

“A setback to the harmonious race relations in this charming city of scented flowers”¹:

The August 1959 riots in Pietermaritzburg

by Sibongiseni Mkhize

Introduction

In 1959 a series of popular revolts erupted in Natal, starting in Cato Manor in Durban and spreading out to other urban centres and rural areas. Relatively large protesting crowds were involved in these incidents which occupied the second half of 1959. This article seeks to investigate the events which occurred in Pietermaritzburg in the context of countrywide disturbances. These events will be analysed against the background of anti-apartheid political mobilisation, which occurred during the 1950s. I will explore the issues which sparked off these Pietermaritzburg events, the kinds of organisation, the crowd behaviour which occurred and the protagonists. Furthermore, I will examine their significance in the politics of anti-apartheid resistance. The reasons why these riots occurred at this particular point in time will be the subject of my analysis.

Background to the Pietermaritzburg riots

In June 1959 there were widespread riots and disturbances in the Durban African area of Cato Manor. The fundamental causes were socio-economic, arising from such factors as poor living conditions and widespread poverty. But it was the exhaustive beer raids on illegal stills that provided the flashpoint. In municipally-controlled areas it was illegal for Africans to brew their own beer. Instead, they were obliged to purchase it from the municipal beerhalls. Proceeds from the beerhalls were then supposedly used for the development and administration of African facilities.²

The Cato Manor incident was echoed in similar events in many towns and rural areas of Natal, with women being at the forefront. In the towns the municipal monopoly over the brewing of traditional beer, *utshwala*, the police raids, influx control, low wages and unemployment appeared to be the main reasons for riots. Women accused their menfolk of spending their meagre incomes in beerhalls. In the rural areas discontent centred around land shortages, betterment schemes, cattle culling, cattle dipping, influx control, and poverty which was perceived to be caused by the government's policies.³ African women played an active role in the protests of the 1950s, and were vociferous in opposing their proposed subjection to the pass laws and the curtailment of informal sector activity.⁴ A common feature of these struggles is that they were led by women. Although the oppression was hard on both men and women there were differences in the way African men and women were treated by the apartheid laws.

The position of African women in society in both rural and urban areas

explains why it was women who took the lead in confronting the state, even if that involved violence. Many African women in towns did not work in industry. This, together with their relative freedom from the pass laws, helps to explain their militancy. For them involvement with urban industrial society was neither as humiliating nor as brutal as that experienced by their menfolk and this may have conditioned their attitude to authority.⁵ C. Walker has pointed out that:

Women in the towns in South Africa during the 1950s were frustrated by the state of flux and uncertainty that surrounded the urban family, the position of women was often contradictory, their status confused. On the other hand women's new position was not always sanctioned by society. In the eyes of the law they were still subordinate to men, while their right of residence in town was increasingly insecure, especially after 1952 when the tighter influx control measures were introduced.⁶

In the case of women in the rural areas Walker argues that:

By the 1950s African women's reproductive function within the reserves was strained to near breaking point. By then it had become manifestly clear that the reserves were no longer functioning as viable subsistence bases for migrant workers.⁷

It was this complex set of forces that led to the Natal riots of 1959. Following the Cato Manor incident there was a wave of urban and rural militancy from August 1959. Some of the towns and rural areas that were affected were Estcourt, Mooi River, KwaDweshula in Port Shepstone, Harding, Ixopo, Camperdown and New Hanover.⁸ This militancy could also be seen against the

background of the hesitation of men to confront apartheid. One can also argue that there was a perception that state reaction to mass protest actions would not be as harsh on women as on men. The other main point is that most men were working and there was always the threat of dismissal, so the people who had the time to organise were often women.

Municipalities relied on profit from official beer sales for the provision of services to Africans. Municipal Bantu Revenue accounts were used to finance urban African housing and recreational facilities, and to subsidise welfare activities such as feeding schemes and milk funds in the townships.⁹ This explains why municipalities regarded the controlled sale of *utshwala* as vital.

The raids by police did not deter women from brewing, either for domestic consumption or for sale. African women continued to defy the law, brewing liquor at home to sell in order to earn a few pennies more and to retain a traditional form of hospitality. Because of the meagre wages their men brought home, the women deeply resented the money they drank away in the beer-halls.¹⁰ The municipal monopoly over the brewing and sale of beer was seen as not only restricting the cultural expression of the African working class; it was also viewed as exacerbating the economic deprivations of African workers.¹¹ It was against this background of discontent about beer brewing, liquor raids, removals, poverty, unemployment and influx control that women revolted in Natal in 1959. Two months after the Cato Manor incident of June 1959 Pietermaritzburg experienced what were officially referred to as “Native Disturbances”. These events shared some of the features, which had

taken place in Durban’s shantytown of Cato Manor.

