

# The emergence and radicalisation of black political formations in Kroonstad, 1915 to 1957

Tshepo Moloi

*University of the Witwatersrand*

(NRF Chair: Local Histories, Present Realities)

tshepo.moloi@wits.ac.za

## *Abstract*

From the beginning of the 1920s to the 1950s Kroonstad witnessed the emergence of black radical formations, although this happened intermittently. The inaction of the ANC in the 1920s provided the ICU with space to infuse its radical protest methods in this town. This caused members of Kroonstad black community, particularly women, to challenge the Kroonstad Town Council after it had hiked rents in the late 1920s. This was unheard of in Kroonstad, and it undoubtedly left a lasting impression on some of the residents. This was reflected later when some of the residents openly defied the Council. For a brief moment, after the demise of the ICU, moderate formations like the Native Advisory Board (NAB) and the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives (JCEN) filled the political space in Kroonstad. However, after several unsuccessful attempts to challenge the Kroonstad Town Council's unpopular decisions on behalf of the residents of Kroonstad's black locations, they ceased to exist. The early 1950s saw the revival and emergence of another black radical formation led by women, resisting the government's Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act of 1952. The women in Kroonstad mobilised and demonstrated against this law. Although the government responded swiftly and crushed the women's resistance and forced them to carry passes, it was not, however, able to totally eradicate the radical ideas which had been infused by the black radical formations in Kroonstad over the years.

**Keywords:** Kroonstad; Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union; African National Congress; Native Advisory Board; Joint Council for Europeans and Natives; Keable 'Mote; Registered and Ratepayers' Association; Black politics.

## Introduction

According to Bradford, “immediately after the First World War, black protest hitherto unprecedented in scope and intensity swept through South Africa. Sparked by soaring inflation, it assumed forms ranging from riots and boycotts to strikes and anti-pass campaigns”.<sup>1</sup> The emergence of radical black political formations in Kroonstad can be traced back to this period. Although a branch of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, renamed the African National Congress in 1923) was in existence by 1915,<sup>2</sup> it remained restrained in its approach. This was partly due to the national body’s preoccupation with the Land Act,<sup>3</sup> and moreover its general “modus operandi”. At this stage, the SANNC national leadership relied on petitioning and pleading with the British Crown to intervene on behalf of the black people in South Africa. And occasionally it held days of prayer.<sup>4</sup> It was the emergence of the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU) that radicalised black politics in Kroonstad until the mid-1930s, when the ICU ceased to function. The demise of this branch (and the numerous unsuccessful attempts to resuscitate the ANC in Kroonstad), left a political vacuum which was filled by moderate black formations in the locations. Black radical political formation was to be revived again in the 1950s by women engaged in the anti-pass campaign.

The article will demonstrate that the radicalisation of the ICU in Kroonstad was, first, because of the changing character of this body from being exclusively a labourers’ formation to operating like a mass-based political party “... voic[ing] a broad range of popular grievances”<sup>5</sup> and, second, it was particularly because of the rent hike imposed by the municipality and the heavy-handed method of enforcing law by the Kroonstad Town Council, particularly the administrations prior to the election of a progressive mayor, A Krebsen, in 1935,<sup>6</sup> when dealing with the residents in the locations. Furthermore, the

---

1 H Bradford, *A taste of freedom: The ICU in rural South Africa, 1924-1930* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), p. 2.

2 This is supported by the involvement of Reverend AP Pitso, a leading figure in the Kroonstad’s branch of the SANNC, in the committee, under the chairmanship of RW Msimang, which in 1915 was tasked with the writing of the constitution of the SANNC. See P Walshe, *The rise of African Nationalism in South Africa* (Craighall, AD Donker Publisher, 1987), p. 205.

3 See for example P Limb, *The ANC’s early years: Nation, class and place in South Africa before 1940* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2010), p. 219.

4 Two delegations were sent to Britain in 1914 and 1919 to request Imperial intervention in South Africa. T Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983), p. 3.

5 T Lodge, *Black politics...*, p. 6.

6 *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 30 March 1935.

article will contend that the emergence of moderate formations in Kroonstad's locations was because of the dearth of campaigns such as those embarked upon by black women in Potchefstroom, in the Western Transvaal (today's North West Province) toward the end of the 1920s. Finally, the passing of the Riotous Assemblies (Amendment) Act in 1930 effectively prohibited radical formations and their politics, and this had a serious impact on the black politics in Kroonstad. According to Walshe, "this Act strengthened moderate influences, making it abundantly clear that militant speeches, demonstrations and passive resistance offered no easy way to the alleviation of grievances".<sup>7</sup>

However, by the late 1940s the moderate formations in Kroonstad had ceased to exist. After the National Party (NP) government, which had ascended to power in 1948, had passed the Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act in 1952, which made provision for women to carry reference books,<sup>8</sup> emerged the ANC Women's League (or women who supported it), which mobilised women in the locations to resist this Act, and this undoubtedly helped to once again radicalise black politics in Kroonstad.

### **Establishment of Kroonstad and the formation of black locations**

On March 1855, "The Friend of the Free State" reported a sale of erven (land) in the village of Klip Plaat Drift, Valsch River, in the district of Windburg. Joseph Orpen, the Landdrost (magistrate) of Windburg and the government land surveyor, later named this place Kroonstad.<sup>9</sup> This place, located in the northern Orange Free State, was proclaimed a municipality, with its own local government in 1875.<sup>10</sup> Dot Serfontein, in her commissioned book to document the 130<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of Kroonstad, suggests that the first inhabitants of Kroonstad were whites, but by the 1880s natives had also begun to settle in the area.<sup>11</sup> However, by 1925 the Kroonstad Town Council (KTC) had resettled black people who had initially lived in what is today town north of the town, in their own locations.

