

Capitalising on Privilege: Home-based Businesses and Informal Settlements in Indian dominated residential areas in Durban, South Africa

By

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This paper is an ethnographic account of fieldwork that began in 1997 when African squatter camps in the Greater Durban Metropolis accommodated people almost equal in number to the settled tax paying Indian residents. While their numbers were being seen as an almost destabilizing factor to the sub-region, and prompted many to label them as ‘land invaders’, others also saw a window of opportunity opening up for them by virtue of the space they owned as residents. The response was to provide a service along the lines of mainly grocery retailing. The closure of many licensed shops that were vulnerable to hold-ups and theft created a space for a nascent shopkeeper class that capitalized on the opportunities that the squatters provided as a captive market. The paper demonstrates, through case studies, how the emergence of these home based businesses actually served on the one hand as a catalyst for racial friction and on the other hand as a test case for racial integration in post-apartheid South Africa. It also intensively examines the time that the service providers put into their work, the inputs of labor from family members and the relationships they built with the African clientele that they served. The contradictions brought about by the social tensions and the cordial relationships that emerged between Indians and Africans demonstrated the organic build-up towards a new multi-racial environment.

Introduction

My regular drive several times in the week through the suburbs in which I grew up to know only as being Indian residential areas, created through apartheid’s notorious Group Areas Act of 1950, was suddenly being swamped by a proliferation of African dominated squatter camps. Since the early 1990s vacant land in Indian dominated residential areas in the city of Durban were being increasingly occupied by Africans either trying to flee the political violence between African National Congress and Inkatha Freedom Party supporters in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, or desperately trying to look for greener pastures away from their impoverished rural enclaves. What used to be a relatively quiet and almost crime free Indian neighborhood, was suddenly turned into a mixed residential area without consent of the authorities and no proper planning and facilities. Squatters are by no means a new phenomenon in South Africa. They are essentially a result of the apartheid state’s deliberate marginalisation of the African majority from the mainstream economy. The failure to provision the rural sector and to build a viable African urban sector, has led to the twentieth century witnessing regular spurts of Africans swarming the urban areas, either in protest or in sheer need for survival (see Maasdorp and Humphrey’s 1975; Murray 1987; Bonner 1990; Mabin 1990; Ardington 1992; Cranshaw and Heron 1990; Phillips 1992; McCarthy and Hindson (1994). However, this paper concentrates more on the ethnography in the research areas than about the merits or otherwise about the referenced publications.

The rapid increase in the population sizes in the squatter camps radically altered the dynamics of movements and requirements by the residents who shared the living spaces in the research areas viz. Clare Estate, Reservoir Hills and Asherville. There were as a result of this, two segments within the areas i.e. the tax paying residents and the squatters who acquired for themselves a degree of legitimacy that included representation in the Durban City Council, as well as voting rights for local councilors. Their legal status encouraged many to expand upon their dwelling sizes and increase the number who shared the spaces under a single roof. This added to the number of people who began building new structures in the squatter camps, who in turn brought in more people. As a result emerging characteristic features in the squatter camps were high density of people and high unemployment.

The visibility of the unemployed people was obvious in several ways. During the day most either spent time outside their dwellings in view of passing motorists and the residents, or walked up and down the streets either aimlessly or looking for casual work with the residents. In several daytime visits to the outer rings of the squatter camps there were groups of young men seen gambling with cards, drinking beer and cooking food. Others simply sat around talking to one another and not engaging in any activity. While some opened tuck-shops within the squatter camps, they were neither adequately stocked nor had the range of goods to meet most of the squatters requirements. Capital, as each one that I spoke to responded, was the constricting factor in the expansion of their operations. Their lack of privately owned transport, a lack of knowledge to purchase in ways and places that saved on their buying and that could increase their profits, and the refusal of wholesaling companies to deliver in the squatter camps added to their difficulties as nascent entrepreneurs.

These features within the squatter camps added a new dimension to the character of the research areas. As populations whose basic needs did not require large capital inputs, the squatters provided a captive market for many Indian residents. They were better endowed than the squatters with spare capital and privately owned transport that encouraged many to engage in casual to more formalized types of retail trading. The latter type of traders should not be confused as retailers who operate in licensed, fully equipped shops that are sanctioned by the laws of the Durban City Council. Their formalized trading actually constituted an operation from an enclosed space such as a motor car garage or a part of the

house, both of which were road facing and which have been transformed for purposes of trading.

Understanding the relative successes of smaller unlicensed traders (hereafter referred to as traders), who operated either from the pavements or from part of their houses, require an understanding of how licensed businesses have been affected since transformation. Since 1994 the number of armed robberies that have taken place in businesses have escalated at alarming levels. This resulted in shopkeepers opening later in the mornings when the streets were busier, making sure that there was always more than one person in the shop at any one time and that they are armed with guns, closing early in the evenings when it is safer to do so, and either selling their shops or just disengaging from business because of their failures to sell their shops or to operate profitably. Of all the shopkeepers who have been interviewed, every one of them had some unpleasant experience with robbers either in their shops or at their homes. Since all have been family operated businesses, inevitably a family member was a victim of the incident. The casualties ranged from being traumatized to being stabbed or shot to death. The case studies below are constructed from interviews with shopkeepers who operated within a radius of just a kilometer from each other.

Mr. M., a shopkeeper for more than forty years, inherited his general dealer business from his late father in 1969. It was then situated in a different location about a kilometer away from where he was operating at the time of the interview. He worked with two other brothers who, like him, were married with children and living in their own houses. The profits from the business were shared equally by all three brothers. They considered it a thriving business and lived comfortably after paying their entire monthly debts and overheads. Between 1994 and June 1997 they were held up three times in their shop and twice at home. On one occasion one of the brothers was severely beaten with the butt of a gun, while in another occasion at home the interviewee, his wife, mother and a sister who was visiting during the day, were badly beaten and robbed. His wife spent two weeks in hospital with a swollen face, cracked ribs and trauma. His confidence in the business fell drastically after June 1997 because of these incidents. From January 1997 he installed wrought iron gates and served their customers from behind them. However, the volume of his business took a serious downward turn when a neighbor, two doors away, first started selling fruit and vegetables from his garage. As this enterprise improved he apparently increased his range of stock in groceries, directly affecting the former's family business. By January 1998 he decided with his brothers, to abandon the business after failing to sell it.