These protest activities by women have been the subject of scholarly analysis. Terms such as “Natal Disturbances”, “Natal Riots”, and “Beerhall Riots” have been widely used to refer to a wave of protest by women in Natal. In my analysis I will attempt to go beyond just seeing them as disturbances or mere riots but as vents of political mobilisation amidst the intensification of state repression of anti-apartheid opposition. Seeing the incidents as mere “beerhall riots” conceals some important dynamics concerning the position of African women and African communities during the late 1950s. The issue of liquor brewing and dipping tanks was important and helped to galvanise African women’s opposition to the white administrators.

Women’s demonstrations in Pietermaritzburg

Pietermaritzburg was not going to be immune from the riots, which were taking place in Natal. The Native Administration Department purported to be concerned with improving race relations in Pietermaritzburg. In his annual reports, D.N. Bang, who was the manager of that department, always commended the city for its excellent record on race relations. The disturbances of 1959 came as a shock to him and he reported that

In the middle of August, the city’s long and excellent record of harmonious race relations received a setback when large groups of women carried out demonstration at the Sutherlands Police Station, outside the Bantu Men’s Hostel and the beer halls. Parties wielding sticks raided the beer halls and then left pickets.¹²

On 8 August 1959, a crowd of African women marched to the office of the Native Administration Department.¹³ They were complaining about the lack of employment, low wages and influx control, and they demanded that the authorities allow domestic brewing.¹⁴ Soon after this incident, on Friday 14 August, a crowd of African women estimated at between 200 and 300 congregated in Pietermaritzburg to see the Chief Native Commissioner. However, before going to the Chief Native Commissioner's office they started by staging a protest at Sutherlands Police Station in Plessislaer, Edendale, where about 30 of their colleagues were being detained, allegedly for carrying dangerous weapons.¹⁵ This crowd at Edendale involved women from both urban and rural areas around the city. Some came from as far as Durban and Camperdown.

The additional Native Commissioner, Mr Otte, went to Sutherlands to listen to the women's grievances. Their main grievance was that their men were not giving them enough money. Others included the enfeeblement of their husbands by the government, poverty, influx control, unemployment, and increased taxation. The Zulu word they used for enfeeblement or emasculation was *ukuthenwa*, which can be translated as "castration"¹⁶. Perhaps the women saw themselves as taking over from the men who had been rendered powerless. The word *ukuthenwa* has a symbolic importance because it is commonly believed that a man's private parts, especially testicles, are his source of power.

After speaking to Mr Otte at Sutherlands, the women boarded buses to town with the aim of speaking directly with the Chief Native Commissioner. Carrying sticks, they gathered at an open

space next to the *ematsheni* (beerhall) in Retief Street to await others who were still due to arrive by bus.¹⁷ When one police officer asked the women why they were carrying sticks they told him that they had agreed that they would recognise each other in that way.¹⁸ More women arrived at the paddock where others were already standing.¹⁹ A call for police assistance came from the beerhall and 56 policemen arrived. In the paddock the women danced and sang in a circle. Suddenly they rushed straight towards the police who were stationed between them and the beerhall. The police charged and the screaming women scattered in all directions.²⁰ After this baton-charge the women invaded the beerhall from the rear and upset some of the tables with beer mugs on them.²¹ The male patrons of the beerhall were dispersed by this action. The demonstration continued until evening when women started to board the buses back home.

On the following day the situation was still tense and the Retief Street beerhall was closed. Business continued at other beerhalls in Ortmann and Havelock roads. However, in the case of the Havelock Road beerhall Bang reported that:

Before I got there I saw women wielding sticks making their way from the beerhall. The police then arrived but they were too late. The women had cleared the beer hall and had thrown away their sticks. The hall was then closed, and the police briefed to watch entrances and be on the look out in case of any attempts being made to burn property.²²

This demonstration by women was part of the struggle by African women to challenge their white authorities. Pietermaritzburg provided a meeting place

for both rural and urban women, as it was where the office of the Chief Native Commissioner was situated. There was a strong likelihood that this action of protest and defiance influenced what took place in Sobantu Village the next day. The Sobantu revolt was different in that it involved both men and women and, unlike the women's demonstrations elsewhere, this event involved a small community from the same township and was related to local problems that the residents experienced. The Sobantu revolt also differed from the women's demonstrations in the targets identified by the crowd and in the amount of damage caused.

Before plunging into an examination of the riots I will start by outlining Sobantu's economic and socio-political context before and during the 1950s. The intention is to highlight the important aspects, which might have led to the eruption of violence on the weekend of August 14-16.

