

Evaton and a quest for economic independence: A new dimension to entrepreneurship, 1940-1949¹

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Abstract

In South Africa, commercial activity such as entrepreneurship was one of the socio-economic institutions manipulated by the white government to develop and maintain an unequal society. The aim of this article is to locate African entrepreneurship within the wider theme of social, political and economic change that impacted on African economic independence in Evaton. Its main objective is to question whether the white government presented a favourable political environment for Africans to be economically independent in the 1940s. If so, what form of official support did they provide? If not, what type of policy measures were implemented by the government to discourage Africans from operating businesses? The article also examines how these policies met resistance from local traders.

Keywords: Evaton; Economic independence; African; Entrepreneurship; Sharecroppers.

Introduction

This article analyses the character and evolution of entrepreneurial activities in Evaton in the 1940s. During this period, the freehold location experienced important changes as a result of the influx of a large number of newcomers from different parts of the country. These conditions introduced constraints on land-use that adversely affected the subsistence economy. Until then, the relatively sparse population of the area was mainly involved in subsistence farming. Confronted by substantially new conditions, the local population embarked on a process of establishing different economic activities and, driven by a desire to maintain their autonomy, engaged in entrepreneurial activities.

¹ Thanks to Prof Nancy Jacobs of Brown University for casting a rigorous editorial eye over an earlier draft of this work.

Image 1: Evaton Map



Source: Available at www.google.co.za/search?q=evaton map & espv, as accessed on 23 March 2017.

The focus on Evaton's freehold status, which gave it relative freedom from state control, makes it an interesting case study of African entrepreneurial activity in the first half of the twentieth century.² Unlike most locations and townships elsewhere, Evaton witnessed the establishment of a wide range of local economic enterprises that included butchering, shop keeping, grave and pit digging, transport, brickmaking, ambulance industry and bakery.

The strong desire for economic independence in this peri-urban area may be traced to the significant presence of the former sharecroppers who founded the settlement. Evaton was the home of independent farmers who had prior experience as sharecroppers and who were relatively prosperous and market oriented. These families constituted a fairly coherent community with a strong sense of self-help and economic independence.³

The experience of African entrepreneurs in the freehold area of Evaton has received remarkably little historical attention. This article will therefore

² Evaton was established in 1905 and is situated thirteen miles from Vereeniging and twenty eight miles from Johannesburg.

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explore how the former sharecroppers and other local traders responded to the character and evolution of internal and external factors, such as the internal markets, personal position of local entrepreneurs, and legislative challenges.

Literature on African entrepreneurship

Over the past four decades, historical studies of African entrepreneurship have arguably stagnated. This underdeveloped scholarship may be attributed to a critical research that focused on race, class, and resistance to colonialism, urbanization, and the broad economic and political developments of the twentieth century. The first major study of entrepreneurship is the classical collection of biographies by Mweli Skota who recorded the lives of African entrepreneurs in South Africa.⁴ In this seminal work, Skota provided the names and short biographical narratives of African entrepreneurs of the Transvaal, particularly of the Reef, but did not detail the motives and circumstances that pushed individuals into businesses and the context in which traders operated. Shortly after the publication of Skota's work, Ray Phillips provided another account of African entrepreneurship.⁵ He reported that only two or three hundred retailers on the Reef were "keeping adequate books, taking inventories of stock and keeping a check-up on their businesses... wholesalers estimate that not more than ten to fifteen percent of these men are making a living out of their shops".⁶

The main contribution of Phillips' work to our knowledge of the early African urban entrepreneurs was his depiction of the conditions under which entrepreneurs operated. In his understanding, the weaknesses of African entrepreneurs were the lack of management skills and capital. From the 1930s to 1960s, there was an academic lull; virtually nothing was written on African entrepreneurship. The period of the 1960s and 1970s saw a critical shift when a handful of scholars explored the experiences of African entrepreneurs in African townships and in the former Bantustans. The foundation for these studies was laid by Leo Kuper who opened up a new conversation, the single contribution to a national discourse.⁷ He was followed by scholars of the

4 M Skota, *The African Yearly Register* (Johannesburg, R.L. Esson and Co. Ltd, 1937), pp. 5-100.

5 R Phillips, *Bantu in the city* (Alice, Lovedale Press, 1938), p. 20.

6 R Phillips, *Bantu in the city...*, pp. 20-21.

7 L Kuper, *An African bourgeoisie: Race, class and politics in South Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965), p. xi.

Eastern Cape, Gillian Hart and RB Savage⁸ who pointed out how African entrepreneurs were restricted by severe apartheid structural limitations in different municipal townships and Bantustans.

Geographically, this literature is limited and confined to different spaces of subordination, overlooking the potential of entrepreneurial growth in the African freehold townships. It also ignored that African enterprises were not subject to the same formal rules, such as contracts, licensing, inspection, reporting and taxation in the freehold settlements. Moreover, this body of literature tended to concentrate on goods and services that served the needs of local residents, failing to note that some of the entrepreneurs' businesses were not positioned to serve fellow Africans. In this light, this article opens up a new academic dialogue on African entrepreneurship in freehold townships.

With this in mind, this article, through an analysis of the economic history of Evaton, provides further insight into resistance to "proletarianisation". In part, it ties well with the work of neo-Marxist scholars that addressed the question of African entrepreneurship and resistance. Cobley, in his comprehensive overview of African entrepreneurship historiography has curiously given us excellent histories that link African entrepreneurship and resistance.⁹ His argument, however, is based on detailed political consciousness attached to trading rights among African traders in municipal controlled townships, not in freehold areas. He reveals that African entrepreneurs saw trading rights as a means of viewing their own success, as well as contributing to the upliftment of their people. Southall shares similar views, his work inspired by the growing African resistance to the South African government from the 1970s.¹⁰ Seldom discussed in this radical literature is the relationship between African economic mobility and the favourable socio-economic conditions provided by freehold African landed enclaves around the country.

