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Breaking the Rules One Drink at a Time: Prohibition in British Colonial Africa

By Byron Hurte

> "*The Duke of Westminster rose to call attention to the evils attending the introduction of foreign spirits among native races in Africa, and to appeal to the government to continue their efforts to mitigate them by restriction, and where possible, by prohibition of the liquor traffic*." – "House of Lords," *The Times*, May 7, 1889.[1]

In the colonial era of Africa, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British colonial government strictly prohibited African colonial subjects from consuming imported and local beers, as well as other spirits. The introduction of anti-alcohol ordinances in British colonies disrupted long-held drinking practices that were embedded in pre-colonial societies' cultures and social practices. Before the colonial period, Africans across the continent consumed native beers, ales, meads, and fermented wines at communal events, such as weddings, religious ceremonies, harvest time, saints' days, and holidays.[2] For example, the low alcohol content of South African "kafir beer," made from maize, grain, and honey, allowed individuals to enjoy their imbibements generously without becoming inebriated.[3] These widespread and socially significant drinking practices were upended and transformed by the colonization of Africa, during which European nation-states established and consolidated vast territories across the continent. British traveler A.W. Hall describes this transformation through an interview with Mr. Betts, a native alcohol dealer in the British colony of Sierra Leone. In the

[1] "House Of Lords." *The Times*, May 7, 1889, 6. The Times Digital Archive.

[2] Charles H. Ambler, "Drunks, Brewers, and Chiefs: Alcohol Regulation in Colonial Kenya 1900-1939," *Drinking,* University of California Press, 2023, p.166. Mark Lawrence Schrad. "Black Man's Burden, White Man's Liquor in Southern Africa," *Smashing the Liquor Machine: A Global History of Prohibition,* United Kingdom: Oxford University Press (2021): 170.

[3] Ibid, 170.

interview, Mr. Betts states, "I have on the road now thousands of gallons of rum, and several thousands of demijhons of gin…They have become slaves to the white man's rum and gin. Rum and gin are their incessant demand and cry..."[4] Missionaries and teetotalers (non-drinking Europeans) criticized the harmful effects of alcoholism, such as violent confrontations, a state of inebriation or incapacity, excessive drinking, moral degradation, and public drunkenness, demanding that colonial governments adopt and implement temperance or prohibition policies. For instance, in the late nineteenth century, during their campaign to abolish the liquor trade in West African territories, abolitionists, humanitarian societies, and other anti-liquor crusaders entered a heated debate with liquor merchants. Humanitarians Bishop Tugwell of Western Equatorial Africa and British M.P. Sir John Kennaway condemned liquor traffic in West Africa, claiming that "gin and rum shipped to West Africa contained poisonous alcohol that led to widespread drunkenness and laziness, demanding its abolishment."[5] Liquor merchants argued that the trade in spirits boosted African trade, supplying the natives with durable European merchandise.[6] Theoretically, by drawing on prevailing racist discourse of the period, and painting West African subjects as morally corrupt and lawless, the anti-alcohol crusaders were attempting to gain support for a humanitarian intervention. Ultimately, British powers responded to public outcry by establishing prohibition measures and temperance bans. This paper will explore and assess the effectiveness of British prohibition laws in Africa. In the first part of this paper, I will argue that colonial measures to prohibit alcohol in the British colonies of Africa were largely

[4] A. W. Hall, *Three Hundred Miles in a Hammock; or, Six Weeks in Africa*, Houghton, N.Y: Houghton index print, 1889: 108.

[5] A. Olorunfemi, "The Liquor Traffic Dilemma in British West Africa: The Southern Nigerian Example, 1895-1918," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 17, no. 2 (1984): 229.

[6] Ibid, 229.

ineffective because colonial governments profited from the importation of European alcohol and used prohibition to control colonial subjects. The second part of the essay examines how colonized individuals and African communities in British settlements navigated and resisted prohibition, further underscoring the ineffectiveness of colonial anti-alcohol laws.

