touba among others. Cooper illustrates many events in African cities that demonstrate workers' efforts to counter their labour challenges, and close the gap between the margins and marginal. He writes extensively on resistance strategies employed by African peoples at workplaces, which he illuminates further by citing the example of Ghana, where workers employed modes of resistance such as strikes and demonstrations to express their grievances.

In his other study, *Africa since 1940*, Cooper writes that in places like Kenya, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and South Africa, the state found it difficult to control and confine African women to rural areas. 'Women', he writes, 'asserted their own place in urban spaces. Male migration created occupational niches for women, including cooking, beer brewing and prostitution.'

When it comes to analysing local brewing, consumption and commoditization of indigenous alcohol in Africa, scholars such as P La Hausse, Van Wolputte and Fumanti, Willis, McAllister, Haggblade and Holzapfel, Dobler, Bryceson and Akyeampong among others provide detailed history of drug and alcohol consumption culture in connection to African socio-cultural, gender, and traditional perspectives. They synergise introduction of European alcohol and colonial laws to African alcohol brewing, drinking, and consumption pattern.

In South Africa, Iain Edward studied shebeen queens and illicit alcohol production in Cato Manor in-line with his analysis of gender roles, class struggle, and religious associations as it related to women's success and

challenges in the illicit brewing of liquor. Edward presents the 1940s and late 1950s as period of economic hardship for women in their struggle to survive in the urban locale. In this context, the shebeen was a viable business option. He shows how women brewed gavine and shimayane concocted with European liquor.

Edward, interestingly, shows the manner in which the African National Congress (ANC) served as inspiration to the militancy of women towards their removal from Cato Manor to KwaMashu, a new township established in apartheid South Africa where Africans were to be forcibly relocated, resulting in the Beerhall Riots of June 1959 in which nine policemen died. Edward captures the rage of the women and the factor that precipitated it in the above crisis by asserting that: “African women invaded the sacrosanct male domain of the municipal beerhalls, singing, ululating, haranguing, or better still beating any African male occupants, fouling beer containers and chasing the men away with insults about their lack of manliness, their cowardice and failure to support their women”.

Terence Ranger, one of the profound Zimbabwean and African historians, discusses the different styles of resistance in southern African rural areas and cities that goes beyond the resistance strategies outlined by Edward. The trade in spirituous liquor in colonial Africa increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries owing to economic interest derived from custom duties and taxes imposition.

In the case of Nigeria, Heap’s *Struggle to Control Liquor in Southern Nigeria* resonates the impact of trade in imported liquor as a valuable colonial source of revenue on Nigerian citizens in relation to the colonialists’ relationship with the local chiefs. He posits that the licensing of trade in imported liquor generated concerns and reactions by the people of Ibadan and Abeokuta in the early twentieth century. In *Beer in Nigeria*, Heap presents brewing as economic means of livelihood as well as the changing pattern of drinking amongst the Nigerian people in the colonial up to the post-colonial periods. In the same vein, Paul Hausse, in *Brewers, Beerhalls, and Boycotts: A History of Liquor in South Africa*, focuses on the changing pattern of alcohol consumption and also mentioned in his thesis that the municipality used beer profits to house and administer Africans.

Felix Forae focuses on the prohibition of illicit alcohol in colonial Nigeria. The work traces the dimension of alcohol consumption in Nigeria during colonial period, analyses the history behind the importation and introduction of alcohol spirit by Europeans which contained high levels of intoxicants, injurious to African peoples’ health. Forae argues that European alcohol spirit was frowned upon, and campaigned against by the Church Missionary Society and the Brussel Convention of 1889 – 1890. The author maintains that the Europeans imported the foreign alcohol into Nigeria leading to subsequent prohibition of local gin in *Urboboland* which had been part and parcel of the *Urbobo* people since the pre-colonial period. Consequently, production of local gin “*Ogogoro*,” in *Urboboland* expanded.