Economic independence for Townships

Evaton was distinct from most other African settlements. Its status as a freehold township made it a rarity like the freehold areas of Johannesburg

8 RB Savage, *A study of bantu retail traders in certain areas of Eastern Cape* (Occasional Paper No 9, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Grahamstown, Rhodes University, 1966), pp. 4-10; G Hart, *Some socio economic aspects of the African entrepreneurship* (Occasional Paper No 16, Grahamstown, Rhodes University, 1972), pp. 2-6.

9 A Cobley, *Class and consciousness: The black petty bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924-1950* (Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1990), pp. 2-4.

10 R Southall, "African capitalism in contemporary South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7(1), 1980, pp. 38-39.

such as Kliptown, Sophiatown and Alexandra that were really part of the greater Johannesburg urban area. Despite the formal status of both Alexandra and Sophiatown as being outside the municipal boundary, by the 1930s these freehold settlements were labour reserves with a high population of wage labourers. Geographically, these townships were located on the doorstep of a major urban centre, Johannesburg.

As a result, geographical factors and the limiting pass laws in the neighbouring municipal controlled locations became core issues to the rapid growth of the number of sub-tenants. In Alexandra in particular these historical dynamics led to the early decline of subsistence economy in the 1920s.¹¹

Evaton, some miles distant from Johannesburg, did not fit into this analysis. Officially, some of these freehold localities were labelled as slums, based on their over-crowding, poverty, and a blighted physical appearance. Unlike Evaton, which was sparsely populated, Sophiatown suffered from an: “insalubrious environment [that] was marked by gutters, uncollected garbage ... inadequate filthy lavatories, and stench”.¹²

What distinguished Evaton from these areas was its economic history, self-sufficiency, demography, and geographical location. “Evaton is one of the most orderly places I know of in the Transvaal”, said Sol Plaatjie, testifying to the Native Economic Commission.¹³ Physically, the area had big yards. The sizes of stands varied: there were larger stands at 4000 square metres, the smaller ones were 2500 square metres.¹⁴ This physical advantage enabled residents to be relatively successful subsistence farmers for the first three decades of Evaton’s development, allowing local residents to refrain from working for white industrialists. Another important aspect that made Evaton stand out was the presence of the Wilberforce Institute, the only African controlled school in the Transvaal. The main purpose of the Institute was to produce self-reliant citizens; in its motto “African advancement”, Wilberforce stressed the importance of providing students with liberal education. The school was under the control of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, originally established by African Americans in the United States of America. The institute attracted a group of educated Africans to settle in the area.

11 P Bonner and N Nieftagodien, *Alexandra: A history* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2009), pp. 1-6.

12 D Hart and G Pirie, “The sight and soul of Sophiatown”, *Geographical Review*, 74, 1984, p. 40.

13 Report of Native Economic Commission 1930-1932, UG, 22, Pretoria Government S. Plaatjie’s testimony in the Printers, 1932.

14 Report of the Native Commissioner on Evaton, NTS 361-364, 27 May 1947.

Even after the collapse of subsistence farming, Evaton provided opportunities for entrepreneurial growth and opportunities for Africans to prosper economically, including enterprises such as grave digging and ambulance operations. In the freehold areas of Johannesburg, these services were under the control of the Johannesburg City Council. Because of its relative autonomy and opportunities, Evaton attracted Africans with means to buy properties and set up homes who saw Evaton as an area where they could advance their social and economic life in an urban environment. Depending on individual interest, Evaton's freehold status and autonomy provided room for Africans who aspired to advance themselves in different spheres of life.

From its inception, Evaton residents struggled to maintain the settlement as an autonomous self-contained community. Interviews reveal that local residents had deep cultural commitment to landownership based on the principles and value of economic independence. The first wave of residents had experienced unprecedented upheavals and hardships as a result of land dispossession that transformed the rural economy. These complexities and struggles dominated scholarly writing in the 1980s¹⁵ and a number of historians have identified land shortage among African people as the main factor that pushed them to proletarianisation.¹⁶ The great majority of this generation possessed excellent agricultural skills, lived on and from the land until they came to Evaton. A significant proportion of these inhabitants had prior experience as sharecroppers as a result of close links with the capitalist and commercial world in the rural Highveld and Natal.

These families were deeply rooted to independent spirit. Their dependency on land for livelihood persisted in Evaton till the 1940s, where they upheld their old economic independence tradition through subsistence farming. Land was a major resource for economic stability: it was where food was sourced through agriculture and on which cattle relied for grazing. Unlike Alexandra and Sophiatown, in Evaton locals grew their own food and lived as an interdependent community bonded by reciprocity. Each family was responsible for producing its own food that would take care of its subsistence needs. Indeed, there were very few household items that were bought from the grocery store and these were secondary to daily food consumption.

15 W Beinart et al, *Putting a plough to the ground: Accumulation and dispossession in rural South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1986); T Keegan, *Rural transformation in industrializing South Africa: The southern Highveld to 1914* (Johannesburg, 1987), pp. 1-3.

16 S Trapido (ed.), "Putting a plough: A history of tenant production on the Vereeniging estates, 1896-1920", W Beinart et al, *Putting a plough to the ground...*, p. 5; T Keegan, *Rural transformation in industrializing South Africa...*, p. 4; K Shillington, *The colonisation of the southern Tswana* (Braamfontein, 1985), pp. 2-5.

