

## Black Africans in Cape Town, 1890–1939

Quantitative History and Uncharted People: Case Studies from the South African Past  
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# QUANTITATIVE HISTORY AND UNCHARTED PEOPLE

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## CASE STUDIES FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN PAST

*Edited by Johan Fourie*

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# CHAPTER 9

## BLACK AFRICANS IN CAPE TOWN, 1890–1939

*Nobungwele Mbem\* and Michiel de Haas\*\**

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### Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century many black Africans,<sup>1</sup> willingly or unwillingly, gravitated towards South Africa's emerging cities. Most of these migrants were involved in mining, various forms of low-skilled labour, and, less commonly, domestic service. The mines of Kimberley and the Transvaal attracted black Africans from various parts of southern Africa.<sup>2</sup> The labour forces of the factories and farms of Durban and the harbour of Port Elizabeth consisted mostly of black Africans of various ethnicities from the nearby rural homelands.<sup>3</sup> As black Africans were not permitted to own land in the cities, this rendered their presence in the urban areas temporary and often resulted in circulatory systems of migration, aspects of South African migration that are extensively covered in the historiography.<sup>4</sup> Cape Town's commercial economy, even though dominated by white and coloured workers, attracted black African migrants

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<sup>1</sup>We use the term 'black' in this chapter to mean only black people and not, as in Cape Colony and South African historiography, to mean the group disenfranchised by apartheid, which includes coloured, Indian and Asian people as well as black.

<sup>2</sup>See Teresa K. Connor, 'Ambiguous Repositories: Archives, Traders and the Recruitment of Mineworkers in the Eastern Cape: 1900–1946', *South African Historical Journal* 72, no. 1 (2020): 98–124; David Yudelman and Alan Jeeves, 'New Labour Frontiers for Old Black Migrants to the South African Gold Mines, 1920–851', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 13, no. 1 (1986): 101–24 and Robert Vicat Turrell and Turrell Robert Vicat, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871–1890*, vol. 54 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Alan Jeeves, 'Sugar and Gold in the Making of the South African Labour System the Crisis of Supply on the Zululand Sugar Estates 1906–1939', *South African Journal of Economic History* 7, no. 2 (1992): 7–33 & Gary Baines, 'The Control and Administration of Port Elizabeth's African Population, c. 1834–1923' (1989); R.F. Callebert, *Livelihood Strategies of Dock Workers in Durban, c. 1900–1959* (PhD Thesis, Queen's University (Canada), Department of History, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>William Beinart and Peter Delius, 'The Historical Context and Legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 4 (2014): 667–88; Wayne Dooling, 'Cape Town Knows, but She Forgets': Segregation and the Making of a Housing Crisis during the First Half of the 20th Century', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44, no. 6 (2018): 1057–76; Wayne Dooling, 'Poverty and Respectability in Early Twentieth-century Cape Town', *The Journal of African History* 59, no. 3 (2018): 411–35.

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as well. Most arrived in Cape Town at a mature age, became semi-permanently settled and returned to their rural homelands at retirement age. This does not match the general circulatory pattern of black mobility in South Africa.

This chapter studies black African migrants who arrived in Cape Town from around 1890 to the 1930s. These were not the 'pioneers' but the 'early adopters', preceding the much larger influx in the second half of the twentieth century, during and after apartheid.<sup>5</sup> We look particularly at household composition, gendered experiences and employment to see how these marginalised people in Cape Town took advantage of opportunities and overcame constraints. We argue that black migrants from the Transkeian Territories and the Ciskei who chose Cape Town over other migrant destinations traded the risk of a more precarious lifestyle for potential higher wage earnings and more freedom in their decisions about family life, work and residence.

The chapter helps to complete the picture of South Africa's black migration history, in two ways. Firstly, black African migrants are often discussed as a *category*, subjected to the policy decisions of a powerful and discriminatory state apparatus. South African migration historiography has often analysed black African mobility in relation to migration policy, town planning and urban governance; rarely do the migrants themselves surface as individuals with diverse experiences, preferences and choices. Rather than their agency and individuality, it has stressed their *commonality* and *uniformity* as subjects to be governed.<sup>6</sup> By taking individuals as the focal point, this chapter diverges from this tendency.

Secondly, the chapter adds to our knowledge about migratory moves of black Africans to Cape Town before apartheid, when the city had a small black population which had often travelled long distances, and whose migration and settlement was less controlled and more diverse than in the mining compounds of the Transvaal. This migration to Cape Town was particularly notable for the tension between the migrants' agency and the precariousness of their situation. The chapter illustrates this by tracing their histories of migration and family formation, experiences, work and livelihoods in the late inter-war period. Understanding more about these 'early adopter' migrants could illuminate migration research today. Some consequences of internal migration, such as the stepwise gravity flow characterising recent migration, have origins in institutions and strategies of

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<sup>5</sup>On the concepts of 'pioneer' and 'early adopter' migrants within broader 'migration transition' theory, see Hein De Haas, 'The Internal Dynamics of Migration Processes: A Theoretical Inquiry', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 10 (2010): 1599, 1607–9.

<sup>6</sup>See, for cases related to migration to Cape Town: Barry Kinkead-Weekes, 'Africans in Cape Town: State Policy and Popular Resistance, 1936–73' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, Faculty of Arts, Department of History, 1992); Maynard W. Swanson, 'The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900–1909', *The Journal of African History* 18, no. 3 (1977): 387–410; Muchaparara Musemwa, 'Aspects of the Social and Political History of Langa Township, Cape Town, 1927–1948' (Master's thesis, University of Cape Town, 1993) and Dooling, 'Cape Town Knows, but She Forgets': 1057–76. A major exception is the life histories collected by Belina Bozzoli and Mmantho Nkotsie. See B. Bozzoli and M. Nkotsie, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1983* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1991); Callebert, *Livelihood Strategies of Dock Workers in Durban*.

the period we examine.<sup>7</sup> Most black African residents of Cape Town today are isiXhosa speakers.<sup>8</sup> Most have links with the former Transkei and Ciskei rural homelands. Moving from an agricultural to a commercial economy leads to changes in household composition and survival strategies, and this is still true of migrants to Cape Town today.<sup>9</sup>

Our key source of information for this effort of historical reconstruction of agency and precarity is – perhaps counterintuitively – largely quantitative. We used microdata from 101 African households recorded in the Social Surveys of Cape Town 1938 and 1939, a rich sample of black African residents drawn from the metropolitan area's black communities, almost all of whom had migrated to Cape Town in the preceding decades. These surveys provide detailed information on the work and income, current and previous residence, and age and family of 159 people, and cover a total of 300 individuals.<sup>10</sup> We had to exercise some caution because of biases arising from the nature of the sample. Nevertheless, the dataset yielded valuable information for writing the stories of previously 'unaccounted' Cape Town residents in the 1930s and enriching our understanding of their experiences, the difficulties they faced, and their aspirations.

## Historical background

With the mineralisation and industrialisation of South Africa's economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, large flows of black African migrants converged on the cities. Most were temporary and often circular sojourners, but became more permanent settlers. Within the broader landscape of South Africa's migration histories, Cape Town is a peculiar case. Whereas most black African migration in South Africa was state-directed and controlled by labour recruiting agencies, the migrants who moved to Cape Town from rural homelands did so on their own account. Up to the era of our study, moreover, they made up less than 5 per cent of the city's mainly white and coloured population. In this section we look at how early twentieth century Cape Town became a receiving region for growing numbers of black migrants, despite the precariousness of residency and employment for many of the newcomers, who nonetheless chose this destination deliberately.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Simon Bekker, 'Migration from South Africa's Rural Sending Areas: Changing Intentions and Changing Destinations', *Migration to South Africa within International Migration Trends* (2006).

<sup>8</sup>Robert Mongwe, 'The Importance of Language Identities to Black Residents in Cape Town and Johannesburg', *Reflections on Identity in Four African Cities* (2006): 171–88.

<sup>9</sup>Bekker, 'Migration from South Africa's Rural Sending Areas'.

<sup>10</sup>We also looked at other variables, such as religion and education, which remain to be analysed elsewhere.

<sup>11</sup>See, for this point, especially the work of William Beinart. William Beinart and Colin Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa: Politics & Popular Movements in the Transkei & Eastern Cape, 1890–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); William Beinart, 'Beyond "Homelands": Some Ideas about the History of African Rural Areas in South Africa', *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 1 (2012): 5–21; William Beinart, 'A Century of Migrancy from Mpondoland', *African Studies* 73, no. 3 (2014): 387–409; Beinart and Delius, 'The Historical Context and Legacy of the Natives Land Act of 1913', 667–88.