British measures to prohibit the consumption and distribution of alcohol in Africa proved difficult because colonial administrators depended on revenues from the sale and taxation of European-made spirits. For example, within a five-year span, 1889-1893, a combined 5,431,888 gallons of brandy, gin, rum, and whiskey, valued at £423,517, were imported into the Gold Coast.[7] Likewise, in Lagos, a combined 7,348,054 gallons of brandy, gin, rum, and whiskey, valued at £518,399, were imported into the colony from 1890 to 1894.[8] The British government capitalized on alcohol in Africa to finance and sustain its newly established colonies. Taxes and duties imposed by administrators on liquor accounted for half to three-quarters of all colonial revenues, making alcohol the most critical import for self-sustaining settlements.[9] The price of alcohol continued to climb over the years until it peaked just before the Great Depression. For instance, by 1930, the total value of liquor imports and exports into Southern Nigeria was £27 million.[10] Officials resisted alcohol prohibition measures, as revenues from taxing spirits enabled the colonies to be self-sustaining rather than financially dependent on colonial powers.[11] Instead,

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[7] Great Britain, Parliament, Command Papers, *Papers Relative to the Liquor Trade in West Africa*, Sess. 1897. C. 8480. Cambridge, U.K.: Chadwyck-Healey, 2005: 17.

[8] Ibid, 18.

[9] Roderick Phillips. "Alcohol and Native Peoples 1800-1930," *Alcohol: A History*, University of North Carolina Press (2014): 220.

[10] Chima Korieh, "Alcohol and Empire: 'Illicit' Gin Prohibition and Control in Colonial Eastern Nigeria," African Economic History, no. 31 (2003): 116-7.

[11] Phillips, "Alcohol and Native People," 222.

they deliberately raised taxes and duties on liquor to boost revenue and provide substantial funding for their colonies. British Journalist and member of the West African Section of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, Edmund D. Morel, describes why this calculated act was so crucial to colonial revenues, stating, "from 45 percent to 75 percent of the revenue of their Colonies is derived from this (liquor) traffic."[12] Prohibiting the consumption and distribution of alcohol would be economically crippling for British colonies. Officials relied on these revenues to demonstrate financial competency in governing a distant part of the homeland. For example, Sir Robert Henry Meade, Head of the British Colonial Office, describes in his letter to the Chambers of Commerce of London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Glasgow that, "…the Gold Coast and Lagos derive 60 per cent. and the Niger Coast Protectorate about 80 per cent., of their total revenue from the liquor traffic."[13] Administrators had no intention of stopping the flow of liquor, since alcohol duties were the top source of revenue for the colonies.[14] Rather than limiting access to or outright banning spirits, officials sought to maximize state revenues by introducing local provisions to control the availability and allocation of alcohol in colonial territories. In particular, authorities implemented policies to control the sale, importation, and distribution of imported spirits.[15] Instead of prohibiting alcohol altogether, colonial controls safeguarded these lucrative revenues, ensuring financial stability.

Although colonial authorities valued alcohol revenues as an essential source of stability for financing British colonies, industries relied on alcohol to recruit, motivate, and compensate workers. The rise and expansion of industries, such as gold and diamond mining, were closely

[12] E. D. Morel, *Affairs of West Africa*. London; W. Heinemann, 1902: 234.

[13] Great Britain, Parliament, Command Papers, *Papers Relative to the Liquor Trade in West Africa*: 4.
[14] Schrad, "Black Man's Burden," 172.