This economic practice served as the cornerstone of the local economic independence, delaying local incorporation into wage labour and differentiating Evaton from other freehold townships on the Reef. Subsistence economy catered for the basic needs of residents, while more successful farmers were able to sell their goods on the market. One of the descendants of these farmers, Sonto recalls: “we had maize and different kinds of vegetables, we also had fruit trees like grape, apple, apricots and pears, and it was green all over with trees and plants, we would eat and save for next season”.¹⁷ This is supported by Mjikisi Maseko’s recollection:¹⁸

... hey man there was nothing people of Evaton were practicing agriculture, they were just planting in their stands, for example, I would plant this place there was no poverty there was maize in these stands we were not starving there.

Tsepo Khanyi pointed out a grinding stone that her mother used, observing:¹⁹

... we looked down upon people from urban areas because they bought everything while we were planting everything, here at home we grinded *mabele* (*sorghum*) and made *ting* sour porridge that is made out of sorghum. We never bought *mabele* or maize we planted and we exchanged with other families.

Several testimonies evoke the impression that many Africans that bought properties saw the township as an independent space where they could advance their social and independent economic life in an urban environment. Paul Seshabela recounts: “For our parents landownership of these stands represented and sustain a sense of progress, land possession was seen by our fathers as a great achievement against the persistence of racism, which prevented any significant competitive advancement of Africans”.²⁰

For local residents, the ownership of land was one of the most important ways of obtaining their freedom and improving their status and citizenship. The question of independent livelihood also emerges as the dominant theme in the interviews. “Our parents were not willing to work for whites they were content with what they ripped from their gardens”.²¹ “My mother depended on food from the garden... she grinded corn and sorghum for subsistence purpose, she never worked in Vereeniging. She supplemented income by selling vegetables derived from subsistence existence”.²²

17 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, S Kekane, Evaton 22 January 2010.

18 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, M Maseko, Evaton 14 May 2010.

19 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, T Khanyi, Evaton 3 July 2009.

20 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, P Seshabela, Evaton 14 May 2011.

21 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, D Seremi, Evaton 12 September 2010.

22 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, T Khanyi, Evaton 13 May 2011.

These testimonies are strikingly vivid and suggest the value of local economic independence, but they seem to be problematic as they obscure internal social differentiation, class composition and the question of wealthier and poor residents. There appear to be competing voices against the economic dependence crises and proletarianisation that deprived Africans their independence.

Interestingly, the interviews reveal that Evaton provided a refuge to Africans who sought to evade working for white industrialists and how the local residents valued economic independence. Additionally, they are useful in pointing out some aspects that distinguish Evaton from other urban African freehold settlements. In fact, subsistence farming, which revolved around independent livelihood and freedom from labour market, served as a dynamic and significant economic force in the local community.

Population growth and the change of land use

The introduction of industrial manufacturing processes led to the massive growth of industries in South Africa. The mass migration of Africans to the towns began to take place, particularly on the Rand, where a more stabilized African work-force was needed to fill the growing numbers of semi-skilled jobs and industrialists were prepared to pay higher wages to secure such categories of labour.²³ A number of industrial “growth points” were identified by the government in the 1940s. Among others, the region of the Vaal Triangle was identified as potential growth points for iron, steel and engineering industry.

This led to the rapid development of the two towns of Vanderbijlpark and Sasolburg. The new emerging industrial development created a huge demand for African labour. The increasing numbers of African workers, pushed out by structural conditions that prevailed in the reserves, were attracted to Vereeniging region. As a result, many labour migrants looked to Evaton as a place in the region where they could settle freely without being required to obtain permits that authorised their presence in the settlement. Undoubtedly, the freehold status and its relative autonomy offered much to attract migrant workers and other desperate displaced Africans. Migrants and aspiring property owners found Evaton desirable, many of them preferring it to other settlements. These workers established the township as an important social centre that was increasingly characterised by a greater sense of autonomy

²³ P Walshe, *The rise of African nationalism in South Africa* (London, 1970), pp. 4-7; D O'Meara, “The 1946 African mine workers' strike in the political economy of South Africa”, *Journal of Common Wealth and Comparative Politics*, 13(1), 1975, pp. 146-173.

than other townships. At the same time, many urbanised Africans from the Johannesburg peri-urban area, slum yards, municipal locations and white owned yards chose to relocate to Evaton where they bought properties and set up homes. One of the defining features of this period was not only the population growth, but also the way in which humans and non-humans were linked together in heterogeneous and often unrecognized assemblages that contribute to the making of a uniquely urban township.

The analysis of this new development offers important insight into the understanding of local population growth and changing land use in Evaton. This new industrial development impacted heavily on the local economic independence. During these years, it became increasingly difficult for wage labour migrants to find suitably priced residential accommodation as no new houses were being built.²⁴ One of the most pressing factors adding to this was the adverse impact of pass laws in restricting African ingress and settlement in urban areas. In addition, the Vereeniging Town Council's removal of Top Location in the 1940s, an African township in Vereeniging, also contributed to population growth in Evaton.²⁵ Top Location had many tenants who rented rooms and a large proportion of these tenants did not qualify for housing schemes in the newly established Sharpeville. Among these tenants there was a group of unmarried Basotho women that migrated to Vereeniging. Joshua Vilakazi recalls:²⁶

Many Basotho came here when Top was demolished and the new space and rules in the new location were not the same. The municipality became strict and beer brewing was closely monitored.