Sobantu: A model village

Sobantu Village was built in 1927 to accommodate Africans, particularly middle class Africans who had professional jobs in town, and it was situated on the south-eastern side of Pietermaritzburg.²³ It was also hoped that the establishment of Sobantu would be a solution to the problem of informal settlement around the edges and in the backyards of Pietermaritzburg.²⁴ From its establishment the place had been referred to as the Native Village, but in 1947 it was renamed Sobantu to honour Bishop J.W. Colenso on whose farm it had been built.²⁵ It was situated within a short walking distance from the white residential area of Bishopstowe and from the city's central business district. The first houses that were built were the

sub-economic types, but later economic houses were also built in order to cater for those who could afford them. The expansion of Sobantu was halted in 1954. This worsened the housing crisis as the community of Sobantu was growing. The last houses were completed in 1957, bringing Sobantu's final complement to 1091.²⁶ By this time an estimated 3 000 villagers were living in 545 houses, with more already under construction.²⁷

The Pietermaritzburg City Council, which was responsible for the administration of Sobantu, was aware of this problem. Two white officials were responsible for the day-to-day running of the village. They were the superintendent and his assistant. From 1958 the superintendent was S.W.D. St John Ward who had been an assistant since 1955, and a policeman before. His assistant was R.V. Taylor. These white officials stayed with their families in Sobantu. It has been argued that the relationship of villagers with the municipality as a whole depended largely on the degree of rapport between the residents and the superintendent, as he was the official with whom they were in direct and daily contact.²⁸ Sobantu residents complained about Ward's attitude. Although he was effective in reducing large arrears in rentals, his method of calling tenants to account at 4 a.m. could not have improved his popularity or that of the city council.²⁹

Up to the mid-1960s Sobantu was the only African residential area within the Pietermaritzburg borough and as such it was directly controlled by the city council.³⁰ In 1954 Sobantu was earmarked by the Minister of Native Affairs, H. F. Verwoerd, for removal as it was not sited in accordance with the Group Areas Act.³¹ It was not only the minister's

disapproval, which cast a dark shadow over Sobantu's future; there were also the nearby white property owners who opposed Sobantu's expansion. It should be pointed out that during the 1950s there was centralisation of the control of African townships by the Department of Native Affairs in Pretoria. The threat of removal came during the mid-1950s and made it impossible for any expansion of the village to take place. The future of Sobantu was uncertain and in 1956 the Pietermaritzburg City Council reported, "The city council is faced with the problem of finding suitable land to establish its future Native location arising from the refusal of the Minister of Native Affairs to allow the extension of the existing Sobantu Native Village".³² The proposal to remove Sobantu was opposed by the city council as well as the Liberal Party (LP) and the African National Congress (ANC).³³ Sobantu was regarded as a "model village" and its cordial relationship with the city's Native Affairs Department led to it being held in high esteem.

The body that purported to be representing the residents of Sobantu was the Sobantu Advisory Board, but its members did not enjoy the support of the majority of the residents. During the late 1950s the board members were S.T. Khumalo, T.J. Mkhize, J.M. Sikhosana, S.S. Zondi, P.J. Ngcobo and L.B. Msimang.³⁴ Regrettably the advisory board files do not give biographical information on its members as this would have helped in understanding what kind of people stood for elections to this board. Members of this board used to stay in office for a long time. It has been argued that this was due to the fact that very few residents took an interest in choosing their official representatives.³⁵

During the late 1940s an opposition group had been formed, known as the Sobantu Residents' Association or Isolomuzi Vigilant Association. It consisted of people such as G. Khumalo, A. Mngadi, L. Mtshali, K. Tlale and H. Dladla. This group accused the advisory board of being unaccountable to the residents. This situation continued during the 1950s and numerous letters were written by the association to the city council complaining about the advisory board which they claimed was an illegitimate and unrepresentative body. The prominent figure in the Isolomuzi was Godfrey Khumalo who used to write letters to the Town Clerk and the Chief Native Commissioner in which he complained about poor municipal administration in Sobantu, and he saw himself as the "chief" of Sobantu.³⁶ Khumalo's actions should be viewed against the background of his vendetta with the advisory board from which he had been expelled. Khumalo had been a teacher for many years. He was also active in the formation of development schemes in Sobantu, some of which were the Bantu Co-operative Union in 1937, the Bantu Social Services in 1939, the Bantu Workers' Club in 1943 and the Community Sunday Services in 1944.³⁷ In 1946 he was accused of being unscrupulous after it was found that he had embezzled some funds for the Ikhwezi Committee of the village.³⁸ He was a gifted organiser, musician and a good public speaker. In 1949 he was charged with the failure to pay rent, and that led to his subsequent expulsion from the village.³⁹

In 1956 Bang reported that there was "a strained atmosphere, particularly among the educated and semi-educated group of natives who have taken to reading both European and native papers



Daniel Nielson Bang (1910-1985) pictured (centre) with a group of Zulus in traditional dress. The provenance of the photograph is unknown but it was probably taken in the early 1950s during his time at "Bantu Affairs". Bang grew up on a Norwegian mission station in northern Zululand and regarded Zulu as his first language, Norwegian as his second and English as his third. After his time at Bantu Affairs, he lectured in Zulu at the University of Natal. (Information and photograph supplied by his granddaughter, Marina Bang)

avidly".⁴⁰ This atmosphere was related to the material hardships that most young people were experiencing. They found themselves unemployed in an urban area in which they enjoyed Section 10 rights. To worsen the crisis caused by the shortage of housing and by unemployment, economic rents for houses were introduced in December 1956.⁴¹ This was a directive from the central government and it forced residents with an income of more than £15 per month to pay economic rentals. This measure resulted in rental increases of up to 100% in some cases.