---

7 P Walshe, *The rise of African Nationalism...*, p. 222.

8 T Lodge, *Black politics...*, p. 140.

9 D Serfontein, *Keurskrif vir Kroonstad: 'n Kroniek van die ontstaan, groei en vooruitsigte van 'n Vrystaatse plattelandse dorp* (Johannesburg, Persko-Boekdrukkery, 1990), p. 16.

10 P SND de N Kay, *Notre Dame: Under the Southern Cross* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1984), pp. 52-53.

11 D Serfontein, *Keurskrif vir Kroonstad...*, p. 2; in this article the terms black (referring to Africans and the so-called coloureds) and native occur throughout the text. However, the term native will be used where it refers to official terminology or documentation.

Between the 1920s and the promulgation of the Group Areas Act in 1953, which made way for the establishment of “model” townships such as Seisoville in Kroonstad, four locations were built in Kroonstad to accommodate black people. First, it was A Location.<sup>12</sup> This location accommodated black people who had been removed from town. Over a period of time, the population grew and new locations were established: B (also known as Marabastad), C (or Cairo) and D Locations.<sup>13</sup> A substantial number of black people arrived in Kroonstad during the 1920s and 1930s in search of employment opportunities and a place to stay. For Bonner and Nieftagodien, “the drought which began after 1927 and reached its worst in 1932-1934 forced many farmers to abandon their farms and those who remained laid off black labour tenants in their thousands. Many of them... left the land and headed for the town”.<sup>14</sup>

The old residents of A Location have fond memories of life there. For example, when Leboseng Violet Sesele, who was born there in 1933, was asked to describe “A” location when she was growing up, she responded as follows:<sup>15</sup>

Very quiet and it was fun. We were living in peace. The elders of the community were getting along; children were disciplined. There was peace and harmony.

In spite of the fond memories of the early inhabitants of Kroonstad’s black locations about their residential areas, life was not always easy, particularly for those who earned meagre wages<sup>16</sup> and those who were unemployed, many of whom engaged in trading despite the fact that this was deemed illegal. The KTC refused to grant blacks trading rights, using the authority of the Urban Areas Amendment Act No.25 of 1930. Although the Act stipulated that the local authority, if directed by the Minister and in consultation with the Administrator, was permitted to let sites within the location for trading or business purposes,<sup>17</sup> the KTC adopted an uncompromising position. It argued that it would only make a definitive decision on this matter after the

---

12 JSM Setiloane, *The history of black education in Maokeng, Kroonstad* (Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1997), p. 3.

13 JSM Setiloane, *The history of black education...*, pp. 3-4.

14 P Bonner & N Nieftagodien, *Alexandra: A history* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2008), p. 25.

15 T Moloi (Sunday Times Heritage Project), interview, LV Sesele (former resident of A Location, Kroonstad), 24 November 2006.

16 In 1935 Sam Arthur Mofokeng, a resident of Kroonstad, complained to *Umteteli wa Bantu* about the meagre pay Africans were receiving in Kroonstad, and hoped that in the new year things will[sic] improve. See *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 2 March 1935.

17 Historical and Literary Papers (HLP), Wits University Library (WUL), AD1433 (Box CK.3): Joint Council of Europeans and Natives (JCEN), Drafting memorandum on granting of trading rights in locations.

sitting of the Native Trading Rights Inquiry on 5 September 1932. By 1933 the government had still not made a decision about “native” trading rights. Thus the “status quo” remained in Kroonstad. To eke out a living, black people traded illegally. A number of them were arrested and fined.<sup>18</sup> The KTC’s refusal to grant black people trading rights seem to have continued until after the Second World War. In 1947-48 “the [Native Affairs] Committee in Kroonstad recommended that Abel Mathike, Sam Kuoalane, David Chakane, Nichodums Ntanga and Gilbert Mayeza (possibly Mateza) be permitted to trade as butchers in the location”.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, during this period a significant number of black women had drifted to Kroonstad. This was made possible by the passing of the Natives Urban Areas Act in 1923, by which General Jan Smuts’ government stopped black women from carrying passes despite resistance by some municipalities in the Orange Free State (OFS).<sup>20</sup> This effectively removed all restrictions on women entering urban areas.<sup>21</sup> However, the 1930s was a doomed period to enter the urban areas, because the Nationalist Party government which came to power in 1929 made everything possible to provide job opportunities to “poor whites” at the expense of the blacks. Thus Jack and Ray Simons argue “Government agencies put them out of work to provide jobs for whites, and tightened the pass law controls to keep work-seekers out of town”.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the black women who had drifted to the urban areas joined the ranks of the unemployed. Most of them survived by selling homebrewed beer. “Beer brewing”, note Bonner and Nieftagodien, “... was a pervasive feature of location life... Women monopolized the brewing of beer and it was often their major source of income”.<sup>23</sup>

Like other trades, this particular trade was deemed illegally by white authorities. As a result, the government, through the Native (Urban Areas) Act No.13 of 1928, prohibited the supply or delivery of liquor to Africans.<sup>24</sup>

---

18 HLP, WUL, (JCEN), Minutes, Kroonstad, 20 March 1935.

19 Council Minutes (CM), Kroonstad Municipality, 21 February 1949 – 29 August 1949.

20 Wells notes how the Springfontein and Bethulie municipalities opposed the government’s stand on black women’s passes. JC Wells, “The history of black women’s struggle against pass laws in South Africa, 1900 – 1960” (D.Phil, Columbia University, 1982), pp. 204-210.

21 JC Wells, “The history of black women’s struggle ...”, pp. 209-210.

22 J & R Simons, *Class & colour in South Africa 1850-1950* (International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1983), p. 416.

23 P Bonner & N Nieftagodien, *Kathorus: A history* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 2001), p. 11.

24 C Kros, “Urban African women’s organisations and protests on the Rand from the years 1939 to 1956” (B.A. Honours, Wits University, 1978), p. 46.

