SANITATION AS A VEIL

The Role of Complex Social Tensions in the Rise of Institutional Racism in Cape Town from 1899 to 1923

Abstract: The “sanitation syndrome” captures the exploitation of public obsession with disease prevention and urban cleanliness in South Africa to provoke yet veil social conflicts that contributed to the rise of institutional segregation. In addition to tensions between European colonialist and African indigenous populations, status divisions among the latter group significantly impacted the passage of segregationist legislation. Cape Town's historical context during the early twentieth-century provides evidence of a small yet important group of African elites. These elites simultaneously utilized urban sanitation concerns for sociopolitical gains while inadvertently supporting the implementation of racial segregation.

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At the turn of the twentieth century, a bubonic plague epidemic spread to South Africa and reignited colonialist fears surrounding an illness that previously decimated Europe. By analyzing a period of rising sensitivity to disease prevention due to the plague outbreak, various scholars argue that urban sanitation promoted racial segregation across this region by veiling underlying social status tensions. Racial attitudes contributed to views of Africans as sources of disease, and sanitation efforts directly encouraged racial separation as a supposed measure to quarantine infections. European desires to preserve their ethnic and socioeconomic dominance motivated strategic manipulation of public sanitation fears to fuel support for segregation policy.

In a recent publication however, Marc Epprecht, a Canadian historian at Queen's University who published several books on African health, challenges the well-established argument using sanitation to explain the emergence of South African racial segregation. He claims, “sanitation syndrome' is prone to ignore the diversity of opinion and motives of Africans in debates.” Epprecht critiques current arguments for limiting their focus to social tensions between European colonial and African indigenous populations during the rise of institutional racism from 1899 to 1923. Such arguments underscoring existing disputes between Europeans and Africans are valid; however, they overlook the status divisions within the African population in Cape Town. In this article, I posit that the latter also significantly contributed to the emergence of segregationist legislation. Particularly, Cape Town’s historical context created the economic and public health conditions that fostered the development of a small yet important African elite group who may have impacted the implementation of segregation.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SANITATION SYNDROME
The Second Anglo-Boer War occurred in South Africa from 1899 to 1902 and had enormous implications on the public health and economic landscapes of Cape Town. War brought additional ships through its ports to provide wartime supplies for the British army, which inadvertently carried infectious agents of bubonic plague from India and Australia to South Africa. The first Cape Town plague case appeared in 1901, which sparked public unrest and instilled new urgency for urban cleanliness among government health officials. Cape Town spent over 16,000 pounds on postwar disinfection schemes in its urban center according to a Medical Officer of Health report, highlighting an intense focus on sanitation in response to plague outbreaks.

Despite the efficacy of initial bubonic plague control measures, an outbreak of smallpox in 1904 refocused attention on urban hygiene efforts. These incidents coincided with additional socioeconomic effects of the Second-Anglo-Boer War that combined with interests in sanitation. The war vastly increased the number of African war prisoners in Cape Town who were captured from interior regions. Prisoners generally remained in the Cape Colony following their detainment, leading to a 25% increase in African population numbers to total roughly 900,000 by 1901. Many captives were placed as laborers in the agricultural industry during a postwar recession to the extent that white farm owners became heavily dependent on African labor to sustain their businesses. Despite readily available labor, employers became increasingly worried about maintaining traditional economic influence through European master and African servant relationships. Combined anxieties over controlling bubonic plague outbreaks and the balance of race-based labor divisions following the war contributed to the emergence of the “sanitation syndrome” in Cape Town.

CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS OF THE SANITATION SYNDROME
The Cape Colony Report on Public Health for 1904 and 1905 provides insight into the dual imperatives of sanitation and segregation. Exemplifying what Maynard Swanson, an African history professor at Miami University, characterizes
as the “sanitation syndrome,” the report demonstrated the sheer number of infectious diseases rampant in Cape Town. A range of mild poxes to fatal plague cases validated European fears of illness. To rectify their concerns, Europeans viewed segregation as one solution to Cape Town’s public health crisis. The report displays how medical discourse contained racist attitudes that propelled a segregationist agenda despite successful efforts to control the spread of infections. For example, Dr. John Gregory, the Medical Officer of Health, described a public concern that a mild form of smallpox was “derived from the Native races.” He claimed there were, “doubtless number of points lending colour to this view,” even though the report later acknowledged that mild disease symptoms resulted from “smallpox which has been modified in its effect by vaccination.” However, Gregory intentionally did not share his knowledge of vaccination successes to bolster support for racial segregation in Cape Town using quarantine zones. The actions of public health officials converged with developing socioeconomic conflicts after the Boer War, such as rising unemployment among Europeans, that amplified support for segregation. Contemporary arguments tie evidence of the sanitation syndrome to European control of African labor, the emergence of racial segregation, and maintenance of social hierarchies.