[15] Korieh, "Alcohol and Empire," 113.

linked to the use of alcohol as a recruiting tool to preserve native labor forces. This was important because the consumption of alcohol was traditionally exclusively reserved for African elders, as men were prohibited from indulging in spirits until they were married and had children.[16] Capitalizing on the desires of African youth to escape the yoke of their elders, such as being able to drink alcohol, employers used the availability of liquor as an incentive to attract and retain a young labor workforce.[17] Mining industries often incentivized African labor recruits by immediately providing them with local and imported alcohol. Like the agricultural "dop" or "tot" system (the practice of giving wine to male farm workers at regular intervals during the working day),[18] alcohol was utilized as a tool to retain young African workers. Miners amassed large debts for booze as mine owners supplied them with spirits while they worked in the mines, thereby extending their employment to pay off their obligations.[19] Mine owners retained a labor force through the manipulation of young African mine workers by keeping them in a state of indebtedness and extended servitude. In addition to alcohol debts, employers strategically retained their African employees by flooding mining camps and towns with distilled spirits, which were approximately 10 times stronger in potency than native produced alcohols. Benefiting from the stronger alcohol content, African workers were kept in a state of subordination, as spirits provided energy while also numbing the impact of their working and living conditions.[20] Industries exploited the alcoholic addictions of African laborers as a form of

[16] Charles H. Ambler, "Drunks, Brewers, and Chiefs, Alcohol Regulation," 166.

[17] Ibid, 174.

[18] Gavin Williams, "Slaves, Workers, and Wine: The 'Dop System' in the History of the Cape Wine Industry, 1658–1894," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 5 (2016): 893.

[19] Schrad, "Black Man's Burden," 173-4.

[20] Phillips, "Alcohol and Native People," 223.

submission to maintain production. In turn, inebriated African workers escaped the despair caused by the expansion of new and old industries, the growth of urban centers, and the consolidation of foreign rule by consuming highly potent imported liquor. Profiting from the labor of a stable workforce, mine owners capitalized on the alcohol addiction and indebtedness of African workers for monetary gain.

The use of alcohol as a form of currency challenged colonial prohibition measures by making enforcement nearly impossible. In various settler territories, the British government used alcohol to supplant printed money as a new form of currency, or, as Nigerian natives called it, a "gin currency," because it was a tangible asset with a visible exchange value.[21] Gin was a suitable alternative to colonial currency because it was relatively inexpensive, widely available, and incredibly popular among African drinkers. While carrying out his missionary work in Onitsha, Archdeacon Dennis recounted his encounter with gin currency, on the African West Coast, "…when they went to market, it was impossible to buy what they wanted without gin to give in exchange…people could certainly always procure far better bargains with gin than in any other way…Even now, after cash had been introduced, gin was still used as a currency."[22] Much like merchants, major industries also turned to alcohol to recruit and pay native workers. Industries exploited alcohol as a payroll system, compensating African employees with liquor instead of monetary wages for their labor. For example, in British South Africa, alcohol was used not only to pay mine workers, but "the provision of alcohol to South African workers was a well-entrenched practice."[23] Providing alcohol in exchange for employee labor significantly stifled

[21] Ibid., 221.

[22] Thomas John Dennis, "Pawning Children," The African Times and Orient Review, Vol. 1, (1912): 32.

[23] Phillips, "Alcohol and Native People, 227.

alcohol restrictions in British South Africa. Alcohol was so widely accepted as a form of currency in Nigeria that some courts instituted exchange systems allowing people convicted of offenses to trade liquor for cash to pay their fines.[24] For instance, Hansard Parliamentary member, Sir James Parker, representing Halifax County, England, in the House of Commons debates on the salaries and expenses of the Department of His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, regarding Southern Nigeria, he states, "…as in Nigeria, they use as currency and which they use to pay fines in their courts…Fines are paid in courts of Nigeria in gin."[25] Liquor was so deeply embedded in the colonial economy that it carried the same value and authenticity as paper currency. The exploitation of alcohol as a currency, an industry payroll system, and a means for paying magistrate fines undermined British prohibition regulations, hindering their enforcement.