Mrs. M.E. rented a shop directly opposite a squatter camp named Lusaka, about one kilometer away from Mr. M. above. Robbers shot the previous owner of the shop dead in 1995. This discouraged others from taking over the premises for at least eight months, until Mrs. M.E. and her husband decided to take the risk of running the shop at a significantly reduced rental. Since then they were robbed thrice, in April 1996, August 1997 and March 1999 respectively. She ran the shop with her husband and was helped by her unemployed nephew at least three days a

week. In April 1996 her husband was robbed when he was alone, but was not physically harmed. In August 1997 her nephew was held up and shot in the stomach. Fortunately he recovered in hospital and was back at work after three months. Allegedly there were women across the road who were witness the incident but were too afraid to talk to the police. Two arrests were made for the shooting but the suspects were released because nobody was willing to give evidence against them. In March 1999 Mrs. M.E., her husband and nephew, were accosted once again by two robbers. This time however, Mrs. M.E.'s husband was better prepared and had already suspected the two from the time he opened his shop. He cocked his gun and had it ready. At first one went into the shop and bought a box of matches, and later the other came for the same thing. The third time they walked into the shop together. Mr. M.E. asked his nephew to serve them, while he stood with the gun in his hands. As he suspected, one of the two robbers produced a homemade gun and pointed it to his nephew while the other raised his hand with a long knife warning them to cooperate. Mr. M.E. unhesitatingly, but surprisingly, raised his hands and shot both of them, killing one and seriously wounding the other. With both in their fifties, and two of their children still studying, Mr. and Mrs. M.E. found it difficult to close down the business and do something else. They consider themselves too old to divert their energies in another enterprise, despite their meager earnings and high risks in a volatile area. They have one of two places to go to i.e. Cape Town where her brother is, or overseas, "anywhere there's peace and respect for life".

The high degree of fear that has become prevalent among business people reached obsessive levels. Several interviewees have as a result started trading behind wrought iron gates. The purpose is to keep clients outside the shop and reduce the possibility of being robbed.

Opening and closing shops later and early respectively, and disengagement from business created opportunities for the potential unlicensed traders. Many started off by setting up make-shift stalls on the pavements, but withdrew from such a practice within a short period because all of them had fallen victim at different times to thieves and had their money and goods stolen and were physically attacked. The stall operators were from both gender groups and from a range of age groups and employment backgrounds. They opened earlier than the normal shops in order to serve the pedestrians from the squatter camps, who were on their ways to work. There was a simple logic to this – most do not have the firewood to prepare meals early morning, so bread, eggs, tinned fish or beans were ideal items to sell to them for lunches at work. The early morning human traffic became a thriving market for many of these traders – who enjoyed the advantage of confidence from the major bread suppliers and other wholesalers who delivered to their doors. The aversion to deliver in the squatter camps was complimented by the establishment of these smaller unlicensed trading outposts. The manufacturers and wholesalers recognized the potential market in the squatter camps and agreed to deliver to the household enterprises, despite the protest from licensed

shopkeepers. The latter complained about the rapid decline in their businesses because of the proliferation of unlicensed traders. However, these stalls provided conveniences for the working people and others from the squatter camps because of their proximity to them. Unlike the stalls and tuck shops within the squatter camps, the household run stalls had a wider range of goods at generally more competitive prices. The one item that the squatters could not avoid from the household stalls was bread. This requirement induced other purchases such as tinned food, paraffin, frozen chicken, maize meal, candles, firewood and other basic incidental items.

The experiences of hold ups led the traders as well to work with the same caution and security of the licensed shopkeepers. They too started trading with anxiety and from behind wrought iron bars. Their layouts, investments, volumes of business and working patterns provided interesting ethnography that was symptomatic of conditions in developing countries.

An insight into the unlicensed traders operations

Most, if not all household members were engaged either full time or peripherally in the trading activities. These household enterprises expanded to a point that required inputs from more than one person, as well as space that could adequately cater for the things they knew were profitable and quick to retail. The enormity of the tasks eventually gave way to a distinct gender and aged based division of labor. Work for most traders began from about 04h00 in the summer months and 05h00 in the winter months, and ended not earlier than 20h00. The day usually began with women's domestic duties in their kitchens, when they saw to the needs of their school going children, their working husbands and other household members, and later to the general neatness of the home. The business activities usually began around 5h30 to service the early morning commuters going to work. Among those who retailed fruit and vegetables work had to begin before this time for at least three days of the week. This was determined by the working hours of what is generally referred to as "the bulk market" in Central Durban, where wholesalers in fruit and vegetables sell in bulk to retailers for resale to the public. The operating hours of the bulk market are from 04h00 in the mornings and at most times require that business people do their purchasing early in the mornings from this hour to ensure that they get quality goods. On these days work actually begins for the women of the household from around 03h00 to provide breakfasts for those who do the marketing. The efficiency with which the traders do their work demonstrates a range of factors relating to the successes in their enterprises. Many have had to work with

brute determination to survive because they were victims of unemployment that was brought about through retrenchments, resignations from work out of frustration or through a shortage of work in their particular fields. Others among the traders included pensioners and housewives. In most of these enterprises they were also helped by school going children and others who were in tertiary institutions, as well as by friends and relatives who helped only to keep themselves busy during the day, without any remuneration.

The details of the daily lives of twelve unlicensed operators were collected through repeated visits between February and November 1998. Some basic information is illustrated in the table below about how few of the traders have always lived while others have had to reshape their working lives.