*Ogogoro is a widely known local beer in southern Nigeria tagged with different appellations such as Sapele water, Push Me I Push You, Kai-Kai, Taju Taju, Morning Pepper Soup and Agbakiara to mention but a few. Forae argues further that local gin was declared illicit by the colonial government as it was sold in competition against the white imported spirit, and secondly, the Ogogoro contains a substance such as distilled palm wine that increases the tipsiness and intoxication of consumers. Though the author argues that the local people of Urbobo experienced colonial police attacks, arrests and onslaught but there was no expression of direct open physical protest against the colonial police as posited by Ladua and Edwards in the South African case.*

Edward Said, Spivak Gayatri, Bhabha Homi, and Michel Foucault, amongst others, echo the voices of the subaltern and the oppressed in critiquing the views of western writers that Africans are primitive and powerless. In different ways, they also make the argument that knowledge and power produce “truth”. Colonial powers were in a position of dominance and able to define which behaviours were acceptable and which were not for subjugated peoples. Beer brewing was one of the behaviours deemed unacceptable by colonial powers and proscribed accordingly. These theorists also argue for some form of agency of the oppressed. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out, these theorists ‘suggest that although it may be difficult for subjects to escape the effects of those forces that “construct” them, it is not impossible. The very fact that such forces may be recognised suggests that they may also be countermanded.

James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak*, depicts the nexus between the weak and the powerful, bourgeois and peasant, master and subject, and the imposition of imperial culture, image and extension of power is not eternal. Hence, he submits that power is the stimulant to resistance. From this perspective, one can argue that the establishment of home brewed alcohol by Black women can be seen as a form of resistance against colonial laws that sought to prevent them from continuing their cherished brewing socio-economic activities which had been in existence before the advent of white settlers and the introduction of European liquor.

### **Illicit Consumption, Prohibition and Resistance**

Local production of alcohol by indigenous African people paralleled against the imported beer was considered illegal mainly because of its perceived threat to the colonialists' attempt to establish monopoly of profitmaking. Therefore, whilst African people were restrained from brewing, the women became obsessed with their own beer halls in order to make profit and thus fend for the family. Thus, the establishment of what the colonial authority considered to be illegal liquor came into existence in Cato Manor by women as a means of livelihood. To that end, in South Africa, police frequently raided and arrested shebeen operators and individuals involved in illegal use and consumption of substance across the country. For example, in the 1950s, police raided Bergville in search for dagga and other substance used by the people, the arrests led to clash with Africans that resulted into killings of five police officers. In addition, in 1951, riots broke out in the Free State township of Thabong after the raid and arrest by the police. During this period, the residents breached the condition that they should not brew more than four gallons. Subsequently, the women protested the unfair arrests.

As Shebeen became illicit so was the drinking of prohibited locally brewed beers unless licensed and not to be found being drunk in shebeens. Cato Manor operators were assertive in countering the police raids on shebeens by invading the European municipal owned beer parlours. This did not happen only because their men (black) were patronising the European beer halls, but for neglecting responsibility to their family especially to their wives who equally owned beer joints despite being under ban. To the women, it was a means of economic freedom and livelihood. At some point, the issue of whether Africans should be allowed to drink alcohol was not really a big issue, rather the main issue was whether people could be allowed to drink legally, meaning that there was no absolute prohibition as the Africans proved it impossible.

There existed a relation of shared interest between the Europeans and Africans. The tendency to drink liquor among Africans and greed for profit among the bottle store keepers. 1959 and 1960 represent epoch of social-political and class struggle between the Africans and the Europeans in South Africa against apartheid with the strategic motivation and support from African National Congress in which women were militantly aggressive and revolted against the oppressive apartheid government. The scene of Cato Manor of 1960 became intensified and disastrous in the event of women resistance to the apartheid police movement to remove the women and halt the operation of illicit trade and consumption of alcohol. This upfront confrontation was a brave effort of women over their economic freedom that will give them access to their farms and save their children from forced labour. Eventually, the law and order of the apartheid police triumphed and subsequently led to their relocation.

