

# **‘Home is where the heart is’: Negotiating the Construction of Identity for Xhosa Women Migrants in Thokoza Hostel, Durban, circa 1985**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a historical case study of Xhosa women migrants, mainly from the eastern part of the former ‘homeland’ of Transkei, who had moved to Durban in search of work and who found a refuge at the only hostel for African women in Durban, Thokoza. Various studies have been written of black men’s lives in hostels in apartheid South Africa but little of the lives of female hostel residents who were migrants.

The fieldwork for this paper was undertaken in 1984 and 1985 as part of a larger project which focused on migrant agricultural workers who came from Pondoland to the sugar cane fields of Natal to eke out a living in the absence of relatives who could provide for them in Transkei (see Buijs 1993). In 2008 I moved to Mthatha and revisited the earlier material I had collected which has resulted in this paper.

The paper examines firstly the reasons why these women were forced to leave their homes, as none said it was by choice and their negotiation of a Xhosa identity in the hostel in the context of the apartheid reification of ethnicity. While the mid-1980s were the height of what is known as ‘grand apartheid’ with constant regulation of movement for African women by officials of the regime, it was also a time of extreme poverty in the rural ‘homelands’ where peasant farming was debilitated by drought and the death of livestock. For these women whose adult men folk had either died or deserted them, even when sons had grown up mothers placed little or no reliance on assistance from them. Despite the absence of

this assistance from men, the women insisted on the importance of their ties to their rural birth homes and the remittances they sent from their meagre incomes for their homesteads to be looked after, elderly relatives cared for and school fees paid.

The second part of the paper examines the social and cultural divisions among the hostel residents, among them those based on age (post-menopausal women as opposed to younger, sexually active women), divisions based on ethnic origin (mostly between Zulu and Xhosa women who formed the two main groups) and divisions based on different levels of education, although most of the hostel residents worked as domestic servants for white families in the middle class English speaking suburbs of Durban and relatively few were hawkers of traditionally brewed beer or bead sellers. Despite having left their rural homes by necessity and not through choice, to earn a living in an urban area, most of the women interviewed claimed a strong attachment to their rural home and said they intended to retire there 'one day'. This, despite many being long past retirement age and with few or no family members to take care of them in the rural areas. 'Home' therefore became effectively the hostel surroundings, and 'family' the fellow residents who collected money to bury deceased hostel dwellers when family members from the rural areas failed to turn up to collect the bodies and who also cared for sick residents who were sometimes bedridden. The rural birthplace became a source of proclaimed identity rather than a reality to which any of the women would return.

**Keywords:** Xhosa, women, migrants

## **Introduction**

Most of the literature dealing with migrants from Transkei during and before the apartheid era has been mainly concerned with men (cf. Mayer *et al.* 1981) and has given the impression that the wives, sisters and daughters of these men remained behind in the countryside, living presumably mainly on the remittances sent to their rural homes by their migrant kin. However, research has shown that while there were 349,026 male migrants from Transkei in 1983 there were also 50,476 female migrants, a sizeable

proportion. Leslie Bank (1995) notes that research in the 1990s by Moodie and Ndatshe (1992) and Saphire (1992) highlighted the collapse of rural production in the Transkei in the late 1980s following extensive droughts which killed off livestock and prevented the harvesting of crops. These droughts, and the increasing failure of male kin to send remittances drove rural women to urban areas; the Witwatersrand, Cape Town, and in the context of this paper, urban Natal, namely Durban.