While residents were still astonished by the news of rent increases the council announced that there was going to be a possible increase from 2/- to 8/6d

per month on electricity charges.⁴² The electricity tariff was only one of their numerous problems. Besides the economic rentals, since January 1959 the residents had been facing an increase in the Bantu General Tax.⁴³ To add to these pressures the Department of Bantu Education recommended that a levy of 2/- per family be paid for buildings to cover the rent for the school buildings.⁴⁴ Bang was, however, reluctant to implement this measure as he was unsettled by the relatively high tension and unemployment in the village. He argued that this levy was going to constitute an added burden and recommended that its introduction be delayed.⁴⁵

These increased financial demands were proving to be too heavy for a community that was already facing over-

crowding and unemployment. It would appear that the local Native Administration Department was sensitive to this opposition, for early in August 1959 Bang recommended to the city council that the electricity tariffs and school levy be suspended for another year on the ground that “unemployment is rife and for other reasons there is a feeling of tension. The introduction of additional charges at this moment is therefore inadvisable”.⁴⁶ To this the council concurred, but the message did not reach the Sobantu residents early enough to avoid the riots which took place in the middle of August. According to Seethal, it was these increases, in conjunction with other grievances and events, which precipitated a riot in Sobantu from 14-16 August 1959, with damage estimated at £23 000.⁴⁷

“A distressing shock to all of us”

On Saturday, 15 August, an outbreak of violence occurred at Sobantu Village. Although these riots were related to the tense atmosphere, which had prevailed since the previous day, they had some interesting features which differentiated them from the beerhall incidents. The purpose of this section is to investigate these riots in the light of mass mobilisation which was prevailing in the province. Issues such as how and why they took place will be important to explore. Aspects such as the targets identified by this crowd are also worthy of analysis. The question of whether this was just a spontaneous event, or a carefully planned political action is also important. The behaviour of the crowd during the incident showed that the event was influenced by what had taken place in Cato Manor. The nature of the participants in this incident also makes it different from the previous protest

actions in the city in which crowds were predominantly composed of women.

On Saturday afternoon the overseer at the Ortman Road beer hall, which was adjacent to Sobantu, was assaulted by a band of people armed with sticks when he refused to let them in with their weapons. N. H. Nicholson was later taken to hospital with lacerations to his scalp and chin and a compound fracture.⁴⁸ The carrying of sticks can be viewed as an intention to attack, but this was also part of what African men, particularly in the rural areas, did. However, the beating of Nicholson reflected the atmosphere that was prevalent at the time. This relatively minor incident was likely to be related to the widespread attacking of the beerhalls. Bang viewed the assault on Nicholson as mere thuggery because the attackers took some of the money when it was spilt on the floor.⁴⁹ However, this was not an isolated incident in view of what occurred subsequently.

Bang seemed to be sensitive about the turbulent atmosphere, which had surfaced in Pietermaritzburg. Suspecting that municipal institutions such as beerhalls were in danger of being attacked, he spent the whole day patrolling them. To add to his anxiety, when he was driving past the bus terminus at Sobantu Village at 6 p.m. he noticed a crowd of young people assembled there. “As I drove past they shouted *Afrika! Mayibuye iAfrika! Asinifuni!* (Come Back Africa! We don’t want you!) and gave the thumbs up signal of the ANC. I then warned the superintendent that the atmosphere was unwholesome and also reported to the police”.⁵⁰ The incident shows that there was an advanced level of political consciousness in the village. The chanting of slogans suggests that the spirit of resistance had found fertile ground in the local youth.

The drama which ensued after the arrival of police, shocked the administrators and other interested groups who viewed Sobantu as a model village which co-operated with its administrators. At 6.30 p.m. Constable de Kock's police van was stoned at the bus stop. Ward, the superintendent of Sobantu, went with his police when he heard the commotion. He approached from the eastern side of the Sobantu hall only to be met by a hail of stones. They were forced to retreat to the offices and by then Constable de Kock had reached the superintendent's house. According to Bang's report, De Kock warned Ward to evacuate the white women and children but, as stones were falling on the roof and driveway, he argued that it was necessary to fire two shots each in into the air in order to get to his car.⁵¹ It was not only Ward's family that had to be evacuated, there was also that of Taylor, the assistant superintendent at the village.

