

## *Urban Violence in Colonial Africa: A Case for South African Exceptionalism*

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*In an attempt to move beyond the parochial character of the otherwise rich historiography of urban South Africa, this article compares the level of violent crime, gang conflict and vigilantism in the segregated townships and mining compounds surrounding South African cities, particularly Johannesburg, in the period to 1960, with that of African neighbourhoods in colonial cities elsewhere on the continent. The evidence suggests that concepts of South African exceptionalism need to take account of the extraordinary degree of urban violence that distinguished South Africa from its colonial contemporaries. A brutalising mining environment, combined with racial ordinances that criminalised Africans and coloureds and exposed vast numbers of men to prison and prison gangs, produced a culture of urban violence unique in colonial Africa.*

Wives and young girls were raped in the streets and on their way home from work. Some were even raped in their own homes in front of their families who were too terrified to report to the police for fear of victimisation. The gangsters ruled the townships at the point of knife or pistol. They robbed the people in the trains to and from work, in the bus queues, and in their homes. They assaulted innocent victims in the street and terrorised one area after another. (Non-European Affairs Committee Report to the Johannesburg City Council, 1954)<sup>1</sup>

Colonial 'pacification' campaigns in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Africa clearly demonstrated European military superiority, and for several decades thereafter colonial states maintained an effective monopoly on armed force. Despite the relative scarcity of armed resistance to colonial rule until the 1950s, violence and the threat of violence remained an intrinsic aspect of the colonial project. All colonial governments devised coercive methods to monitor and control subject populations. Racial legislation specifically designed for colonial settings criminalised a wide range of activities, and Africans who resisted compulsory labour, military conscription, taxation and land alienation faced capital punishment, incarceration, corporal punishment and exile.<sup>2</sup> Some regimes were more ruthless than others but without exception colonial rule was underwritten by force. Not surprisingly, historians have tended to focus on the violence visited upon colonial subjects by authoritarian governments and the ways in which the colonised sometimes overtly resisted but more commonly endured, avoided, manipulated and subverted repressive colonial policies. And, while colonial historiography has largely abandoned the resistance/collaboration binary that 'flattens' the lives of the colonised to pursue a more complex understanding of African interactions with colonial states, violence unconnected to nationalist struggles continues to be understudied. William Beinart addresses this omission in his exploration of violence in southern African historiography: 'Explaining and understanding African political violence as a response to conquest, dispossession and the authoritarian nature of colonial rule or apartheid

1 Cited in L.F. Freed, *Crime in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Juta, 1963), p. 127.

2 F. Bernault (ed.), *A History of Prison and Confinement in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 2003).

has not been particularly problematic ... More difficult has been the related issue ... of violence within or between African communities'.<sup>3</sup> However, when one considers that open confrontation with the colonial state held out much danger and little chance of success, this violence becomes easier to explain and understand. Within the constraints imposed by colonialism Africans carved out spaces for themselves – physical, material and psychological – primarily in competition with other Africans.<sup>4</sup> In certain circumstances these relationships led to violence.

Investigating the conditions and consequences of violence within African communities has the dual purpose of revealing how the colonised shaped and experienced urban environments while at the same time casting light on the structural forces that influenced the prevalence and forms of violence. Colonial cities provided many of the causal factors widely acknowledged as key contributors to violence.<sup>5</sup> Similarities with the nineteenth-century American frontier, for example, are readily apparent. David Courtwright argues that the frontier became a breeding ground for various conflicts primarily because of the concentration of young, single men predisposed to violence. Moreover, 'institutional restraints like efficient police, predictable justice, permanent churches, and public schools were lacking, as were the ordinary restraints of married life'.<sup>6</sup> In the first decades of colonial rule especially, urban African populations were overwhelmingly male. Urban life was alienating and many of the mechanisms that mediated violence in migrants' home communities were absent in the cities. The authorities responded swiftly and severely when Europeans were victimised, but Africans who preyed on other Africans had little to fear from the colonial justice system. Despite such shared characteristics, colonial cities were not uniformly violent.

This article compares the level of violent crime, gang conflict and vigilantism in the segregated townships and mining compounds of South African cities, particularly Johannesburg, in the period to 1960, with that of African neighbourhoods in colonial cities elsewhere on the continent. Every conceivable historical source – oral testimony, archival documents, contemporary newspapers and magazines, autobiographies, fiction and academic studies – indicates that criminal and communal violence in the greater Johannesburg area, known as the Witwatersrand or Rand, had a significant impact on the lives of African residents. Was Johannesburg really much more violent than other colonial cities? If so, why did certain urban contexts in colonial Africa generate higher levels of violence than others?

## The South African Case

Johannesburg came into being as a mining camp in 1886 and ten years later 'it was the largest urban place in Africa south of the Sahara'.<sup>7</sup> The gold mining industry required a massive African labour force and the black population on the Rand increased from approximately

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3 W. Beinart, 'Political and Collective Violence in Southern African Historiography', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1992), p. 465.

4 This is not to say that Africans refrained from violent resistance, only that prior to the nationalist struggles that gathered momentum in the 1950s and 1960s violence directed against colonial authorities tended to be sporadic and spontaneous.

5 Urban centres did not have a monopoly on violence during the colonial period, but rural violence within colonised populations, unless it reached spectacular levels, rarely attracted official attention. Urban crime and conflict was more likely to have been recorded in newspapers, biographies and colonial documents.

6 D. Courtwright, *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 66.

7 K. Beavon, *Johannesburg: The Making and Shaping of the City* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2004), p. 6.

15,000 in 1896 to more than 200,000 by 1920. Ninety per cent of these migrants were male, and a large majority worked on the mines.<sup>8</sup> Many were not bachelors but almost all left their families behind when they travelled to the Rand. Different ethnic groups were housed separately in bleak, single-sex barracks on mine property. Underground labourers engaged in physically demanding and dangerous work and were frequently assaulted by white supervisors. Some groups of mineworkers struggled to maintain traditional notions of morality and authority, but there were few restraints, institutional or otherwise, to moderate violent behaviour in this environment.

Ethnic 'faction fights' between groups of workers on the Kimberley diamond fields and railways were recorded as early as the 1870s. The Rand compounds, home to hundreds of thousands of African mineworkers, carried on the tradition on a much larger scale. Pitched battles, sometimes involving hundreds of combatants, became regular events.<sup>9</sup> These 'incidents of "intertribal" violence' observes Dunbar Moodie, 'were taken by whites to be primordial and inevitable, precipitated by individual squabbles, no doubt, but unavoidable in dealing with primitive, "uneducated natives"'. Policy was thus one of containment, and deaths from faction fights, like death from rock falls underground, were taken for granted'.<sup>10</sup> Such convictions absolved mine management of any responsibility and it was never considered that supervisory abuse or housing and job allocation policies that encouraged ethnic chauvinism could lead to violence.