In precolonial Nigeria, local alcohol distillation and consumption in Urhoboland was basically for spiritual or religious purposes and also for entertainments, especially amongst the women. Whilst their male counterparts always took economic advantage of the status of alcohol as an article and currency of trade with the Portuguese traders. However, the period of global economic depression of 1929 which snowballed into 1930 – 40s world war periods, resulted in high demand of war combatants, low wages, declining produce prices, without a corresponding fall in the price of imported items, and retrenchments of colonial officers and in effect fell native women who served as cooks and stewards for these colonial officials. Hence, Urohobo women sought economic solace in distillation of local gin, given its level of profitability.

Though there were boycott against the colonial plans to license the sale of spirituous liquor in Ibadan and Abeokuta despite the success of such policy in Lagos. This was due to the religious reasons and health implications. Despite liquor trade being a flourishing commercial venture in colonial Nigeria, its importation and sale was banned by international agreement in the Northern Nigeria being a Muslim dominated region. In

Ibadan in 1909, women traders resisted the colonial policy of liquor licence because they considered it as a way of being exploited through taxation by the colonial government. Religious, socio-cultural factors and local nationalism efforts also shielded the brewers and marketers of the local alcohol in *Urboboland*. A more arresting indication of social acceptability and nationalism of the “illicit alcohol” was the use of “illicit distillation” at a church in Urohobo as a substitute for Holy Communion wine. There are paucity of incident of resistance or protest action by the *Urhobo* people against the colonial police who rather clandestinely operated and hid their products.

This led to the colonial strategy of the use of plain clothes policemen. The colonial administration desired for information on illicit distillation at first, but villagers soon became aware of such plans and began to outsmart the strangers in their arena. Hence, the authority changed tactics to the informer system but the informer system fell into disrepute as some distillers turned to informing the police for ulterior motives to wipe out local competition. In the scheme of things, colonial officer known as Denton reported that “The practice of planting illicit Alcohol upon innocent persons is on the rise and is assuming such proportions as to become a menace. Others promised to give information for money, got the money and from the police and disappeared. In fact the secrecy that surrounded illicit distillation meant that the informers were often in the dark as the police.

On the other hand, the apartheid policy and the law enforcement officers’ efforts in South Africa against illicit brewing and consumption of liquor was intensified. The relentless arrests being made by apartheid police and disturbances of the indigenous brewers caused stiff resistance by the women against them. As for the *Urhobo* people, they attached serious significance to the *Ogogoro* (gin) ranging from spiritual, cultural, religious to health benefits. Thus, the local alcohol was used as libation during ceremonies like marriages, child dedication, appeasement of gods, rituals as well as healing of ailments such as rheumatism. Both in Nigeria and South Africa the women brewer of local alcohol were driven by economic benefit and sustenance due to the gender inequality and colonial laws of prohibition, discrimination as well as wide gap between the labour, capital and the state.

**Findings of the Study:** This section provides findings based on the qualitative method of analysis of the data gathered from both archival materials and scholarly literature related to this research.

European liquor merchant hired “runners” that sold his liquor to *shebeen* operators or himself owns a *shebeen* business. This idea was to sell out liquor in huge volume in order to make immense profits as quickly as possible.

Unlike the indigenous South African Blacks, the colonial administration granted license to trade in imported liquor to indigenous Southern Nigerians but later resisted it in Ibadan and Abeokuta owing to cases of alcohol abuse amongst men; fear of tax collection from resisting women traders; fear of neglecting the mild locally brewed liquor for the potent imported spirit and some considered the license boycott as temperance movement.

The police that were saddled with the responsibility of enforcing the laws of prohibition of illicit liquor and arrest of *shebeen* operators and illicit consumptions defied the authority by patronising *shebeen* liquor themselves.

*Shimayane* alcohol is made from fermented or distilled sorghum and yeast as the *Urhobo* alcohol (*ogogoro*) is a product from a fermented palm wine tapped from the palm tree. Though, both products are locally brewed but made from different ingredients.

The women brewed and marketed the local liquor at the *Cato Manor* while in *Urboboland* the men tapped the palm wine, women brewed and sold it.