Alcohol prohibition aimed not only to regulate the consumption and distribution of alcohol, but also to socially control and economically exploit African populations. British prohibition measures within the colonies were often masked strictly as a means to regulate the consumption and distribution of alcohol, but, in practice, these procedures were put into place to sanction and dominate colonized populations. For instance, in his proclamation regulating the sale of liquor in the Cape of Good Hope and Transkeian Territories of South Africa, Governor Hercules Robinson decrees, "no spirits shall be sold under any such license to any Native not being a Chief, Petty Chief, or Councillor, unless he shall produce a permit signed by a

[24] Ibid, 221.

[25] Great Britain, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 20 July 1911, James Parker, Col 1287-1356.

magistrate, justice of the peace, or filed cornet."[26] Not only were regulations put into place to control the distribution of spirits within British colonies, but stiff penalties were enforced on natives who failed to abide by established liquor rules. Governor Hercules Robinson further states under bullet point 10 of his proclamation, "…upon conviction, before the Magistrate of the district in which the offence (unauthorized liquor sales) is committed, to a penalty not exceeding £20, or in default of payment to imprisonment with or without hard labour, for a period not exceeding three months."[27] These restrictive measures enabled colonial governments to safeguard their revenues and civilize native subjects.

Colonial officials enacted prohibition measures and temperance bans to regulate alcohol consumption and prevent African people from distilling liquor. For example, the 1890 Brussels Act prohibited "intoxicating liquor" in African areas where spirits did not exist and placed minimum duty rates on alcohol imports; In 1893 and 1895, British East Africa Company officials and Protectorate administrators banned imported alcohol, beer, and wines for African consumption; In 1919, the Treaty of Sèvres prohibited all African consumption of spirits.[28] British administrators employed restrictive mechanisms to control native peoples in newly formed colonies, including instituting levies and trade licenses, imposing outright bans, and direct taxation.[29] In 1879, British administrators paid a yearly stipend of rum and gin to several

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[26] Great Britain. Parliament. Command Papers. *Further Papers Regarding the Laws or Ordinances for Regulating the Sale of Intoxicating Liquors in the Colonies and in Native Territories Under British Protection.* Sess. 1888, C.5563, Cambridge, U.K.: Chadwyck-Healey, 2005: 7.

[27] Ibid, 7.

[28] Justin Willis, "Demoralized Natives, Black-Coated Consumers, and Clean Spirit: European Liquor in East Africa, 1890-1955." Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 29, no. 3 (2001): 57-60.

[29] Samuel Amartey, "Colonial Liquor Regulation, Akpeteshie, and Smuggling along the Pra River, Shama Hinterland, Southern Ghana." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, (2025): 4.

African chiefs in exchange for their commitment to ban human sacrifice, slave dealings, murder, and smuggling in their lands of authority.[30] These types of vicious behaviors obstructed British progress from "civilizing" a modern African society. The yearly stipend was used as a powerful tool to ensure the core tenets of the British civilizing mission were upheld by African leaders under colonial rule.

By gaining the support of tribal chiefs, British leaders employed a top-down approach to control and civilize the African population. In addition to these more top-down approaches, control over alcohol was also used by British authorities to transform and supposedly "civilize" African beer drinking culture. For instance, the Natal Native Beer Act of 1908 gave rise to the "beer hall system," which outlawed traditional native alcohol brewing and allowed the colonized workforce to legally drink alcohol exclusively in beerhalls. The profits went to local colonial administrations, who used the revenues to build prison-like barracks for African workers, hire a white police force, and turn an immense profit.[31] Beer halls were implemented by British administrators to appear as a form of social control to regulate the consumption of alcohol by native subjects; in reality, they were employed as a form of economic control, enabling officials to accumulate substantial revenue from the collection of spirit duties. Alcohol revenues multiplied as administrators controlled the production and distribution of beer and other spirits, using various enforcement measures to maximize profits.