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**Table 9.1** Black African population of Cape Town, 1865–1939.

| <i>Census year</i> | <i>Black Africans in 'CT proper'</i> | <i>Share of total CT pop.</i> | <i>Black Africans in 'greater CT'</i> | <i>% of total 'greater CT' pop.</i> | <i>% of Black Africans outside 'CT proper'</i> |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1865               | 274                                  | 1.0%                          | 707                                   | 1.8%                                | 61.2%  |
| 1875               | 173                                  | 0.5%                          | 202                                   | 0.5%                                | 14.4%  |
| 1891               | 623                                  | 1.2%                          | 781                                   | 1.0%                                | 20.2%  |
| 1904               | 2,147                                | 2.8%                          | 7,492                                 | 4.3%                                | 71.3%  |
| 1911               | 964                                  | 1.4%                          | 2,088                                 | 1.3%                                | 53.8%  |
| 1921               | 4,468                                | 2.4%                          | 8,691                                 | 4.1%                                | 48.6%  |
| 1926               | 11,565                               | 5.4%                          | <i>n/a</i>                            | <i>n/a</i>                          | <i>n/a</i>                                     |
| 1936               | 13,034                               | 4.4%                          | 14,160                                | 4.1%                                | 8.0%   |
| 1938               | <i>n/a</i>                           | <i>n/a</i>                    | 15,788                                | 5.2%                                | <i>n/a</i>                                     |
| 1939               | <i>n/a</i>                           | <i>n/a</i>                    | 18,500                                | 5.9%                                | <i>n/a</i>                                     |

Source: SS1 – *Series of reports and studies issued by the Social Survey of Cape Town: The Growth Population (1942)*, Kinkead-Weekes, Barry. 'Africans in Cape Town: State Policy and Popular Resistance, 1936–73': 31 and Worden, Nigel, Elizabeth Van Heyningen, and Vivian Bickford-Smith. *Cape Town: the making of a city: an illustrated social history*. Uitgeverij Verloren (1998):71, Fast, Hildegard Helene. 'Pondoks, houses, and hostels: a history of Nyanga 1946–1970, with a special focus on housing.' PhD thesis., University of Cape Town, Faculty of Arts, Department of History (1995): 32.

Table 9.1 shows the enumerated size and share of the black African population in Cape Town from 1865 to 1939. It illustrates a number of stylised facts, each of which we address further in the historical narrative below. First, the black presence in Cape Town has deep roots, going back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, even though population numbers and shares remained very small until a sustained take-off in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Second, the size and share of Cape Town's black African population did not expand in a linear fashion, but dipped significantly between 1904 and 1921. Third, a large proportion of Cape Town's black Africans did not live in the city proper but in the surrounding areas, especially during the first quarter of the twentieth century, when the black population of 'greater Cape Town' was more than double that of 'Cape Town proper'. As the borders of 'Cape Town proper' were not stable over time but shifted outward, population-size comparisons over time are more accurately made with reference to 'greater Cape Town'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Cape Town's growth is discussed in the 'Growth of Population Report'. This report was part of a series of reports on the Social Surveys of Cape Town funded by the Carnegie Corporation, found at Batson Collection, Ms, 451. Manuscripts section, Stellenbosch University Library and Information Service. University of Cape Town Department of Social Science: Reports and Studies Issued by the Social Survey of Cape Town, Edited by Edward Batson, 'Growth of Population', May 1941, no. SS1.

In the early twentieth century, the Transkeian Territories comprised the major sending region of South Africa's black migrants, and have often been referred to as South Africa's 'labour reserve'.<sup>13</sup> The agricultural economy of these territories was disrupted by the nineteenth-century frontier wars, disasters such as the 1856–7 cattle killings and 1890s rinderpest, and the promulgation of the Natives Land Act of 1913.<sup>14</sup> The decline of the agricultural economy weakened the economic position of black African traders and merchants, leading many to seek wage incomes. Many heads of households who were unable to pay hut taxes were pushed to explore alternative means of earning an income such as selling their labour.<sup>15</sup> Wage earnings, in turn, not only affected the livelihoods of the migrants themselves but also contributed to socio-economic changes in the rural homelands which further spurred migration.<sup>16</sup>

The Transvaal mines were the largest receiving region of Transkeian Territories labour migrants. In 1912, 26 per cent of all South-Africa-sourced migrant labour in the Rand mines came from these territories (Mozambique contributed 48 per cent).<sup>17</sup> The Transvaal mines had a great appetite for cheap unskilled labour and used labour brokers for recruitment. Monopsonistic brokers such as the Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC) and the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) were instrumental in controlling the direction of labour migrancy.<sup>18</sup> Taking advantage of the pass laws, the WNLA enforced restrictions which limited the choice of jobs for black African migrants outside of the mining sector.<sup>19</sup> The Transvaal mines attracted an estimated 15,000 black

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<sup>13</sup>William Beinart, *Political Economy of Pondoland, 1860–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 35–6. We use the term 'labour reserve' with caution because it is commonly used by historians to describe lands and communities occupied by black African people, and to an extent black African governance structure. The term may seem harmless because most of the systems and archives we consulted are colonial, but we find it problematic because it reduces the rural black African communities to sources of labour. One way to bring out the narratives of an unaccounted people is to discourage the use of such terms.

<sup>14</sup>Beinart and Delius, 'The Historical Context and Legacy of the Natives Land Act', 667–88; Roger Southall, *South Africa's Transkei: The Political Economy of an 'Independent' Bantustan* (London: Pearson Education, 1982); Jeffrey B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–1857* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1989) & Nomalanga Mkhize, 'In Search of Native Dissidence: RT Kawa's Mfecane Historiography in Ibalani lamaMfengu, (1929)', *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinary* 13, no. 2 (2018): 92–111.

<sup>15</sup>Southall, *South Africa's Transkei*, 67–73.

<sup>16</sup>See, Gordon Pirie, 'Railways and Labour Migration to the Rand Mines: Constraints and Significance', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19, no. 4 (1993): 713–30; Kombo J. Moyana, 'The Political Economy of the Migrant Labour System: Implications for Agricultural Growth and Rural Development in Southern Africa', *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement* 1, no. 1 (1976): 34–41; Bank, Leslie, 'City Slums, Rural Homesteads: Migrant Culture, Displaced Urbanism and the Citizenship of the Serviced House', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 5 (2015): 1067–81.

<sup>17</sup>Pirie, 'Railways and Labour Migration to the Rand Mines'.

<sup>18</sup>Jeeves, 'Sugar and Gold in the making of the South African Labour System: The Crisis of Supply on the Zululand Sugar Estates, 1906–1939'. Based on a paper presented to the Seventh Biennial Conference of the Economic History Society of Southern Africa, Pietermaritzburg, July 1992.

<sup>19</sup>Sheila Van der Horst, *Native Labour in South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942): 158 & 164.

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African migrants from across southern Africa in 1890, with the flow swelling rapidly to 318,000 by 1936 through WNLA and NRC recruitment.<sup>20</sup>

Despite its distance from the mining towns, Cape Town was indirectly affected by the mines' migrant labour system, not only because migrants to both regions came from the same sending region, but also because of the railway connecting the mines to Cape Town's harbour.<sup>21</sup> Because of the ease with which information and people could travel between the mines and the harbour, we should expect that labour markets and wages were integrated and that at least some of the migrants considered both destinations as alternatives. At the same time, Cape Town had distinct characteristics as a migrant destination, some of which it shared with emerging urban destinations in the Transvaal. Unlike migration to the mines, labour migration to Cape Town was self-organised and self-funded and did not offer a predetermined, time-restricted place of residence as arranged through a recruitment process. Cape Town's growing manufacturing industries relied on white and coloured labour and employed black Africans only to fill labour shortages. Others found work in the informal sector,<sup>22</sup> which was insecure because the jobs were mostly casual and seldom based on a contract.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the casual jobs were mostly for men.

The South African War (1899–1901) boosted black African migration to Cape Town. During the war, the Transvaal mines were shut down and the migrant labour system put on hold. The migrants were diverted to military work, for example in the Cape ports, which attracted tens of thousands of Transkeian and Ciskeian migrants.<sup>24</sup> War-time wages in Cape Town were comparatively favourable. From 1899 to 1902 the Cape ports paid workers four shillings per day (about £6 a month); a substantial premium over the pre-war monthly Transvaal mine wages of £2 to £3 in 1895 and £2 10s 0d to £2 14s 0d in 1899. As a consequence of the slow performance of the mines during and after the war, the WNLA reduced wages from a fixed monthly amount of £2 10s 0d in 1901 to a minimum of £1 10s 0d and maximum of £1 15s 0d in 1903, despite the increasing cost of living.<sup>25</sup> After the war, military work ceased at the Cape ports and the mines resumed operations. However, the mines struggled to reach pre-war numbers of unskilled migrant

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<sup>20</sup>J.S. Harington, N.D. McGlashan and E.Z. Chelkowska, 'A Century of Migrant Labour in the Gold Mines of South Africa', *The Journal of the Southern African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy* 104, no. 2 (2004): 66.

<sup>21</sup>A. Rommelspacher, "'Too Delicate to Work'? Women and Work in Cape Town 1938–1939', Unpublished doctoral thesis chapter. Pirie, 'Railways and Labour Migration to the Rand Mines': 713–30; Gordon Pirie, 'African Township Railways and the South African State, 1902–1963', *Journal of Historical Geography* 13, no. 3 (1987): 283–95.

<sup>22</sup>Rommelspacher, 'Too Delicate to Work'; Goldin, 'The Coloured Labour Preference Policy, Co-option and Contradiction', *Collected Seminar Papers. Institute of Commonwealth Studies* 33 (1984): 108–20.

<sup>23</sup>Batson Collection, Ms, 451. 'A Socio-Economic Classification of Occupations in Cape Town', November 1946, no. SS8.

<sup>24</sup>Van der Horst, *Native Labour in South Africa*, 162. William Beinart and Colin Bundy, 'Introduction: "Away in the Locations"', in *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa*, ed. William Beinart and Colin Bundy (Johannesburg: Ravan, 2017): 20.