Criminal gangs further added to the insecurity of mineworkers' lives. Such groups, typically established along ethnic lines, assaulted, robbed and murdered miners and neighbouring township residents. The most prominent of these early organisations began as bandits preying on black work seekers making their way to Johannesburg on foot. Originally based in the rocky hills south of the city, these Zulu marauders consolidated under the leadership of Jan Note (Nongoloza) to form the Ninevites, an African criminal organisation that, at its height, could call on a thousand members. As the British administration tightened controls on the black population in the wake of the South African War (1899–1902), the gangs took refuge in mine and prison compounds, a move that precipitated a greater reliance on coercive male–male sexuality as Ninevite 'soldiers' exploited teenage boys.

For a decade after the war, Note ran a vast criminal empire, which included 'at least ten other "fighting generals" based in the mine compounds all along the line of the reef',<sup>11</sup> from his prison cell. 'For as long as the pass laws ensured the constant flow of men into and out of the prisons, and the system did not effectively separate hardened criminals from first offenders, he could continue to exercise control over an organisation which now reached out to embrace prison, mine compound and black township alike'.<sup>12</sup> The strength of the gangs was broken in 1912 following three separate incidents in which a white policeman, a black policeman and a white miner were murdered. As long as Ninevites preyed on migrant miners or location inhabitants there was little official reaction, but once they targeted whites and black agents of the state, the government set out to eradicate the gangs. A special police squad was tasked with hunting down prominent members, many of whom received indeterminate prison sentences. The men suspected of the white constable's murder were caught and hanged. These measures, combined with prison officials' success in persuading

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8 W. Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2001), pp. 30, 110.

9 As Patrick Harries notes, we have much more extensive source material for the Rand. P. Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860–1910* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1994), p. 121.

10 T.D. Moodie, *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration* (Berkeley, University of California Press 1994), p. 181.

11 C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886–1914, Volume 2: New Nineveh* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1982), p. 182.

12 C. van Onselen, *The Small Matter of a Horse* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1984), p. 23.

Jan Note to renounce his organisation, effectively ended the Ninevite presence outside the prison system.<sup>13</sup>

Keith Breckenridge draws an explicit connection between the Ninevites and the Isitshozi, another mine-based criminal outfit that persisted until the 1940s. 'The ferocity of Ninevite activities encouraged forms of defensive worker organisation ... Mpondo workers, who were largely excluded from the Zulu-dominated Ninevite gang, formed their own, duplicate organisation'.<sup>14</sup> Again we see that ethnic mobilisation was central to early campaigns of violence on the Rand. The Isitshozi may well have started as a means for self-protection but its members, who became feared as 'the people who killed people on the mines', soon graduated to a range of violent criminal activities, including rape and sexual coercion within the compounds. Unless violence between African workers directly threatened workplace production or the security of white employees, mining officials and police rarely addressed this problem. The absence of regulation further contributed to a cycle of violence as aggrieved mineworkers felt they had little choice but to resolve disputes in a fashion that sometimes led to full-blown faction fights. 'The workers who were being attacked by the gang did not distinguish between the Mpondo and the Isitshozi, probably because the boundaries between members and non-members were fairly fluid. Thus, isolated attacks by the gangs tended to provoke much bigger clashes along ethnic cleavages'.<sup>15</sup> In 1929–1930, when sustained conflicts disrupted mining operations, the authorities launched investigations that led to numerous Isitshozi receiving long-term jail sentences. Many other suspects were deported to Pondoland. Opposition in the compounds forced the gangs to relocate to the townships and, although the organisation maintained a presence on the mines throughout the 1930s and 1940s, it was gradually absorbed into the urban underworld.

Before the Isitshozi disbanded it almost certainly played a role in the birth of the Marashea or Russians, the most powerful and enduring migrant criminal society in Johannesburg. In the late 1940s, Basotho migrants formed the Marashea at least partially to protect themselves from Mpondo assailants.<sup>16</sup> By the 1950s, gang chapters in numerous Johannesburg townships were linked to neighbouring mine compounds from which they drew the bulk of their supporters. Despite their propensity for factional violence, the 1950s Russian gangs generally avoided conflict in the compounds. Jobs on the mines provided crucial income, access to new recruits and sanctuary from the police, and gang members were reluctant to jeopardise their livelihoods by antagonising mine management. Instead, these Basotho migrants concentrated their campaigns of violence in the townships, dominating entire neighbourhoods, exacting 'protection' fees from residents and defending their territories against all-comers, including the young fully urban thugs known as *tsotsis*. The Marashea hatred of *tsotsis* was symptomatic of a more generalised friction between migrant workers and urbanised youth. *Tsotsis* often preyed on vulnerable migrants unschooled in the ways of the city and migrant gangs responded with sometimes indiscriminate attacks on city youth.

The Marashea remained a force to be reckoned with in Johannesburg townships until the 1980s, but from the 1940s urbanised youth groups, ranging from informal street corner gangs

13 Van Onselen, *Studies*, Chapter 4. Prison authorities stepped up their campaign against the gangs by isolating members in separate cellblocks and transferring leaders to penitentiaries elsewhere in South Africa, yet the Ninevites prospered and the 'number' gangs that continue to dominate prisons throughout the country trace their origins to Note's criminal empire. See J. Steinberg, *The Number* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2004).

14 K. Breckenridge, 'Migrancy, Crime and Faction Fighting: the Role of the Isitshozi in the Development of Ethnic Organisations in the Compounds', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 4 (1998), p. 58.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

16 G. Kynoch, *We are Fighting the World: A History of the Marashea Gangs in South Africa, 1947–1999* (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 20.

to readily identifiable criminal outfits, eclipsed migrants as the greatest criminal menace. With poor educational, employment and recreational prospects, city-raised youth organised neighbourhood gangs as early as the 1930s when the Blue Nines 'lived entirely by robbery and ... were feared by other Africans not only for their crime and violence but because they were essentially beyond social control'.<sup>17</sup> Belinda Bozzoli's collection of oral testimony from female migrants, who resided in Rand townships in the 1930s and 1940s, highlights their sense of anxiety with the growing dangers of urban life. Maria Mathuloe described such a situation in Alexandra, just north of Johannesburg. 'At first it was a nice and cool place but afterwards life changed because of gangsters. There was the Msomi gang and the Spoilers gang. These gangsters were dangerous, they robbed and killed people'.<sup>18</sup> Bozzoli's informants portrayed 'themselves as being at the centre of a range of evil forces, some anonymous, others less so, composed of brutalised gangsters, who lack any moral concern, and who are associated with darkness, ruthlessness and lack of guilt'.<sup>19</sup> The study of community responses to crime in Johannesburg's western townships led David Goodhew to conclude that 'Toward the end of the 1940s and in the early years of the following decade the situation worsened considerably across the Reef and in the Western Areas in particular. The district became hideously unsafe. The pattern remained much the same, with youthful groups attacking individuals, particularly on pay-days and in transport facilities'.<sup>20</sup> By the 1950s, Clive Glaser judged that the 'the majority of permanently urbanised black youths in South Africa's key urban conglomerate, the Witwatersrand, was involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in *tsotsi* gangs'.<sup>21</sup>

Big gang culture flourished from the 1940s. These operations controlled large territories, had dozens and sometimes hundreds of members and were involved in an assortment of criminal activities. Glaser compiled a list of roughly 100 township gangs operating on the Rand between 1940 and 1960 that were sufficiently prominent to have been recorded in the media or popular memory. These well-known outfits, along with countless small-time *tsotsi* gangs, generated a climate of terror. 'Violence was very much a way of life for the *tsotsis* ... Murders, assaults, and rapes carried out by youths were daily occurrences ... Gang warfare was probably the most common form of violent activity for the *tsotsis*. Wars regularly broke out over territorial competition, sexual rivalry, personal insults, and gambling debts. In order to assert their authority or take revenge, bigger gangs would often carry out horrific ritual violence'.<sup>22</sup> *Tsotsis* battled with each other, against migrant groups and with exasperated adult residents who were determined to stamp out youth crime.