Prohibition measures were enacted to control and assimilate native subjects to British standards of civilization; however, these restrictions provoked resistance and rebellion among many African populations. To resist prohibitory measures enacted by colonial governments,

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[30] Dmitri van den Bersselaar, "Somebody Must Necessarily Go to Bring This Drink: Gin Smugglers, Chiefs and the State in Colonial Ghana." *Cultural and Social History* 11, no. 2 (2014): 247.

[31] Schrad, "Black Man's Burden," 176.

African drinkers, brewers, and distributors of beer, wines, and liquor took to underground networks to quench their thirst. Historically, smuggling was a livelihood where individuals or communities evaded political-economic structures such as taxes, prohibition laws, or legal restrictions for their own economic gain.[32] The unintended consequences of levies, tariffs, and prohibition restrictions on imported alcohol imposed by British administrators led many Africans to seek underground networks to supply their liquor requirements. As an act of resistance, native populations resorted to smuggling networks to fulfill their drinking desires. For instance, in the prohibition zone of Northern Nigeria, people were able to consume alcohol accumulated through smuggling operations of imported liquor or illicit spirit distillation.[33] Smuggling allowed native people to access and consume imported liquor without paying colonial taxes or duties on spirits. Additionally, it allowed the consumption of native distilled spirits, financially supporting various African communities.

Illicit liquor distribution directly impacted local merchants, diminishing their profits and shrinking margins of colonial economies. Smuggling was so rampant that retailers had no recourse but to seek help from British authorities. For instance, on the Cape Coast, local merchants lodged a formal complaint to Governor W. Brandford Griffith requesting colonial assistance, "We would urge upon your Excellency the expediency of stationing a District Commissioner, with a sufficient staff and force between New Town and the Tanoe River for the purpose of intercepting this illicit traffic."[34] Likewise, when officials were unable to provide

[32] Amartey, "Colonial Liquor Regulation," 4.

[33] Simon Heap, "'We Think Prohibition Is a Farce': Drinking in the Alcohol-Prohibited Zone of Colonial Northern Nigeria." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31, no. 1 (1998): 24.

[34] Great Britain, Parliament, Command Papers, *Gold Coast. Further Correspondence Respecting the Affairs of the Gold Coast*, Sess. 1888, [C.5357, C. 5615], Cambridge, U.K: Chadwyck-Healey, 2005. 102.

assistance, vendors would appeal for financial relief by requesting a reduction in duties. Again, vendors complained to Governor W. Brandford Griffith, demanding, "If the Government is not in a position to stop the smuggling...we would respectfully request…the Government to remove the inducement to smuggle by reducing tariffs."[35]

The illegal trade of alcohol offered several options for African women to choose from, including small-scale operations of smugglers consisting of individuals looking to make some extra money and professional smugglers who were recruited and funded by a large group of wealthy individuals, including tribal chiefs.[36] Smuggling was a lucrative underground enterprise, offering financial opportunities for those willing to risk arrest in exchange for substantial monetary gain. Smuggling also provided accessibility to alcohol supplies for African people where restrictive measures were implemented, and liquor was banned. Smugglers capitalized on natural terrains, which concealed illicit contraband and limited liquor enforcement by colonial authorities. In Southwestern Ghana, for example, smugglers found the small town of Wawase ideal for trafficking as it sat on the edge of the Pra River, surrounded by swamps and ravines on all sides, making it difficult for authorities to enforce liquor regulations.[37] The isolation of small towns and terrains made it difficult for prohibition forces to navigate undetected by smuggling rings. Smugglers used waterways to conceal liquor transport, either by strapping large bottles and small kegs beneath the keel of boats, keeping them hidden from the view of colonial police when stopped, or by retrieving illicit gin upriver after Customs officers inspected them.[38] For instance,

[35] Ibid, 102.

[36] Bersselaar, "Somebody Must Necessarily Go to Bring This Drink," 249.

[37] Amartey, "Colonial Liquor Regulations," 6.