Table 7.1 illustrating number (1), household size (2), number in formal employment (3), previous employment of stall holders (4), range of goods (5), type of clientele (6), and no of working hours per day (7). *The number in brackets indicates the issues in the table below.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	6	0	Building trade; heavy duty driver	Firewood, candles, paraffin, vegetables	Mainly squatters	12
2.	2	0	Plasterer/tiler	Groceries	Mainly squatters	16
3	5	0	Shop assistant	Groceries, firewood	Mainly squatters	16
4	5	0	Vegetable stall in Durban market	Groceries, fruit, vegetables, frozen chicken	Mixed	16
6	7	1	Taylor in a clothing factory	Regular Beer, liquor, African beer	Mainly Africans	18
7	6	0	Shebeen	African beer, regular beer, liquor	Mainly Indians	10
8	6	2	Vegetable stall in Durban market	Vegetables, fruit, poultry	Mainly Indians	12
9	7	1	Bricklayer	Vegetables, fruit	Mixed	8
10	4	1	Market gardener	Vegetables, fruit	Mainly squatters	10
11	13	0	Vegetable stall in the market	Vegetables, poultry	Mainly Indians	12
12	8	2	Builder	Vegetables	Mainly squatters	10

A number of interesting factors emerge from the table above. Only five of the twelve households had people who were engaged in wage or salaried employment. In three of these five cases (numbers 8, 9 and 12) the working members' salaries were crucial to the survival of the household. The profits from the trading that was done by household members did not yield sufficient returns to meet their expenses, but only meagerly

complimented the wages and salaries that were brought into the household. In these cases it was the retired first generations from within the households who were engaging in fruit and vegetable retailing. Their responses to questions about the reasons for their trade were unanimously about the difficulties of meeting basic expenses and saving their properties from expropriation by the Durban City Council, should they fault on paying their property taxes. Each of the traders operated from makeshift mobile stalls that were set up every morning and dismantled every evening. Their range of mainly vegetables and to a lesser extent fruits, evidently made them significantly smaller traders than the others mentioned in the table.

It is apparent from the table that all of the traders' previous employment was from outside professional fields. Their range of employment types placed them in the lower middle class category and all of them owned the properties from which they traded. They were residents in their respective areas for four decades and more. Those who worked in the building trade were either retired or frustrated in trying to acquire secure employment. One of the respondents stated that Indian tradesmen were being ousted from the industry by cheaper African labor. This point was evident in the contemporary building construction industry in Durban. Africans were previously excluded from engaging in skilled labor, so their entry into the market brought them in at significantly lower rates than qualified and certified Indian tradesmen. The building industry in South Africa also suffered a major recession in the late 1970s and did not recover since then. It marginalised a number of its employees and forced them to seek alternative sources of income. Others who have either been market gardeners or stall owners in the Central Durban market have had various experiences that also had a racial basis to it. The market gardener reflected in the table lost his farm in the Springfield Flats area when it was expropriated through the 1950 Group Areas Act in 1968. This forced him to relocate to the market where he had to shift from being a producer and wholesaler of vegetables to one who had to start buying to sell as a retailer. But like the other market stall owners he had to leave the market because it was being over traded by African "squatter sellers" – who entered the market in large numbers and sold from the pavements outside the market and from empty spaces inside the market. The Durban City Council, who administered the cite was unable and unwilling to control the numbers who traded inside and outside the market.

Those who made a living out of shebeens were from two different backgrounds. One became unemployed after the men's suit factory (number 6) in which he worked drastically

retrenched staff in 1994, while the other (number 7) ran his shebeen independently for at least thirty years. The difference in these operations was that the items they sold were not publicly displayed like those of their fruit and vegetable counterparts. During apartheid, such businesses were under constant surveillance by the police because they were not tolerated. Only over the last decade or less, laws against shebeens were relaxed, but they had to acquire official approval from the local authorities. The two individuals engaged in the same trade for different reasons and were affected in different ways after the 1994 election. While one operated with relative ease over the last thirty years the other functioned under constant threat of being reported by his neighbors and raids by police.

K.P., an unmarried 57-year-old man, was seriously injured in a fight in 1968. After his recovery he was considered unemployable because his right hand was no longer able to perform normal duties. He decided in 1969 to open a shebeen because the friends he had were regular drinkers and there was no local pub in which they could socialise in the evenings and weekends. He knew he could draw their attention towards his enterprise at home, which was separated from the rest of his family's privacy. Up to 1993 his clientele were mainly Indians. But after this period he spread word around in the squatter camps, through friends, that he was selling African beer. Over a period of six months his clientele changed to 40% African and 60% Indian. However only known Africans were allowed to sit in his business and enjoy their drinks. The normal service to Africans was to take away only. K.P.'s service extended to at least 18 hours a day because that is all he ever does. His business approach is totally informal and he enjoys the company of various friends who stay overnight with him at different times.

S.R. a 46 year old retrenched tailor started his shebeen in August 1995 when he decided he was too frustrated to look for employment and his capital was being drastically eroded through household expenses. Selling liquor was totally against his moral values but survival had pushed him into doing so. His house was situated on a road that was regularly used by squatters from a neighboring camp about one hundred meters away. Regular and African beer was especially touted with the squatters who eventually began to support him in large numbers. The City Council refused him permission to operate a shebeen, therefore making his enterprise unlicensed and illegal. He complained that the neighbors continuously objected to the sight of Africans frequenting his house to buy liquor and threatened to report him to the police. He managed to win their confidence by challenging them to find him employment and he promised to stop his sales of beer and liquor if this was done for him. He believed this generated some sympathy from his neighbours, but at a cost. He is to refrain from selling his items at night because of the fear of attracting the wrong people who might mingle with the genuine clients and commit crimes against them. Hence his working hours were reduced in comparison with his counterpart K.P. above.

It is apparent from the table that the working hours of these respondents are longer than usual. The figures in the last column reveal an average of approximately thirteen hours per day, making it five hours higher than the normal working day in South Africa. The difference between the two case studies above is that one feels a sense of protection because

the former is usually patronised by old friends and known district people, while the latter had risked exposing himself to totally unknown people from a different racial group. Hence the number of working hours between them is vastly different. Both however ensure that men do the work and serve their clients. Conventional norms in Indian households forbid women from participating in these kinds of activities, although their support in these two cases was less visible.