The South African authorities did little to address the epidemic of violence in the townships. Police were very thin on the ground in black areas and concentrated on enforcing racial legislation. By the 1950s 'the most serious categories of crime in the black areas – murder, gangland slayings, rape, extortion – lost out to the chilling bark of the police "*Waar is jou pas?*" (Where is your pass?)'.<sup>23</sup> Mongane Serote's novel, *To Every Birth its Blood*, describes the plight of Alexandra residents:

17 D. Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (London, Longman, 1985), p. 109.

18 B. Bozzoli with M. Nkotshe, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1930* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1991), p. 153.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

20 D. Goodhew, 'The People's Police-Force: Communal Policing Initiatives in the Western Areas of Johannesburg, circa 1930–62', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 3 (1993), p. 458.

21 C. Glaser, 'The Mark of Zorro: Sexuality and Gender Relations in the Tsotsi Subculture on the Witwatersrand', *African Studies*, 51, 1 (1992), p. 47.

22 C. Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1935–1976* (Portsmouth, NH., Heinemann, 2000), p. 65.

23 I. Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race: Native Administration in South Africa* (Berkeley, University of California Press 1997), p. 116.

[T]here were Spoilers who made sleeping a terrible inconvenience. I do not know how Spoilers broke down doors, but they did, and then they took everything: wardrobes and the clothes on them, tables, money, even lives. They were feared. There were the Msomis, equally brutal, more efficient and better organised. The Spoilers and Msomis brought the movies out of the movie houses into the streets of Alexandra, for real, guns, blood and all. There were the police. They came on horseback, in fast cars, in huge trucks, and shot for real; they came in Saracens and with machine guns and banged on doors . . . there were beer raids. There were pass raids.<sup>24</sup>

Township residents consistently complained that the focus on bureaucratic offences compromised the police's ability to combat serious crime.<sup>25</sup> In fact, gang members were known to boast they had little to fear from a police force that prioritised pass and liquor offences.<sup>26</sup>

In the absence of effective protection, adult residents in many neighbourhoods organised street patrols and other community initiatives. Some of these informal policing efforts reportedly lowered crime rates, but others engaged in criminal activities and harassed the communities they were supposed to protect.<sup>27</sup> All groups, even those that exercised strict discipline and concentrated on fighting crime, relied on physical force to apprehend and punish suspects. Such strong-arm tactics invited retaliation and occasionally led to confrontations between informal policing groups and criminal gangs. Senior police officials were ill disposed towards independent African policing groups, whose very existence 'was a powerful critique of their failure to tackle crime'.<sup>28</sup> The state routinely outlawed these groups and members who continued to patrol were arrested. A more sinister element was introduced when the police actively encouraged township violence by assisting criminal gangs involved in conflicts with community policing organisations linked to nationalist movements. Local police sponsorship was an important factor in the Marashea victory over civic guard groups associated with the African National Congress in 1950s' Newclare. The police openly endorsed the Marashea as anti-Communist crusaders and while the guards were harassed and arrested at every turn, the Russians were given a free hand in this protracted and bloody struggle.<sup>29</sup>

This snapshot of Johannesburg's criminal landscape provides a sense of the degree to which violence and the fear of violence was imbedded in township life. Cape Town and Durban, the two largest South African cities after Johannesburg, also experienced their share of criminal and gang violence.<sup>30</sup> However, the absence of large mining industries, and the predominance of a coloured underclass in the Cape, altered the periodisation, scale and dynamics of urban violence in these centres. Violently inclined youth groups and outright criminal gangs emerged in Durban during the first few decades of the twentieth century, but these outfits never attained the size or notoriety of their counterparts on the Rand. Durban was a much smaller city with an African population of some 30,000 in 1916 and had nothing comparable to Johannesburg's vast mining compounds. However, as Paul La Hausse has observed, some of the criminal groups operating in Durban may well have been started by Ninevites and other gangsters forced out of Johannesburg during the South African War.

24 M. Serote, *To Every Birth its Blood* (London, Heinemann, 1981), p. 22.

25 G. Kynoch, 'Friend or Foe? A World View of Community-Police Relations in Gauteng Townships, 1947-77', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 37, 2 (2003), pp. 298-327.

26 Glaser, 'Zorro', p. 59.

27 Urban communities in South Africa have historically had ambivalent relationships with informal policing groups. On the one hand, residents often applauded measures that may have discouraged criminals, yet many were wary of vigilante excesses. See Kynoch, 'Friend or Foe?'

28 Goodhew, 'People's Police Force', p. 465.

29 See Kynoch, *We are Fighting*, Chapter 4, for a comprehensive description of the Newclare conflicts.

30 Some form of the *tsotsi* menace existed in cities throughout South Africa. The Mayers documented people's fear and loathing of *tsotsis* in 1950s East London, and newspapers reported on youth crime and gangs in Kimberley, Pretoria, Pietermaritzburg, and Bloemfontein from the 1940s. P. and I. Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1961); G. Kynoch, 'From the Ninevites to the Hard Livings Gang: Township Gangsters and Urban Violence in Twentieth Century South Africa', *African Studies*, 58, 1 (1999), pp. 55-85

'Many of those black refugees who found work or swelled the ranks of the "dangerous" unemployed in Durban, were bearers of newly-acquired forms of criminal organisation and cultural codes which had been forged in the prison-compound complex of the Witwatersrand'.<sup>31</sup> From the early 1900s, young Zulu migrants, many employed as 'houseboys', formed stick-wielding gangs known as *amalaita* that were renowned for their territorial battles and attacks on African police. Suspected *amalaita* were specifically targeted by the Durban authorities and 'every year hundreds of youth convicted of "leita offences" (breach of the peace) were sentenced to several months hard labour and over ten lashes'.<sup>32</sup> The *amalaita* gangs gradually disappeared as a result of more effective policing in the 1930s, the replacement of young male domestic workers with females, and the emergence of more fully urbanised African gangs who favoured the knife over the stick.<sup>33</sup> Gang violence and vigilantism do not seem to have surfaced in Cape Town until the 1940s when massive urban migrations led newly-arrived and out-of-work youth to form street gangs in District Six. Threatened by these developments, elements of the more established coloured working class responded with vigilante tactics. These family-based groups, which came to be classified as mafias, graduated to extortion and various criminal rackets, carving out their own territories. By the 1950s, numerous gangs and mafias were fighting for control of District Six and other coloured settlements.<sup>34</sup> These territorial battles continued and often expanded in the Cape Flats where inner-city coloured populations were removed during the resettlement schemes of the 1960s. Despite its comparatively late start, gang culture is more prevalent on the Cape Flats than anywhere else in contemporary South Africa.