[38] Heap, "We Think Prohibition Is a Farce," 42.

in a letter to Governor W. Bradford Griffith, local retailers report the illegal actions of smugglers importing liquor into Cape Coast, "The goods purchased at the French ports are carried up the Assinee River, the Abey and Eyhi lagoons, and the Tanoe River, are landed at the back of New Town, carried overland to the Ankobrah and thence to Essaman, Prestea, and Tacquah, for sale."[39] Smugglers employed inventive tactics to maximize waterway usage in transporting illegal liquor. Smuggling provided a resourceful and clever way for African people to evade prohibition measures to continue consuming alcohol.

Colonial officials viewed smuggling as a criminal activity, depriving the government of revenue, diminishing the state's ability to govern, institute justice, and develop infrastructure, while also being seen as an act of wrongdoing against African communities.[40] British colonies were significantly impacted by the illegal underground trade of alcohol, which weakened their civilizing controls and resulted in a drastic loss of revenue from imported liquor. For example, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, Gold Coast officials reported a 91.4 percent drop in gin imports and an 82.4 percent drop in revenue collected from spirit licenses, but an increase in smuggling convictions of akpeteshie or illicit gin from 11 people in 1930-1931 to 603 people in 1933-1934.[41] Smuggling operations thrived during the Great Depression because of British alcohol controls and the high cost of imported liquor. As an act of resistance to prohibition laws and assimilation ideals, the African people sought creative solutions, like smuggling, to access liquor for personal indulgence.

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[39] Great Britain, Parliament, Command Papers, *Gold Coast. Further Correspondence Respecting the Affairs of the Gold Coast*, 102.

[40] Bersselaar, "Somebody Must Necessarily Go to Bring This Drink," 254.

[41] Emmanuel Akyeampong. "What's in a Drink? Class Struggle, Popular Culture and the Politics of Akpeteshie (Local Gin) in Ghana, 1930–67." *Journal of African History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 215–36.

Although underground smuggling operations offered access to alcohol, it was the illicit distillation networks that provided the liquor African people sought. As colonial officials intensified restrictive measures on local alcohol manufacturing, producers concentrated their efforts on circumventing prohibition laws, such as illegally distilling spirits in forests and homes to meet the demand for alcoholic drinks.[42] In his letter to the Editor of the Times regarding "Alcohol in West Africa," the Late Deputy Comptroller of Customs for the Gold Coast, R. Killingly Gibbons references a section of *The Trade Report of the Gold Coast for 1931*, alluding to the problem of illicit distillation in British African colonies, stating, "Illicit distillation of spirits is a simple and cheap process, and, owing to the almost insuperable difficulties in the way of its prevention and detection, is spreading in the Colony and Ashanti."[43] As Illegal distillation manufacturers produced cheap, affordable liquor for local populations to consume, undermining colonial efforts to control and eliminate alcohol. Prohibition measures opened a gateway for an underground distillation network, providing opportunities for alcohol producers to make sizeable profits. For instance, in Nigeria, the cost of illegally distilling four bottles of spirits was approximately 5 shillings; each bottle sold for 5 shillings, yielding a 300 percent profit for the producer.[44] Illicit Nigerian distillers profited substantially from producing liquor illegally, undermining colonial revenues collected through duties and taxes on imported spirits.

Manufacturing alcohol was relatively cheap, as the equipment needed to produce liquor consisted of a kerosene tin, a water pot, and a couple of lengths of metal piping.[45] Most distilling

[42] Korieh, "Alcohol and Empire," 125.

[43] R. Killingly Gibbons, "Alcohol in West Africa," *The Times*, March 22, 1934, 10.

[44] Heap, "We Think Prohibition Is a Farce," 48.