Instead, it regulated that Africans seeking to purchase liquor should do so from beer halls created by the municipalities. It was against this ruling that in other parts of the country black women embarked in protest action against the local authorities.<sup>25</sup> These women were against the canteens because they perceived them as places where their husbands spent their hard earned money, which they were supposed to use to feed and clothe their children. To prevent beerbrewing, in Kroonstad the KTC's police intensified raids on houses known to be selling homebrewed beer in the locations.<sup>26</sup> It was against this background that radical black political formations emerged in Kroonstad's locations.

### **Black political formations**

In 1915 the SANNC held its fourth annual meeting in Kroonstad.<sup>27</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that the SANNC branch in Kroonstad was militant and radical to have influenced this decision. It is, however, possible that it was because at this stage Kroonstad offered a convenient meeting place. It was midway between Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Natal and the Cape on the mainline.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Limb argues that “despite economic difficulties and legal provocations, OFS Congresses’ leaders generally emphasized moderate tactics”.<sup>29</sup> For him, this was because of lack of industrialization in the province. And this, according to him, “denied Congress the opportunity to forge stronger ties with urban workers ‘whose demands, wages and better working conditions, militated radical politics’”.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, Walshe contends that “Bloemfontein remained the ANC’s stronghold, with Kroonstad persistently active...”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Ntantala, in her book, claims that the ANC had a strong branch in Kroonstad.<sup>32</sup>

Available literature contradicts these claims. Although the SANNC branch already existed in Kroonstad by 1915, there is no evidence to demonstrate

---

25 H Bradford, “‘We are now the men’: Women’s beer protests in the Natal countryside, 1929”, B Bozzoli (ed.), *Class, community and conflict: South African perspective* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), p. 297.

26 It was reported in 1935 that “the police stamped out “Skokian Queens” in Marabastad. *Umteteli wa Bantu*, February 1935.

27 F Meli, *A history of the ANC: South Africa belongs to us* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988), p. 53.

28 Ntantala, in her book, called Kroonstad a place of transit. P Ntantala *A life’s mosaic: The autobiography of Phyllis Ntantala* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1992), p. 86; also see D Serfontein, *Keurskrif vir Kroonstad...*, p. 85.

29 P Limb, *The ANC’s early years...*, p. 220.

30 P Limb, *The ANC’s early years...*, p. 345.

31 P Walshe, *The rise of African nationalism...*, p. 232.

32 P Ntantala, *A life’s mosaic...*, p. 83.

that it attempted to mobilise, less radicalize the black masses there. There is no doubt, however, that some of the leading figures in the branch of SANNC in Kroonstad were held in high regard within the Congress. For example, it has been noted above that Reverend Pitso was included in the Constitutional Committee, headed by Msimang. It is possible that this might have also been the inspiration behind the SANNC's meeting in Kroonstad. Beyond these probabilities, it is difficult to state with certainty the reason for this meeting to be held in Kroonstad. What is certain, though, is that in 1920 the branch of the SANNC in Kroonstad was moribund. It was for this reason that the Industrial and Commercial Coloured and Native Workers' (Amalgamated) Union of Africa (ICWU) began making attempts to fill the political vacuum left by the SANNC. Some of the militant and vocal members of the SANNC, like Keable 'Mote, joined the ICU.<sup>33</sup>

Over the years, numerous attempts were made to resuscitate the SANNC/ANC in Kroonstad. But all these were unsuccessful. It was reported that in 1935 some of the African leaders in Marabastad [were] working hard to re-organise the branch of the ANC under the leadership of Simon Ndlovu.<sup>34</sup> After failing to achieve this objective, in 1936 Simon Ndlovu, Keable 'Mote and Sol Ngoanabase were reported, again, to be attempting to revive the ANC in Kroonstad.<sup>35</sup> But by 1938 the ANC was still inactive there. In fact, in that year Paul Rich notes that the president-general of the ANC, the Reverend Mahabane, pressurised 'Mote... to establish the branch of the ANC in Kroonstad.<sup>36</sup> It is possible that the residents of Kroonstad's locations did not show interest in reviving the ANC, because they doubted if it would operate differently from the already existing moderate formations in the area during this period (moderate formations in Kroonstad are discussed below). After all the SANNC/ANC had in the past failed to radicalise black politics in the locations.

The reason for the inactiveness of the ANC's branch in Kroonstad is that it neglected to become involved in the day-to-day hardships experienced by the residents of the black locations. In contrast, according to Limb, the ANC's Thaba 'Nchu branch, in the OFS, discussed the Land Act, passes for women,

---

33 See H Bradford, *A taste of freedom...*, p. 70; Ntantala, *A life's mosaic...*, p. 83.

34 *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 8 June 1935 and 15 June 1935.

35 *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 6 May 1936.

36 P Rich, "Managing black leadership: The Joint Councils, urban trading and political conflict in the OFS, 1925-1942"; I Hofmeyr, D James & T Lodge (eds.), *Holding their ground: Class, locality and culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1989), p. 190.

education, hostels for domestic workers, and state replacement of black rail workers and interpreters by “poor whites”. This, Limb argues, raised the support for Congress in Thaba ‘Nchu.<sup>37</sup> In similar vein, in 1920 the Congress’ support grew in Springfontein, in the OFS, following the role of the branch of the SANNC when it supported the women’s anti-pass campaign there.<sup>38</sup>

From the mid-1920s the ANC was besieged by internal problems, ranging from heightened disillusionment with the politics of diplomatic persuasions, and the change of leadership from militant Josiah Gumede to the ageing Pixely Ka Izaka Seme in 1930, and to the “not so radical Reverend ZR Mahabane”.<sup>39</sup> It was against this background that the ICU occupied the centre stage of black politics in Kroonstad – albeit briefly.