In the final years of apartheid African women from the Bantustans such as Ciskei and Transkei formed a significant proportion of those migrating elsewhere in South Africa in search of a livelihood. In an earlier article (Buijs 1993) I discussed the plight of a number of Transkeian women employed as agricultural labourers in the then Natal province. In this paper I discuss women who managed to find employment in Durban and accommodation at the largest hostel for African women, located in a central part of the city, called Thokoza. Among the issues I investigated were the reasons why the women left their rural homes (for instance, widowhood, the need to provide for dependents) and why they chose to come to Durban as opposed to other possible destinations, their methods of finding employment and accommodation in the city. It is important to remember that at this time in the history of South Africa the infamous influx control regulations made such women 'foreigners' without an automatic right to live and work in the city, and thus much of their time was taken up with attempts to either circumvent the regulations or obtain the much coveted Section 10 endorsement on their identity documents which allowed them to live and change jobs in the city. Those without a Section 10 endorsement had to work for one employer for an uninterrupted period for ten years before applying for the endorsement. The apartheid authorities spent much time and effort attempting to 'endorse out' men and women and send them back to the homelands before the ten year time limit elapsed. Once 'endorsed out' a returnee had to begin the ten year period of working for one employer all over again.

## **Methodology**

I was introduced to the women I interviewed at Thokoza Hostel through a fellow staff member at the University of Natal who herself lived in the

hostel. Dumisani R. (not her real name) and I would arrive at Thokoza at about 5.30 pm, when most residents had returned from work. Dumisani then approached those women she was acquainted with (she was on the residents' committee and thus well known to most women living in the hostel) who were from the Transkei and asked if they would agree to being interviewed. In most cases Dumisani acted as interpreter although most of the women understood English and could speak it well. My sample was limited by the exigencies of time and finance available and thus could not claim to be representative of the approximately 30% of the hostel population who were from the Transkei. The sample was also opportunistic since it was composed of women who happened to be in the hostel at the time I was there.

The average age of the women interviewed was 48.3 years, the eldest being a widow of 85 and the youngest an unmarried woman of 28. 45% of the women were widows while another 45% had never married. Only 5% were married at the time of the interview and only 10% had never borne children. The majority of these women, therefore, had no formal links to a man through marriage and most had no informal ties women, 70% had passed Standard Six or a higher grade, and 25% had passed Standard Eight or Nine, the equivalent of the old Junior Certificate which allowed holders to train as teachers or nurses. Only 5% had no formal education at all and only 20% had passed Standards Two or Three, the equivalent of four years of primary schooling. These percentages are comparable to those found by Behardien, Lehulere and Shaw (1984) where a majority of the 104 domestic workers in their Western Cape sample had more than six years of schooling. The women I interviewed were therefore comparatively well-educated compared to male migrant workers from the same areas of eastern Transkei (see Beinart 1993 for an overview of the lack of formal education of most male migrants). Their ability to earn an income in the city meant that they were able to contribute to the rural ideal of 'building the homestead' by sending regular remittances to support children or the elderly or for ploughing or other agricultural expenses. By supporting the homestead in this way, the women reinforced a claim to be accepted, responsible members of the community, albeit more absent than present. It was this contribution that allowed the women to speak of the importance to them of 'home' and their homesteads, with the connotations of personhood and ethnicity which being a member of the extended family or *umzi* contained (McAllister 1993).

## **Leaving Home**

Leaving Transkei was always a matter of necessity, according to my interviewees (cf. Cock 1980), usually precipitated by a crisis such as the death of the breadwinner, whether husband or father. Sarah H. aged 45, was left without any means of support when her husband died suddenly in 1970. Typically, when a crisis or death occurred in a family forcing a woman to migrate in search of work, employment was found in the first instance through the recommendation of a kin member who was already working in the city. Sarah said she decided to come to Durban to look for work as it was the nearest large urban centre to her home in Umzinkulu (about 200 kms away) and her husband's uncle's wife was working in Durban at the time 'so she brought me to Durban'. This relative also obtained a job as a domestic worker for Sarah. The necessity of having a kin member who could 'smooth the path' for the incoming migrant was because Section 10 of the Bantu Areas Consolidation Act made it illegal for African women to enter so-called 'white areas' to look for employment. Job seekers who wandered the streets of cities in search of work were in danger of being rounded up by Bantu Affairs officials and 'endorsed out' or sent back to the homelands. It thus became important for job seekers to have someone in town who could recommend them to prospective employers and thus circumvent the apartheid regulations.