[45] Ibid, 48.

equipment materials were inconspicuous, readily accessible, and easy to obtain; however, some items, such as metal piping, required more ingenuity to acquire, raising alarm amongst colonial officials. For instance, authorities reported an epidemic of stolen feed pipes from launches and cars in Calabar Province, Southern Nigeria.[46] Producers gathered whatever materials they could find to outfit their underground stills, whether purchased or stolen. Criminal activity associated with the illegal distillation of alcohol, such as stealing feed pipes, raised concern amongst colonial officials that some African people were blatantly resisting prohibition measures. No longer able to ignore the open contempt of prohibition laws, officials cracked down on illegal liquor production. Although suppression of illicit distillation increased, administrators quickly discovered that the consequences of prohibition, court trials, and imprisonment did not curtail illegal production but only drove the industry further underground, where manufacturing continued unabated.[47] Legislator Henry Snell argued before the House of Commons that grog sellers intentionally undermined British trade. He contended that substantial profits and inconsistent enforcement of relatively small fines only encouraged underground networks and deprived law-abiding merchants of rightful revenue.[48] Instead of discouraging illegal alcohol production, the threat of penalty only compelled distributors to divert to alternative covert operations rather than relinquish production. Illegal alcohol producers did not fear penalty, punishment, or imprisonment from colonial authorities, as substantial profits derived from illegally manufacturing alcohol were too valuable to surrender.

[46] Akyeampong, "What's In a Drink," 220.

[47] Korieh, "Alcohol and Empire," 125.

[48] Great Britain, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 30 April 1929, Henry Snell, Col 1432.

Illicit alcohol thrived on limited opportunities, offering African women a space to become financially independent, contribute to their families' financial welfare, and fulfill a meaningful role providing spirits to native people. As the Great Depression crippled rural and urban economies, urban women turned to underground networks to sell illicit gin and make money.[49] Moreover, African women capitalized on the illegal alcohol economy as a means of supporting themselves and their families. Many urban women sold illegal spirits to supplement the inadequate wages of their husbands.[50] In British colonies, native women had little to no opportunity to earn compensation through work-related employment because wage-paying jobs were exclusively reserved for men. Traditional employment opportunities for women were largely confined to domestic servitude roles, consisting of long hours, exhausting work, time away from family, and sub-poverty wages, as well as being subjected to sexually exploitive behaviors by their male employers. In an article written for the African National Party, South African political activist and editor, Jameson G. Coka describes working conditions for women and girls in South Africa:

> It is easy for African Women to get into employment. It is hard for them to get a living wage…Women usually get into domestic service for Europeans, where they are employed in various capacities… This is fairly easy because every European, no matter how poor, requires a black servant…Women employed in domestic service sometimes live in their employer's premises… they are not encouraged to have visitors. Sometimes husbands are prohibited from seeing their wives…Single girls living in that way are constantly exposed to the ravishes of omprincipled (unprincipled) young and old men who are slaves to their beastly lusts…In many instances, degraded and lascivious Europeans molest them…They have neither regular working hours nor a standard wage… The average wage of a domestic servant is $6 per month.[51]

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[49] Akyeampong, "What's In a Drink," 221.

[50] Akyeampong, "What's In a Drink," 224.

[51] Jameson G. Coka, *How African Women Earn Their Living*, "South Africa in Associated Negro Press News Releases." *Claude A. Barnett Papers, 1918-1967, Series 2: Africa and Other Foreign Interests, 1925-1966; Subseries 2: Topical Files Grouped Geographically by Continent and Nation 1925,* 5-6.

On the other hand, illicit liquor trafficking gave women an escape from the humiliation and hardship associated with traditional jobs, providing them an opportunity to earn substantial profits as well as being able to contribute meaningfully to their family's income. According to Jameson G. Coka, "native women, moving from rural areas to urban towns, were enthusiastically drawn to the underground liquor trade because it offered them financial prosperity."[52] The role of many African women changed as they took advantage of these underground opportunities. For instance, in the British colony of Ghana, urban women produced akpeteshie gin, earning and controlling revenues, thus homogenizing alcohol consumption among urban populations.[53] Seizing a space in the illegal alcohol trade, women not only distributed but also produced illicit alcohol for native communities to consume.