<sup>25</sup>Van der Horst, *Native Labour in South Africa*, 164 & 166.

labourers.<sup>26</sup> In 1903 only half of the 90,000 black African migrants working on the mines in 1899 had returned to work, owing to the lower wages and the risky nature of the work.<sup>27</sup> Wages in the Cape harbours declined but remained more competitive than those offered on the Transvaal mines.<sup>28</sup> Between March 1901 and November 1903, only 9,725 black African migrant workers were transported by railway to the Transvaal mines.<sup>29</sup> Between June 1903 and June 1904 nearly 10,000 workers were given passes to work in Cape Town.<sup>30</sup>

With migrant numbers in Cape Town growing, the colonial administrators established townships as an entry point for black Africans and to monitor their movements.<sup>31</sup> The Dock Native Location was established at the Cape Town docks in 1884 as the city's first settlement for black Africans. At its peak in 1900–1 it accommodated 10,000 people.<sup>32</sup> In a 1901 report, the Cape Town Office of the Commissioner of Public Works for Native Location Uitvlugt (later renamed Ndabeni) identified three kinds of black African resident: temporary, migratory and permanently settled. Most were migratory and would typically move between the rural homelands and their job in the city.<sup>33</sup> Although the numbers were said to be small, the Commission noted that the numbers of permanent black African residents were already increasing, hence the need to locate them far from white residential communities.<sup>34</sup> Spurred on by an outbreak of bubonic plague, approximately 7,000 of them (including 500 women) were resettled in 1902 in Ndabeni.<sup>35</sup> The much larger number of black residents in greater Cape Town than in Cape Town proper (Table 9.1) reflects the importance of Ndabeni location as a residential area in 1904. A highly skewed sex ratio (thirteen men for every woman) testifies to its migratory and male-dominated community.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Harington, McGlashan and Chelkowska, 'A Century of Migrant Labour in the Gold Mines', 66.

<sup>27</sup>Pirie, 'Railways and Labour Migration to the Rand Mines', 717.

<sup>28</sup>William Beinart, 'Jamani – Cape Workers in German South West Africa, 1904–12', in *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa*, ed. William Beinart and Colin Bundy (Johannesburg: Ravan, 2017): 168.

<sup>29</sup>Pirie, 'Railways and Labour Migration to the Rand Mines', 717.

<sup>30</sup>Beinart, 'Jamani – Cape Workers', 168.

<sup>31</sup>Dooling, "'Cape Town Knows, but She Forgets'", 1057–76.

<sup>32</sup>Swanson, 'The Sanitation Syndrome', 387–410.

<sup>33</sup>Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town. Department of Native Affairs. NA 457, Commission of Native Location for Cape Town Report: To Honourable Thomas Lynedoch Graham, K. C., M. L. C, Colonial Secretary of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, 1901.

<sup>34</sup>Goldin, 'The Coloured Labour Preference Policy', 108–20. A similar development took place in the Transvaal, where growing numbers of black residents were located in townships such as Klipspruit in Johannesburg. Susan Parnell, 'Race, Power and Urban Control: Johannesburg's Inner City Slum-yards, 1910–1923', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 615–37.

<sup>35</sup>J.E. Holloway, R.W. Anderson, et al., Report of Native Economic Commission, 1930–1932. Part III, 'Natives in Urban Areas', 64. Available online: <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/5028>; and see, Swanson, 'The Sanitation Syndrome', 387–410.

<sup>36</sup>Black African sex ratios in other African cities at the time tended to be much lower. See, for example, Felix Meier zu Selhausen, 'Urban Migration in East and West Africa: Contrasts and Transformations', in *Migration in Africa: Shifting Patterns of Mobility, 19th to 21st Centuries*, ed. Michiel de Haas and Ewout Frankema (Abingdon and Routledge, New York: Routledge, forthcoming in 2022): 281–307.

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Cape Town's manufacturing sector employed skilled and semi-skilled whites, many of whom were immigrants from Britain and Australia. Semi-skilled and 'unskilled' black Africans operated the largely informal urban service sector. In 1904, Cape Town was hit by a recession which resulted in large-scale job losses.<sup>37</sup> Many white immigrants left and most black Africans lacked the skills to replace them. The recession hit Cape Town's black African population hard as jobs were scarce in both the informal and domestic sectors.<sup>38</sup> The cost of living was high, and most Ndabeni residents had zero to low incomes. Difficulties in sustaining livelihoods were compounded by restrictions on livestock ownership and a ban on owning a business licence or operating a shop.<sup>39</sup> These conditions resulted in numerous residents returning to their rural homelands, and a substantial decline in the number and share of black Africans in Cape Town in between the census years 1904 and 1921 (Table 9.1).

With Cape Town's economy in crisis, a new opportunity for its black African residents arose when German South West Africa (GSWA) began recruiting workers to support the German military efforts to root out Herero and Nama resistance against colonial rule (1904–7) and to build GSWA's railroad network. In the peak years, the number of South African migrants working in GSWA reached around 10,000, which equalled the number employed in the largest Cape ports.<sup>40</sup> GSWA recruitment resulted in a stepwise migration pattern, in which Cape Town – Ndabeni in particular – served as the receiving region for self-funded migrants from parts of the Ciskei and Transkeian Territories and the sending region (i.e. recruitment ground) for GSWA. Black African migrants were offered competitive wages of £5 per month, which included free transport, food and clothes. In comparison, wages in the mines had increased only to an average of £3 between 1903 and the 1910s.<sup>41</sup> Recruitment from Cape Town to GSWA was facilitated through labour brokers, who often reneged on promises and failed to pay labourers their full wages at the end of their assignment. Labour recruitment to GSWA was discontinued in 1912, partly because of poor working conditions and maltreatment of workers, as well as resurging labour demand on the Transvaal mines.

During the 1910s, now that it was part of the Union of South Africa, Cape Town's economy recovered from the post-South African War depression of 1903–9. Later, the demand for exports as a consequence of the First World War boosted the Cape's industrial sector.<sup>42</sup> The factories that sprang up – supported by laws such as the Civilised Labour

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<sup>37</sup>C. Simkins and E. van Heyningen, 'Fertility, Mortality, and Migration in the Cape Colony, 1891–1904', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 22, no. 1 (1989): 85–6; Martin Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring Workers in Cape Town, 1900–1939' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, Faculty of Commerce, School of Economics, 1984): 68–70.

<sup>38</sup>Goldin, 'The Coloured Labour Preference Policy', 108–20.

<sup>39</sup>Cape Archives Depot, NA 457.

<sup>40</sup>Beinart, "Jamani" – Cape Workers, 168.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 169–70.

<sup>42</sup>Nicol, 'A History of Garment and Tailoring Workers in Cape Town', 71.

Policy of the 1920s – employed a large number of coloured women and some coloured men. Employment opportunities in the manufacturing and informal sector arose for black Africans as well, attracting more migrants which in turn triggered petitions from white and coloured ratepayers pressuring the city council for segregated living. The claim was that an increase in black African presence in the central city depreciated the value of property and was a security threat. Despite the hostile response, new arrivals increased resulting in overpopulation and poor sanitation in black residential and squatter areas.<sup>43</sup>

The Natives Urban Area Act of 1923, which aimed to firmly establish segregationist urban residential spaces, linked black presence in Cape Town to employment and regulated black mobility through ‘influx controls’. In line with this Act, a plan was made to resettle Ndabeni’s residents in a new township, which became known as Langa.<sup>44</sup> Like Ndabeni, Langa, completed in 1927, was built to accommodate the increasing labour demands for informal and unskilled work in the city, and the growing black African population. Conditions in Langa were designed to be slightly better than those in Ndabeni. Poor white labourers were hired to build the houses in Langa, but the ‘civilised’ wage rates offered to them by the government to address the ‘poor white problem’ made this labour expensive so rent was increased to recover costs.<sup>45</sup> However, protesting black African residents managed to negotiate rental reduction three times.<sup>46</sup> Resettlement took place during 1927–8 and Langa took over from Ndabeni as Cape Town’s main ‘bridgehead’ community for newly arriving migrants.

Already in 1901 the Commission of Native Location had noticed that black women were increasingly migrating to Cape Town, contributing to the growth of a settled black population. The point was again stressed by the Native Economic Commission (1930–2).<sup>47</sup> Some degree of permanency was beneficial to employers, ensuring a consistent supply of labour with the skills they required. Unlike the corrugated structures of Ndabeni, which were mostly intended for one person, Langa had married quarters set aside for couples and families, even though the majority of the accommodation was designed as a temporary arrangement for single occupancy.<sup>48</sup> Langa also had sections of unlisted barracks which were often occupied by people undocumented in the official books.<sup>49</sup> Langa is particularly important for this chapter since it was the neighbourhood hosting the largest number of the black households in the Batson survey.

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<sup>43</sup>Kinhead-Weekes, ‘Africans in Cape Town’, 13–26.

<sup>44</sup>Holloway, Anderson, et al., Report of Native Economic Commission, 5.

<sup>45</sup>Hildegard Helene Fast, ‘Pondoks, Houses, and Hostels: A History of Nyanga 1946–1970, with a Special Focus on Housing’ (PhD thesis., University of Cape Town, Faculty of Arts, Department of History, 1995): 31–4.