There has been an equally profound division of labor among the fruit and vegetable sellers, but with more overt support for the enterprises from the women. The first four listed in table 7.1 operated as two pairs of neighbors with tacit understandings of each other's businesses. Numbers 1 and 2 were immediately adjacent to each other while numbers 3 and 4 were about 40 meters apart from each other and about a kilometer away from numbers 1 and 2. Numbers 1, 2 and 3 converted their motor car garages into shops, while number 4 extended his house to create an enclosed space for his business. In the cases of numbers 1 and 2 their enterprises were intended to compliment each other, especially after the shop close by closed down after its third brutal robbery, in which two people were killed and another seriously injured (see chapter six). The closure provided an opportunity for them, which was grasped soon after. They worked in harmony together as old friends and regularly discussed their day's activities. Their years of association and operating in close proximity to each other could be equated to a social club because it drew other district friends and nearby relatives to them at all times of the day. While one sold groceries and frozen food, the other sold domestic fuel items such as firewood, paraffin and candles. The men ran both stalls with active support in the trading only sometimes from women, as illustrated below.

I.M., a 52 two year old unmarried plasterer, gave up looking for employment in his trade since 1992. His complaint was against the cheaper African tradesmen that building firms were hiring. At the rate that he used to earn, he considered it too demeaning to return to the trade for such low wages. He started his business in March 1995, but stopped it in August after he was robbed at gunpoint. He reopened it in December 1995 and stopped it again after his nephew, who stayed with him, committed suicide in 1996. He restarted in November 1997, but this time with metal gates blocking the steel door and a small centralised space cut out from the metal gates to serve his customers. He was barely visible from the road because of this precautionary gate. He began work at 5h30 and closed between 22h00 and 23h00 every day. He lived with a friend in his three bedroomed flat that was part of a three-floor building. Below his flat were two other flats, which were occupied by his two married sisters and their families. Both helped him when he needed assistance and cooked his food by taking turns. All three households paid significantly reduced rent because the building was directly opposite an unsightly and unsafe squatter camp, named Canaan (see chapter 6).

Under the circumstances the occupants of the block of three flats believed that their occupation of the building was more of a favor to the landlords than for their own benefit.

G.H., a seventy two year old retired plasterer decided to trade from his garage and incorporate his two unmarried sons, one a plasterer and the other a heavy duty driver into his activities. While both complained of the difficulties of finding work, their parents also complained of their alcoholic tendencies. They thought it was appropriate to trade with the squatters and hopefully keep their sons' minds occupied and away from liquor. They succeeded only up to a point in disciplining them. When business improved by selling paraffin and firewood, G.H. decided to buy a deep freeze from which he started selling frozen chicken and chicken giblets. This investment paid off well, but was soon stolen when the garage was broken into and the entire deep freeze was stolen. He felt disinclined to continue trading and stopped for a while. When his sons returned to their drinking habits he decided to reopen his business. After four months from restarting, three people who made it appear as though they were from the squatter camp held up the father and two sons at gunpoint. Each of the three was badly beaten up and they all had to endure the embarrassment of not being able to defend one another. This brought an abrupt halt to their enterprise in October 1996.

While stalls 1 and 2 were operated mainly by men, the women helped by ensuring that they received their beverages, snacks and meals at the required times. Although there was a tendency to ignore the role of the women in these enterprises their contributions were equally important. The men often counted themselves only in their trading and spoke in terms of their working hours, without acknowledgement of the women. Their duties were taken for granted and not counted as substantive work that was indeed integral to the work of the men, despite the fact that they helped to clean the garages and stand in for a few hours on the days when the men had other chores. They tended to draw a distinction between help and work.

In the cases of 3 and 4, the situations were significantly different. Both were married and had experience in retail trading. Their proximity to each other was of no consequence to their trading. While number 3 had converted his garage into a space for his retail activities, number 4 had extended his house for this purpose. Interestingly, both had licensed businesses on either side of each other, which were once thriving retail outlets. But however both closed down because of their inability to sustain themselves in the changing political and economic situations. Their rentals were high and they felt that they were too easy targets for hold-ups. There was a continuous stream of pedestrian traffic for most of the day, starting from at least 05h00 and winding down after 21h00. The early morning hours and particularly the early evening hours were their busiest. Both stalls were supported by hundreds of squatters during these hours, clearly bringing in substantial amounts of cash

into their businesses. The backgrounds of the men in these two outlets made them more persevering since their experience in retail gave them a better outlook on how to deal with clientele in such situations. They worked for most hours in the day and the inputs by their wives were significant and emphatically appreciated by them. But the fear under which they functioned was a perennial problem.

A.R., a fifty year old fresh produce trader, began using his double garage in 1992 to sell fruit and vegetables to people in his neighborhood (emphasis on Indians). He started this business from home as an experiment to test its viability. His intention was to withdraw from trading in the market in Central Durban because "there the Africans are overcrowding us and only robbing the Indians". While he worked in the market his wife ran the business from home, producing a turnover of between R500.00-R800.00 per day. It did not take long for this to show even bigger returns, encouraging A.R. to withdraw from his market stall. He was receiving more support than he expected because his African clientele grew substantially. From April 1994 he paid full attention to his venture from home. From August 1994 he started retailing a few grocery items such as tinned beans and fish. By October 1995 his wife was attacked and robbed. The second robbery took place in February 1996. His house was burgled twice in 1995 and 1996. After these incidents he decided to install steel burglar guards and serve clients from the pavement. The house burglaries took place when nobody was inside. All four incidents occurred during the day when A.R. was absent from home. He increased his grocery selling in November 1994, directly affecting the two shops close to him. He started selling cigarettes and frozen chicken. By November 1997 he was retailing at least 1000 kilograms of chicken, 500 packets of cigarettes and at least 1000 tins of beans or fish per week, taking his daily turnover from between R500.00 – R800.00 to up to R3000.00 per day. Support for his business had a distinct ethnic breakdown to it. His Indian clients supported him during the day while African clients supported him early in the morning and in the evenings. His wife usually awoke at 03h00 and he began his day from 04h00 when he had to go to the bulk market for fruit and vegetable. Thereafter she made breakfast for her two children and mother, packed her children's school lunches, cleaned her house and started trading from 06h30. A.R.'s affinity for the bulk market encouraged him to return to it, but this time as a wholesaler. He had eight stalls, which were managed by his son and younger brother. While support from the squatters had helped to finance his expansion, he felt he "could do without African business. They have no respect for us and there is no future for us Indians in this country. I am not a racially biased person, but I worked long enough with Africans to know that they are not interested in real progress. The moment they see someone progressing they want to rob and kill him. That's why I rather take my family away to India. Over there there's lot of poverty but not so much killing and hold-ups like here!" Because of their insecurity A.R. stood outside the garage with friends while his wife traded from inside. He believed this is to be a deterrent to any would-be robbers.