## Urban Violence in Colonial Africa

Frederick Cooper's notion of colonial power as an essentially urban force that dissipated the further one moved into the hinterland can be refined to distinguish between different sectors of colonial cities.<sup>35</sup> The gaze of colonial authorities was firmly situated on the primary commercial areas and white neighbourhoods and black residential areas were largely unregulated other than for tax collection and occasional police raids. Thus, a sort of urban indirect rule emerged as African groups in the cities ordered settlement patterns, religious and cultural practices, recreation, economic activities and often policing and judicial structures, albeit within the overarching constraints of colonial imperatives. Some groups, such as advisory boards, church societies and business associations, appealed to colonial authorities for a heavier police presence and protection from criminal elements, while others – squatter organisations, liquor sellers and criminal gangs – benefited from the lack of state regulation. Certainly, urban centres north of the Limpopo suffered from crime but as John Iliffe points out, it tended to be 'crime by individuals against property, rather than the gang violence of South African cities'.<sup>36</sup> A survey of colonial cities confirms that residents were most concerned with 'juvenile delinquency' and property offences.<sup>37</sup>

31 P. La Hausse, 'The Cows of Nongolozla: Youth, Crime and Amalaita Gangs in Durban, 1900–1936', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16, 1 (1990), p. 84.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 109–11.

34 D. Pinnock, *The Brotherhoods: Street Gangs and State Control in Cape Town* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1984), p. 29.

35 F. Cooper, 'Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History', *American Historical Review*, 99, 5 (1994), pp. 1,516–45.

36 J. Iliffe, *The African Poor* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1987), p. 176.

37 Another common feature of the urban colonial experience seems to have been the prevalence of gender violence, both fighting between men over women and violence by men against women. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore this phenomenon, but the secondary literature indicates that the most brutal excesses, including deadly gang conflicts and brazen daylight gang rapes and kidnapping occurred with greater regularity in South African settings.

The larger Nigerian cities perhaps most closely modelled South African levels of urban crime. Lagos and Ibadan were sizeable by colonial standards and had grown rapidly from 1911, when Lagos had a population of 74,000 and Ibadan 175,000, to 1960 when both claimed 600,000 or so inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> Criminal gangs became more visible and active from the 1930s in Lagos and Ibadan as the 'economic crisis and the growing population provoked an unparalleled development of unemployment'.<sup>39</sup> However, even as the incidence of armed robberies and burglaries increased, crime resulting in serious injury or death 'remained exceptional during that period'.<sup>40</sup> Despite public outrage over the activities of organised pickpockets in Ibadan, 'the majority of crime committed by juveniles was against property, rather than the violence between gangs on the American or South African model'.<sup>41</sup> So, even in the relatively crime-plagued cities of south-western Nigeria, residents did not have to contend with the degree of gang war, rape and violent robbery that had become routine in many South African townships.

Political violence sometimes sparked an increase in gang violence. Nairobi experienced a surge of gang activity during the late colonial period, but only within the context of the Mau Mau civil conflict. Criminal gangs appear in reports from the early 1940s, however; violent crime was relatively rare until the 1950s when Mau Mau militants banded together to assassinate suspected loyalists and rob businesses to raise funds for the insurgency.<sup>42</sup> Even then, Luise White's informants claimed that 'The Mau Mau gangs that terrorised the African locations were ... unarmed, on foot, and substantially less competent than they were in their own accounts years later'.<sup>43</sup> With the end of the Emergency and the suppression of Mau Mau, violent crime in Nairobi dropped precipitously, despite a population explosion and increasing unemployment.<sup>44</sup> Violent youth gangs had become 'an established part of the [Kinshasa] scene' by the early 1960s but were judged to be a product of the political violence and economic crisis associated with independence.<sup>45</sup> Juvenile crime had been a problem during the colonial period but violent robberies and gang rivalries became much more common when young men were recruited into the militant youth wings of political parties. Additionally, an unprecedented population increase from 400,000 in 1959 to perhaps one million Africans by the early 1960s 'resulting both from the lapsing of pre-Independence controls on population movements and from rural unrest' seems to have accelerated gang activity in Kinshasa.<sup>46</sup>

Social histories of other colonial cities indicate the relative absence of communal conflict and violent crime. In 1950s' Dar es Salaam, colonial officials and adult residents viewed the approximately 10,000 children 'not under the care of their parents or any recognised guardian' as a nuisance, but these youngsters did not inspire the same terror as South African *tsotsis*.<sup>47</sup> Their offences were largely limited to public drunkenness and urination, bicycle

38 L. Fourchard, 'Lagos and the Invention of Juvenile Delinquency in Nigeria, 1920–60', *Journal of African History*, 47, 1 (2006), p. 117.

39 L. Fourchard, 'Urban Poverty, Urban Crime, and Crime Control: The Lagos and Ibadan Cases, 1929–45', in T. Falola and S. Salm (eds), *African Urban Spaces in Historical Perspective* (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2005), p. 294.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 301.

41 S. Heap, 'Jaguda Boys: Pickpocketing in Ibadan, 1930–60', *Urban History*, 24, 3 (1997), p. 326.

42 D. Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2005), Chapter 5.

43 L. White, *Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 208.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

45 J.S. La Fontaine, *City Politics: A Study of Leopoldville, 1962–63* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 166–7.

46 J.S. La Fontaine, 'Two Types of Youth Groups in Kinshasa (Leopoldville)', in P. Mayer (ed.), *Socialization: The Approach from Social Anthropology* (London, Tavistock Publications, 1970), p. 192.

47 A. Burton, 'Urchins, Loafers and the Cult of the Cowboy: Urbanisation and Delinquency in Dar es Salaam, 1919–1961', *Journal of African History*, 42, 2 (2001), p. 201.

theft, pickpocketing, harassing women and football hooliganism. Assaults and robberies were not unknown and certain areas were avoided after nightfall; however, the ‘small numbers involved in serious crime meant that the situation in Dar es Salaam was containable’.<sup>48</sup> Terence Ranger’s analysis of violence in colonial Bulawayo focuses on spectacular eruptions of communal conflict in 1929 and 1960. Ranger attributes these riots to ethnic, generational and class divisions and uncovered no evidence of a persistent criminal menace. Youth gangs in late 1920s’ Bulawayo took the form of competitive boxing and dressing associations that occasionally – especially around the Christmas holiday period – clashed with ethnic rivals, but did not generally commit robberies or other street crimes. By 1960, although youth gangs seem to have sustained themselves at least partially through criminal activity, they still lacked the *tsotsis*’ murderous reputation.<sup>49</sup>

Jeanne Penvenne’s account of the labouring population of colonial Maputo makes only a passing reference to youth gangs engaging in petty theft and fencing stolen goods in the 1940s.<sup>50</sup> Female residents of colonial Harare reported that rape was not uncommon in the African location, but mentioned nothing about gangs, street crime or vigilantism. In fact, when asked ‘What was the worst thing about living in town?’ Teresa Barnes’s informants focused on male control, particularly the difficulties associated with husbands who attempted to prevent their wives from working.<sup>51</sup> This portrayal describes a different reality from that of Bozzoli’s respondents who spoke volumes about the dangers of life in Johannesburg.