The utilization of sanitation went beyond mere disease control, but was opportunistically used to address European desires to control labor relations in Cape Town. European employers relied on an influx of migrant male African workers and previous war captives for low-wage labor in industries like construction, agriculture, domestic work, and port docking. However due to a post-war recession and higher job competition, cheaper African labor sources exacerbated unemployment fears among white artisans and storeowners. Migrant African laborers were especially disconcerting since they were less bound by master-servant relationships as they flowed in and out of Cape Town’s center. To create a stable, low-cost African labor supply and control employment rates of these groups, Europeans sought to “domesticate their labor force” by instilling institutional segregation and urban pass law systems. The South African Native Races Committee, which reported annually on African affairs, outlined rules for the passes African laborers were required to attain before entering Cape Town’s city limit. The Committee’s 1901 publication describes how segregating Africans into reserves and quarantine location neighborhoods along the city outskirts functioned to provide the economy with workers “almost exclusively engaged in agriculture.”

It should be noted, however, that not all Africans were immediately segregated. Some employers wanted workers within close proximity leading to 8,428 Africans housed on private property in Cape Town year-round to fulfill roles in domestic work or small businesses. At this point, European economic control contributed to African social class divisions by differentiating the lowest class laborers who resided in locations from those who retained more access to urban resources. Sanitation and disease prevention justified segregation in the first place, hence its role as a guise for economic motives.

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Swanson argues, “the underlying question was one of social control: how to organize society to provide for mutual access of black labourers and white employers without paying social costs of urbanization or losing dominance of white over black.” Sanitation fits this purpose: despite actual socioeconomic goals, the Native Reserve Locations Act of 1902 was passed in Cape Town in order to isolate blacks from whites to prevent disease transmission according to the Medical Officer of Health Report. Upon passage of the law, roughly 6,000 Africans were immediately transferred to the newly established Ndabeni temporary quarantine location (then called Uitvlugt) that later became a permanent residential area. Many blacks were not forcefully relocated at this point, considering the 255,901 Africans who remained in Cape Town.

In addition to relocation practices, the implementation of increasingly stringent pass laws further controlled the movement of Africans within Cape Town and between the city and locations. Unequal access to urban resources between individuals in reserves and those in the city in turn shaped their employment opportunities. These economic and geographic differences set the stage for discrepancies in social mobility and increased status divisions within the African population, as will be further discussed. Contrary to disease fears, most slaves still allowed Africans to make daily contact with Europeans via work whether or not they lived in quarantine locations or Cape Town. Therefore, employment practices indicate that sanitation policies served as justification for segregation instead of as true efforts towards disease containment. Segregation supposedly protected the European community but was clearly set up to enhance an economic structure that favored them.

Unsurprisingly, utilization of sanitation to pass institutional segregation laws negatively impacted social status tensions in
Cape Town. In the Northern Cape Colony, the dependency of European-run industries on black labor intensified racial conflicts to the extent that laborers risked their status to testify against employers about maltreatment grievances. Africans in Cape Town also practiced their own methods of resisting subjugation. Those forcefully removed to locations outwardly protested racial abuse and rebelled against the Native Reserve Locations Act by drifting back to urban residences during periods of reduced enforcement. In 1907, for example, only 2,234 Africans remained in Ndabeni despite its initial population at 6,000.

Social statuses continued to divide when Cape Town leadership further limited African voting rights. The former Native Voters Act of 1892 posed a barrier to enforcing pass laws and location acts because African landowners retained their voting rights according to its wealth-based criteria for suffrage. Postwar employment offered additional Africans an opportunity to enter the middle class and potentially gain voting power through this legislation, which white leadership sought to preclude. In response, European politicians amended the previous voting act, denied suffrage to more Africans, and prevented resistance to racial segregation.