<sup>46</sup>Holloway; Anderson, et al., Report of Native Economic Commission.

<sup>47</sup>Cape Archives Depot, NA 457; Holloway, Anderson, et al., Report of Native Economic Commission, 64.

<sup>48</sup>Dooling, ‘Poverty and Respectability’, 417; Sipokazi Shambu, *Social History, Public History and the Politics of Memory in Re-making ‘Ndabeni’s’ Pasts* (Master’s thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2010).

<sup>49</sup>Batson Collection, Ms, 451. ‘Distribution of Households’, May 1944, No. SS25, 8.

## Quantitative History and Uncharted People

Economic prospects in the Cape, already challenging for most black Africans, worsened with the Great Depression of 1929–34, which brought economic decline to economic sectors outside the gold mine value chain.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the deteriorating environmental conditions in the Ciskei and other parts of the Transkei in the early 1930s forced many black Africans to abandon the rural agricultural economy for urban wage earnings as a household survival strategy.<sup>51</sup> As a result the number of recorded (Table 9.1) and unrecorded black Africans residing in and around Cape Town increased sharply.<sup>52</sup> The 1937 Natives Law Amendment Act acknowledged some black Africans as permanently provided that they complied with the pass laws and could prove continuous residence or Cape Town as a birthplace.<sup>53</sup>

Although the city council had made attempts in 1926 to enforce ‘seek-work permits’, it struggled to enforce compliance. This resulted in the promulgation of the more restrictive Proclamation 105 in 1939, which restricted the entry of new arrivals without “*firm offer of employment*”. Failure to comply was a criminal offence.<sup>54</sup> Proclamation 105 coincided with the start of the Second World War, which generated new employment opportunities for black Africans, as had been the case with earlier war-time episodes.<sup>55</sup> Pass laws compliance was suspended in 1941–3 due to high demand for black African labour and the city council’s inability to provide sufficient formal housing.<sup>56</sup> After the war, the construction of Nyanga, beginning in 1945, definitively entrenched a policy of segregationist residence.

## Social surveys of Cape Town by Professor Edward Batson

The Batson social surveys of Cape Town were conducted from October 1938 to April 1939. The records are stored in Stellenbosch University’s special collections library and were recently transcribed and digitised. They are a useful source for understanding migration to and residence in Cape Town before apartheid.<sup>57</sup> The surveys were part of

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<sup>50</sup>Nicoli Natrass and Jeremy Seekings, ‘The Economy and Poverty in the Twentieth Century in South Africa’, Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town. CSSR Working Paper No.276 (2010): 7–8; Barry Eichengreen, ‘Gold and South Africa’s Great Depression’, *Economic History of Developing Regions* 36, no. 2 (2021): 175–93.

<sup>51</sup>Charles Hilliard Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination, and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 72.

<sup>52</sup>Kinkead-Weekes, ‘Africans in Cape Town’, 28 & 31–26.

<sup>53</sup>Fast, ‘Pondoks, Houses, and Hostels’, 35.

<sup>54</sup>Kinkead-Weekes, ‘Africans in Cape Town’, 32, 38.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 32 and Fast, ‘Pondoks, Houses, and Hostels’, 35, 41.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>57</sup>The Social Surveys for Cape Town were transcribed by Nobungwele Mbem as part of her doctoral thesis research project. These surveys were accessed at the Stellenbosch University Library Special Collections. The transcription was made possible through the Biography of an Uncharted People project based at Stellenbosch University funded by the Mellon Foundation.

a project headed by sociologist Professor Edward Batson from the University of Cape Town that investigated the standard of living and incidence of poverty in white, coloured and black households in Cape Town.<sup>58</sup> The survey used the methods of Professor A. L. Bowley of the University of London, who conducted a similar project in England in 1913 in Merseyside, New London and Bristol. To apply these methods to Cape Town, Batson made some adjustments to account for socio-cultural and administrative-institutional differences.<sup>59</sup> Some of the problems he encountered were language barriers, an ethnically mixed and illiterate population, lack of comprehensive and accurate maps, and lack of sufficiently trained staff.<sup>60</sup>

Batson collected data for a randomised sample of Cape Town's full population of about 59,000 private households. Just over 3 per cent of all households were visited for the project.<sup>61</sup> Close to 2,000 surveys were conducted, with 1,980 yielding analysable results.<sup>62</sup> Of these, only 101 (about 5 per cent) were black households, comprising a total of 300 residents, corresponding to about 2 per cent of Cape Town's black African population, and 3 per cent of black African households.<sup>63</sup> The households surveyed were located across greater Cape Town, with concentrations in the city proper, Woodstock, Langa, Athlone and Kensington (see Figure 9.1). Households in the informal settlements or single quarters (barracks) of the southern parts of Cape Town, where in fact the majority of black residents lived, were not included.<sup>64</sup>

Measuring living standards, the prime objective of Batson's project, is complicated because of fundamental differences in diverse cultures' and communities' ideas of quality of life and what they value and why.<sup>65</sup> In Cape Town the measurement was complicated further because it was white officials and surveyors who did the measuring, using racial hierarchies and a 'Western template' as the desired standard. The Native Economic Commission's 1930–2 report, founded on the premise that black Africans are 'lesser' humans until assimilated to European standards, emphasised the need to urbanise and westernise them:

In the original Native economy the variety of articles of consumption was limited. [...] The European, and civilised races generally, have opened up new avenues of enjoyment for those who had more than was necessary to satisfy the purely

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<sup>58</sup>The Poverty Datum Line was an estimate of the income needed to survive or to attain the 'minimum essentials for health and decency'. See, Batson Collection, Ms, 451. 'Poverty Datum Line', May 1941, No. SS3, 1.

<sup>59</sup>Batson Collection, Ms, 451. 'Surveying Methods', May 1941, No. SS9, 1 & 3.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, 3.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid, 3 & Batson Collection, Ms, 451. 'Distribution of Households', May 1944, No. SS25, 1.

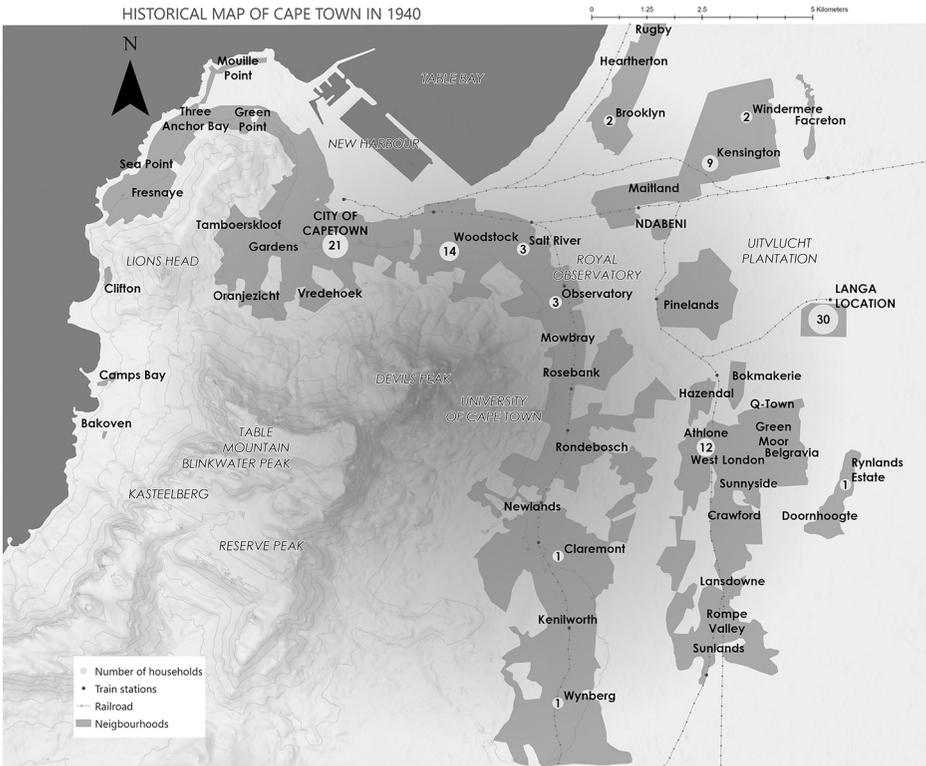
<sup>62</sup>Ibid, Appendix A.

<sup>63</sup>For the population, see Table 9.1. The 'Distribution of Households' report estimated the number of black residents in private households in Cape Town as 3,100. Ibid., 1.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid, 8.

<sup>65</sup>Amartya Sen, 'The Living Standard', *Oxford Economic Papers* 36 (1984): 3–4.

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**Figure 9.1** Location of surveyed households.

Source: Created by Zina Janssen, based on a map from c. 1940 from National Geo-Spatial Information (Trig Survey), and made available by Adrian Frith. (<https://htonl.dev.openstreetmap.org/50k-ct/#10/-34.0000/18.5000/c1940>).

Note: we were able to link 97 households (out of 101) to a neighbourhood.

physiological requirements, by the introduction of conventional necessities. [...] The urbanised Natives have followed Europeans in this. Instead of continuing on a standard in which the limits of personal expenditure for necessities were determined by physical capacity, they have adopted the more diversified standard of living of the Europeans. This is a 'higher' standard because it is more diversified, and therefore free of the monotony of eating merely to live; it is also higher because it is based on, and gives scope for, a higher development of the arts.<sup>66</sup>

Batson's Social Surveys of Cape Town were similarly based on methods developed in western contexts, with little sensitivity to issues of racially segregationist spatial planning and its relation to poverty and respectability, the importance of which has been stressed

<sup>66</sup>Holloway, Anderson, et al., Report of Native Economic Commission, 78.