As a result, they rented rooms in the township of Evaton, where they concentrated in Small Farm. This was reported by the Additional Native Commissioner to the Director of Native Labour:²⁷

This released area has increased exceedingly rapidly in population owing to its proximity to Johannesburg, and to the absolute lack of control over community. Most of standholders owning large houses keep lodgers, others have permitted the building of one and two roomed huts on their stands...sanitary convenience available on any one stand are quite inadequate for all residents.

²⁴ P Bonner, "African urbanisation on the Rand between the 1930 and 1960: Its social character and political consequences", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21(1), pp. 115-129.

²⁵ P Frankel, *An atrocity: Sharpeville and its massacre* (Johannesburg, 2001), pp. 7-8.

²⁶ V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, J Vilakazi, Vereeniging, 20 May 2012.

²⁷ National Archive of South Africa (NASA), Pretoria, NTS 361/364, Letter, Additional Native Commissioner / Director of Native Labour, 26 March 1946.

Similar conditions were observed by Dr Clark who was alarmed during his inspection by the changing conditions in the settlement. He reported, “Natives in Peri-Urban Areas outside Released Area, was likely to be irksome and that these natives would tend to move away from control into released area and so aggravated the position in Evaton.”²⁸ Many stand-holders, colloquially referred to as *omastende* in Evaton took an advantage of the situation and sublet rooms to migrants. Legally, *omastende* contravened the condition of sale contained in their title deeds.

The clause stipulated “the holding may not be subdivided and that no person other than the owner or the member of his family may reside on such holding”.²⁹ In response to these developments, Clark reported that the area had become congested and that slum conditions were beginning to appear in Small Farms. He further concluded that these conditions posed a danger of contamination and infection.³⁰ By 1939 it was estimated that the population increased from 12 000 to approximately 40 000 residents.³¹ This suggests that Evaton’s population doubled in a few years. This congestion did not only pose a danger to health conditions but also contributed to the end of subsistence farming.

Physically, the new development changed the original pattern of the settlement. Scattered humble houses began to consolidate and the settlement became the high density township with more diverse neighbourhoods. This restrained land used for cattle grazing and agricultural activities. Initially, land use was fragmented into open spaces that served as grazing land, arable land where agriculture was practised, and the residential space. Agricultural fields were transformed into residential space, large development of backyard rooms that accommodated tenants began to appear. Depending on the landlord’s choice, many yards had five to ten rooms. In one instance a landowner put up 30 rooms for rent.³²

Continuity of economic independence in war years

After 1940, these major local economic structural changes posed threats to the quality of local economic independence. This raises the question of how this change impacted on the lives of the local community that relied on subsistence farming. The local residents had to grapple with adjustment

28 NASA, NTS 361-364, Report, Deputy Chief Health Inspector on Local Health Condition, 17 May 1946.

29 NASA, NTS 361-364, Report, Minister of Native Affairs, 27 May 1947.

30 NASA, NTS 361-364, Report, Deputy Chief Health Inspector on Local Health Condition, 27 May 1940.

31 NASA, NTS 361/364, Report of the Native Affair Commission, 1939.

32 Personal observation during fieldwork.

crises generated by the local economic change. In order to cope with this transformation, a large proportion of local residents had to sell their labour in the neighbouring industries, as Seremi attests “ISCOR, Brick ‘n Tile, Stewards and Lloyd employed many stand owners here we could not survive on agricultural products anymore”.³³

For example, Mr Makhene who was an independent brick maker had to work for Brick ‘n Tile in Vereeniging, that head-hunted him for his skills. Some members of the community struggled to maintain their economic independence. They found themselves in an awkward situation but nonetheless made the best of circumstances by seizing every opportunity to develop enterprises and participate as businesspeople in the commercial life of a developing community. They responded to new commercial opportunities, resulting in new forms of entrepreneurship that expanded in a relatively uncontrolled, decentralised if not random ways.

New visible and invisible networks of social and economic exchange emerged as some of these businesses were separate from the mainstream flows of the national capital. A large proportion of the aspiring local traders were former sharecroppers, who to some degree imbibed the idea of individual self-improvement through diligence and effort.³⁴ Oral testimonies inform us that their main motivations that engaged them in microenterprises included improvement of household income, creation of employment opportunities, and the search for self-independence.

Many sharecroppers were business-minded individuals with great experience in market economies as evinced by their sharecropping activities in the rural Highveld. For example, Muda Dlamini, who was a former sharecropper, operated butchery. Gilman Nkutha operated a small poultry business rearing chickens and selling eggs, chicken and chicken feathers for pillow making. Local women also demonstrated their entrepreneurial capability during this period. Christina Meku’s grandmother and her friends, Dwight Seremi’s and Paul Seshabela’s mothers, all former sharecroppers, were hawkers. They sold their farm products in the white suburbs of Johannesburg. The lack of sources, however, on income differentials that possibly influenced decision-making between residents as to who sold their labour to the neighbouring industries and entrepreneurs.

33 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, D Seremi, 12 March 2011.

34 T Keegan, *Facing the storm...*, pp. 2-8.

According to Paul “our mothers worked for themselves and achieved more wealth than those who worked for others”.³⁵ Nxumalo repaired and sold bicycles from his small workshop. This class demonstrated the ability to diversify, integrate and specialise in their respective trades that contributed to their economic independence and upward socio-economical mobility. It is striking that former sharecroppers, such as the Dlaminis, Seshabelas and many others, struggled to maintain their economic independence throughout their long life span. Even during the period of the most constant economic insecurity they ventured into entrepreneurship that enabled them to turn their backs on wage labour.