However, these legislative changes also contributed to widening social divisions among Africans by concentrating black political power among a small group of representatives. Members of the African upper class still evaded political restrictions because of their wealth and preserved their “non-racial Cape franchise” since the British promised “equal rights for all civilized men.” They comprised “registered voters… exempted from statutory residential segregation” and thus quarantine and pass policies surrounding sanitation. As sanitation was used as an argument to justify changes to new voter laws, it once again prompted segregationist actions that increased colonial status discrepancies and tensions.
Argue in previous works demonstrate how Cape Town’s public health and economic environment combined with sanitation concerns to produce racial segregation. While scholars have focused on social tensions between European colonizers and indigenous African groups in producing institutionally racist outcomes, they have ignored the impact of dynamic relationships within the African population that arose before and during early sanitation practices. Contrasting earlier arguments, Epprecht explicitly researches the development of South African institutional segregation in this time period through a case study of Pietermaritzburg and Durban. His rebuttal underscores how current discussions of sanitation syndrome lack information on diverse African opinions and actions regarding urban segregation. In Durban, Africans were not always forcibly removed from their homes. Some families purposely fled its urban center to outrun a growing number of sick Europeans in the area contrary to the common viewpoint that only the opposite occurred. In Pietermaritzburg, most Africans not employed as migrant labor actually lived in approved city residences rather than locations. Previously explained primary accounts also show that a substantial number of Africans remained in Cape Town for similar reasons. Epprecht identifies the presence of an African elite that influenced Pietermaritzburg debates to favor segregation, highlighting how some Africans participated in forming legislation rather than statically receiving them. Ramifications of the African elite’s influence do not reduce colonial responsibility for institutional racism, but considering both African and European motives complicates its emergence. Oddly, Swanson acknowledged the existence of an African upper class in his discussion of sanitation syndrome and its exemptions to forced relocation. He notes that more than 3000 franchised homeowners, domestic workers, and commercial workers remained in Cape Town after the Native Reserve Locations Act. However, Swanson fails to account for effects of economic and political changes in Cape Town during this time period that fostered the growth of a small but significant African elite class. Class divisions within the African population then contributed to the rise of segregation. Since African labor was usually more affordable than white labor, increased demand for the former increased their job prospects. Some employers sought Africans for skilled positions, which created chances for education and relative social mobility. Political structures shifted to favor localized rule, which offered minor yet novel leadership opportunities to prominent African figures.

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The oversimplification of social relationships in arguments of sanitation

Insights from the education system

Certain employers sought educated Africans for economic benefits, hence the admission of some individuals into schools in albeit limited spaces as shown in the following primary accounts. First, a minister named Ramsden Balmforth described ways to enhance African suitability for British economic needs by placing greater religious emphasis in their education. While viewed as less subservient compared to uneducated laborers, educated Africans were sometimes preferred because of their “moral and civic development” and greater assimilation into English culture via education that better suited business settings. Across South Africa in 1908, there were 133,000 African students in schools that, “scientifically trained [them] in the habits of industry to make them more efficient members of society,” signaling that Europeans used education as a pipeline for producing future skilled laborers. A new educated African class indicates the formation of a wealthy elite social strata conditioned into European culture.

Secondly, several hundred African schoolteachers existed throughout South Africa by 1911 who also made up an upper class respected by both Europeans and Africans. Despite their race, teachers followed curriculums designed to give African students “full knowledge of European modes of thought…to break the curse of Native Life” aligning with sentiments of a patronizing European civilizing mission to create Western cultural conformity. Hobart Houghton’s 1911 publication argued for establishing a South African Native College in Cape Town to help Africans “advance,” providing a pathway for social mobility that is also indirect evidence of an African elite. Wealthy African families promised donations up to 10,000 pounds to the South African Intercolonial Native Affairs Commission in support of the university. An upper class must exist if families have these means, especially counting their hopes of becoming trustees of the institution. A colonial-designed education effectively created skilled African workers who were “cultured, sensitive, and…out of touch with their own race.” However, intentional education curriculums failed to assuage the unease of European leadership who feared educated Africans maintained political ambitions and a desire to select their own leaders. This leadership formulated rules to restrict the power of Africans, such as bars to practicing law, but education nonetheless created a wealthy social status division in the Cape Town African population whose agendas deviated from the masses.
PRESENCE OF MINOR ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP ROLES

After the creation of reserves and quarantine locations, Cape Town political structures shifted to adapt to population dispersion. It allowed for increased local self-government through the establishment of District Councils. District Councils also allowed upper-class Africans to hold local leadership roles. For example, one account of a Cape Town District Council lists Africans holding positions titled Native Collector of Council Rates, Native Councillor, and Road Inspector. Reasons for incorporating Africans into local government are not stated, but one possible explanation is to take advantage of their shared race with other African residents to increase compliance with policies. A secondary source by Bickford-Smith confirms that African members on Native Councils assisted in ruling local populations.