According to Bang's report, "Mr Taylor came to take over while Mr Ward took the families away. He then took some men with him and proceeded towards the mob, which listened to him for a while, but resumed stone throwing so he and his men were obliged to retreat".⁵² Meanwhile the road near the Ortmann Road beerhall was barricaded and cars passing there were pelted with stones. The village shopping centre was then attacked by a group of Africans, and police reinforcements arrived.⁵³ However, it should be taken into consideration that Bang was not an eyewitness, but he reported what he was told by the police and Ward as he left Sobantu before the flare-up of violence. His report suggests that the police knew about the deaths of two people. The crowd used sticks, stones

and bricks to fight the police. This was what provoked the police, who were led by Major O. Kjelvei, to use their revolvers to defend themselves. They allegedly fired at the feet of the advancing mob, aiming at the leaders who were at the front.⁵⁴

During this pandemonium, two Africans who were part of the crowd were killed. The official sources estimated the crowd to consist of about 300 men and a few women. It was reported in *The Natal Witness* that the two were "well-known agitators" and led the crowd, which was stoning the police and the village officials.⁵⁵ The use of the word "agitators" implies that other people were just stirred up to revolt and they did not share the sentiments of the leaders of the crowd. There was a conflict of opinion about who actually killed these two people. Africans argued that Ward fired the two fatal shots. This was, however, disputed by Bang who pointed out that this was not possible as there was a 2,5 metre high wall separating the mob from his house. He further argued that "in any case, the two Africans who were killed were shot while he was evacuating Mrs Ward and Mrs Taylor and their families and the police are in possession of the full facts relating to their deaths".⁵⁶ According to *The Natal Witness*,

Rocks started landing on the roof on the Ward family as they were getting ready for bed. The rocks came from the direction of the Sobantu Hall. Two South African policemen in a van arrived and advised Mr St John Ward to evacuate his family. He switched off the light in his home and took his wife and children to the front and then went into the yard to fetch his car. He and the two policemen fired shots into the air, which caused the mob to disperse. He took out his car and drove his family to Topham Road

police station, where they were still staying with Sergeant Gafney and his wife yesterday.⁵⁷

However, the fact of the matter was that two Africans, George Radebe and Gordon Ndlovu, died of gunshot wounds.⁵⁸ The police fire dispersed the crowd and the people ran towards the schools. The police suspected that there was a pre-arranged plan when they saw the crowd using cans of what appeared like paraffin or petrol to ignite the school buildings.⁵⁹ According to *Ilanga*, all three village schools were set alight. At the Russell Infants' School the water tap at the kitchen was left open from Saturday to Monday, and on the wall was written "*Mayibuye i-Afrika*".⁶⁰ Even though the Pietermaritzburg Fire Department was called, the tumultuous situation impeded them from continuing with their work, so they ended up watching helplessly as the buildings were razed. *The Natal Witness* reported that:

At the primary school a school office was fired first, then the staff room, two lobbies and six classrooms. In addition, windows in the buildings were damaged, doors broken, a typewriter burnt and crunched underfoot, and books and records hurled in an untidy heap to feed the flames. Blackboards were ripped from the walls and tossed on to the floor. In one classroom the head-twisted iron roofing is hanging down amid the other debris; in other a film projector is lying still in its case but irreparably damaged.⁶¹

To a certain extent this incident of the burning of the school could be seen as a result of people's frustration with Bantu Education. These schools fell under the control of Department of Bantu Education, which during the 1950s had centralised the control of education.⁶² It was

the same department that had recently proposed a levy of 2/- on residents of Sobantu. There is a strong likelihood that the destruction of the schools was because they were perceived as government property.

Bang pointed out that a feature of the rioting at Sobantu Village was that it was carried out almost entirely by youths, many of which were obviously schoolchildren. Only a few older men and women took part. The preponderance of youngsters in the crowd can be viewed as a legacy of a situation where those who had just finished school were finding themselves joining the ranks of the unemployed.⁶³

Finding themselves unemployed in a situation where they had to support their families was a cause of bitterness. One study has revealed that political consciousness was high among the youth of the township.⁶⁴ Peel mentions the case of a retired teacher she interviewed, who pointed out that she recalls noticing the prevalence of pictures of Kwame Nkrumah and the African continent on the exercise books of pupils.⁶⁵ Pupils were showing their identification with the liberation struggles that were taking place in Africa, and with the African continent, which was still under colonial rule. Nkrumah was also significant in the sense that he epitomised Africa's ability to eradicate foreign domination.

These violent incidents at Sobantu took place in a community that was under stress. As has been pointed out above, the people of Sobantu were uncertain about their position during the 1950s as there was a threat of removal. There was also a housing shortage and the increase in rentals. Unlike the other demonstrations, which were led predominantly by women, this one did not belong to any specific sex. Even

though the people of Sobantu were prevented by officials from holding political meetings, many often went to Edendale to attend ANC meetings on Sundays.⁶⁶ Sobantu's image as a model village was tarnished and the city's claims for having an excellent record on race relations were shattered by this incident. The letter from the Town Clerk to the Secretary for Bantu Education illustrates this when he said that "as race relations have always been so good in Pietermaritzburg it was rather surprising that the disorderly behaviour occurred at Sobantu village on 15 August 1959".⁶⁷ It was the last thing that the local authorities would have expected to happen in Sobantu. The crowd focused its attention on corporation property, breaking anything that was possible to break. Houses belonging to several municipal police were stoned.⁶⁸ This destruction was not only directed at property, but also at individuals who were seen to be associated with the municipality. Lawrence Msimang, a member of the Advisory Board, narrowly escaped when the mob came to attack his house and he only survived by hiding in the kitchen with his family.⁶⁹ One municipal policeman was also hurt.