For them, entrepreneurship was becoming an important economic pillar that replaced subsistence farming. More and more former sharecroppers ventured into different types of businesses in search for a better life. Livestock and other farming assets were liquidated in order to invest in local enterprises. This is better illustrated by Paul Seshabela’s testimony: “my father who had two ploughs and a span of cattle had to sell his stuff in order to invest on starting a shop”. In a similar vein, James Moagi recalls: “Our elders had no choice they were forced to go to work but some of them felt that whatever agricultural assets they brought from the Highveld could assist them to start businesses...my father sold his cattle and bought a lorry”.³⁶ For this class, this shift was another attempt to maintain their economic autonomy amidst mounting pressure for them to become wage labourers.

The lack of archival sources on the subject makes it difficult to measure an accurate rate of development. However, the use of interviews as the main source of data, it is perhaps safe to conclude that there was a steady expansion of shops, butcheries, and other services between 1940 to 1945. The period can be called one of evolving economic changes with an advent of the new retailing formula. In most cases, these businesses were family owned; each merchandiser knew his or her customers well. In times of crisis they would sell on credit. In the case of the Motubas, the Nhlapos and many other business families, children would assist after school and over school holidays.³⁷ Some of these stores were beautiful, some were “dark dingy”. In this context of rapid economic change, business knowledge and formal education were cast as remedies to deal with the situation. The early 1940s represented

35 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, P Seshabela, 12 July 2010.

36 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, J Moagi, Evaton, 11 June, 2009.

37 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interviews, conducted with different families. 2010-2011.

quite a different socio-economic character from the subsistence farming era, presenting a significant change in food consumption and production in the settlement. Dwight Seremi explains the nature of this economy:³⁸

Our agricultural space was reduced by the development of rooms and population growth and the expansion of the settlement impacted on grazing land. We then stopped producing crops that we use to get from our garden; it was the beginning of dependence. Many shops emerged. We started buying things that we used to grow.

The decline in a subsistence economy introduced changes in the local consumer demands for goods and services, as well as in local food supplies. It created an adjustment in consumption and retailing that reshaped economic activities and occupations, and also introduced new structures of markets in Evaton. Given the emergence of the new economic institutions and infrastructure, this article argues that new entrepreneurial opportunities emerged. In order to adapt to the changing local economy, innovative local residents, particularly the sharecroppers, responded by opening up new businesses. In turn, this delayed the teleological trajectory to labour market. In other words, the local sinking into labour market was not easy or deep-seated but slow.

Businesses: An emerging variety

In the 1930s Evaton saw the evolution of the new forms of entrepreneurial activities, such as transport, grocery shops, butcheries, bakeries and coffin makers. This new economic orientation was inspired by the local demands, greatly strengthened by servicing the needs of newcomers. First was the expansion of the building trade, no doubt a reflection of the considerable new development of residential structures that often formed a defining characteristic of the 1930s and 1940s local renaissances. Maseko noted that “by this time many residents extended their dwellings because families were expanding and others rented rooms out to migrant workers, so the service of bricklayers became important.”³⁹ Secondly, there was significant growth in all forms of aforementioned retailing activities. Small shops began to play a more important role in supplying the local community with consumption goods.

38 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, D Seremi, Evaton, 21 June 2011.

39 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, M Maseko, Evaton, 27 July 2011.

A similar role was played by butcheries that provided the community with meat. Shops sold everyday groceries while butcheries sold meat. It was critical, then, that the Evaton retail sector increases both in size and in the sophistication and range of its activities. This was observed by Sergeant Pretorius: “here are eight butcher shops and each one has his own slaughter place and nobody see to it. There are also fourteen shops, no shop hours are in force, except the Sunday law”.⁴⁰ This report also indicates that local retail was not regulated; local butchers slaughtered without authoritative interference of the Meat Board.

Before 1940, detailed and accurate inventories of Evaton’s local trade by value, kind, and orientation were not taken. Data of individual entrepreneurial activities, such as stores and butcheries, is not available. This may be because of Evaton’s freehold status. The only available data that covers this period is the police report which indicates that, by the 1930s, there were less shops and butcheries that could be included under the heading “Retail”. The analysis of early trade within Evaton may be based upon the data, however fragmentary, found in the national archive in which there is nothing on the specialty store such as the clothiers, chemist, and hardware. It seems as if local stores were for general rather than restricted dealerships.

This is not to suggest that all stores were the same. The oral testimonies reveal that there was a significant difference between stores depending on the ownership, size, stock and the location. Moreover, there was a definite class and gender division among the shopkeepers. The emergence of new shops was not only linked to the ongoing population growth, but also to significant changes that had occurred in the trading patterns.

First, the local residents became traders and were thus direct competitors with white- and Indian-established businesses in the region. Secondly, women made significant in-roads into new territory during the 1940s. Mary Maseko, for instance, controlled a store in Small Farm, the southern part of Evaton. The oral interview informs us that “she was selling good food; it is where we used to meet and eat”.⁴¹ Paul Seshabela remembers: “I know Mary her father operated a bus company and she was the best food seller we enjoyed her food. She was not the only one. Our mothers would go sell vegetables

40 NASA, NTS 361/362, Letter, Sergeant Pretorius / Magistrate of Vereeniging, Enforcement of Dog Tax at Evaton Township, 16 May 1933.

41 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, A Nkosi, Evaton, 20 June 2010.

every weekend. When they come back we would enjoy”.⁴² There were many informants who commented about the female enterprise, Me Meku, for instance confirmed: “women, our grannies worked hard”⁴³ “Many aunties sold consumer goods here”.⁴⁴

Female traders substantially increased their grip on itinerant trade, trading food products and crafts in urban Johannesburg. They formed a group of food suppliers to the growing city of Johannesburg. The foodstuff they sold, mostly vegetables and fruits, were bought from the neighbouring farms. Some were locally grown from their gardens. Unlike in municipality locations, most of the shops and butcheries in Evaton were located in the residential stands, not in a central area, usually laid out in a square shape shops and there were small retail stores selling the same scanty stock of cigarettes. Shops were thus central to consumption, the social use of the peri-urban space, and the changing social and physical structure of the 1930s and 1940s.