### ***The ICU and the radicalisation of black politics in Kroonstad***

In 1919 Clements Kadalie, who was born in Nyasaland (today’s Malawi), founded the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU), organizing “coloured” and African dockworkers in Cape Town.<sup>40</sup> The following year, according to Bradford, “H Selby Msimang, a leading Congressman who had headed a Bloemfontein struggle for wages of four shillings and sixpence a day, called a conference of established and aspirant working class leaders”. Amongst those who attended this conference in July 1920 was Kadalie, the secretary of the ICU. Bradford writes “those at the conference agreed to create ‘one great union of skilled and unskilled workers of South Africa, south of the Zambesi’”.<sup>41</sup> At the end the conference resolved to establish the Industrial and Commercial Coloured and Native Workers’ (Amalgamated) Union of Africa (ICWU). But by the end of 1921 the name was changed to the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of Africa – following the incorporation of the ICWU by Kadalie’s ICU.<sup>42</sup>

In the 1920s a substantial number of the black populace resided on the farms. According to Bradford, “some 85 per cent of the African population lived in the countryside, and in the Free State nearly 80 per cent of this lived on farms”.<sup>43</sup> It therefore made sense that the ICWU would recruit and

---

37 P Limb, *The ANC’s early years...*, p. 219.

38 JC Wells, “The history of black women’s struggle...”, pp. 208-209.

39 F Meli, *A history of the ANC...*, p. 82.

40 See H Bradford, *A taste of freedom...*, p. 3.

41 H Bradford, *A taste of freedom...*, p. 3.

42 H Bradford, *A taste of freedom...*, p. 6.

43 H Bradford, *A taste of freedom...*, p. 4.

mobilise Africans on the farms. However, even at its nascent stage the ICWU demonstrated its intention to reach out to urban labourers. For example, Wells notes a police report of a meeting held in the Kroonstad location on November 25, 1920, linking a man named Joseph, probably an ICU[sic] organizer from Bloemfontein, telling a meeting of about forty blacks that they should demand 10/6 per day for skilled labourers and 7/5 per day for unskilled labourers, and 4/6 per day for male and female servants living in town.<sup>44</sup> It was later under the banner of the ICU, led by Kadalie, that the ICU changed its character and operated as a political party, taking up both rural and urban socio-economic and political issues. Johns remarks:<sup>45</sup>

In April 1925 the ICU was on the verge of becoming an organised movement of mass protest. It tried to maintain its trade union character. But in a situation where any question regarding non-white labour was inevitably a political one, the pronouncement and actions of the ICU and its leader took on an increasingly political colour.

In line with this shift the ICU in Kroonstad became involved in the locations affairs. In 1928, for example, the mayor of Kroonstad accused the ICU of being instrumental in advising standholders not to pay their taxes.<sup>46</sup> Although 'Mote, secretary of the ICU in OFS, was singled out as the prime instigator, this boycott seems to have been led mainly by the women's section of the ICU.<sup>47</sup> It is not clear whether this boycott yielded the desired results, but it certainly prompted the town council to begin to take note of the presence of ICU in the area.

Buoyed, perhaps by the residents' response to the ICUs' role, 'Mote, a leading figure in the ICU in Kroonstad, advocated for the replacement of the Native Advisory Board (NAB) with a new association, after concluding that this body was not advancing the interest of the community. Although his proposal was hotly challenged mainly by teachers in that body, it nevertheless caused members of the community to begin to question the role of the NAB (see below).

---

44 JC Wells, "The history of black women's struggle...", p. 189.

45 SW Johns, "Trade union, political pressure group, or mass movement? The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa", RI Rotberg & A Mazrui, *Protest and power in black Africa* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 716.

46 D Serfontein, *Keurskrif vir Kroonstad...*, p. 449.

47 H Bradford, *A taste of freedom...*, p. 69; Some of these women included Eva Kubedi, Magdelene Mashalane, and Emely Machoba. See P Limb, *The ANC's early years...*, p. 342.

Towards the end of the 1920s the ICU was experiencing serious internal tensions, which finally resulted in its demise. This was reflected in the infighting between leaders and accusations and counter-accusations of embezzlement of the union's finances caused the disintegration of the ICU.<sup>48</sup> This caused its split, with AWG Champion, for example, breaking away to form his ICU "yase Natal" (ICU of Natal). In Kroonstad, conversely, tensions developed between 'Mote and Kadalie. There is no available evidence to explain the exact reason(s) for this tension. But it is possible to surmise that after his trip overseas Kadalie, as the leader of the Union, felt that 'Mote was becoming too radical whereas he favoured a moderate approach.<sup>49</sup> This was evident when during the ICU's fight against the Kroonstad's Town Council, Kadalie failed to come to 'Mote's defence. Instead, he distanced himself and the National Council of the ICU from 'Mote, insisted that he was away in Europe at the time and therefore could not be associated with 'Mote's actions.

Soon rumours that 'Mote was embezzling the union's funds began making rounds.<sup>50</sup> This was a ploy to turn the members against him. Johns notes "complaints were made that Keable 'Mote, the Provincial Secretary of the OFS whose speeches particularly disturbed white South Africans, was spending union funds illegally and that he refused to heed advice from the headquarters in Johannesburg".<sup>51</sup> To contain him, in 1928 the union decided to transfer 'Mote to the Transvaal.<sup>52</sup>

However, 'Mote did not take this decision lying down. He threatened to secede from the ICU. But after negotiations he reconsidered.<sup>53</sup> Later he hit back by associating himself and the ICU in the OFS with the Communist's organised campaign to burn passes on Dingaan's Day, December 16 1929.<sup>54</sup> Kadalie, who by this time had made a deal with the government not to deport

---

48 See for example, I Liebenberg & F Lortan, "The role of the labour movement in the struggle for liberation"; I Liebenberg, F Lortan et.al, *The long march: The story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa* (Pretoria, HAUM, 1994), pp. 227-240.