Different people and organisations expressed their dismay at what had taken place during the weekend. The ANC and the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) issued a press statement in which they denounced the use of violence but pointed out that violence was provoked by the action of the municipal police.⁷⁰ The statement was issued by Dr C. Motala and A. Gumede in which they expressed their deep regret about the events of Friday and Saturday. The Liberal Party also expressed its regret about the destruction, which had occurred at Sobantu and asked for a commission

of inquiry to be set up.⁷¹ However, the commission of inquiry was never instituted. The Mayor, C. B. Downes, also expressed his disappointment at what had taken place at Sobantu. In line with the official view of the time, he argued that "it was just a minority of hooligans who were responsible for this and not the proper citizens of Sobantu".⁷² Other organisations also sent their letters to the Town Clerk to express their sympathy with the Native Administration Department.⁷³ The mayor's view was echoed by other African organisations such as the Urban Bantu School Board, which pointed out that:

Sobantu Village has for many years enjoyed the reputation of being one of the model Bantu Villages in South Africa. It has been a beautiful, loyal and quiet village. The events of last weekend came as a distressing shock to all of us. We have no doubt that the ruins of the fine buildings, as they now stand, have convinced everyone of the futility of violence and rioting. We feel sure that such things will not happen again in Sobantu.⁷⁴

In his report D.N. Bang also echoed Downes's sentiments when he said,

It is my opinion that the local native has had little to do with what has taken place. I am firmly of the opinion that the ANC have instigated a few local firebrands to cause trouble, and the sooner the ANC gets banned the better. Unfortunately the masses are in sympathy with any movement which has as its ultimate aim the removal of European control, so one cannot expect much active support from them in suppressing the radical element. Moreover, they are afraid of reprisals. An instance is the case of Mr. L.B. Msimang, who, for the sake of his own safety, has resigned from the Village Advisory Board.⁷⁵

Bang's report seems to suggest that there was a substantial ANC support in the village. He even pointed out that when he went to Sobantu on the Monday he found that "wherever I went those who greeted me gave the ANC's thumb up signal".⁷⁶ There is a strong likelihood that the ANC was involved in the Sobantu riots, although official documents and newspapers cannot give information as to what extent.

Godfrey Khumalo, who had been an ardent foe of both the Native Administration Department and the Sobantu Advisory Board since the 1940s, also sent his letters with some recommendations about what to do to avoid riots in the future. Unlike many others, he did not see the Sobantu riots as the work of a few irresponsible hooligans. He argued that municipal policies were responsible for the riots. He stated that

The root cause is municipal oppression. The city council is to blame for allowing it to destroy the children of Africa... The riots are the flowers of seed planted over the last 30 years, through the abuse of the 1927 Native Administration Act by the local authorities.⁷⁷

The determination to sabotage what was seen as corporation property continued even after the Sobantu riots of the Saturday. At Edendale on Sunday an Indian a garage owner, Dookran, foiled an attempt to burn a bus which belonged to the corporation.⁷⁸ On Monday there was an attempt, by what the *Witness* called "Native trouble makers", to burn the Mthethomusha school at Edendale. The police, who were patrolling nearby, saw the fire and they put it out with the help of some members of the public.⁷⁹ In the afternoon police went to the Have-lock Road area when African women linked arms and blocked the roads

against the buses travelling to and from the bus stops.⁸⁰ Probably the women were doing this because this area was adjacent to the beerhall. A deputation of women claiming to be leaders of the Friday march came to see Bang about their grievances. Their grievances included "a 1d-a-day increase in wages for their menfolk, relaxation of influx control so that their men can come to the city freely and obtain work, and a reduction of rent at Sobantu Village".⁸¹ The wage increase demand was in line with the South African Congress of Trade Union's (Sactu) campaign for a living wage⁸².

Political events such as meetings and other forms of protest continued in the city after the above-mentioned incidents. Bang was becoming perturbed about what was taking place. The Africans that he had thought he understood clearly for many years were changing before his eyes. In his annual report for 1959 he argued that

It is regretted that the unrest, which occurred during the last corporate year, continued on a modified scale this year. From time to time meetings were held by certain Bantu organisations and trade union leaders, preceded by the circulation of pamphlets, and these meetings had an unsettling effect on the Bantu population. Beer halls and markets were boycotted and women armed with sticks actually raided the beer halls on certain occasions. A strange phenomenon was noticeable in that the men offered no resistance. They were in fact, so terrified that they fled in a panic and did not return for days.⁸³

This quotation seems to suggest that trade unions were becoming active in the politics of resistance in Pietermaritzburg. What also seems to have perplexed Bang was the gender issue involved in beer-hall boycotts. The fact that men offered

no resistance was astonishing to him. Women were taking the men's role of carrying sticks and using them against men. Women were using male symbolism to assert their position in society.