Many shops and butcheries were generally small, by and large single proprietorship and catering only for the local segregated African market. They were a major source of groceries because they had to meet the recurring daily or at most weekly demands. Oupa Motuba recalls that these shops were located in the neighbourhood as oppose to the neighbouring town.⁴⁵ The contributions of family as a working unit in many shops and butcheries played an important role in the smooth operation of these family enterprises and could be one of the reasons why the Motuba’s shop still exists today. In the case of Mary Maseko, a female shopkeeper, she was assisted by her daughter and her brother.⁴⁶ This made shopping trips short and localised. The significance of these shops as a subject of study inspired this article.

Another important entrepreneurial activity was butcheries. By the 1940s the numbers of shops had grown, and the Director of Native Agriculture reported that in Evaton “there are 40 licensed Native butchers in the area”.⁴⁷ Local butcheries were not controlled by the Meat Board and slaughtering of livestock took place in the backyards. The slaughter poles were grossly unsanitary. Seremi describe them as ramshackle wood-and-iron structures. Cattle, sheep and pigs were slaughtered by neighbouring boys who were rewarded in a form

42 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, P Seshabela, Evaton, 16 July 2010.

43 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, C Meku, Evaton, 17 August 2010.

44 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, B Mkhabela, 19 August 2010.

45 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, Oupa Motuba, Evaton, 12 May 2010.

46 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, M Maseko, Evaton, 2 July 2011.

47 NASA, NTS 361/364, Report, Director of native Agriculture on Eaton Native Slaughter Facilities, s.a.

of offal.⁴⁸ Like the new shops, many butchers' shops appeared in the 1930s; they seem to be the first specialised shops in Evaton.

The supply of meat in Evaton was dominated by producer-retailers, in other words traders who owned cattle and small scale butchers, such as Dlamini whose family still operates the butchery today. Many of these butchers like Mokgothu were cattle dealers who had a long history of dealing with cattle.⁴⁹ These butchers supplied a growing number of working class who were forced to buy meat nearly every day because of the lack of the household refrigeration. The emergence of these commercial activities raises the question of official control of these enterprises. It also raises the question of interrelation between the economy, on the one hand, and urbanisation, the local and central government, and the simultaneous change in population composition and consumption revolutions in the arts, politics and religion on the other.

Impact of business legislation

In order to understand the impact of the business legislation on local entrepreneurship, it is important to learn how the introduction of trade licences affected the growth of local businesses in Evaton, and how it impacted on self-reliance and employment that the local traders fostered. Some of the earliest scholars that focused on African entrepreneurship reveal that “for the government[s], there [was] an insoluble problem of encouraging African trade in African areas as part...of restricting its growth”.⁵⁰

One of the most important contributors in this discourse was Leo Kuper. At one level, Kuper provides us with the history of the African middle class, the “petty bourgeoisies”. At another level, his work addresses structural aspects that impacted negatively on entrepreneurial advancement among Africans. Some important aspects that Kuper's work brings out vividly is the manner in which the white government crushed every semblance of human dignity, hope and entrepreneurial advancement.⁵¹ He analysed entrepreneurship as one of the significant characters that placed Africans “at the apex of subordination”.⁵² In other words, Kuper's analysis submits that legislation that governed African entrepreneurship was not a neutral official initiative but

48 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, D Seremi, 13 June 2010.

49 V Khumalo (Personal collection), interview, A Dlamini, Evaton, 12 May 2011.

50 L Kuper, *An African bourgeoisie...*, pp. 2-5.

51 L Kuper, *An African bourgeoisie...*, p. 2.

52 L Kuper, *An African bourgeoisie...*, pp. 4-5.

was political. It was deliberately tailored to systematically discourage Africans from being economically independent. In keeping with the need for labour, this entrepreneurial legislation was conceived as part of an overall apartheid programme designed to both control labour supply and divide Africans.

In a similar vein, Gillian Hart examined the development of African-owned enterprises and the nature of obstacles with which African entrepreneurs had to contend. Hart distinguishes factors inherent in the economic environment and those imposed by conscious policy decisions over which the entrepreneur has no control.⁵³ An early observer, such as Ray Phillips, attributed the weaknesses of African entrepreneurs to the lack of management skills and ability.⁵⁴

Although entrepreneurial skills and abilities are important determinants for the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial function, this article does not focus on abilities. It is inspired by the way in which Kuper moves from the “ability approach” to the socio-political analysis. When considering that local entrepreneurship was only meaningful within a given socio-political framework, the “ability” approach becomes very limited. It does not allow to locate local businesses within the wider themes of socio-political and economic change. Of course, problems of costs, training, cash flow, and turnover were common to all African economic undertakings and a number of historians have paid more attention on them.⁵⁵

In other words, this inquiry focuses more on the institutional framework under which local traders operated. It draws heavily on policy decisions, which were driven by the fact that stable and efficient governments operate to engender a climate conducive to the successful pursuit of economic gain.⁵⁶ It focuses on laws, administrative actions and procedures that governed trade licences. Government policies do not directly and unproblematically reflect on the success of entrepreneurship. In its nature, the state provides the context

53 G Hart, *African entrepreneur*, occasional paper, 16 (Institute of Social and Economic Research, Grahamstown, 1972).

54 R Phillips, *Bantu in the city* (Lovedale Press, 1938), p. 20.

55 RB Savage, *A study of bantu retail traders in certain areas of Eastern Cape*, Occasional Paper, 9, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Grahamstown, Rhodes University, 1966, p.1-7; G Hart, *Some socio-economic aspects*, pp. 1-9; A Copley, *Class and consciousness: The black petty bourgeoisie in South Africa*, pp. 3-4; R Southall, “African capitalism in contemporary South Africa”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7(1), 1980, pp. 38-70; S Keeble, “The expansion of black business into the South Africa economy with specific reference to the initiatives of the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce in the 1970” (Unpublished MA thesis University of the Witwatersrand, 1981), pp. 3-10.