M.J. a 43 year old father of three children started his business in 1994. Prior to this he worked with an uncle as a shop assistant for 13 years. He later found employment with the Durban Corporation as a laborer. While he worked there he decided to emulate his neighbor A.R. and start selling fruit and vegetables to the squatters. But he had to borrow money from relatives, which he claimed he is still paying back. His day begins at 04h00 and ends at about 21h00. His business

grew to a point of evidently turning him into a formidable competitor with his neighbor and induced his resignation from the Durban Corporation. His space was stacked with crates of fruit and vegetable, African beer and groceries. The trading was done almost entirely by his wife while he saw to the purchasing of stock, and like A.R. he stood outside the counter area to act as a watchman for his business. M.J. had at least three burglaries that cost him an accumulated amount of R8000.00. He relies on the squatters for his survival and is unhappy to hear of their relocation through the housing schemes that are being developed all over Durban. He is optimistic about the future of the country and does not envisage emigration, despite the fact that he believes that “since the elections the country is all upside down”. To him “Wherever there’s people there’s trouble. So where are we going to run to?” M.J. was reluctant to divulge his daily takings or the volumes that he sells per day or week. It was equally difficult to estimate how he fared with his neighboring competitor, although he certainly appeared confident and liked the success of his venture.

Both A.R. and M.J. were evidently from different class backgrounds. While the former was had a relatively more convenient material background, the latter had substantially fewer comforts. But the neighboring squatter camps provided them with ample opportunities to uplift their material circumstances and offset the statuses of established licensed shops. While one was able to return to the market with greater capital potential than previously, the other worked himself up to a position that permitted him to resign from a job that ensured him a regular and guaranteed income. Both their enterprises were effectively recent manifestations of post-apartheid change in Indian dominated residential areas. Their relative successes raise a number of important questions about the failure of established licensed businesses and their replacement by unlicensed smaller ventures that fall within the category of informal businesses. At least eight reasons, both fact and conjecture, may be posited as explanations for this situation. The factual situations were visible and became self-evident over time, while conjectures are based on assumptions from the ethnographic evidence:

1. The unlicensed traders operated at an advantage from the licensed shops in that their expenses were comparatively lower. The rentals and other expenses of the licensed traders were generally higher.
2. This gave the unlicensed traders the advantage of trading at lower costs, thereby drawing the bulk of the clientele towards themselves.
3. Unlike the licensed shops, their counterparts relied more on household labor than on hired labor.
4. The unlicensed traders generally came from an employment background that exposed them more to African behavioral habits and patterns of socialisation, allowing them to adapt easily to the hardy ways of people from the squatter camps.

5. Unlicensed traders appeared to gain the confidence of the squatters much faster than the shopkeepers because of this.
6. There was an apparent class distinction between the shopkeepers and the squatters, which drew a distinct line between the two groups. The latter group, as it was reported on more than one occasion, did not like the social distance that Indian business people wedged between them. They preferred a more casual approach in dealings with them – which was seriously lacking by the licensed traders. This created an aversion among the squatters to support such enterprises.
7. Through a more personalised approach towards the squatters, many of the latter were able to acquire credit that was not so easily acquired from the shopkeepers.
8. The personalised relationships allowed individual unlicensed traders a more knowledgeable insight into the structure and functioning of the squatter camps and their residents' requirements.

The issues above provide a glimpse into the relationships of the unlicensed traders and the squatters, which is further amplified in the section below.

Their relationships with African clientele

Understanding the relationships between African squatters and Indian traders must be understood against the background of the nature of contemporary violence, state based corruption and the lack of progress in service delivery since the ANC takeover in 1994, and the historical mutual mistrust between Africans and Indians. This is despite the general cordiality and the dependence on both groups for support and service respectively from each other being a visible characteristic in their day to day affairs. From a purely observational viewpoint, several characteristics were made obvious. The traders who carried out their business from behind metal and steel bars made the fear and anxiety with which they operated very obvious. After their losses through theft and the violent episodes that each one suffered, they too, like the licensed shops, had to draw a line between clientele and themselves. All were fully armed with guns, always had friends and relatives with them, had monitored alarm systems, and generally operated with a constant measure of vigilance. Most unknown male clientele who were either seen for the first time or who were seen only at intervals were usually viewed with caution and suspicion. When the circumstances permitted, the practice among the traders was to quietly ask another client if the new face was a familiar one and whether he was from the neighboring squatter camp. When no other known squatter was close, the traders either broke into their Indian dialects or gestured or

whispered to one another, indicating the presence of the unknown person/s. During these moments trading was done with utmost care and a virtual readiness on the part of the male traders to either fight back, run, shut the doors, or call for help. Each one had stated that their overtly demonstrated readiness had helped to foil other likely holdups on more than one occasion. The presence of neighbors at the trading outpost, the watchful eyes of the neighbors from their balconies, and their closeness to either panic buttons or the telephones were equally helpful in this regard. Another major deterrent were the signs, attached to the walls, of the security firm monitoring their alarms, with notices such as **“Armed response in under ten minutes”**. Each notice had a picture of a gun and was glaring with the expectation of swift and violent responses to possible attacks. The metal and steel gates were also a wedge between traders and clients in that they helped in keeping accurate records of purchases and sales and shoplifting, especially during busy hours. Traders had to ensure that their clients were a safe distance away from their stocks, in order to minimise or obliterate pilfering, especially when they were busy. It was also for this reason that more than one person had to be in attendance during trading hours. While one served, the other/s kept a watchful eye on what was taken away after the exchange of money and goods. The traders reported huge losses in their stocks prior to the installation of the steel gates. After taking this precautionary measure and ensuring that there was vigilant assistance at all times, they believe that they could account more accurately for their stocks. It was also easier for them to be served and controlled from behind these gates. It reduced the possibility of being held up and therefore permitted them to trade with greater peace of mind. For instance, ever since the gates for numbers 2, 3 and 4 were installed, and after their introduction of vigilant assistants, there were no robberies or recollection of pilfering. Their experiences taught them important lessons in safety and the need to realize the kind of political climate in which they functioned.