**Table 9.2** Categories of household members, sorted by frequency.

| <i>HH members</i> | <i>No.</i> | <i>No. per HH</i> | <i>Av. age</i> | <i>Earners</i> | <i>Share earning</i> |
|-------------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Head              | 101        | 1.00              | 38             | 98             | 97%                  |
| Wife              | 58         | 0.57              | 33             | 16             | 28%                  |
| Daughter          | 51         | 0.50              | 8              | 3              | 6%                   |
| Son               | 50         | 0.50              | 8              | 4              | 8%                   |
| Lodger            | 12         | 0.12              | 28             | 8              | 67%                  |
| Nephew            | 6          | 0.06              | 21             | 3              | 50%                  |
| Niece             | 5          | 0.05              | 16             | 0              | 0%                   |
| Granddaughter     | 3          | 0.03              | 1              | 0              | 0%                   |
| Grandson          | 3          | 0.03              | 1              | 0              | 0%                   |
| Brother           | 2          | 0.02              | 23             | 1              | 50%                  |
| Sister            | 2          | 0.02              | 41             | 1              | 50%                  |
| Stepson           | 2          | 0.02              | 21             | 1              | 50%                  |
| Cousin            | 1          | 0.01              | 21             | 1              | 100%                 |
| Mother            | 1          | 0.01              | 62             | 0              | 0%                   |
| Sister-law        | 1          | 0.01              | 24             | 0              | 0%                   |
| Stepdaughter      | 1          | 0.01              | 13             | 0              | 0%                   |
| Wife of lodger    | 1          | 0.01              | 21             | 0              | 0%                   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>300</b> | <b>2.97</b>       | <b>25</b>      | <b>136</b>     | <b>45%</b>           |

Source: Batson Social Survey.

Note: The final column shows the share of individuals in each category of household members who is an income earner.

in earlier scholarship.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, surveyor comments reveal that residents were often hesitant to share information, especially about their incomes, which at least some probably underreported.

The questionnaire Batson used aimed to elicit as much detailed information as possible about the head of the household, often the primary wage earner. Information was also gathered about other wage earners and members of the household, categorised according to their relationship to the head. Name, age, sex, occupation, address, wages, mode of transport, next-of-kin, rent, birthplace and year of migration of household heads and wives were recorded. Less information was collected about other household members. The number of the household head's children who were not in Cape Town was also mentioned. Table 9.2 shows the relationship of the household members to the head. All the households were recorded as having at least one wage earner, frequently

<sup>67</sup>Dooling, 'Poverty and Respectability', 411–35.

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the household head. The smallest households contained one person (27 per cent of all households) and the largest eight, the average household size being 2.95 and the median two. The average number of people per room was 2.01 and the median two. The density of occupation varied from six people sharing a single room to one person having two rooms to their own.

The resultant dataset is rich and diverse and gave us many insights into the lives and decisions of black Africans in Cape Town. However, it is clearly not fully representative. Firstly, it represents the population of black *residents* in Cape Town (and only those in formal houses), but not the population of black *migrants* – those who migrated to Cape Town at some point in their life. Migrants who stayed only briefly were less likely to appear in the survey and are thus underrepresented. Since migration was the object of our study, we must take sample selection bias (survivorship bias) into account and not overstate the importance of long-term settlement relative to more temporary and circular forms of migration, which largely remain outside our purview. Secondly, the sample represents migrants at a particular stage in their lives and cannot give us any idea how long they typically stayed in Cape Town. The length of stay of household heads and their wives is recorded, but not of other household members. It is likely that those who stayed the longest in Cape Town would also be household heads, about whom the survey provides a lot more information. We cannot know the survey respondents' future plans, particularly the more recently arrived younger ones, who may have either stayed long beyond the survey date or instead have left soon after. Most older people would have returned to their home regions, so those who decided to stay in Cape Town into old age (and are thus observed in the Batson survey) may have had specific reasons for doing so.<sup>68</sup> These caveats do not prevent meaningful analysis of the sample, but should be borne in mind.

## Migration, marriage and family formation strategies

In what follows, we explore key life course events of Cape Town's black African residents. In particular, we look at *patterns* and *variation* in individuals' timing of migration to Cape Town in relation to marriage and family formation strategies. We also explore the extent to which Cape Town's residents retained their links with the sending regions. Jointly, these explorations offer important clues about the residents' migratory decision-making and the permanency of their stay.

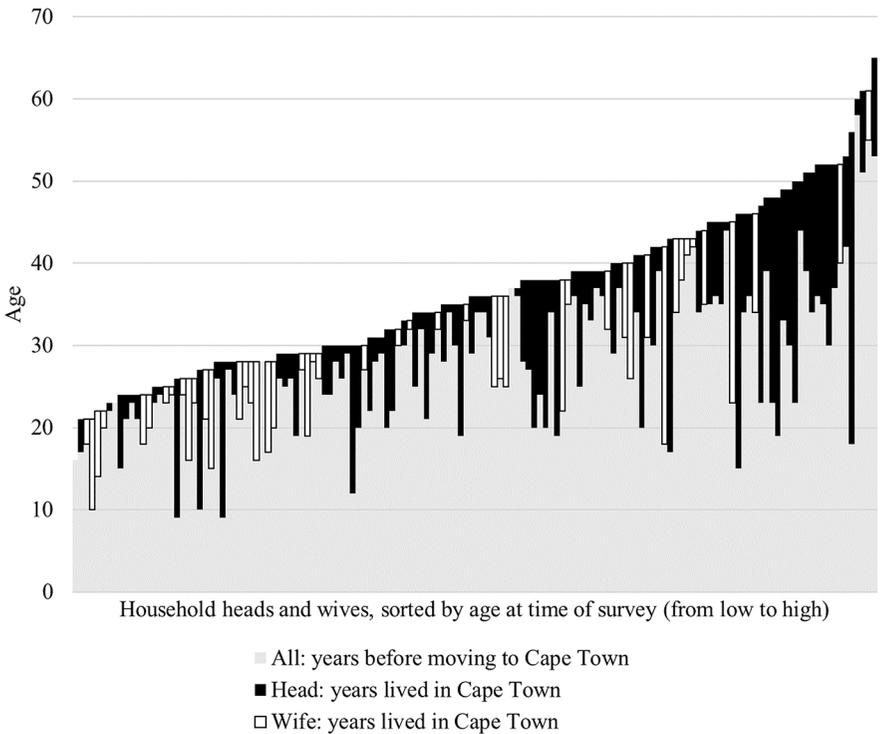
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<sup>68</sup>Notably, however, we do not observe a correlation between the length of stay (or age) of household heads and wives, their living costs (rent) and their earnings. We found null results in bivariate and multivariate regressions with these variables (and after controlling for sex). Space does not allow us to report these results here.

**Migration histories**

As a first step, we are interested to find out to what extent Cape Town’s late-1930s residents can be classified as migrants. This proves to be overwhelmingly the case. Of the household heads and wives with a known migration history, ninety-four heads (97.9 per cent) and fifty-four wives (93.0 per cent) reported that they arrived in Cape Town at some point during their life. Only two heads and four wives were born in Cape Town (between 1889 and 1911). Figure 9.2 ranks the heads and wives with a known migration history by age, showing how many years they had lived in Cape Town at the time of the survey.

As is common with urban migration, by far the majority of migrants had arrived at working age. Fourteen household heads (15.1 per cent of all migrant heads) and ten wives (20.4 per cent of all migrant wives) arrived before their twentieth birthday. Only six household heads (6.5 per cent) and four wives (8.2 per cent) arrived after the age of forty. The average age of arrival was 28.3 for household heads and 26.2 for wives, and the corresponding medians were 28 and 25. Importantly, we only know when they arrived



**Figure 9.2** Migration histories of migrant household heads and wives.

Source: Authors’ calculations, based on data from the Batson Survey.

Note: Two non-migrant household heads and four non-migrant wives are excluded from the graph.

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**Table 9.3** Duration of current residence in Cape Town at time of survey, by age cohort.

| Age        | Frequency  | Av. no. of years |
|------------|------------|------------------|
| 20–29      | 43         | 5.49             |
| 30–39      | 51         | 6.96             |
| 40–49      | 32         | 12.97            |
| 50–59      | 11         | 17.55            |
| 60–69      | 5          | 7.50             |
| <b>ALL</b> | <b>142</b> | <b>8.65</b>      |

Source: Batson Social Survey.

for their *current* stay. Some may have lived in Cape Town or other migration destinations at earlier periods in their lives. These would be either *circular* migrants, if they alternated between Cape Town and one particular place, or *stepwise* migrants, if they moved to a new place each time. The Batson survey does not provide any direct evidence on this issue, although references to some family members of Cape Town residents having moved on to Johannesburg testify to the incidence of stepwise migration.<sup>69</sup> The fact that older residents (at the time of the survey) had arrived, on average, at an older age than the younger ones,<sup>70</sup> may imply that they had some unrecorded earlier migratory experience (to Cape Town or a different destination) before their current stay in Cape Town, but it can also be attributed to increasing migration over the half century preceding the survey, affecting all age groups.