56 G Hart, *African entrepreneur...*, pp. 3-5.

for the total reproduction of the social and economic order as a whole. The South African government under which African entrepreneurship operated was an autonomous actor with its own agenda that served the dominant economic interest.

Trading rights

Before 1940 there was no official control of businesses and the struggle for trading rights in Evaton was not known. These conditions frustrated the Director of Native Agriculture who depressingly wrote, “absences of control the police find it impossible to check stock theft, black market in meat and general lawlessness. At the raid conducted under the auspices of the Meat Control Board last November 6, six five ton lorry loads of beef illegally slaughtered in Evaton area were removed”. This, among other reasons, led to the introduction of the trade licensing system. The application for a licence was submitted in the 1940s to the Rural Licensing Board at Vereeniging for its recommendation, and then to the Chief Native Commissioner before the approval of the Minister. For the renewal, the Chief Native Commissioner had the power to approve.

The Chief Native Commissioner described the process and procedure of dealing with licenses as cumbersome.⁵⁷ There were a number of government departments involved in the process: the application for a license was officially circulated within the Police Department, which was under the authority of Special Justice of the Peace, the Department of Labour and the office of the Native Commissioner. Each office had to assess the application and give its recommendation report to the Licensing Board. The police had to assess the social background and criminal records of the applicant, submit a recommendation to Chief Native Commissioner, and the approval of the Minister would then be sought. In the case of renewals, the Chief Native Commissioner delegated the authority to approve.⁵⁸ The issuing of trade licenses in Small Farms, which was still new, was in the hands of the Licensing Board without the intervention of the Department.

The details contained in the following application letters indicate how eligibility requirements inhibited some aspirant traders from venturing into trade. In the case of Jim Joubert’s application for license, the local police vouched for his good character and could say nothing detrimental about

⁵⁷ Evaton Township Report, NTS 361-364.

⁵⁸ NASA, NTS 361/364, Report, Native Affairs of Commissioner on Eaton Township, 27 May 1947.

him.⁵⁹ From the records, it appears that the Department of Native Labour evaluated work and business experience and educational background. For the application to be assessed and approved, educational, criminal, work experience and financial status was evaluated by these departments. The question of education became critical; authorities were aware that many local applicants were not educated. What frustrated the applicants was the fact that the department did not recognise personal experiences of the applicants. It is possible that some applicants did not have formal education but were skilled and experienced in the respective field.

During the period between the two world wars, very few Africans were educated and the educational requirement implies that very few residents could operate businesses. For example, 25 per cent of African children attended school and 88 per cent of their African adults were illiterate.⁶⁰ In addition, oral evidence suggests that a large proportion of pioneers were sharecroppers with very little formal education, if not illiterate. There were very few educated entrepreneurs, except Rev Mokgothu who owned a butchery, the Motubas and other few families.

The problem of education as a stumbling block is evident in Jim Joubert's application. In his response to Joubert's application, the Special Justice for Peace wrote, "Applicant has had no schooling, cannot read and write and the only official language he speaks is Afrikaans. He will not be able to comply with Section 134 Act 24 1936 and has no intention of keeping books". Apart from education, the Native Affairs Department also assessed the geographical location of the proposed business and its proximity to a similar commercial establishment in the vicinity. This assessment was regulated by the provision of the Proclamation No 104 of 1933 (amended in 1952) provided that no business should be established within two miles of the similar trading site already occupied.

The issue of geographical proximity was noted in Josiah Moagi's application letter where the Additional Native Commissioner, I.P O'Driscoll, pointed out, "In view of the fact that the applicant has no educational or any experience of business, and there is a butchery nearby, I am unable to recommend the

59 NASA, NTS 1244 1330/162, Letter, Trade license application, Jim Joubert, 28 May 1948.

60 RH Davis, "Charles Loram and an American model for African education in South Africa", *African Studies Review*, 19(2), 1976, pp. 87- 99.

application”.⁶¹ Moagi’s proposed butchery was to be located just less than a mile away from Mabasa’s butchery. It was the same with John Mtsweni who was refused a license in 1946 because of the location of his proposed butchery. The Secretary of Native Affairs wrote to Mtsweni, “I have the honour to inform you that this application was refused as it was considered that there are sufficient ... butchers in the Evaton Township”.⁶² Unlike other applicants who never challenged the decision of the Licensing Board, Mtsweni challenged the refusal which he regarded as unfair. The rule was successfully challenged by the attorney’s petition and Mtsweni won the case, receiving a license which the Minister approved.