Conclusion

One can conclude that the August riots in Pietermaritzburg were part of a series of many popular struggles that were taking place in Natal, both in the urban and the rural areas. These demonstrations were led by women and they focused on grievances that specifically affected women as well as their communities, irrespective of gender. In August 1959 in Pietermaritzburg women marched to the city wanting to see the Chief Native Commissioner. These women came from different urban and rural areas around Pietermaritzburg. It was a convergence of urban and rural grievances. There is a strong likelihood that there were links between the women's demonstration and the outbreak of violence at Sobantu on Saturday 14th. This violence shocked the Native Administration Department, which did not expect such a revolt to take place in a village, which was seen as a "model village". The city council and the NAD blamed hooligans for what occurred in Sobantu. They could not imagine that the residents of Sobantu, who had a reputation for good behaviour, could express their anger and frustration in that manner. Sobantu was a community under extreme stress with socio-economic problems such as housing shortages, increases in rentals, and overcrowding. There was also a threat of removal under the Group Areas Act of 1950. At the same time there was an increase in the rate of unemployment for the educated youth in the village. Anti-apartheid resistance was also

making its impact in Sobantu as there was substantial support for the ANC. It seems also that the Saturday event was carefully planned, as there was a group of youth that were shouting resistance slogans. Unlike the other events, which were led predominantly by women, the Sobantu crowd was heterogeneous, although the young males formed a large portion. The Sobantu incident could therefore be viewed as both a reaction to the local problems as well as a contribution to the countrywide anti-apartheid popular struggles which were taking place at the time.

NOTES

- 1 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/4/2/340, Ref. 197/21, G. F. Khumalo to TC, 19 August 1959.
- 2 J. Yawitch, "Natal 1959: The Women's Protests" paper at *Conference on the History of Opposition in South Africa*, University of Witwatersrand, 1978. pp. 296-9. L. K. Ladlau, "The Cato Manor Riots, 1959-1960", Unpublished MA Thesis, Durban, University of Natal, 1975, p. 34.
- 3 T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983), p. 149; K. Luckhardt and B. Wall, *Organize or Starve: The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), p. 304; L. Kuper, "Rights and Riots in Natal", *Africa South*, Volume 4, Number 2 January-March 1960, p. 21; *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1958-1959* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1959), pp 42-4.
- 4 P. O. Tichmann, "African Worker Action in Durban", Unpublished MA Thesis, Durban University of Natal, 1983. p.50.
- 5 Lodge, *Black Politics* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983), p. 141.
- 6 C. Walker *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (London, Onyx, 1982), p. 149.
- 7 *Ibid.* p. 146.
- 8 Lodge, *Black Politics*, p. 195; *Race Relations Survey 1958-1959*, pp. 140-1; *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1959; *Daily News*, 17 August 1959; *UmAfrika*, 22 August 1959; *Ilanga*, 22 August 1959.
- 9 Ladlau, "The Cato Manor Riots", p. 34
- 10 Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve*, p. 303.
- 11 Tichmann, "African Worker Action", p. 49.