But their functioning is not only about negative issues with people from the squatter camps or a one-way track of simplistic ethnic divisions. For instance, the trader’s reliance on clients from the squatter camps for information on unknown faces is an indication of a measure of acquaintanceship and friendship that existed between the two groups. Many from within the squatter camps have become willingly vigilant on behalf of the traders. The squatters were aware of their holdups, burglaries and the generally vulnerable positions under which the traders operated. For these reasons they were genuinely empathetic and were very supportive towards the traders. This relationship grew out of regularity of support and a growing sense of mutual respect from both sides as their familiarity with each

other grew. But it began more as a tendency from the traders touting for support than from the squatters wanting to buy – at least initially.

The point at which the traders made their entry into the market was the most crucial for them. Those who realised that the success of their ventures depended more on the squatters than on their Indian neighbors had to operate with greater tactfulness. An important mechanism in this exercise was the ability to talk to the squatters in the dominant local African language i.e. isiZulu. This had an almost immediate endearing effect on the relationship between the client and service provider. Speaking in isiZulu opened up the channels for communication, for the understanding of particular ethnic requirements and a cordial and preferable manner through which to conduct business. In more ways than one, most of the traders worked towards ingratiating themselves with the squatters in order to attract more business and win their confidence. The latter aspect was also crucial in acquiring a measure of security against other known criminals in the area. As one trader stated: *“You got to know some of the right guys in there if you want to be safe.”* A particular approach has been to ensure that a close relationship was established with the executive committees in the neighboring squatter camps. Every squatter camp had an executive committee that came into existence through a manner of voting that was actually only a semblance of democratic procedures. Most executives were “elected” in at least one of three ways viz.

1. Through the popularity they achieved through their entrepreneurial skills. Such individuals were able to muster support for themselves either through the sale of various kinds of beer and liquor,
2. Or their oratory skills and the political backing that the respective squatter camp showed for a particular political party,
3. or sheer brute strength and belonging to a powerful gang within the squatter camp.

These executives wielded tremendous amounts of power and enforced disciplinary codes as they saw fit – but only while they managed to last in office. Their existence enforced procedural norms that first required their recognition as the legitimate local authority. The respect they commanded encouraged the traders to befriend and consult with them on issues of common concern. Squatter executive structures were the avenues through which the traders also befriended the inhabitants within the squatter camps. This served as an effective entry point into the purchasing power that was so latent within the squatter camps. Receiving the approval of the local executive was a crucial issue in their support of the

nearest trader. But it did not come without any risks. In this type of poverty-stricken situation, where cash is not always readily available, credit and trust are two sides of the same coin. They have proved to be significant in the processes of cementing closer relationships and inducing a closer bondage between the two sectors. Providing credit was an important way through which the traders acquired some form of recognition. However it took place only after the client was deemed sufficiently regular, well known to the trader and trustworthy enough to warrant credit. An assessment of figures that took several months to collate because of the sensitivity of the information and the unwillingness of the traders to divulge it, revealed that at least three traders from the table above had amounts of R7000.00, R6500.00 and R5000.00 outstanding to them. While, from most of these amounts there was hope that the debtors will repay, a substantial amount in each case was carried over for months. Amounts of R2700.00, R2200.00 and R3500.00 were respectively carried over for a period of more than three months. These amounts, which were owed interest free, were unlikely to be recovered, although the traders were still hopeful that the day might arrive when the debts could be finally settled.

There were several accounts of individuals reportedly being disciplined by the executives, after being reported by the traders, during the fieldwork period. After taking the matter directly to the local executives the issues did receive their attention. The traders were satisfied that the persons responsible for the problems, especially relating to matters of bad behavior and not paying overdue accounts, were dealt with amicably and to the satisfaction of all concerned. But the success of these cases depended upon the appropriate person being located. Many of the squatters who had debts relocated to other squatter camps or found employment in distant places and therefore had to relocate, making it difficult for them to traced. When relocated people were traced, the local executive did not have any jurisdiction over them, and therefore could not impose their will upon them. While these losses do add up to substantial amounts, they were evidently not destructive to the entrepreneurs in view of the volumes of cash business that they were doing.

The social advantages in giving credit had paid off enormously in the favor of the traders. They were seen to be humane in the eyes of the squatter communities and as people who reached out to them in times of desperate need. Credit had facilitated the images of the traders in positive ways among the squatters, making them acceptable and approachable people to deal with. Their understanding of basic and incidental requirements and their provision at comparatively affordable prices were significant in the services they provided

to the squatters. In addition, their proximity to the squatter camps and long hours of service that went beyond the normal trading hours, had acted as a center of convenience that were travel free retail outlets. To some extent, the trading posts became convenient spots, for friends from the squatter camps, to meet. Small groups were often cited standing for hours talking to each other, often drawing in the chief trader and/or his assistants into their conversations. These meetings were generally light hearted, jovial and free from any tensions and suspicions of any sort, providing situations of normalcy among familiar people. It demonstrated the informality and highly personalised manner with which business was generally conducted. Many of the squatter clientele were known by their first names to the traders and their daily requirements were often given to them after gesturing or using sign language. Often, the words “usual” were used to stipulate requirements at the point of transaction. With understanding and a willingness to serve, a parcel such as a loaf of bread, a packet of frozen chicken and a tin of beans or fish would be put together in a packet and either exchanged for the required payment or booked down as credit. It was also a frequent sight to witness cordial conversations between the traders and squatters of the day’s events or of each others well being, or about conditions inside the squatter camps. This had engendered a broad sense of acceptance for the traders, revealing a somewhat tacit integration into the squatters’ lifestyles. The cordiality between the two groups revealed several interesting incidents about the contradictory scenarios of harshness and common human decency that prevailed in their world of transformation – which the section below highlights through reference to certain incidents that were witnessed in the course of fieldwork.