There was no case of women resistance in *Urboboland* while *Cato Manor* women were recorded to have resisted the apartheid police.

In both colonial territories, the authorities were concerned that locally brewed alcohol was hazardous to health with no benefits. But in actual fact, it appeared that locally brewed liquor was seen as a threat to the colonial finance and the belief among the colonists was that if it was allowed to become strengthened it may hinder their monopoly of trade and profitmaking.

*Cato Manor* women were not only *shebeen* operators, they were also involved in the religious and political organisations. However, drinking at *Cato Manor* usually be in a quickie state of fare as police raid was constant and the consumers were always on the lookout for police. Oftentimes, all strategies of evading police detection become overturned by the smartness of the law enforcement officer.

*Ogogoro* production in *Urboboland* is not just for commercial profit, it signalled the connection between the *Urhobo* people and their ancestors as religious connotation and cultural factors. When it is mixed with herbs concoction it cures ailments like rheumatism and treatments of fever, spleen disorder and other diseases. In the case of *Cato Manor* brewers, production and consumption of *shemiyana* was largely for commercial profits and livelihood with little knowledge of religious and cultural benefits.

The synergy of this study gives an opportunity to understand the nature and benefits of the locally produced liquor. However, in as much as there was little or no evidence of women resistance in *Urboboland*, is not to say that the region has nothing to offer. The resistance has resulted in giving women the economic freedom to engage in production, consumption and sale of indigenous liquor as a means of livelihood.

Even though both areas have become modern as parts of independent political entities, the production and consumption of commercial alcohol are still popular among women and this production of locally made liquor still enjoy patronage. For example, it is still being served during ceremonies such marriages, naming and funeral services.

## CONCLUSION

The place of space in colonial Africa was a struggle between the people and the state. Virtually every aspect of the African colonial state had a taste of segregation and prohibition laws. These laws made African survival more difficult and created an unequal economic environment between whites and blacks. This implies that the prohibition law that restrained and limited the Black Africans' socio-economic benefits and political opportunities necessitated the uprising of resistance across race, class, age, colour, sex, ethnicity and religious lines.

This paper indicates that resistance, be it protest, demonstrations or even the clandestine establishment of *shebeens* and the consumption of locally brewed alcohol, was a strategy employed by Africans to agitate and achieve their rights from colonial interlopers. Thus, the mid-twentieth century represented largely period of anti-colonial struggle for equality and freedom. African women resisted colonial laws over the brewing of local alcohol, its trade and consumption. In late 1950s *Cato Manor*, women's riots against the police were a protest of socio-economic interest and political class struggle. Women's resistance in *Cato Manor* was uniquely different to that of *Urboboland*. For example, where alcohol brewing, trade and consumption was also prohibited basically to discredit the local gin on health risk and on the basis of gaining sole economic control of alcohol for maximum profits by the colonial administrators, political, cultural and religious factors aided the establishment of *shebeens* and consumption of indigenous liquor.

Thus far, it can be understood that even though there was no significant form of protest by the women of *Urboboland* unlike those in *Cato Manor*, the *Urhobo* people strategically concealed the local beer from the colonial authority. Despite severe punishment against Blacks that continued to produce and patronise the locally brewed liquor, they resisted by ensuring that traditional African drinks made from agricultural products such as sorghum, corn, yeast, palm wine, amongst others, with different names attached, survived till post-independence era. This explains why the end of apartheid did not put a stop to local production of liquor and South African Black women are still in business in spite of stiff competition from branded imported liquors. Nevertheless, the local gin, *Ogogoro*, remains a significant product of libation in *Urboboland* and Southern Nigeria as a whole. In contemporary southern Nigeria, women dominate the brewing and sale of local drinks such as fermented corn (*Burukutu*); *Ogogoro* mixed with herbs such as tree barks, roots, and fresh green leaves and fruits, (*pito*); some hawk around motor parks, homes and marketplaces. Men represent the prime regular customers and consumers of these herbal and medicinal drinks as they help to fight off fever, typhoid, chronic pile, back pains while also serving as good libido boosters to mention a few.

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