- 12 *Pietermaritzburg Corporation Yearbook, 1959-1960*, p. 139.
- 13 NAD, TC Files, Minute Book 25, Ref. 152/202, NAC Minutes, 11 August 1959.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *The Natal Witness*, 15 August 1959; *The Natal Daily News*, 15 August 1959; *UmAfrika*, 22 August 1959; *Ilanga lase Natal*, 22 August 1959; D. R. Bonnin, "Class Consciousness and Conflict in the Natal Midlands, 1940-1987: the Case of the BTR Sarmcol Workers", Unpublished M SocSc Thesis, Durban, University of Natal, 1987, p. 160.
- 16 *Ilanga*, 29 August 1959.
- 17 *Ilanga*, 29 August 1959; *Daily News*, 15 August 1959; *Natal Witness*, 15 August 1959; *UmAfrika*, 22 August 1959.
- 18 *Ilanga*, 29 August 1959.
- 19 It has not been possible to find the estimate of the number of women who gathered in Retief Street, but the number of police suggests it was a large crowd.
- 20 *Natal Witness*, 15 August 1959.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Bang to TC, 20 August 1959.
- 23 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/4/2/74, Ref. 140/1 Native Housing, p. 1-3; For a detailed account on the history of Sobantu Village see H. Peel, "Sobantu Village: An Administrative History of a Pietermaritzburg Township, 1924-1987", Unpublished BA Honours Thesis, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal, 1987.
- 24 "The Environmental and Development Challenges of Sobantu Village", Introduction prepared by the University of Natal's School of Environment and Development for Coursework Examination, a component of which was the study of Sobantu village.
- 25 S.W. Kirkpatrick, "Sobantu Planning Initiative" (Final Draft) Prepared for KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Administration (May 1994), p. 11; H. Peel, "Sobantu Village" in J. Laband and R. Haswell (eds), *Pietermaritzburg 1838-1988: A New Portrait of an African City* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1988), p. 82; A. Xaba and E. Ntshangase's talks during the field examination for Masters students in the School of Environment and Development at Sobantu Community Hall, 15 July 1997.
- 26 *Ibid.* p. 128.
- 27 C.E.P. Seethal, "Civic Organisations and the Local State in South Africa, 1979-1993", Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Iowa, 1993, p. 203.
- 28 Peel, "Sobantu Village", p. 132.
- 29 *Ibid.* p. 133.
- 30 *Ibid.* p. 82.
- 31 NAD, TC Files Vol. 4/4/2/74, Refs. 140/1 and 140/110, Sobantu Village: Proposed Removal of Inhabitants, Letter from Town Clerk to Secretary for Native Affairs, Pretoria, 6th November 1956; Ref. 140/1 Chief Native Commissioner's Memo 28/12E Second Location for Pietermaritzburg: Points for discussion on 30.07.57; "Native Housing and the future of Sobantu Village" *Pietermaritzburg Corporation Yearbook 1955-1956*, p. 32.
- 32 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/4/2/74, Ref. 140/1, Native Housing at Edendale, Joint Confidential Publication of the city council and The Local Health Commission.
- 33 H. Peel, "Sobantu Village", pp. 113-4.
- 34 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/4/2/340, Ref. 198/3 Sobantu Advisory Board Meetings.
- 35 *Ibid.* p. 123.
- 36 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/4/2/340, Ref. 197/21; Refs. 197/21(40); 198/02. In one of his letters he even asked why the Bantu Authorities Act was not applicable to Sobantu village.
- 37 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/4/2/340, Ref. 197/21 G. F. Khumalo's correspondences to Chief Native Commissioner and Town Clerk.
- 38 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/4/2/340, Ref. 197/21, Letter from W. Chiliza to Town Clerk, February 1946.
- 39 *Ibid.* Letter from the Secretary for Native Affairs to Chief Native Commissioner, 4 November 1952.
- 40 Quoted in Peel, "Sobantu Village", p. 126.
- 41 *Ibid.* p. 128; Seethal, "Civic Organisations", p. 205.
- 42 Peel, "Sobantu Village", p. 130; NAD, TC Files, NAC Minutes, Minute Book 25, 11 August 1959.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 NAD, TC Files, NAC Minutes, Minute Book 25, 11 August 1959; Peel, "Sobantu Village", p. 131.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 Peel, "Sobantu Village", p. 130; NAD, Minute Book 25, 11 August 1959.
- 47 Seethal, "Civic Organisations", p. 205.
- 48 *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1959; *Ilanga*, 22 August 1959; NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214 Bang's report to TC.
- 49 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Bang to TC.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Bang to TC.
- 52 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Bang's report to TC.
- 53 Peel, "Sobantu Village", p. 136.

- 54 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Bang's report to TC.
- 55 *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1959.
- 56 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214.
- 57 *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1959.
- 58 *UmAfrika*, 17 August 1959.
- 59 *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1959.
- 60 *Ilanga*, 22 August 1959.
- 61 *Natal Witness*, 19 August 1959.
- 62 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Letter from Town Clerk to the Secretary for Bantu Education (Pretoria), 6 September 1959.
- 63 *Corporation Yearbook 1958-1959*, p. 129
- 64 Peel, "Sobantu Village", pp. 125-6.
- 65 *Ibid.* p. 126.
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Letter from Town Clerk to the Secretary for Bantu Education (Pretoria), 06 September 1959.
- 68 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Bang to TC; *Corporation Yearbook 1959-1960*, p. 139.
- 69 *UmAfrika*, 22 August 1959; NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Bang's report to TC.
- 70 *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1959; See also NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Letter from NIC to Mayor, 5th October 1959.
- 71 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Letter from Liberal Party to Mayor, 24 August 1959.
- 72 *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1959; *Ilanga*, 22 August 1959.
- 73 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Letters from: African Welfare Society to Mayor, 25 August 1959; Natal African Teachers' Union to the Mayor, 25 August 1959; Local Health Commission to Mayor, 11 September 1959.
- 74 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Letter from the Urban Bantu School Board to Town Clerk, 26 August 1959.
- 75 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/5/551, Ref. 199/214, Bang to TC.
- 76 H. Peel, "Sobantu Village", p. 141.
- 77 NAD, TC Files, Vol. 4/4/2/340, Ref. 197/21, Letter from G. F. Kumalo to Town Clerk, 19 August 1959.
- 78 *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1959; *UmAfrika*, 22 August 1959; *Ilanga*, 22 August 1959.
- 79 *Natal Witness*, 18 August 1959.
- 80 *Ibid.*
- 81 *Ibid.*
- 82 Luckhardt and Wall *Organize or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), p. 244.
- 83 *Corporation Yearbook, 1959-1960*, p. 32.