

Culture and Conflicts: Witbank Colliery Life 1900-1950

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Abstract

In providing an overview of culture on collieries in the Witbank district of South Africa, the paper covers issues such as housing, food, sex (including male/male sex), drinking, religion, soccer and dancing. It also provides a contrast between the culture of black and white employers. It draws on examples from elsewhere in the world in constructing an argument that is critical of culturalist tendencies in social history. The premise of the paper is that history should be concerned with the dynamics of change - how things come about, why they stay the same, and how and why they are transformed - and that this approach is one that should be applied to the study of culture, including everyday life, as well as other areas of historical investigation. Moving from this, the paper highlights the importance of the state, specifically the 1911 Native Labour Regulations Act, in shaping colliery culture, but it also recognises that there were limits to the state's ability to enforce its own legislation. The police force was relatively weak, and enforcement often depended upon mine owners whose interests did not always coincide with the state. The paper closes: 'Black miners created their own culture, not in circumstances of their own choosing, but under conditions they influenced and would eventually transform through working-class mobilisation'.