49 It is possible that Kadalie was becoming jealous of 'Mote's rapidly increasing popularity in the OFS. In 1927, for example, at an ICU meeting held in Parys, 'Mote was introduced by Simon Elias, who addressed about 600 people, as "my Jesus", and when 'Mote ascended the platform to speak the crowd broke spontaneously into song "God Save Africa". Free State Provincial Archives (FSPA), Free State Province, SOO 1/1/47, No. 8/10 1946; See *The Parys Post*, 10 May 1927.

50 D Serfontein, *Keurskrif vir Kroonstad...*, p. 450.

51 SW Johns, "Trade union...", p. 732.

52 H Bradford, *A taste of freedom...*, p. 163.

53 SW Johns, "Trade union...", p. 732.

54 A similar campaign was called by the CPSA in Potchefstroom on Dingaan's Day, 1929. See R Edgar, *The Making of an African Communist: Edwin Thabo Mofusanyana and the Communist Party of South Africa 1927-1939, Hidden Histories Series* (Pretoria, University of South Africa, 2005), p. 10.

him back to Nyasaland, openly opposed the campaign. This struck the final nail in the coffin of the ICU and the OFS' ICU branch, spelling disunity. In April 1931 'Mote convened a conference in Kroonstad of ICU branches in the OFS and western Transvaal. At the meeting 57 delegates formed the Federated Free State ICU of Africa, and elected Selby Msimang president and 'Mote secretary.<sup>55</sup> However, this new organisation was stillborn. And in 1934 the ICU branch in Kroonstad ceased to function after a lengthy period organising both on the farms and in the location, which had once led Kadalie to boast that "the ICU [has] never failed in Kroonstad".<sup>56</sup> The demise of the ICU in Kroonstad inevitably paved the way for the moderate formations in Kroonstad to function without any hindrance, but this also arrested the radical politics which were beginning to emerge in the locations.

### **Moderate formations and non-radical politics**

From the 1920s to the 1940s two moderate formations operated in Kroonstad. These were the Native Advisory Board (NAB) and the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives(JCEN). These were essentially established as a bridge to the growing schism between blacks and whites, particularly the officials in various towns, which were reflected in widespread protests across the country. It is the contention of this article that these formations were moderate because, unlike the ICU, did not use radical methods like mobilizing the masses to challenge the local white municipalities' unpopular decisions. They, instead, embraced the politics of appeasement. To achieve its objective, the government first established the NAB.

#### ***The Kroonstad Native Advisory Board***

The government, through the Native Affairs Department (NAD), recommended the creation of advisory boards, "and the Urban Areas Act of 1923 carried this through".<sup>57</sup> However, the Boards had no real power. Nieftagodien argues that "they were explicitly denied any real power and their overall functions were limited to an advisory capacity".<sup>58</sup> Moreover, according

55 SW Johns, "Trade union...", p. 747.

56 D Serfontein, *Keurskrif vir Kroonstad...*, p. 451.

57 MS Tetelman, "We can: Black politics in Cradock, South Africa, 1948-85" (Ph.D, Northwestern University, 1997), p. 25.

58 NM Nieftagodien, "The implementation of urban Apartheid on the East Rand, 1948-1973: The role of local

to him “local authorities were neither obliged to consult the advisory boards nor to take into account any recommendation by them”.<sup>59</sup>

The earliest Kroonstad Native Advisory Board was essentially made up of teachers. This is hardly surprising, because from the late 1920s Kroonstad had become one of the important centres of black education in the country.<sup>60</sup> Their standing in the community made them obvious choice within the community to represent the residents. Some of these members included Manes, Pitso, Makhetha, Damane, Dingalo, Molete, Modise, Tladi, and Lekhetla.<sup>61</sup> In spite of their standing and education background, the members of the NAB were led by whites. And for Cobley, “[the NAB’s] credibility was... damaged by the role of the white chairman, which often precluded the possibility of direct criticism of the local authority”.<sup>62</sup> He notes:<sup>63</sup>

Board members were encouraged to use their “good office” in such matters as resolving domestic disputes, discouraging illegal brewing and sale of liquor, informing the authorities of necessary repairs and improvement of services and, in general preserving “peace and good order”.

In line with this the Kroonstad NAB failed to protect the residents who survived by selling homebrewed beer in the locations (see below). Finally, Board members were made to believe that they were superior to the rest of the community and that it was their duty to lead by example. JR Brent, Kroonstad’s superintendent stressed this message to delegates attending the Location Boards Congress in 1935 when he said:<sup>64</sup>

You leaders must never lose sight of the fact that you are at least a century or two ahead of the Bantu masses you lead. You are educated men. You understand and have absorbed the modern civilization outlook. Never fall into the error of imagining that any appreciable number of your followers have the same outlook. Labour patiently to teach and to leaven them so that one day they will be able truly to enjoy the benefits of modern civilization. Don’t always aim at popularity or political advantage, and head them gently in the right direction.

---

government and local resistance” (Ph.D, Wits University, 2001), p. 197.

59 NM Nieftagodien, “The implementation of urban Apartheid...”, p. 197.

60 JSM Setiloane, *The history of black education ...*, pp. 49-77.

61 D Serfontein, *Keurskrif vir Kroonstad...*, p. 523.

62 AG Cobley, *Class and consciousness: The black petty bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 69.

63 AG Cobley, *Class and consciousness...*, p. 206; MS Teteleman, “We can...”, p. 26; P Bonner & N Nieftagodien, *Alexandra...*, p. 37.