The mining industries of colonial southern Africa, with the exception of Witwatersrand mines, did not significantly influence patterns of urban violence. Southern Rhodesian mines were dispersed over a very large, predominantly rural territory. Faction fights occasionally took place and African workers experienced supervisory violence, albeit to a lesser degree than their compatriots on the Rand because the financially strapped Rhodesian mines employed proportionately far fewer whites. However, we have no evidence of criminal societies forming on these mines and the violence that did occur was confined to the isolated mining compounds.<sup>52</sup> By 1930, 30,000 African miners laboured on the Zambian Copperbelt with many thousands more men, women and children in surrounding municipal townships and informal settlements. Two crucial developments differentiate the Copperbelt from Johannesburg area gold mines. Most mines on the Copperbelt adopted a stabilisation policy that encouraged African men to settle with their families. The percentage of married workers increased steadily from the early 1930s as management judged that ‘married labour was “more efficient, healthier, more contented and remains longer than the single native”, and that women in the compounds discouraged prostitution, gambling, fights and general disorder’.<sup>53</sup> Even if mine owners on the Rand had lobbied for such a system the state’s insistence on limiting black urbanisation would have made it politically untenable. Furthermore, to minimise the likelihood of collective violence, compound housing on the Copperbelt was not ethnically segregated. Instead, ‘the seventy or more [ethnic] groups were deliberately scattered throughout the compounds’.<sup>54</sup> Zambia’s mining areas were largely immune from

48 A. Burton, *African Underclass: Urbanisation, Crime and Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam* (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 147. See chapters 6–8 for a discussion of crime.

49 T. Ranger, ‘The Meaning of Urban Violence in Africa: Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, 1890 to 1960’, *Cultural and Social History*, 3, 2 (2006).

50 J. Penvenne, *African Workers and Colonial Racism: Mozambican Strategies for Survival in Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, 1877–1962* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1995), p. 146.

51 T. Barnes, *‘We Women Worked So Hard’: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, 1930–1956* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1999). See Chapter five.

52 C. van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900–1933* (London, Pluto Press, 1976).

53 J. Parpart, *Labor and Capital on the African Copperbelt* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1983), p. 35.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the faction fighting, gang violence and vigilantism that afflicted Johannesburg. Charles Ambler's study of the Copperbelt's liquor industry records only that 'In the relatively anonymous atmosphere of the beerhalls, small slights could rapidly escalate into fights. Above all, men fought over women'.<sup>55</sup>

While it is possible that urban violence has been underreported in the colonial period, it is most unlikely that large scale gang violence, violent crime and communal conflict could have been common without receiving greater attention in the historical record. Since the available evidence supports the view that South African townships, particularly on the Rand, were much more violent than other urban centres in colonial Africa, we need to investigate the factors that distinguished South Africa from its more peaceful counterparts.

### South African Exceptionalism

All the colonial cities examined in this article shared a number of conditions that are commonly identified as inducements to violent crime and social conflict. Urban African populations throughout the colonial period almost always had a substantial residuum of under- and unemployed people who lived on the margins. In depression-era Lagos and Ibadan, 'the nature of urban African poverty began to change. The traditional poor were still there but new categories of poor, including children and teenagers, joined hawkers and the expanding mass of unemployed'.<sup>56</sup> Periods of economic growth did not necessarily benefit the poor. During the boom years of the 1940s, increasing numbers of Africans migrated to Nairobi to seek work but with rising inflation even those who were successful struggled to make ends meet. In 1949, the buying power of African wages was worth less than 20 years earlier. 'Nairobi had become a poverty trap'.<sup>57</sup> Housing conditions and urban amenities in African locations were almost uniformly deplorable, with large numbers of people living in informal shantytowns. Colonial planners considered native reserves and tribal areas to be the natural home of their subject populations and feared that urban living weakened traditional structures of control, making 'detrified' Africans much more difficult to manage. As Andrew Burton observes, 'Accompanying this antipathy towards the social aspects of urbanisation was a corresponding neglect of infrastructure and services in the African townships. If the African's true home was in the countryside then improving urban conditions was pointless – indeed it might only contribute to the problem by drawing more Africans from their tribal homes'.<sup>58</sup> From the beginning of the colonial period urban migrants throughout the continent were overwhelmingly male and this bias usually persisted long after the initial waves of migration. As late as 1956, African men in the locations of Harare outnumbered women 59,272 to 6,312.<sup>59</sup> Most urban populations were ethnically diverse and in many cases different groups of migrants dominated occupational niches and settled in particular neighbourhoods. However, only Johannesburg generated a succession of violent ethnic gangs.

Those who have studied South African youth gangs claim that broken families and a lack of structure produced generations of township boys for whom joining a gang was a more or less natural choice. Glaser offers a stock portrait of just such a figure in 1930s–1950s' Johannesburg:

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55 C. Ambler, 'Alcohol and the Control of Labor on the Copperbelt', in J. Crush and C. Ambler (eds), *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa* (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 1992), p. 349.

56 Fourchard, 'Urban Poverty', p. 296.

57 Anderson, *Histories*, p. 185.

58 Burton, *African Underclass*, p. 23.

59 Barnes, 'We Women', p. 3.

The typical male township teenager lived in an unstable family unit from which one or both of his parents were absent . . . He had left school because his household could not afford to keep him there, especially since schooling was in any case unlikely to secure him a better job in future. He was unemployed . . . There were no decent recreation facilities in his vicinity. While his sisters tended to do a great deal of housework, looking after young children, cleaning, or preparing meals, very few of the boys he knew were expected to do the same. He spent the major part of his day without supervision or any structured activity. Gang life seemed attractive; it offered companionship, a sense of belonging, and a possible means of income.<sup>60</sup>

Such a trajectory makes perfect sense, but these conditions were not unique to South Africa. Male urban youth throughout Africa confronted many of these same difficulties, yet a violent youth gang subculture was exclusive to South Africa in the colonial period. Indeed, as mentioned above, 1950s' youth gangs in Dar es Salaam were more of an annoyance than a mortal danger, despite the presence of some 10,000 street children.