Among other requirements, experience became another problem during the application process. In the case of Katy and Richard Ntshika who applied for a trade licence in 1946, O’Driscoll, the Additional Native Commissioner, responded to their application as follows, “... neither of the applicants have any experience, and they have only £11 capital, and in view of the Special Justice of the Peace’s Evaton remarks, I do not recommend the application”.⁶³ The requirement of experience meant that the founders should have worked in the industry or operated the business before. Certainly experience had a huge positive effect when entrepreneurs had it, but it seems unreasonable for the Board not to give a chance to those who had the desire to take entrepreneurial risks to prove themselves. Perhaps experience was used as a justification to discourage those who desired to venture into entrepreneurship. It is the argument of this article that the study of trade licence application can be a useful way of approaching some of the problems of the twentieth century African entrepreneurial development. In as much the same way, this article suggests, it is worthwhile to piece together the information now available to understand the response of the Evaton traders to the new policy development. It is then important to ascertain whether African response to these official developments began with suspicion and rejection or was eagerly received.

The evidence presented by archival records, particularly in Mtshweni’s application, richly depicts how trading rights had been the prime source of complaint and discontentment among traders. These circumstances led to the formation of an entrepreneurs’ association, the Evaton Native Traders Association. This body was formed to tackle the problems gnawing at the

61 NASA, NTS 1312/162, Letter, Additional Native Commissioner / Trade license application, Josiah Moagi, 12 April 1946.

62 NASA, NTS 1244, 1309/162, Application for Butchery, John Mtsweni, 6 September 1946.

63 NASA, NTS 1244, 1309/162, Application for Trade License, Katy and Richard Ntshika, 25 August 1946.

heart of the local traders, promoting the commercial endeavors and economic advancement of Africans mainly in Evaton.⁶⁴ The association encouraged unity and aimed to serve the desire of all African traders in Evaton.

According to Oupa Motuba his father was the secretary of the association and believed that solutions to the problem of racial discrimination were primarily economic and that African entrepreneurship was vital.⁶⁵ Anton Ndlovu remarked that the aim of the Association was to further the economic development of African businesses in order to achieve social equality in the South African society.⁶⁶ It represented the struggle for economic freedom. Their struggle was evident when this group complained before the Native Affairs Department about the delay in granting trading licenses.⁶⁷ For this group, operating businesses was important. It offered independence and economic power. In the midst of proletarianisation, this class saw venturing into entrepreneurship as bound up with the values of freedom and self-determination.

Conclusion

When considering the post-World War II political and economic context, African entrepreneurship embodies complexities. It is connected to different forms of resistance and the zeal for African economic opportunity. In the context of Evaton, local entrepreneurship provides a paradigmatic turn in understanding political resistance. As many scholars demonstrate,⁶⁸ formal political activity may be the norm for the elites and the middle classes. However, it would be naïve to expect entrepreneurial defiance to the existing business laws to take the same form.

The demarcation of political resistance to formal political activity tends to overshadow or even obscure other forms of resistance as apolitical. In the interview conducted with William Mokwena, Mokwena's tone reveals that local traders were dissatisfied and frustrated by the licence application process; this led them to take a different form of resistance. In his testimony, he

64 Oupa Motuba Personal Collection, Evaton, Minutes, Evaton Native Traders Association, 1946.

65 V Kumalo (Personal collection), interview, Oupa Motuba, Evaton, 27 September 2011.

66 V Kumalo (Personal collection), interview, A Ndlovu, Evaton, 28 August 2011.

67 NASA, NTS 361/364, Report, Native Affairs Commissioner on Evaton Township, 27 May 1947.

68 TE Nyquit, *African middle class elite* (Rhodes University Institute of Social Research and Economic Research Occasion Papers, 23, Grahamstown), pp. 3-6; H Bradford, *Organic intellectuals or petty bourgeois opportunists: The social nature of ICU leadership in the countryside* (African Studies Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand).

recounts “we could not understand what the government wanted and it was not easy to get licenses, we would have enough money for opening up business, then they would require education, you will have education then they would say no you don’t have experience it was really frustrating”.⁶⁹ This frustration escalated illegal trade that served as a form of resisting the official trade order of the time. This is evident in Jacob Mafobokoane’s case. Mafobokane was refused a trade licence because he was convicted of failing to maintain registration for slaughtering stock and trading without a licence. He was also involved in a stock theft syndicate and was suspected to be one of the receivers of stolen stock in Evaton.⁷⁰

All these factors necessitate the consideration of economic rights as a critical component of the political agenda. Most importantly, the implications for the most marginalised and oppressed entrepreneurs must be carefully examined and integrated into projected solutions. This analysis argues that although local traders’ form of resistance was unorganised and unclear, it undermined power relations. This resistance was motivated by a number of factors beyond the traders’ control, one of which was to resist low wages and to increase their income at the time when income inequality was rising in the South African labour market.

To support this claim the article draws from the work of Scott who argues that class resistance “includes any act[s] by member[s] of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims [for example, rents, taxes, prestige] made on that class by superordinate classes [for example, landlords, large farms, the state]”.⁷¹ Thus, in the terms of this discussion: The class of local entrepreneurs were subordinates which, in the view of power holders, caused disorder when failing to comply with trade rights regulations. Similar to organised political resistance, this action threatened the power of the state. It is important to note that these traders represented a creative strategy for maintaining their economic independence.

The approach utilised is an alternative way of thinking about how Africans challenged government strategies differently from the organised oppositional movements. As discussed, “real” economic independence was seen and felt when the local entrepreneurs’ had the capacity to provide for their own resource needs or own resources necessary for their personal development.

69 V Kumalo (Personal collection), interview, W Mokwena, Evaton, 12 July 2012.

70 NASA, NTS 1247 1385/162, Letter, Assistant Native Commissioner / Native Commissioner, 9 October 1951.

71 J Scott, *Weapons of the weak* (New Haven, 1987), pp. 5-6; J Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 3-8.

This relates to political independence: In order for them to fully exercise the economic power as an independent body, they had to be independent and function in their own interests.