A few significant events and ambiguous ethnography

The data that was gathered during fieldwork required several visits to ensure reliability of information and its careful crosschecking. However, the nature of the responses that were collated, presented difficulties with arriving at a clear understanding of the true perceptions of most of the traders and their views on transformation. Their responses were often inconsistent and were often determined by the pressure they felt due to the busy or difficult periods, what they felt – dependent upon what incident prevailed at a particular time, and what was being witnessed in the course of interviews and conversations. For instance, in the case of one of the respondents¹ who was visited for the third time in four weeks, a closer look at his set-up helped to acquire some familiarization with his methods of operation and his personal views. His single motor car garage, which was converted into a tuck shop, had

¹ Interviewed several times in 1997. The particular incidents below were witnessed on 10 November 1997.

well laid out shelves packed with groceries, a refrigerator, four freezers, a metal gate and a steel door, each of which had a contiguous opening of one square foot through which he served his clients. The interview began with what appeared to be a balanced perspective on the current political and social changes of what was perceived to have taken place since April 1994. His response to the issue was that there are two sides to the African majority, the government and the people who reside in the squatter camp. If one had to look at either side, he argued, then one is bound to find the good and the bad. Unfortunately, as he put it: “One bad egg among them makes everybody look bad. Not all of them (Africans) are bad.” In the course of the conversation, he teased a female client, saying “Can’t you and I get married now?” – acquiring a positive nod from her. At the same time he scolded a seven year old African child who helped him in his business from 07h00 to 21h00, calling him: “You Black bastard!”. The awaiting African clients, whom he evidently befriended, felt totally at ease with him and had enjoyed the amusement of hearing racially loaded jokes.

However, the trader’s views hardened almost immediately when, in the space of within thirty minutes, two separate fights between African youths from the neighboring squatter camp across the road had broken out. This brought out a side of the trader that was clearly hidden and which he preferred to initially suppress. He retorted in the course of the first fight: “Ay brother, with these guys I have a very hard time. As it is on Friday night they were pulling out people’s wives from their shacks and stripping them naked. The crime is gone fuckin’ high here....” A friend interjected saying: “We don’t care which government rules, but we just want our freedom to walk about freely. How can we do it under these circumstances?” Several minutes later a second fight between two other people started. The friend of the trader stated: “This is a fight over women. You see when you put three hens with two roosters in one pen you are bound to have trouble!” The trader added: “When the white man was in power it was peaceful here. These Blacks just take things by force and all they ever want to do is fight. What can we do? We just have to live here! We are too old to go anywhere and run away from this fuckin’ country!”

In the anxiety of these tense moments a squatter approached a friend of the trader and asked to hire his truck. The purpose was to transport a load of his belongings to his rural home about 120 kilometers from Durban. In the process of negotiating the deal and the price, there were interspersed comments about the ongoing fight across the road. The squatter, feeling a sense of irritation, exclaimed: “I just don’t know when we Africans are going to learn to stop fighting! This is the problem everyday over here. We just can’t do anything

about it.” This issue opened up an aspect of the wider inter-dependencies that emerged since the established of the squatter camp. Indians with vehicles, especially trucks and vans, were increasingly providing transport services for squatters, entrenching a somewhat invisible client-patron relationship. The truck owner later stated: “There’s no problems with us here. We all get along very well. When they want to use my transport they come and ask and we settle on a good price. Because of this I am able to park my vehicles outside without problems. They know me and I stand outside late at night, they all talk to me, and nobody does me anything!” The transport was always at negotiated rates and usually paid in advance. Evidence had shown that a lucrative business was emerging between some of the Indian vehicle owners and the squatters.

The conversation at that moment turned to a revealing episode that occurred on the N2 (national coastal highway), relating to an attack that took place several kilometers away from the place of interview, a few weeks earlier. The victims were a young White couple and their two infant children who were travelling from Gauteng for a weekend in KwaZulu-Natal’s north coast. As the story was reported by an interviewee:

One of the children asked to urinate, making the father stop on the side of the road to allow the child to do so. They were then attacked by several Black youths that shot dead the father and mother. The children were then left to themselves under very cold and rainy conditions. A passing highway police patrol vehicle stopped and found the children sitting and crying on each parent. The police suspected that the murderers were from one of soon after arrested three of the suspects at about 16h00 the week before the third visit to the respective trader. The information for their arrest allegedly came from paid informants from within the squatter camp that was opposite the trader being interviewed. The arresting officers were Whites and Indians. Allegations are that the White policemen wanted to shoot dead all the three and then claim they resisted arrest, but the Indian policemen apparently did not share the same sentiment. The former’s reason was based on a perception that the suspects were constantly engaged in deliberate attacks and murders against Whites.²

In a different episode at another trading post, the trader recalled an incident of a fatal stabbing that took place close to his operation. Information on this incident was already gathered prior to the meeting with this trader. The incident was about a stabbing which involved an Indian youth and two Black men. Attempts to reconstruct the story and ascertain the truth about what actually happened brought out six different versions of the incident, which are presented in direct language:

²The information was not verified, but is used in this case to illustrate the impact of racial and ethnic divisions in South Africa.

- *“You heard how these Africans were attacking the Indians in the bus this afternoon. For once the Indian boys stood up to fight them. They killed one and hurt the other one quite badly! We must stop sitting back and taking this from them. I’m glad we taught them a lesson this time.”*
- *“Yah, last Saturday three Africans came to hold up Matthew in his shop and tried to steal his money and whatever they could lay their hands on. Some of the Indian boys were there and saw this. They caught two of them and killed one. I heard the other one is critical in hospital”*
- *“You know what these lighties (boys) are? They just get drunk and start interfering with innocent people. They just killed those two guys for nothing – because they were African.”*
- *“Yah, these bastards killed my brother last year. This time they started with our guys and they didn’t fright... They just fucked them up. They think we are going to be scared of them all the time! These were not the guys who killed my brother. We are still going to get them.”³*
- *“Those Africans started with these lighties. They were drunk and they started interfering with the Indians. One of the lightie’s had a mes (knife) and stekked (stabbed) both of them. One died same time and the other died after a couple of days. When it happened a couple of hundred Africans suddenly got wind of what happened and came fully armed and started singing anti-Indian songs. They wanted the police to do justice straight away, otherwise they were going to start attacking the Indians. When they first saw only Indian policemen, they started acting wild. The Indian cops had to call for back up, and only when the White cops came they calmed down and dispersed – but only because they were going to be tear-gassed! But some of my clients from the squatter camp told me not to worry and not to close my business. They promised to stand and defend me if they attacked us.”*
- *“Hey, these youngsters get drunk every weekend and look for trouble. They stabbed two drunken people, who I heard were old men! They made it bad for everybody now. Just and go and stand in the corner, and you won’t see anybody there anymore. Why? Because they want to behave like gangsters and now they can’t face up to it. The Africans are angry, and are going to attack them at night. That’s why they are not coming around anymore!”*