Colonial style policing is frequently cited as a contributing factor to the high levels of violence in South African townships. William Beinart's assessment represents this prevailing school of thought:

Violence has been seen as a result of differential policing of white and black areas. Incipient conflict would rapidly be controlled when it threatened city centres, points of production or white suburbs. But either because of a lack of concern, or under-resourcing, or the state's or mining companies' intention to defuse class conflict by allowing internal conflict, African locations and compounds were left with little effective policing. Consequently, violent elements were left to fight it out.<sup>61</sup>

But again, as we see in David Killingray's description of policing in Britain's African colonies, this was not a problem specific to South Africa.

Crime in African townships, or factional violence in the countryside might go unchecked, or be thought not to be of great significance by colonial officials either because the administration lacked knowledge about it and the means to prevent it, or because it was not regarded as a serious threat to the colonial order. The prevailing ideology argued that where possible it was the responsibility of the African community to police itself.<sup>62</sup>

In 1950, the teeming shanties and housing estates of Nairobi's Eastlands, home to some 50,000 inhabitants, were policed by a single African inspector assisted by five constables. 'The police protected Europeans and, to a lesser extent, Asians. The African poor were left to fend for themselves'.<sup>63</sup> Colonial policing throughout the continent prioritised the enforcement of racial statutes and the maintenance of public order.<sup>64</sup> Given these commonalities, the standard explanations for South Africa's urban violence – poverty, social anomie, a majority male population, an ethnically heterogeneous urban mixture and inadequate police protection – are clearly insufficient. It seems we have to look elsewhere to account for the South African exception. Charles van Onselen's classic work on turn-of-the-century Witwatersrand offers a promising starting point in the search for essential differences relating to violence.

The web of coercive legislation and its supporting institutions of compounds, courts and prisons, besides reducing the mobility of black workers, also had some unintended consequences. Constant infractions of the pass laws in an industrial system with an increased law enforcement capacity produced a labouring population characterised by its high degree of nominal 'criminal'

60 Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, pp. 40–1.

61 Beinart, 'Political', p. 468.

62 D. Killingray, 'The Maintenance of Law and Order in British Colonial Africa', *African Affairs*, 85 (1986), p. 416.

63 Anderson, *Histories*, p. 188.

64 P. Ahire, *Imperial Policing: The Emergence and Role of the Police in Colonial Nigeria, 1860–1960* (Philadelphia, Open University Press, 1991); A. Burton, 'Brothers by Day: Colonial Policing in Dar es Salaam under British Rule, 1919–61', *Urban History*, 30, 1 (2003), pp. 63–91; J. Willis, 'Thieves, Drunkards and Vagrants: Defining Crime in Colonial Mombasa, 1902–32', in D. Anderson and D. Killingray (eds), *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830–1940* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1991).

experience, ensuring that the working class had great familiarity with the two similar institutions of prison and compound. Labourers and lumpenproletarians were forced to rub shoulders to a greater extent than they might otherwise have done. The pass laws and the newly efficient police system drew *all* Africans, law-abiding and law-evading alike, into the Witwatersrand complex and kept them there.<sup>65</sup>

Early Johannesburg was defined by its large concentration of African migrants housed in single-sex mining compounds and the degree to which Africans were jailed for a variety of, mostly bureaucratic, offences. Mines and prisons served as urban socialising agents for a very substantial portion of African males on the Rand.

African mineworkers led a precarious existence. The ever present danger of rock falls and accidents was compounded by the physical abuse meted out by white supervisors and their black assistants. Underground violence was ubiquitous and Breckenridge maintains that 'as early as the first decade of [the twentieth] century, the patterns of violence were in place on the Witwatersrand'.<sup>66</sup> He argues that this 'world without women', brought together massive numbers of men habituated to violence. Rural African boys grew up in a rough and tumble rural world in which stick fighting, conflicts over grazing rights and even membership in fighting associations were commonplace. Rugby played a similar role in the formative experiences of white miners. Thus, 'organised violence was a central feature of the upbringing of both white and black men'.<sup>67</sup> Underground conflict, however, was not a struggle between equally matched foes. White men could, for the most part, depend on the support of mine management and the white-ruled state when they used violence against black workers to increase production and reinforce a racialised masculine hierarchy. From this perspective, 'mine captains and shift bosses were literally, as well as figuratively, unbeatable'.<sup>68</sup> Some victims of white assault fought back but underground violence perpetrated by Africans was overwhelmingly the preserve of 'bossboys' who acquired their positions by physically intimidating fellow workers. Breckenridge insists that while violence was an essential tool in maintaining the racial order, 'it was also a celebrated, and defining, ideal of masculinity for both white and black men'.<sup>69</sup> Dunbar Moodie adds a materialist dimension to the phenomenon of underground racial violence. 'Assault was entrenched in the structure of production',<sup>70</sup> because white supervisors were pressured to meet production quotas within a system that provided no financial incentives to black workers. Consequently, whites motivated their black subordinates with the boot and the fist.

Whatever the primary cause of these assaults, black workers, invested with an aggressive masculinity that valorised fighting skill and physical courage, were forced, as a condition of employment, to endure the violence of white supervisors and their black 'bossboys'. According to Patrick Harries, faction fights were 'pre-eminently about erecting the social boundaries of inclusion and exclusion through which workers carved out and created a space for themselves in a turbulent and unpredictable world. Faction fighting gave a physical content to their notions of community and a coherence to their sense of justice, hierarchy and self-respect'.<sup>71</sup> Faction fights erupted for a host of reasons, but it seems clear that a competitive assertion of ethnic and masculine identity played a crucial role in many of these battles. We may find here an echo of van Onselen's 'saucepans by day, sergeants

65 Van Onselen, *Studies*, p. 179.

66 K. Breckenridge, 'The Allure of Violence: Men, Race and Masculinity on the South African Goldmines, 1900–1950', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 4 (1998), p. 675.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 674.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 690.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 670.

70 D. Moodie, 'Maximum Average Violence: Underground Assaults on the South African Gold Mines, 1913–1965', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31, 3 (2005), p. 550.

71 Harries, *Work*, p. 124.

by night' – the young male domestic servants on the Rand and in Durban who meekly followed their mistresses' orders only to form gangs that preyed on other Africans (and sometimes whites) in their off hours.<sup>72</sup> Faction fights allowed black workers to reaffirm a more assertive masculinity with substantially less risk of losing their livelihood or winding up in jail than if they retaliated against white persecutors. Moodie argues that collective violence 'is seldom merely moral or symbolic, however. It is generally instrumental as well'.<sup>73</sup> In his interpretation, anxiety over job security and resentment towards 'bossboys' often triggered faction fights with some of the most serious conflicts occurring when a mine received a large influx of new workers. Established miners fought to defend their jobs from new groups of recruits while newcomers, who were often barred from better paid or less strenuous work by the seniority system, used violence to displace entrenched elites. Management job allocation policies frequently inflamed these sorts of rivalries.<sup>74</sup> According to Moodie, violence was built into the structures and policies of the mining industry.