64 AG Cobley, *Class and Consciousness...*, p. 208.

The members of the NAB in Kroonstad took this advice seriously. This was evident when their response pacified the residents following the raids by the police for the lodgers' permits. The dearth of radical formations in Kroonstad to mobilise the residents against the municipality's unpopular decisions afforded the NAB to operate freely. The situation in Kroonstad contrasted with that in Potchefstroom, a town in the western Transvaal but closer to Kroonstad. Edgar describes Potchefstroom in the 1920s as a town reputable for its hostility to black people. According to him, "blacks endured an array of regulations that intruded into every aspect of their lives: curfew; June 1925 Ordinance requiring African men to carry passes between 10:30 pm and 4 am was extended to African women; "and" lodger's fee introduced in November 1927".<sup>65</sup> It was in this town where the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA, or the Party) found fertile ground to agitate. After its initial focus on recruiting white workers from 1921, the Party gradually "... managed to shake off most of the traces of white worker chauvinism that had characterized its beginning, and it was starting to pay attention to the recruitment of black members, with this it also made its first approaches to black women". In 1928 the Party participated in the anti-residence permit which had been launched in Potchefstroom... "and this was clearly a deep concern to women".<sup>66</sup> Josie Palmer (sometimes spelled Mpama) was one of the leading women to have taken part in this campaign.<sup>67</sup> It was not long before Palmer led a demonstration in Potchefstroom, mobilizing the African community, after the murder of Hermanus Lethebe, a local Party member. Lethebe was shot and killed by whites who had invaded the township during the Dingaan's Day demonstration with the intention of disrupting the gathering. The shot was aimed at Edwin Mufutsanyane, who was one of the main speakers at the demonstration.<sup>68</sup>

The NAB's (and later the JCEN's) functioning was further made possible by the government's passing of the Riotous Assemblies (Amendment) Act in 1930. Walshe notes that this Act replaced the Native Administration Act of 1927, to deal effectively with the African politicians who were agitating the masses. It empowered the Minister, "inter alia", to expel individuals from any area of the Union if in his opinion their presence contributed towards "feelings

---

65 R Edgar, *The making of an African Communist...*, p. 6

66 HLP, WUL, A2010, Helen Joseph Papers: C Walker, "Women and resistance in South Africa, 1980", p. 92.

67 J & R Simons, *Class & Colour in South Africa...*, p. 423.

68 J & R Simons, *Class & colour in South Africa...*, p. 423; R Edgar, *The making of an African Communist...*, pp. 10-12.

of hostility” between Europeans and non-Europeans.<sup>69</sup> Undoubtedly, this Act must have caused the radical and vocal politicians to desist from becoming involved in politics, less in radical politics. For example, Henderson Binda, one of the leading figures in the ICU in Kroonstad, joined the JCEN (see below).

In spite of this not everyone was cowed by this law. Some of the residents in the locations voiced their dissatisfaction and anger against the KTC. For example, in the early 1930s the residents of the black locations in Kroonstad were aggrieved by the constant raids by the municipal police, particularly on Sundays searching for homebeer brewers and those who defaulted paying their lodger’s permits. These raids seemingly occurred regularly during the tenure of Mayor FA van Reensen. In a Town Council meeting, the Mayor noted that he could not guarantee that no raids will be conducted in locations on Sundays in future.<sup>70</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that the Kroonstad NAB challenged the Council’s position. It was not surprising when in July 1935 the Native Affairs Department decided to place the Kaffir Beer under the Municipal control. The NAB responded tamely by sending a deputation to the Native Affairs Committee of the KTC to lodge a protest.<sup>71</sup> This failed to convince the residents. The relationship between the NAB and some of the residents of the locations deteriorated when the NAB made it clear that it was in favour of licensed beer-houses.<sup>72</sup>

Having been disappointed by the NAB before, the residents of Kroonstad’s black locations, led by the Registered and Ratepayers’ Association under the leadership of Mr Modibedi, opposed the Native Affairs Department’s decision. *Umteteli* reported “consequently more than 500 people assembled in the location for a meeting, after a vigorous speech by Keable ‘Mote, and unanimously rejected the proposed scheme, and the NAB was asked to resign “en block”.<sup>73</sup> Up to this point, there is no evidence to demonstrate attempts by the Kroonstad NAB to ameliorate the residents’ plight against the municipality. The situation boiled over in 1937 when the residents protested against the municipality’s unabating unpopular decisions. According to *Umteteli*, “the Bantu Hall in Kroonstad was filled to full capacity by people protesting against the police raids on Sundays for Kaffir Beer, Poll Tax and

---

69 P Walshe, *The rise of African Nationalism...*, pp. 220-221.

70 *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 30 March 1935.

71 *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 9 February 1935.

72 *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 30 March 1935.

73 *Umteteli wa Baantu*, 6 July 1935.

Passes.<sup>74</sup>

Noticing the growing dissatisfaction among community members, in an attempt to demonstrate its concern for the residents, the Kroonstad NAB requested the Council to stop the night raids during the months of December and January. The request was turned down.<sup>75</sup> Again, in 1945, the Council rejected the NAB's request to have the names of wives removed from lodger's permits and for the lodger's fee to be reduced from 3 pennies to 2 pennies.<sup>76</sup> The following year, the Board's request that the location's inhabitants should be allowed to slaughter cattle for marriage feasts was turned down.<sup>77</sup> For members of the community, these were clear signs that the Board was failing to advance their best interest.