Additionally, Balmforth alluded to African leadership by describing “native representatives” who cooperated with English advisors to oversee education taxation, further highlighting influential roles elite Africans held relative to other laborers. Leaders in minor positions and families occupying middle to upper-class employment were an “important reason for the emergence of a sizeable petty-bourgeoisie” who were neither segregated into locations nor denied suffrage because of their economic status. Overall, extensive evidence of an influential African elite exempt from consequences of sanitation practices confounds simplistic views of social tensions in sanitation arguments. The motivations of this class, including ambitions to increase their social acceptance among Europeans, may have stimulated increased support for institutional segregation.
COLLISIONS WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL SEGREGATION

The majority of Africans in Cape Town could not vote per the Native Voters Act because they lived in poverty. Among a franchised African elite, however, alliances were formed over mutual interests that often favored overall African assimilation into European culture. Aligning with European policies enhanced the political acceptance and power of African elites within an English-dominated arena, even at the expense of working class laborers.

The influence and values of African elites in politics can be traced back to their desire for social respectability. Education, voting rights, leadership, and the adoption of English civic values helped them attain a degree of respectability in Cape Town society. To support this image, elites displayed enthusiasm about “Black British” identity and attempted to join exclusive elite societies. Effectively, the black elite also aimed to maintain their respectability by dissociating themselves from lower status groups, and may have supported residential segregation to this end.

In the Bishopstowe district of Pietermaritzburg, European leadership was confused by “the apparent alliance between Bishopstowe’s white residents and black elites from the other side of town” in support of a Native Land Act that implemented segregation. Epprecht analyzed how whites did not want to share residential areas with blacks due to African worker stereotypes from their involvement in the informal economy. Black elites allied with whites because they also wanted to promote the image of a “decent’ class of African worker.” They feared a lack of segregation would allow for greater prominence of African roles in the local informal economy, which would hurt their reputations. By advocating for segregation, elites sought to socially and geographically distance themselves from unskilled African laborers through the construction of townships and locations.

The sanitation syndrome veils more complex social status tensions during the development of institutional racism in Cape Town than many current works argue. While discrepancies are easily visible between European and Africans, a nuanced social division among Africans also contributed to generating support for racial segregation. This view does not aim to undermine any racist intent between colonizers and the indigenous population, but rather acknowledges the effects of intra-ethnic conflicts among Africans in Cape Town. Recognizing these impacts is pivotal because it confers greater influence and agency to Africans during this time period and reveals their active participation in forming systemic policies. There were a series of political maneuvers meant to shape local debates surrounding racial segregation. Epprecht's case study showed how African elites outwardly persuaded those of the same race but lower in class to “create a respectable working class township” outside of Pietermaritzburg's urban center. One tactic used to increase support among black commoners for reserve building was promoting them as healthier options to inner cities to escape common infectious diseases and the drudgery of city life – referring to sanitation. Sanitation concerns may have been analogously utilized by the African elite in Cape Town to mask social status divisions and associated goals within their own racial group. Epprecht noted that elites likely impacted segregation in Cape Town because they shared “concerns for health and morals... [and] political ambitions” as those in Pietermaritzburg. Elites as an allied group would be motivated to favor segregation by potential increased access to urban planning, increased economic control, and greater authority in English-dominated politics. Another large gain for African elites occurred in 1923 with the passage of the Urban Areas Act that even more tightly controlled movement of black working-class laborers into city limits. In total, social status tensions among Africans played a role in implementing racial segregation in Cape Town and also drew from arguments on sanitation to justify these actions.

CONCLUSION

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Endnotes


[14] Ibid, 42.


[16] Ibid, 43.


[34] Ibid, 287-281.


[38] Ibid, 146.

[39] Ibid, 146-147.


[41] Ibid, 36-37.

[42] Ibid, 39.


[48] Ibid, 68.


[51] Ibid, 280.

[52] Ibid, 281.


[56] Ibid, 279-282.

[57] Ibid, 283.