In addition to underground assaults and faction fights, criminal organisations victimised fellow workers and initiated a cycle of violence as groups, ostensibly formed for defensive purposes, often assumed a more predatory function. The mining industry on the Witwatersrand, which employed hundreds of thousands of black men in the first decades of the twentieth century, provided the foundation for a contagion of violence that spilled over into the neighbouring townships.

Although migrant gangs were typically based in mining compounds they also operated outside and miners were notorious for their violent exploits when visiting township drinking spots. Mine violence was linked to the fast growing prison system when miners were jailed for any number of offences and because many mines made use of convict labour. At least until the 1930s, these migrant gangs ruled the Johannesburg underworld. The influx of substantial numbers of African women from the 1920s introduced a new dynamic as their children formed the first gangs of urban youth. Coming of age in a violent environment, these youths were attracted to gangs for security and status but also because the pass laws and employers' preference for hiring adult migrants made it difficult for them to obtain work.<sup>75</sup> The escalation in youth violence and crime corresponded to the substantial increase in Johannesburg's African population and the severity with which pass laws were enforced in the post-war townships. Glaser explains: 'The connection between delinquency, gang association, and the pass laws became more apparent. Hundreds of youths were rounded up and jailed or sent to the rural areas. But the hardened ones stayed in the cities, often after serving jail sentences, and lived a twilight gang existence. Periods in jail tended to harden their criminality and registering as unemployed was impossible because it would expose their lack of urban status'.<sup>76</sup> Consider the following exchange between P.Q. Vundla, a prominent local politician in the western townships, and a police colonel at a 1955 Non-European Affairs Committee conference:

P.Q. Vundla: I am satisfied that the cause of the majority of the crimes in the townships is the passes.

Col. Grobler: What?

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72 Van Onselen, *Studies*, p. 59. La Hausse makes similar observations for Durban's *amalaita* gangs in 'Cows of Nongoloza'.

73 Moodie, *Going for Gold*, p. 187.

74 *Ibid.*, see Chapter 6 for a thorough treatment of faction fights.

75 P. Bonner, 'Family, Crime and Political Consciousness on the East Rand, 1930–1955', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 3 (1988), p. 401.

76 Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, p. 39. See also D. Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown* (Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 2004) for the impact of pass laws on youth crime.

P.Q. Vundla: The pass laws. The young men go to the pass office, they are given a definite time within which they have to find employment, if not, they have to leave. Only this morning I took a young boy to the Superintendent – he was born at Masinga, his parents stay in Western Native Township – he was told to leave Johannesburg, he will never leave Johannesburg, the next time you meet him he will be in gaol. He is going to resort to crime.<sup>77</sup>

Pass laws were instituted on the Rand in 1895 and tighter measures of control were periodically implemented throughout the period under consideration. In 1905, African pass offenders made up the majority of the Transvaal's prison population, already more than 4,000 strong.<sup>78</sup> The Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911 systematised pass controls throughout all the labour districts on the Rand and various amendments to the pass laws were added over the years.<sup>79</sup> Enforcement was relaxed during the Second World War as African labour was required to boost production in the manufacturing sector and to replace whites who had entered military service, but the National Party won the 1948 election partially because of its promise to reverse the tide of black urbanisation. In 1952, the Natives Abolition and Co-ordination of Documents Act established a uniform passbook that Africans were required to carry at all times. Police regularly conducted township sweeps moving from house to house through entire neighbourhoods during the early morning hours to demand documentation. Patrols also checked passes at transportation points where African workers disembarked on their way into the city. The lack of a passbook or any irregularities in the required stamps confirming approved employment and the right to seek work in a given area resulted in immediate arrest. On the Witwatersrand alone, some 16,000 men were convicted of pass offences in 1930. Africans in Durban were subjected to similar pressures and by 1901 a third of the city's estimated 20,000 Africans had been arrested.<sup>80</sup> By the mid-1950s the South African police were averaging 275,000 pass arrests per year and a decade later this number had risen to 700,000. From 1916–1981 it is estimated that a staggering 17,250,000 black South Africans were arrested for pass law violations.<sup>81</sup>

Some offenders escaped jail by paying a fine and others were hired out as labourers to white farms, but every year South African prisons were filled to overflow with men whose only crime was a passbook transgression. This criminalisation of urban life was yet another factor that fed the violence, not least because an elaborate and brutal gang hierarchy, descended from the Ninevites, dominated the South African prison system. Both hardened criminals and otherwise law-abiding pass offenders were victimised by and recruited into these prison gangs. The Ninevites' colonisation of the South African prison system also put them in touch with criminal gangs throughout the country. In Durban, for example, by 1916 the Mkosi gang was affiliated with Ninevites established in the local Point Prison.<sup>82</sup> Nowhere is the link between incarceration and gang violence more evident than in Cape Town. Even though coloured boys and men were not required to carry passes, they were jailed in massively disproportionate numbers during the apartheid period for a variety of petty offences. In his study of Cape Town gangs, Don Pinnock argues that some of the most powerful criminal groups – the supergangs – were 'not formed on the streets but in the reformatories and schools of industry. An extraordinarily high number of Coloured youths share the "brotherhood" of detention ... Immediately a boy enters "reform" he is claimed

77 Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, p. 38.

78 Van Onselen, *Small Matter*, p. 20.

79 D. Hindson, *Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), p. 24.

80 La Hausse, 'Cows of Nongoloza', p. 83.

81 Hindson, *Pass Controls*, p. 45; D. Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 122; Beinart, *South Africa*, p. 205; H. Giliomee and L. Schlemmer (eds), *Up Against the Fences: Poverty, Passes and Privilege in South Africa* (New York, St. Martin's, 1985), p. 1.

82 La Hausse, 'Cows of Nongoloza', p. 97.

by one of the gangs'.<sup>83</sup> Again, we see the influence of the Ninevites as coloured prisoners in the Cape adopted the culture and mythology of the number gangs descended from Jan Note's organisation.<sup>84</sup> Prison networks have been linked to specific street gangs since the early twentieth-century and the process described by Kelly Gillespie has a long history in the Cape area.

For those neighborhoods most affected by gang activity – economically and politically marginalized colored and black neighborhoods far away from wealthy white suburbs – the prison operates as a reproductive force in the maintenance of these neighborhoods as criminalized. In the lives of those moving across its boundaries, the prison enables an encounter with a new order of social life, an encounter which has the function of preserving and reinscribing criminality as the defining feature of the particular neighborhoods from which these inmates are largely drawn. By reproducing subjects steeped in the tradition of the number gangs, the prison releases subjects primed to reinvigorate outside criminal networks and to maintain the status quo of criminalized areas of the city.<sup>85</sup>