### ***The Kroonstad Joint Council of Europeans and Natives***

Concurrent with the functioning of the NAB in town, the Kroonstad Joint Council of Europeans and Natives (JCEN) was established in September 1928, consisting of 18 whites and 18 blacks.<sup>78</sup> The main objectives of the joint council were, "inter alia", to promote co-operation between Europeans and Natives in South Africa; to investigate and report upon any matter relating to the welfare of the Native people of South Africa to which the Council's attention may be called; and to make such representations to the Union Government, Provincial Administration, public bodies or individuals as may be thought necessary.<sup>79</sup> Unlike the NAB, the JCEN in Kroonstad comprised a mixed membership. For example, there were church ministers, teachers, a policeman, and even trade unionists such as Robert Sello, Henderson Binda and 'Mote. However, because of his radical views, by 1931 'Mote was no longer a member.<sup>80</sup>

Like the NAB, the JCEN had no real power to influence or change decisions adopted by the town council. Its role was that of a pressure and lobby group,

---

74 *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 2 October 1937.

75 Kroonstad Town Council (KTC), Kroonstad, January 1945: Minutes.

76 KTC, November 1945: Minutes.

77 KTC, September 1946: Minutes; after 1944 some of the NABs were radicalised by the participation of members of the ANC and Communist Party of South Africa. See, for example, Lodge, *Black politics...*, p. 133; P Bonner & NM Nieftagodien, *Kathorus...*, p. 30.

78 P Rich, "Managing black leadership...", p. 184.

79 HLP, WUL, AD1947/65.2 (Box 39): South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR).

80 HLP, WUL, AD1433 (Box CK5.3), Kroonstad Joint Council: Letter, Charles F Martin (Executive member of the JCEN, Kroonstad) / Rheinallt-Jones (Senator), 27 October 1931.

raising issues to put pressure on the local authority. For example, it took up the issue of trading rights for blacks in the location, making representations to the KTC and, later to the OFS municipalities' conference.<sup>81</sup> It also made representations to the Inquiry into Native Trading Facilities in Kroonstad, which started on 5 September 1932. In addition, it sought to send a deputation to the Minister of Native Affairs, who refused to meet the deputation. While it discussed the issue of home-brewing, in advance of the Illicit Liquor Commission's report on the subject,<sup>82</sup> it failed to mobilise the community, particularly African women brewing and selling liquor, when the Kroonstad municipality decided to establish a municipal canteen system, similar to those opposed in KwaZulu and Durban. Instead, the African members of the JCEN, including Mrs E B Kobeli, Elizabeth Khesa, debated the question of Kaffir beer and adopted a resolution that "licensed kaffir beer houses be established and that certain classes of location residents be allowed a limited quantity for family consumption" (and this position as noted above was vehemently rejected by the residents of Kroonstad black locations).<sup>83</sup>

The JCEN's representations, like the NAB's, failed to solve any of the problems, causing location residents to doubt its capacity to advance their interests. Differences in approach caused some of the blacks in the JCEN to feel that their white colleagues were controlling and dictating to them. In 1936 cracks in the Kroonstad's JCEN began to show. In August 1937 Father Charles F Martin wrote to Senator Rheinallt-Jones explaining the reasons for this:<sup>84</sup>

In Kroonstad the type of European here is rather put off by the title Joint Council, because he thinks it is suggested of what his ancestors called "ungodly equality". It is true that the actual dissolution of the Kroonstad Joint Council was due to the defection of the Africans which made it impossible to carry on without doing them more harm than good. But there had always been a problem connected with European members. They were so few that certainly did not effectively balance the African members.

At this stage, the JCEN in Kroonstad had effectively ceased to function. After some years, in 1949 there were talks of reviving it, but this remained an

---

81 HLP, WUL, AD1433 (CK5.3), Kroonstad Joint Council: Letter, Charles F Martin (Executive member of the JCEN, Kroonstad) / Rheinallt-Jones (Senator), 3 February 1932.

82 HLP, WUL, AD1433 (CK5.3), Kroonstad Joint Council: Letter, Rheinallt-Jones (Senator) / Charles F Martin (Executive member of the JCEN, Kroonstad), 5 September 1931.

83 *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 23 March 1935.

84 HLP, WUL AD1433 (CK5.3) Kroonstad Joint Council: Letter, Charles F Martin (Executive member of the JCEN, Kroonstad) / Rheinallt-Jones (Senator), 24 August 1937.

idea.<sup>85</sup> The previous year the National Party (NP) had ascended to power in South Africa on the ticket of apartheid – separate development - and wasted no time in introduced suppressive laws to control black people. One of these laws was the Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act in 1952, which made provision for women to carry reference books.<sup>86</sup> Black women in Kroonstad, just like other women elsewhere in other locations across the country, mobilized to resist this law. It was against this background that a black radical formation was re-established in Kroonstad, and it revived radical politics in the area.

### **Women's anti-pass campaign**

After the government had passed this law, throughout South Africa women were incensed and decided to protest. Recounting the indignation women felt about this law, Maggie Resha writes in her book “To extend the Pass Laws was to pull down the wall which protected the women from the humiliation of carrying these documents”.<sup>87</sup> First, in 1954, 150 women from different parts of the country converged in Johannesburg to adopt a “Women’s Charter” where they launched a new organisation, the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW).<sup>88</sup> The following year, 2000 women from the Transvaal marched to Union Buildings in Pretoria, with a petition to the then Prime Minister BJ Strijdom. However, the Prime Minister snubbed the women.<sup>89</sup> Undeterred, on 9 August 1956 about 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings, in Pretoria to protest the passes. There is no evidence to prove that women in Kroonstad participated in these events, but it is also likely that they did – at least some of them.

It was against this backdrop that some of the older women (possibly members of the ANC Women’s League)<sup>90</sup> in Kroonstad organised some of the women in the locations to protest against being forced to carry passes. The

---

85 TC Moloi, “Black politics in Kroonstad: Political mobilisation, protests, local government, and generational struggles, 1976-1995”, Ph.D, Wits University, 2012, p. 85.