Table 9.3 shows the lengths of residents' current stay in Cape Town, broken down by age cohort. The average for all 142 household heads and wives of various ages at the time of the survey is almost nine years. Because long-stayers were more likely to have been picked up by the survey, and because residents were observed at some unknown point during (as opposed to at the end of) their stay in Cape Town, the figures cannot be taken as representative of the typical lengths of stay. However, they do indicate some pattern of prolonged residence among Cape Town's migratory black population. Another clue to permanency (albeit indirect) is the strikingly even sex ratio of the figures: only 1.3 men for each woman. This is a marked reduction from the extremely skewed ratio of 13:1 at the turn of the century that we mentioned earlier, and in clear contrast to the situation of the more transient migrants contracted from six to twenty-four months on the Transvaal mines. Again, caution is warranted when interpreting these figures, which capture Cape Town's household heads, and exclude other household members and those in informal settlements, whose presence was likely more transient.

<sup>69</sup>As does the migration to German South West Africa in an earlier period, discussed above.

<sup>70</sup>The average (median) age of arrival of those above forty was 33.8 (34) and 25.3 (25) for those below forty.

### *Migration strategies*

The ability to reside with, or even seek out, a spouse is an important factor determining migrants' decision to settle at their destination. Most of the male household heads observed in the Batson Survey were married (eighty-four men or 85.8 per cent of the sample). For eighty of these the wife's place of residence is recorded: about two-thirds (fifty-three) were in Cape Town. The large share of married residents indicates a fairly settled urban population (in line with the markedly balanced sex ratio), especially when placed in contrast to the Transvaal's transient migrant population. We can only speculate about the various reasons why the remaining wives (twenty-seven) were not in Cape Town. Some couples may have been *de facto* divorced, others pursued multi-sited livelihood strategies, with the wife occupying a rural home. A surveyor reported on a remarkable case of a couple who had moved to Cape Town in 1927, after having been married for as much as twenty-nine years. After two years in Cape Town, the wife, now fifty-two years old, 'went back home', and had since 'always' been coming and going. All the while, the husband, sixty-five-year-old Simon Makana<sup>71</sup> had plenty of reason to remain in Cape Town. He was a construction worker, presumably with considerable skill and experience, living in Cape Town with his son aged nineteen and daughter aged nine, who were attending the local St Cyprian school. Two other children, probably adults, lived elsewhere. Three of his children had died. Simon sent regular and sizeable remittances 'home'.

The Batson survey recorded only five female household heads living without a husband in Cape Town. Four reported to be married and one was a widow. That few women lived independently in Cape Town was, at least for a large part, an outcome of government policy. A black African woman would be granted a certificate to live in the city only to join her spouse or, if she was unmarried, to visit her father, who had to provide proof he had been working in the city for a minimum of two years.<sup>72</sup> While such policies strongly restricted independent female mobility, the Batson survey provides some evidence of women circumventing these limitations. For example, in one case, a husband left Cape Town for Johannesburg around 1928. For eleven years, his wife occupied the two-room dwelling in the married quarters of Langa until when, in 1939, her brother, George Makwenkwe, who had been living in Cape Town since 1927, got married to his newly arrived bride and could move in.

How did men and women time their marriage and migration? The survey records the year of marriage and arrival dates of male heads and their wives for forty-six couples resident in Cape Town. Figure 9.3 shows how many years before or after their marriage the respective spouses moved to Cape Town. It also indicates the years during which they were separated because one spouse migrated to Cape Town while the other stayed

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<sup>71</sup>We use the names recorded in the survey, some of which may have been misspelt.

<sup>72</sup>Holloway, Anderson, et al., Report of Native Economic Commission, 1930–1932. Part IV, 'General'. Available online: <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/5028>.



of fourteen wives (71.4 per cent) who followed their husbands to Cape Town hailed from the same home region. This suggests that the couple knew each other and that the marriage was consolidated before the husband migrated, initially by himself, to Cape Town.<sup>73</sup>

The left-hand side of the panel shows the minority of sixteen men (34.8 per cent) who migrated to Cape Town before marriage. In the majority of cases, unmarried men arrived in Cape Town many years before their future brides (4.9 years earlier, on average), possibly saving for bridewealth before making a marriage proposal in their home regions. Surprisingly, in most cases, prospective wives arrived in Cape Town several years before their actual marriage took place (a time gap of 2.1 years on average). Only in three cases (18.8 per cent) did brides arrive in the year of marriage. Given the restrictions on the mobility of non-married women, we might hypothesise that the (stated) intention of their migration was to reside with their future husbands, with whom they already had formed a union, albeit not ordained by the church, in their joint sending region. In two remarkable cases, prospective wives arrived before their future husbands, possibly to set up a home.

One striking observation, however, is that of the eleven women who married their current husband after first arriving in Cape Town, only three (27.3 per cent) stated the same home region as their husbands, a much lower share than for the twenty-five out of thirty-five women (71.4 per cent) who had married before or upon arriving in Cape Town. Similarly, of the sixteen men who married their current wife after first arriving in Cape Town, only six (37.5 per cent) came from the same home region, compared to twenty-two out of thirty (73.3 per cent) of those who had married before or upon arrival.<sup>74</sup> That the majority of those who married after arriving in Cape Town found partners from a different home region suggests that at least some spouses met in Cape Town itself, that is, that a ‘marriage market’ existed in Cape Town. However, our exceedingly small sample does not lend itself to definitive conclusions, and future research, for example using marriage registers, will elucidate Cape Town’s marriage dynamics further.

### *Child-rearing strategies*

The information about the number of children and whether they were present in Cape Town can tell us to what extent couples pursued an urban ‘nuclear family’ strategy or continued to rely on extended families in sending regions. The average number of children reported by household heads was 2.45, of whom 0.91 were present in Cape Town, 0.90 away, and 0.65 deceased (which corresponds to a child mortality rate of 26.7 per cent). In the remainder, we only consider the living children.

The timing of marriage mattered for child-rearing strategies. The average number of living children reported by male household heads (whether their wives were present in

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<sup>73</sup>Sometimes these home regions are defined broadly as ‘Transkei’.

<sup>74</sup>We have more observations for men, because for seven women the year of migration is unknown.

## Quantitative History and Uncharted People

Cape Town or not) who were already married when they came to Cape Town was 3.35, of whom more were away (an average of 2.12, or 63.2 per cent) than present (1.24, or 36.8 per cent). The shares were reverse in the case of those who married in Cape Town: an average of 1.62, of whom fewer were away (0.38, or 23.8 per cent) than present (1.23, or 76.2 per cent). Whether the wife was present in Cape Town or not also mattered greatly for child-rearing strategies. Among male households heads whose wife was present in Cape Town, the majority of their average total number of 2.45 children were present (1.43, or 58.5 per cent), while the reverse was true for the average total number of 1.30 children of household heads whose wife was not present (0.19, or 14.3 per cent). If we combine information about the timing of marriage and presence of wives, we find, as expected, that the largest share of children present was among those married in Cape Town and with the wife present (82.9 per cent), followed by those who married before migrating and with the wife present (46.5 per cent), those who married in Cape Town but with the wife absent (42.9 per cent) and, lastly those married before migrating and with the wife absent (7.1 per cent).

This difference suggests that couples whose marriages were sealed in Cape Town were more likely to rear their children in the urban setting, especially if the wife was present. Those who had married in the sending regions were more likely to raise their children long-distance, possibly with the help of extended families. However, it should be borne in mind that the men who married before coming to Cape Town were on average older than those who married after (43.3 years as opposed to 36.3), which means that the observed difference in child-rearing strategies may also be explained, at least partly, by the fact that their children were older and therefore less dependent on their parents.

### *Remittances*

Remittances are an important indication of continued contact between Cape Town residents and their home regions. Unfortunately, evidence on remittances from the Batson Survey is incidental and anecdotal. In ten cases mention is made in the surveyor comments of remittances being sent by Cape Town residents to family members living in the sending regions, typically a wife and/or children. Among those who remitted income was Stuart Boromane, a sixty-year-old self-employed man who had arrived in Cape Town recently, in 1937, and lived alone in Langa's 'special quarters'.<sup>75</sup> His first wife had died during the 1918 flu pandemic and he had remarried in 1923. He had six children, of whom two had died and four were living elsewhere. Through his business, Stuart made on average 10 shillings per week, with his highest earnings reaching 12 shillings per week. He had just begun to send remittances, totalling £1 between January and May of the year the survey was conducted, about 7.7 per cent of his income for this period.

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<sup>75</sup>Special quarters' were reserved for single men who escaped living in the barracks because they could afford higher rental costs of the single compounds. See Musemwa, 'Aspects of the Social and Political History of Langa Township', 36.

In some cases, the amounts appear to have been quite substantial. For example, Gideon Fouqjo, an unmarried resident of Langa reported sending on average £2 per month to his father's sister in Port Elizabeth, corresponding to 31 per cent of his reported income. John Mdeni, a resident of Langa's 'special quarters' reported sending £1 10s 0d to his wife and two living children in Umtata District per month, 38 per cent of his reported income. In most other reported cases, remittances took up some 10 per cent of reported income. In one further case, the respondent, Joseph Nqewu, who was living with his wife and one child in Langa's married quarters, indicated that he would like to send remittances home to his six children but was unable to afford it.

