

Shebeens

Vusi Mona

Before South Africa's turbulent, political 1980s, shebeens were the mainstay of Black social life — very much as pubs are social centers in the United Kingdom — and legion in almost every African township.

However, due to an exodus of Blacks with disposable income to previously White suburbs, shebeens in South Africa's townships are presently under financial threat. Shebeen owners in the townships must attract their clientele from among a market that either has no money to spend on liquor or prefers to spend money at upscale venues in town. The aspiring masses, left behind by the new Black elite, also want to escape the township squalor and tiny, four-room "matchbox" houses and have a taste of the finer things in life. And if those finer things are associated with town, that's where they'll spend their money.

Yet in spite of the overall decline in shebeen business, one still finds some places in townships throughout the country doing a roaring trade. Take, for example, Wandie's Place in Dube, Soweto, South Africa's most populous Black township. The owner, Wandile Ndala, says he knows that some of his friends in the shebeen business are not doing well, but he hasn't experienced the problem of shrinking patronage. In fact, his shebeen attracts an assortment of customers: foreign tourists (representing 70 percent of his clientele); a number of upwardly mobile Blacks who are tired of living "incommunicado" in self-imposed suburban exile, holed up in a fancy



townhouse or mansion behind vast white walls; and trendy White South Africans who are keen to see the other (Black) side of South African life.

What's his secret? "I welcome guests as friends," he says. "More than that, I think it's my personal touch." Ndala's place — a four-room house extended into a spacious L-shaped hall — is a sophisticated and friendly little joint indeed. His is a shebeen where one can discover heavenly entertainment and remedial potions for flagging spirits caused by suburbia's dull existence and lack of proper diversions.

Ndala's priorities, he says, are good company, good atmosphere, and good food, every day. And this is very much in keeping with the tradition of shebeens. For shebeens were always an oasis where laborers and artisans rubbed elbows with lawyers and musicians, engaging in conversations that ranged around all

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Photo courtesy DACST

subjects, from soccer and music to politics and philosophy. Traditionally set up in a small township house, a shebeen was literally a home away from home: patrons relaxed in the living room or in the concrete yard in the back — a space shared by several other tiny matchbox houses. Drinks — and sometimes food — were served from the kitchen.

Shebeens met the need for social centers brought about by mushrooming urban African settlements. They started as places where people could stop for a drink, a chat, a date, or beautiful music.

In the poorer areas, these drinking houses gave birth to *marabi*, a precursor of modern South African jazz. In the 1930s and 1940s, shebeen proprietors in

poor areas would sometimes hire musicians — normally an accordionist and a singer — to attract customers. The musicians would perform until dawn. In more affluent areas, clubs had access to electricity, and jazz recordings were played. By the 1950s, future stars like Dolly Radebe and Miriam Makeba occasionally performed at top-of-the-line shebeens. But for the most part, patrons

sole support of their families, the women (called shebeen queens) who ran these informal drinking holes had few other commercial options. They could work as domestic servants, for example. They could try peddling pastries, sweets, and other small items — or they could run illegal drinking houses. Many shebeen queens showed an astute business sense, and we can only imagine what

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who wanted to hear live jazz — until the mid-1950s, dominated by big bands — went to performances in community halls.

Ironically, shebeens also owe their existence to a myriad of liquor laws enacted by the erstwhile National Party government. There was a time in South Africa when the government would not allow Blacks to consume alcohol unless they had a permit and could prove they had passed Standard 8 (10th grade). Those who were lucky enough were entitled to buy — only from a White man, of course — six bottles of beer and one bottle of more refined firewater (brandy or whisky) per month.

However, “township mamas,” undeterred by liquor control laws, simply brewed and sold their own concoctions, turning their homes into social rendezvous. In a country that restricted the entry of Black men and women into most businesses, shebeens became a good way to make a living — as long as you didn’t mind turning your living room into a pub and your kitchen into a home-brew storeroom.

It was worth the sacrifice. Generations of Black South African professionals, including some current politicians, were educated on the proceeds of their mothers’ shebeens. Often unskilled and the

they might have achieved if the world of legitimate commerce had been open to them.

Never at a loss for repressive laws, the National Party government set up its own sorghum-brewing concerns and beer halls and made it illegal for Blacks to brew and sell their own. But a determined people always finds a way of defying an unjust law. The government finally gave up, and in 1984 officially recognized shebeens. Liquor licenses were issued; legal shebeens became known as taverns. Activist youths — who saw drinking and revelry as an obstacle to the discipline required by the liberation struggle — had meanwhile been trying to close shebeens down, and sadly they had some successes. But hundreds — licensed and unlicensed — continued to operate, and in the 1990s, the institution scored a comeback.

Although one can find hard-core shebeens in almost every African township, the ones with class and sophistication — at the risk of sounding condescending — are found in townships in the environs of big cities like Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town. Take, for example, Steers in Section N of Umlazi, near Durban. Steers boasts a TV set with M-Net (the pay-television channel), a big screen for sports viewing, excellent toilet

facilities, parking, and security. Although the people who patronize it are somewhat full of themselves, it nevertheless casts the image of shebeens in a good light.

There has also been a move to open shebeens in the suburbs. Mama’s Jazz Joint was the best known of these, operating in Dunkeld West in Johannesburg and filling the gap for elite Blacks who had moved to the suburbs. Its owner, Charmain Modjadji, has recently succumbed to pressure and closed the tavern after complaints by her neighbors, who were afraid it would drive their property values down. People who patronized her abode were socially polished and sophisticated, and drunken brawls never occurred at Mama’s. Modjadji argues that the complaints were indicative of how Blacks have to “fit into” White culture in order to be accepted in the suburbs. Still convinced that shebeens in town are a good idea, she’s in the process of setting up another one in Midrand, a burgeoning city midway between Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Major food and restaurant franchisers are taking their cue from shebeens — the sports taverns they are opening throughout the country are modeled on these traditional drinking spots. One can even find a venue called the Travellers Shebeen & Bar at the Johannesburg International Airport.

For a taste of the glory and magic of the original shebeen, however, one must go back to the township. Here shebeens may no longer be doing the roaring trade they used to, and they may continue to undergo changes in form and style. But they will undoubtedly be passed on as custom and tradition from one generation of the Black community to the next.

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