Understanding the risks of illegally distilling alcohol, female producers relied on the natural terrain to camouflage their illegal brewing operations. For instance, in the British East African colony of Kibera, Kenya, African women worked discreetly to construct private breweries in places like the forest, where oil drums were dug into the ground and placed near rivers for the large quantities of water needed, to avoid police detection.[54] Concealment played a significant role in the illicit production and unlawful consumption of spirits by native people. Once women finished brewing illicit spirits, they opened their homes as a place for consumption. Nubi women in Kibera provided new drinking spaces for native subjects to come into their

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[52] Jameson G. Coka, *"Location Life" And Its Effects Upon Africans*, "South Africa in Associated Negro Press News Releases." *Claude A. Barnett Papers, 1918-1967, Series 2: Africa and Other Foreign Interests, 1925-1966; Subseries 2: Topical Files Grouped Geographically by Continent and Nation 1925,* 4.

[53] Emmanuel Akyeampong. "What's in a Drink," 222.

[54] Johan de Smedt, "'Kill Me Quick:' A History of Nubian Gin in Kibera," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009): 209.

homes to drink, or they would quickly serve drinks through compound fences, kitchen windows, and under bushes to avoid police scrutiny.[55] No matter how cautious women distillers were in keeping their illicit trade discreet, distilleries and underground bars were still discovered by law enforcement agencies, and many women were arrested and fined. Although female brewers were fined and imprisoned, they continued to "conduct their business with blatant disregard for the law."[56] Historian Chima J. Korieh alludes to this fact, stating, "Prohibitions, trials, and imprisonments only drove the industry underground and forced the distillers to seek ever more remote locations to practice their art."[57] Brought on by British prohibition laws and the Great Depression, many married African women were drawn into the unlawful alcohol trade as a means to financially support their families. Native women were instrumental in selling, brewing, and distributing illicit alcohol during the British colonial era in Africa. This new role for women was in direct contradiction to native gender norms. For example, in the British South African province of Lesotho, a woman's role was to labor in agricultural production and perform household duties, where her only means of production was controlled by their relationship to the men in her life, and in the British colony of Kenya, customary law in the preparation and consumption of beer, in some areas, women were excluded from any involvement in the preparation of beer.[58]

The prohibition of alcohol played a vital role in reshaping and reforming African culture and identity. In lieu of sitting idly by and allowing foreign governments to impose their authority,

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[55] Ibid, 210.

[56] Tshidiso Maloka, "Khomo Lia Oela: Canteens, Brothels and Labour Migrancy in Colonial Lesotho, 1900-40," *Journal of African History*, 38, (1997): 101-122

[57] Chima Korieh, "Alcohol and Empire," 125.

[58] Tshidiso Maloka, "Khomo Lia Oela," 102-103; Charles Ambler, "Drunks, Brewers, and Chiefs," 166.

African people actively resisted the suppression of alcohol in an effort to dismantle British dominance spreading throughout their homeland. British governments framed prohibition as a humanitarian effort to civilize native subjects and to reform their moral decline. In reality, British administrators exploited prohibition to monopolize the liquor trade, sustain their economies, and reinforce their imperial control. Prohibition measures, therefore, became a contested issue between British Administrators and African populations as native subjects perceived alcohol restrictions as another form of colonial oppression. By resisting British authority and by actively defying prohibition measures, African people demonstrated their ability to fight back. Covert liquor networks motivated native subjects to build and develop infrastructures, economies, and social systems that represented their culture and were unique to their heritage. Women challenged patriarchal European norms by liberating themselves from servile roles into entrepreneurial positions, catapulting them into spots of authority. By engineering substitute industries in liquor production and trade, native people developed invaluable skills in establishing a self-sustaining economy. Ultimately, prohibition was a driving force in African spirit and resilience in reestablishing their autonomy and regaining control of their own hegemony. By breaking the rules, one drink at a time, African defiance of British prohibition began setting the stage for decolonization.

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