The last respondent’s words about the evening gatherings were correct. Driving through the respective area over several evenings, as an observational exercise, had revealed a complete absence of youth, both Indian and African. A tense atmosphere in the area prevailed for several weeks. It brought out the historical and latent animosity between Indians and Africans. A distinct atmosphere of mutual mistrust and the fear of being attacked under the cover of darkness by either side persisted for at least several weeks. A nearby shop, which was converted into a billiard room and social club for the youth, mainly Indian, closed immediately after the incident. Youth from the squatter camp avoided the area, while the Indian youth gathered in the safety of several of the neighbors fenced yards. The predominant conversations among them for at least two months, was about the stabbing, the possible reprisal from Africans and how they envisage defending themselves and their properties. Conversations often took the extreme ends of mass attacks and mass destruction

³The respondent of this statement was not at the scene of the stabbing when it occurred.

by Africans, whom they believe will show their anger at the incident only in this way. Their preparations were firstly to start with servicing of their guns, finding out about where to get more guns and ammunition, and asking the local police, who were mainly Indian, to be on constant alert. However, there was a general lack of faith in the police services, especially in view of their record of the poor ways in which they handled cases or failed to arrest culprits. One person was arrested and released on bail three days later, while his apparent accomplices went into hiding. The entire neighborhood was geared into a state of perpetual readiness to vacate their homes, defend themselves and mobilize as widely as possible in order to be sufficiently prepared for a possible attack. As both groups cautiously viewed each other with suspicion, the issue calmed down after a period of about six weeks and the area returned to a semblance of normalcy. African and Indian youth who were on talking terms with each other either spoke carefully about the incident or avoided talking about it. They started gathering at their old places and the social club *cum* billiard room was reopened. It was a conflict that only time and responsible behavior had helped to resolve.

The incidents and responses illustrated above are important reflections of inter-group dynamics between Indians and Africans and the manner in which socialization actually took place in the areas of research. The nature of cordiality that existed between the traders and individuals from the squatter camps stopped at the level of acquaintanceship and hardly developed into entrenched friendships. There are various reasons for this, the main one being the unavailability of time for either party to go beyond an acquaintanceship. But there are also taboos on the part of Indians to keep out unknown people, especially if they do not belong to the same racial, ethnic or caste groups. Their social distances were not simplistically based on the aversions that arise out of possible racial or other forms of social prejudice only. However, there has been a distinct pattern of racially based socialization among the Indian and African youth. Wherever they gathered around the traders' outlets, it was always as clearly visible groups of Indians and Africans who were in total separation from each other. While Africans communicated in their respective dialects, especially isiZulu, Indians communicated in English. Language was a distinctive demarcation between the two groups of youth. It helped to create specific identities within each group and demonstrated the segmented nature of the communities in the vicinity. English was an indication of education and to some extent it also meant elitism. isiZulu and other African languages such as Xhosa, Sotho and Shangaan, which were less widely spoken, often determined the working class or marginalised statuses of the squatters. Their limited ability to speak in English often placed them at a disadvantage and lowered their self-esteem when

they had to negotiate for employment. Their ability to speak English was an indication to many potential employers of their exposure to good working environments and an indication that they were or could be trained to become quick learners.

The traders' outlets were convenient spots for "street corner societies". Coincidentally, or perhaps even as deliberate choices in view of their properties market potential, most of the traders were located either at the intersection of two or more streets or within close range of them. Their attraction was particularly strong because of the services they offered. Cigarettes, sweets, beers and cold drinks formed a major part of their evening gatherings, thereby making the traders outlets convenient centers for their socialization, but within distinctly defined ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The dynamics of trade, socialisation and general movements in the vicinities of the traders' outlets are an epitome of post-Apartheid interaction between Africans and Indians. The analysis here was challenging because it mostly represented two classes which happened to be people of two major race groups in the province, one a mainly middle class segment being a distinctly settled urbanised community (Indians) and the other, being under class, showing characteristics of both rural and urban lifestyles together with a high degree of residential mobility (Africans). It was the middle class Indians that exploited the opportunities for retail service provisions and it was mainly the under class Africans whose support sustained this segmented population. It was the Indians knowledge of the wholesale markets, their strong family ties and collaboration, and entrepreneurial flair that made them more successful than their African counterparts. As land-owners who had the advantage of access to capital and credit, the Indian residents *cum* entrepreneurs were evidently building up above average cash reserves under political and economic conditions that would generally not permit the average person to acquire. These conditions afforded them a hegemonic advantage over their African counterparts, who were seen more as sojourners rather than as a permanent part of the neighbourhood. The entrepreneurs recognised the phase in which they were operating and often commented that they have to exploit the opportunity the squatter camps presented while it lasted - since the situation was not likely to last beyond a few years.

However, not all the Indian residents in the research areas were of middle class status. Many who either supported the entrepreneurs or who socialised with them as neighbours

were tenants and unemployed impoverished people. While all of the Indian interviewees were born and raised in Durban, they did not feel a sense of security as South African citizens in the same way that Africans felt. In the course of conversations, they often diverted from the questions by referring to their minority status, their feelings of insecurity and the difficulties of having to live their lives in constant fear. Their trading skills and fortitude in a climate of uncertainty has urged them with hope and optimism that some day in the near future they might be able to trade, walk around freely and live without feeling intimidated as an ethnic minority. These have been the profound fears of the traders and their Indian clients. While many hoped for change and relocation of the Africans to decent housing, some traders were ambiguous about this because their livelihoods depended upon the continued existence of the squatter camps.

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