86 T Lodge, *Black Politics...*, p. 140.

87 M Resha, *Mangoana o tsoara thipa ka bohaleng: My life in the struggle* (Johannesburg, Congress of South African Writers, 1991), p. 112.

88 M Resha, *Mangoana o tsoara...*, p. 142.

89 M Resha, *Mangoana o tsoara...*, p. 112.

90 From oral testimonies there is silence about the political formation these women belonged to. Only one person claimed that one of the leading women in the demonstration, Matseki Majoro, had close links with Nelson Mandela. T Moloi (Local Histories and Present Realities Programme/LHPR, Wits University), interview, LG Mwelase (resident of Kroonstad), 25 September 2009.

most prominent amongst these was Matseki Majoro. Majoro's role in politics dates back prior to the anti-pass campaign. Selele remembers her (and other women) leading a fight against high rent also. She remarks:<sup>91</sup>

This group comprised of older women of the same age as my mother. I know because I was married then. They would go to the town hall in town to protest against rent. They also protested against this thing called... lodger's permit. Ja, they fought against the lodger's permit and rent. They would go to town and demand that they should be arrested. Indeed, they were arrested. But they were later released.

Also Godfrey Oliphant remembers Matseki Majoro as a powerful orator. He described as her follows:<sup>92</sup>

Matseki was very powerful. That's the lady I know personally. [She was one of the] people who used to quote Mandela. "As sy ge praat het" (when she spoke), people would listen. [Addressing people she would say] "It's been long that we've been under the yoke of a white man" – "those were" the words. "We've got to stand up as the people today and fight for our rights". She was that type of a person.

To demonstrate their indignation, Majoro mobilised women in the locations and called them to a meeting. Recalling the actual gathering, Selele, who was present, explains:<sup>93</sup>

I can't remember some of these women. One of them, if I remember well, it was Masielatsa – she's late. These women came up with this idea here in Seeisoville. I can still remember I was sitting next to one of these women whose husband was a shopkeeper when I said 'Me Masielatsa, do you realise that there are some people here who will leave this meeting and go and tell the "boers" (police) that we don't want passes. I think we should stop the meeting so that we can assess the situation. But honestly we didn't want them (passes). But here in Kroonstad we didn't trust each other.

Indeed, what Selele feared happened. Not long after the meeting, Majoro was detained.<sup>94</sup> Lindiwe Gladys Mwelase, who is related to Majoro, returned to Kroonstad after spending some time working in Johannesburg to find Majoro arrested.<sup>95</sup> The government's swift response enabled it to implement its law of extending passes to women. Women in Winburg, in the OFS, were the

---

91 T Moloi (LHPR), interview, LV Selele.

92 T Moloi (LHPR), interview, G Oliphant (resident of Kroonstad), 5 December 2007.

93 T Moloi (LHPR), interview, LV Selele.

94 T Moloi (LHPR), interview, LV Selele.

95 T Moloi (LHPR), interview, LG Mwelase.

first to be issued with passes in 1956.<sup>96</sup> In 1957 African women in Kroonstad were issued with passes as well. Hilda Motadinyane, a resident of Kroonstad, recalls:<sup>97</sup>

Remember that we were forced to take passes. I took mine in 1957 I was working at the creche in Dorcas House. The municipality police came to our workplace and took us to the hall. When we arrived there they took us photographs. We were the first group of women to be given passes.

As had been the experience of their male counterparts, females also experienced the unpleasantness associated with passes. Motadinyane explains:<sup>98</sup>

Then life became hard. Police would knock at our doors in the middle of the night, demanding to see our passes.

The suppression of the anti-pass demonstrations marked the end of ANC's aboveground activities in Kroonstad black locations during this period. However, it did not halt the spirit of radicalism in Kroonstad. The following decades experienced both underground and aboveground organisation and mobilisation in Kroonstad's black residential areas.<sup>99</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to demonstrate the emergence and radicalization of black political formations in Kroonstad in the first half of the twentieth century. It has shown that the ANC (formerly the SANNC) was not active in Kroonstad. In fact, in 1920 it was moribund. This was because, unlike other branches of the ANC in other towns in the OFS, the Kroonstad branch did not involve itself in the day-to-day hardships the residents experienced. The political space left by the ANC was filled by the ICU. The latter, the article argues, radicalized black politics in Kroonstad. Its transformation from being exclusively a farm labourers' body to operating like a mass-based political party, saw the ICU branch in Kroonstad mobilizing the residents to resist the KTC's unpopular decisions. The internal divisions which developed in the late 1920s caused the ICU to cease to function.

The ICU's demise opened space for moderate formations like the NAB and JCEN to represent the residents. But these, particularly the NAB, failed

---

<sup>96</sup> HLP, UWL, A2010: "Women and Protest in South Africa, 1954-1981".

<sup>97</sup> T Moloi (LHPR), interview, H Motadinyane (resident of Kroonstad), 25 September 2009.

<sup>98</sup> T Moloi (LHPR), interview, H Motadinyane.

<sup>99</sup> TC Moloi, "Black politics in Kroonstad...".

dismally in their attempts to the point that the residents demanded that the members of the NAB resign “en block”. The article contends that the moderate formations were able to function freely because of the dearth of political campaigns like in Potchefstroom which galvanized the community in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Furthermore, the promulgation of the Riotous Assemblies (Amendment) Act strengthened the moderate’s influence. However, at the end of the 1940s moderate formations had ceased to exist in Kroonstad.

The early 1950s saw the revival and emergence of another black radical formation led by women. During this period women mobilized to resist the government’s passing of the Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act in 1952. After the 1956 march to Pretoria by about 20 000 women, women in Kroonstad took up the battle to the KTC. Less than a year, the government had crushed the women’s resistance and forced them to carry passes. In spite of this, the government was not able to stop radical ideas, which in later years in Kroonstad caused the formation of radical formations.