Durban, Cape Town and other South African cities had distinctive histories of violence and criminality. In the absence of a massive mining industry and attendant industrialisation, gangs and vigilante organisations tended to develop later and on a smaller scale than on the Rand. However, throughout the country, municipal and national policies to regulate and control African and coloured urban populations consistently cycled males through a brutal penal system that encouraged gang formation and violence, both within the prisons and segregated urban settlements. Marc Epprecht's study of homosexuality in southern Africa confirms that, for some of these unfortunates, sexual violence was a harrowing part of initiation into prison life. By the early 1900s, government officials recognised that the prison system failed to differentiate between violent criminals and those imprisoned as a result of racial ordinances. 'The minister of Native Affairs conceded as much in 1908 . . . Practices in the Pretoria jail, he observed, in particular that of piling men with simple pass law infringements into crowded cells with hardened criminals and gangsters "is not only calculated to spread but is actually spreading the evils of sodomy"'.<sup>86</sup> Newspaper investigations indicated that little had changed by the 1950s. '[T]he willy-nilly dumping together of increased numbers of detainees continued to be the norm in the city jails of Johannesburg. Extortion of sex from newcomers by gangs . . . also reportedly remained endemic'.<sup>87</sup>

All colonial administrations passed discriminatory legislation and most implemented policies to limit and control African urbanisation, but none imprisoned its subjects on anything approaching the same scale as South Africa.<sup>88</sup> When colonial officials decided to take action,

83 Pinnock, *Brotherhoods*, p. 7.

84 See Steinberg, *The Number*.

85 K. Gillespie, 'Bloodied Inscriptions: The Productivity of South African Penal Institutions' (MA thesis, University of Chicago, 2002), pp. 17–18.

86 M. Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queens University Press, 2004), p. 87.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 92. See also I. Niehaus, 'Renegotiating Masculinity in the South African Lowveld: Narratives of Male-Male Sex in Labour Compounds and Prisons', *African Studies*, 61, 1, (2002), pp. 77–97; G. Moloi, *My Life* (Johannesburg, 1991); and Steinberg, *The Number*, for accounts of sexual assault and violence in prisons.

88 This is not to say that imprisonment was uncommon in colonial Africa. For an overview see F. Bernault, 'The Politics of Enclosure in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa', in Bernault (ed.), *History of Prison*. I am indebted to Jocelyn Alexander who has brought to my attention that Southern Rhodesia also imprisoned Africans on a very significant scale for petty offences. The relative lack of urban violence in Southern Rhodesia seems to support the argument that Johannesburg's mining industry and the predominance of prison gangs in South Africa were critical factors in generating and sustaining violent crime, community conflict and vigilantism. Otherwise, Kenya perhaps came closest to replicating the South African case, although this was a wartime aberration rather than business as usual. Just before the outbreak of Mau Mau in 1952, Kenya had a prison population of approximately 9,000. This number increased to almost 90,000 a few years later, almost exclusively because of political detention. D. Killingray, 'Punishment to Fit the Crime?: Penal Policy and Practice in British Colonial Africa', in Bernault (ed.), *History of Prison*, p. 105; Caroline Elkins argues that official figures hide the true extent of imprisonment during the Emergency and estimates that the number of African detainees may have been

repatriation to rural areas was often the preferred method of dealing with urban undesirables. In Dar es Salaam, the 1950s' campaigns that forcibly removed thousands of unemployed Africans were seen by city officials 'more in the light of a humanitarian measure by which the DC can repatriate quasi-criminals rather than imprison them'.<sup>89</sup> Nigerian authorities punished young offenders primarily through corporal punishment and expulsion from urban areas. A 1944 prison report stated that 'a very few indeed are sent to "training school"', while, by the 1950s, hundreds of boys and girls were repatriated from Lagos annually.<sup>90</sup> South Africa utilised mass incarceration as a tool of racial control because it possessed the resources and political autonomy lacking in other colonies. As Africa's foremost industrial power, South Africa had the infrastructure to enforce racial legislation on a massive scale and the means to build sufficient penitentiaries to house offenders. With a white population several million strong, successive South African governments remained committed to the principal of white supremacy. Moreover, repressive policies were not constrained by a metropolitan government worried about its international reputation and the appearance of discrimination. As Killingray observes for British colonial Africa, 'Penal policy and practice in each colony always concerned the Colonial Office in London, which sought to ensure that what was done in the Imperial name appeared to be both consistent and humane'.<sup>91</sup> In the absence of such oversight, South Africa was free to adopt harsher measures to ensure the continuation of white control.

Furthermore, by the 1950s, other colonial governments were adopting a different approach to urbanisation: 'Colonial regimes sought to regain the initiative through "stabilization", to form the poorly differentiated, ill-paid population that moved in and out of urban jobs into a compact body of men attached to their employment. They wanted employers to pay workers enough to bring families to the city so that the new generation of workers would be properly socialized to industrial life'.<sup>92</sup> South Africa was moving in the opposite direction entirely as the apartheid state championed the migrant labour system and sought to minimise the number of permanently urbanised Africans.

## Conclusion

Mahmood Mamdani has argued that 'it is only from a perspective that focuses single-mindedly on the labor question that the South African experience appears exceptional'.<sup>93</sup> This comparison of colonial cities suggests that we need to expand this definition of South African exceptionalism to include the extraordinary levels of urban violence. At the heart of a massive migrant labour nexus, the Witwatersrand industrialised earlier, to a greater extent and more rapidly than any other urban centre in colonial Africa. Simply put, South Africa's mining industry served as an incubator for violence and we need to consider the ways in which African migrants influenced patterns of crime and conflict in the urban locations. The nature and extent of state power in South Africa also distinguishes it from other colonial regimes on the continent. The South African state devoted significant resources to incarcerating coloureds and Africans and we have to take account of the impact of exposing millions of boys and men to humiliating police harassment and a violent prison system. Finally, state

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*Footnote 88 continued*

as high as 320,000. C. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2005), p. xiii.

89 Burton, *African Underclass*, p. 244.

90 Fouchard, 'Lagos', pp. 128, 135–6.

91 Killingray, 'Punishment', p. 98.

92 Cooper, 'Conflict', p. 1,535.

93 M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (London, James Currey, 1996), p. 28.

sponsorship of township violence further undermined the rule of law. These conditions, unique to South Africa, nurtured a culture of violence that has reproduced itself ever since.

A number of variables influenced urban violence in colonial cities. The larger Mau Mau conflict, for example, produced an escalation of violent criminality in Nairobi, while the economic depression of the 1930s witnessed a rise in street crime in Lagos and Ibadan. South Africa was exceptional, however, because of the intensity and persistence of the violence. The urban character of the South African liberation struggle provides further evidence of this exceptionalism. Whereas wars of independence in other settler colonies were primarily rural, South African townships served as apartheid's battlegrounds in the 1980s and 1990s. This politicised fighting increased the scale of conflict but otherwise reflected long established patterns of violence within township communities. Ethnic, generational and migrant–urbanite antagonisms shaped the course of political hostilities just as they had been instrumental in the criminal and communal violence of previous years.<sup>94</sup> South African townships played a central role in these insurrections and the urban emphasis of the liberation struggle and end-of-apartheid conflicts, along with the current crisis of criminality, reflects a violent history generated by South Africa's specific colonial experience.

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94 G. Kynoch, 'Crime, Conflict and Politics in Transition-Era South Africa', *African Affairs*, 104, 416 (2005), pp. 493–514.

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