## Living conditions, work and livelihoods

In this section we analyse the living conditions and livelihood strategies of Cape Town's black African residents, teasing out clues about the ways in which they navigated opportunities and obstacles in an urban setting. We also draw a comparison with earnings of migrant workers in the Transvaal mines.

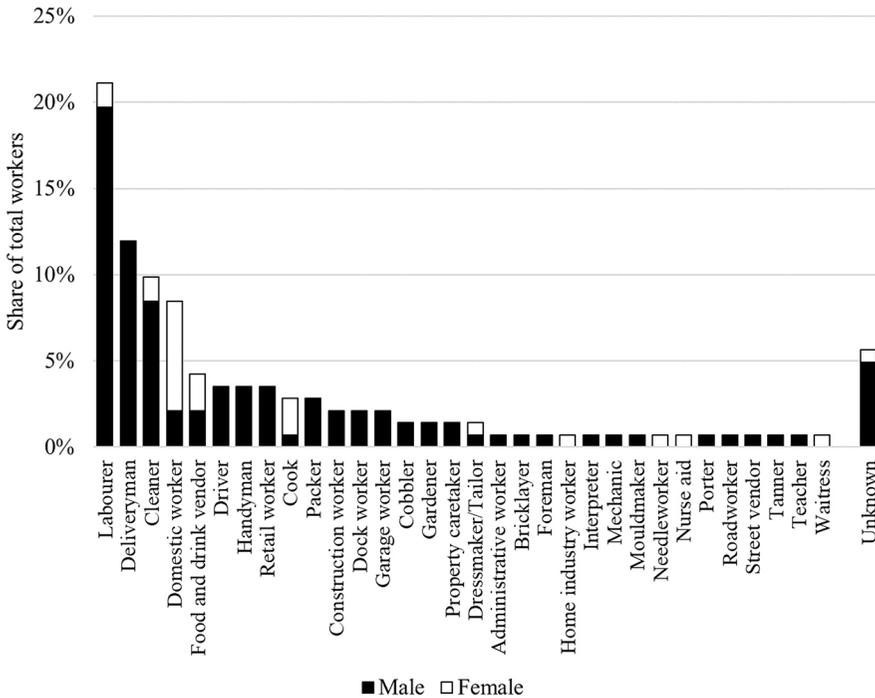
### *Earnings and occupations*

Households had an average of 1.4 wage earners and a median of 1. Each household had at least one person bringing in income, including the female-headed households. The largest number of wage earners in one household, located in central Cape Town, was five, which is also the total number of members of that household. All five were unmarried males between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-six, of whom three were employed full-time and two part-time. The five men shared the £4 monthly rent. Included in the rent were municipal rates and water but the premises did not have electricity or gas. The surveyor mentioned that he had failed three times to find someone at the household before 6 pm. This household was an exceptional case, however, as most addresses were occupied by one or multiple households formed around a family, sometimes hosting one or more lodgers who paid rent to the household head (see Table 9.2).

The average household earnings reported were £1 16s 0d per week, of which £1 7s 0d (75 per cent) was earned by the head, and 9s (25 per cent) by other members of the household. £1 13s 5d (93 per cent) came from wage income and the remaining 2s 7d (7 per cent) from other activities which were predominantly done by women, such as providing meals, brewing beer or hosting lodgers. Some households also had access to a garden for self-provisioning. For example, dock labourer Moulley Qubuka and his unemployed wife, both aged sixty-one, lived in Langa's married quarters where they had access to a garden where they kept fowls and grew vegetables.

The Batson survey reports occupations for almost all earners. Unfortunately, the categories used to describe occupations are sometimes rather crude, with many workers simply listed as 'labourers', while for others a much more specific description is given. Figure 9.4 shows the frequency of occupations, based on our own occupational

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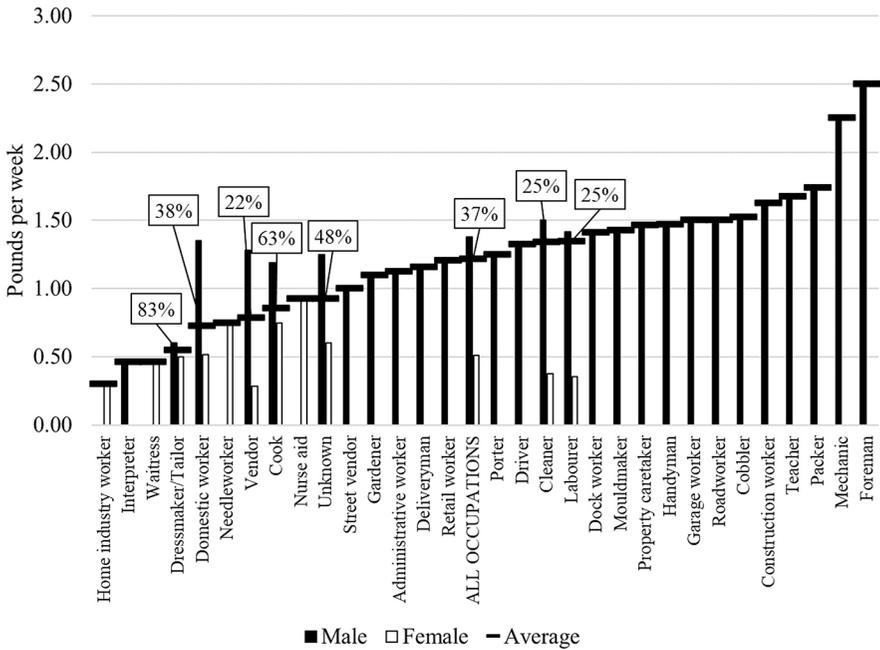
**Figure 9.4** Occupations observed in the Batson survey and their frequency.

Sources: Authors' calculations, based on data from the Batson Survey.

Note: Those without an occupation are excluded from the graph.

classification that is just slightly more aggregated than the descriptions given in the survey. Although the four most frequent occupations (labourer, deliveryman, cleaner and domestic worker) account for over half of all workers, we find a reasonable amount of occupational diversity in the remainder of the sample, including tailors, a bricklayer, an interpreter and a teacher. Women were mostly employed as domestic workers and cooks, but we also find a waitress, a nurse aid and a dressmaker.

The weekly wage for workers in the sample was on average £1 4s 2d, with an average of £1 7s 2d for men and 10s 5d for women. Figure 9.5 shows earnings by occupation and sex. Unsurprisingly, the more precisely defined and hence more specialised occupations, such as cobbler, teacher, mechanic or foreman yielded higher wages. We can clearly see that working women, mostly engaged in the lower-earning occupations to the left of the graph, earned less than men, even within the same occupations (37 per cent of the men's incomes, on average). Even women who headed a household struggled to bring in income. The stories of Jane Bangazi aged fifty and L. Nkomyahlaba aged thirty-nine illustrate this pattern. Both were married but did not live with their husbands. Jane lived a few houses away from her estranged husband, whom she had married in 1918, but who



**Figure 9.5** Earnings per occupation: average and by gender.  
 Sources: Authors' calculations, based on data from the Batson Survey.  
 Note: Female share of male wage indicated if both were available.

now lived with his second wife, who had arrived in Cape Town in 1937. Jane's occupation was described as 'home industry' by the surveyor, according to whom she struggled to make ends meet without her husband's support, 'doing odd jobs, selling beer, and getting presents from men'. L. Nkomyahlabá's husband had moved back to the Transkei four months before the interview and did not support her. She told the surveyor that she borrowed money for rent and food. The surveyor added that she 'undoubtedly sells beer' and suspected that she lived intermittently with a man.

**Living costs**

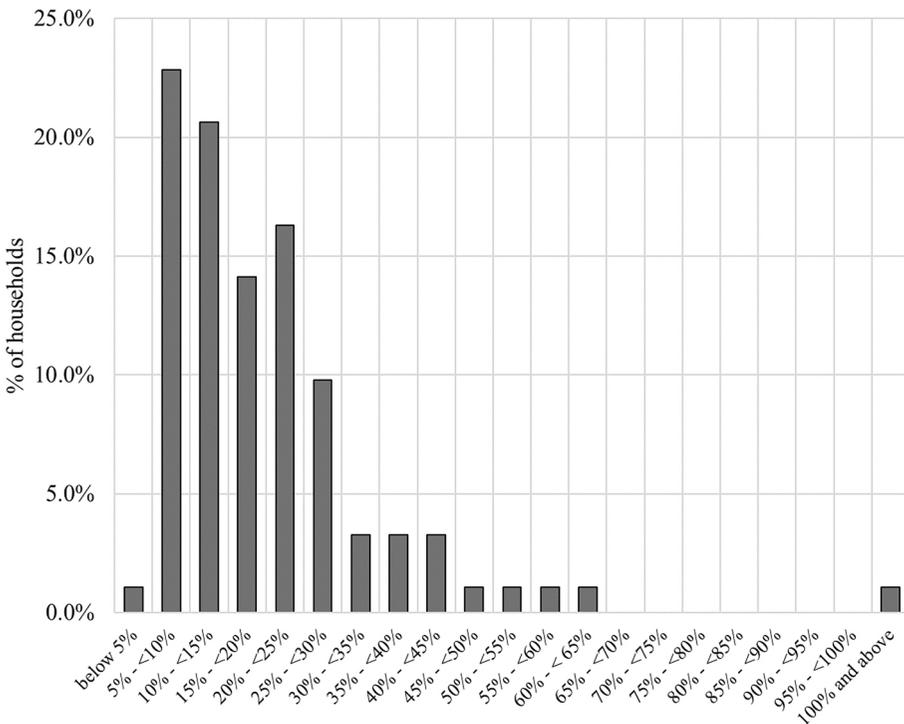
Housing facilities were basic. None of the households had gas and only 18 per cent had electricity. Some workers incurred commuting costs. Transport costs for all workers, added up to an average of 10d per week per worker (3.4 per cent of income). Those who used transport paid an average of 2s 4d per week (8.9 per cent of their income). Feeding a household was expensive. Batson calculated that the cost of the minimum adult male equivalent food basket for a week (at what he defined as the poverty line) was 7s 3d. If we assume that each worker supported 2.5 adult male equivalents, the weekly food costs add up to £1 1s 9d, which represents a striking 90 per cent of a worker's average income. In

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the next subsection, however, we re-assess Batson's cost calculation, and find it too high in comparative perspective to serve as a realistic benchmark of food costs.

As Figure 9.6 shows, rent costs were substantial but appear to have been reasonable as a proportion of income, in most cases. On average, households paid £1 11s 0d rent per month, or 7s 2d per week, corresponding to 20 per cent of total household income. The female-headed household of widow Esther Emmett is a clear outlier, apparently paying more than 100 per cent of its income on rent. Esther arrived in Cape Town in 1935 from Queenstown at age forty-three and lived with her domestic worker daughter, aged twenty-one, the only wage earner. It may be that this household supplemented the wages from domestic work with income from the illegal selling of homebrewed beer. The surveyor expressed concerns about the accuracy of the information given:

Kitchen-dining room 'questionable' house. Daughter gave information. Mother only spoke native language. The daughter said there were several joining native men about and another young girl. I asked how they could pay 2 pounds per month rent when she only earns 25 shillings. She replied angrily 'well we do and it's no business of yours'.



**Figure 9.6** Distribution of rent as percentage of household income.

Sources: Authors' calculations, based on data from the Batson Survey.

### *Comparison of Cape Town and Transvaal living standards*

Incomes in Cape Town can be interpreted more meaningfully if we compare them to wages on the Transvaal mines, which were between £34 and £35 per year in the late 1930s.<sup>76</sup> The median male worker in Cape Town earned £77 11s 5d and those classified as ‘labourer’ earned on average £73 6s 5d. Since Cape Town did not provide free accommodation and transport, we should subtract 25 per cent of this annual wage (based on the above living cost calculations) to make a proper comparison. This leaves us with average net earnings of £54 19s 10d for Cape Town’s ‘labourers’: 57 per cent more than their counterparts on the mines.

However, for an accurate comparison we also need to take into account that mineworkers received rations as part of their pay, and that most Cape Town labourers had to support family members living with them, which was not the case for mineworkers, whose family members were able to generate income and self-provision in their rural homes. When we take these factors into account, the wage gap in favour of Cape Town shrinks considerably. If we assume that each worker had to feed 2.5 ‘adult male equivalents’ (for example: himself, a wife and one child aged ten) at the poverty line established by Batson, this would require £56 11s 0d, which would consume the entire annual wage (before clothing, fuel and other basic necessities are even included). It should be noted, though, that Batson put his poverty line at a rather high level, in terms of the food’s caloric content (3400 calories per day per adult male equivalent), and especially variety (which is unlikely to reflect the rations given to mineworkers). This helps us realise that many of Cape Town’s black residents were unable to attain living standards that Batson considered appropriate at the time, but it obscures the comparison with mineworkers.

If instead we follow the (much lower) minimum food intake at the poverty line that is more commonly defined in the historical ‘real wage’ literature (and more likely to correspond with the value of actual mining rations), the comparison becomes more favourable for Cape Town’s workers. This poverty line is based on a ‘barebones survival basket’ consisting mainly of the cheapest staple (rice, in this case), alongside several non-food items.<sup>77</sup> The annual cost of the food component of this basket in Cape Town

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<sup>76</sup>Dácil Juif and Ewout Frankema, ‘From Coercion to Compensation: Institutional Responses to Labour Scarcity in the Central African Copperbelt’, *Journal of Institutional Economics* 14, no. 2 (2018): 313–43.

<sup>77</sup>For this calculation, we used three ‘per capita’ baskets of 2100 calories each, adapted from Michiel De Haas, ‘Measuring Rural Welfare in Colonial Africa: Did Uganda’s Smallholders Thrive?’ *The Economic History Review* 70, no. 2 (2017): 605–31. For further information about this approach see Robert C. Allen, ‘The High Wage Economy and the Industrial Revolution: A Restatement’, *The Economic History Review* 68, no. 1 (2015): 1–22. For an earlier application to South Africa, see Pim De Zwart, ‘South African Living Standards in Global Perspective, 1835–1910’, *Economic History of Developing Regions* 26, no. 1 (2011): 49–74. For the seminal contribution on British colonial Africa, see Ewout Frankema and Marlous Van Waijenburg, ‘Structural Impediments to African Growth? New Evidence from Real Wages in British Africa, 1880–1965’, *The Journal of Economic History* 72, no. 4 (2012): 895–926.

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in 1938–9 was a mere £8 18s 7d for three persons per year.<sup>78</sup> Subtracting this amount leaves the Cape Town worker with a wage premium of 32 per cent over his mineworker counterpart.

The precise wage gap is contingent on the assumptions underlying the calculation, which can be debated. Nevertheless, a broad picture does emerge of the average Cape Town worker enjoying an income slightly but not spectacularly above that of a Transvaal mineworker. However, we should also consider the fact that wages and living costs in Cape Town were quite variable, probably varying as much over time as they did within this cross-sectional sample.

## Conclusion

Our inquiry into Cape Town's black African migrant residents focused on a comparatively understudied period, which nevertheless marks a crucial era of transition: well after the initial 'early adopters', highly migratory and mostly male, had come to Cape Town in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and just before the emergence of a much larger and more stabilised black African population from the mid-twentieth century onwards under apartheid. Our effort at bottom-up historical reconstruction gives us some tantalising glimpses of black African lives within the greater Cape Town area in the late 1930s. While the fact that only current residents were included in the Batson survey limited our ability to investigate migratory dynamics fully, it has become clear that by this time Cape Town's black Africans had put down strong roots in the city itself, and that the formation of a stable community of settlers was well underway.

We find a population consisting almost entirely of migrants: people who had moved to Cape Town at some point in their lives. Ndabeni's population around the turn of the twentieth century had been overwhelmingly male, which testifies to its migratory character. But the population that Batson and his surveyors found in the late 1930s was quite settled. Household heads and their wives had been present in Cape Town for nine years on average at the time of the survey, and those over fifty years old twice as long. The sex ratio was much more balanced than it had been only a few decades earlier. Most of the male household heads in Cape Town were married, and most of them lived with their wife and children in the city. Some may even have met their future wives in Cape Town. While their presence in Cape Town was consolidated, black residents also retained close ties with their homelands. We observed cases where spouses were separated for long periods of time, or where wives and children were absent, especially when people had been married before coming to Cape Town. Remittances appear to have been common.

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<sup>78</sup>This is the cost of three baskets of 2100 calories, each containing 440 lbs of rice, 6.6 lbs of meat, 6.6 lbs of vegetable fat and 4.4 lbs of sugar per year each. Using mealie meal (490 lbs) pushes up the cost of the basket to £12 18s 7d, and leaves the Cape Town worker with an advantage of 20 per cent. Prices from Batson Collection, Ms, 451, 'The Poverty Datum Line', May 1941, No. SS3, 6.

Most of the households were formed around a family, with groups of cohabiting single male migrants being a small minority. They were heavily dependent on wage incomes, and all households, including those headed by women, had at least one wage earner. Despite limited opportunities in Cape Town's labour market, we found some occupational variation, but most who reported an occupation were men and were simply described as 'labourer'. Women also worked, but their incomes tended to be substantially below those of men, even in the same occupation. Some households were able to supplement their wage incomes through gifts, cooking and brewing, maintaining a garden and subletting to new arrivals. This testifies to their willingness and ability to consolidate their urban livelihoods and establish a more stable presence in town.<sup>79</sup>

According to Batson's own cost of living estimates, Cape Town's workers were barely able to sustain a minimum level of consumption. However, his basket was informed by assumptions about a 'respectable' lifestyle modelled on white consumption standards, which did not necessarily reflect the preferences and aspirations of Cape Town's black residents. If we set aside Batson's basket and place Cape Town's wages in a comparative perspective, we find that they contrasted favourably with those of contract labourers in the Transvaal mines. The main difference was that the city afforded more freedom to choose one's employer and type of work, and more opportunities for permanency of urban living and the family life that comes with it. Despite the many restrictions imposed by segregationist policies, such processes of individual decision-making similarly informed succeeding generations of urban migrants and residents, whose choices and aspirations deserve more attention in South Africa's historiography.

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<sup>79</sup>For a similar argument about Cape Town today, see Leslie Bank, 'Living Together, Moving Apart: Home-made Agendas, Identity Politics and Urban-rural Linkages in the Eastern Cape, South Africa', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 19, no. 1 (2001): 130.

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