Sometimes parents were able to offer a widowed daughter a home when her husband died, but a number of women were forced to move out of the parental home when their parents in turn passed on. Amy M's husband died when her son was six years old and she returned to her parents' home. She came to Durban in 1956 after her father died. 'There was no one at home to look after my child and myself' she said. 'My brothers had no means of helping me, they had their own families to support'. It would appear that the position of sister in a married brother's home is an unenviable one, and that women prefer to migrate rather than live with a brother and his wife, or are asked to leave.

While in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the Transkei was regarded as a bountiful arable and pastoral farming area, supporting many African peasant families who were able to sell surplus produce and earn a reasonable livelihood (Bundy 1979) by the 1980s the proclamation of the Transkei and Ciskei as labour reserves or 'homelands' by the apartheid

regime had resulted for a majority of their inhabitants in near famine conditions exacerbated by drought and the death of livestock. Greenberg notes (2003:114) that lack of land and resources did not even allow agricultural production in the Bantustans to meet subsistence requirements.

The collapse of rural farming contributed to the inability of extended families to provide for family members who had fallen on hard times as tradition dictated should be the practice. Maria M never married and after passing Standard Eight at a government school in Tsolo, taught privately for two years. She came to Durban at the suggestion of a cousin after her parents died. In this way, the cousin said, she would not have to embarrass her married brothers by asking for support. Gloria Q. was able to live with her two illegitimate children at her parents' home in Libode until her children reached school going age when she was forced to migrate to Durban to earn cash to pay for school fees, books and uniforms.

In some cases, death forcing migration was repeated in the following generation. Evelyn M was 60 years of age at the time I interviewed her in 1985. After her husband died, leaving her with one daughter, a cousin found her a job as a domestic worker with an Indian family in Durban. She left her daughter to be brought up by relatives in the Transkei. The daughter married and had three children. In 1985 the daughter's husband died and she in her turn was forced to leave her children with an aunt and come to Durban where she worked as an unregistered domestic worker for an African family in the Umlazi township. Evelyn said her daughter's late husband's family are all dead and thus cannot assist in caring for the children.

Some women were supporting grandchildren in the Transkei when their own children were unable to do so. Beauty M was 70 in 1985. She came to Durban in 1950 after her husband died in order to support her children who were left behind in Transkei. One of her sons (who has since died) had four children, while another son became ill and thus unable to work. Beauty said she was therefore paying for the education of six grandchildren in the Transkei. Her daughters-in-law were unemployed. Beauty's history suggests that those women who obtained paid employment in the city were morally bound to support kin in the rural areas who could not survive on their own. Many of the women I interviewed had children who were unable to find any sort of paid work when they left school, a situation that is unchanged today thirty years later. Caroline H said her eldest son, aged 25, could not find

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work because he was paralysed as a result of a fight and did not receive a disability payment. Her second son, aged 19, had visited Durban to look for work but because he did not have any 'papers' (identity documents) he was forced to return to Transkei. The R20 or R30 which Caroline managed to send home each month out of her salary of R50 went to support her two sons and a daughter who was still at school. Ina S. aged 62 supported her aged mother, her own daughter and three grandchildren in the Transkei. She claimed to send between R60 and R100 of her R118 monthly salary back to the family in Transkei each month. Ina's daughter, aged 36, looked after her grandmother and her own children. She was unable to be registered as a worker in the city and therefore the burden fell on Ina who was registered because she had been working in the city since 1956 when her husband died. A number of women in my sample were prepared to take the risk of being fined or imprisoned and sent back to Transkei after coming to Durban and working illegally. There seemed no other way to prevent their families from starving in the rural areas.

Some women came to Durban without any helping hand. Goodness Q said she had no relatives or friends in Durban but decided it was cheaper to come to Durban than migrate elsewhere when she was forced to leave Transkei. When she arrived she said she 'looked for Indian families for work'. She had heard 'there is work among Indians. They take anyone' (meaning unregistered work seekers) but this comes at a cost, 'they can pay less if we are not registered'. An unregistered domestic worker was less likely to leave an employer if she could not find work legally elsewhere and this led to frequent exploitation with some women willing to work for very low wages (R50 per month in 1985) because they felt they had no alternative. Living conditions for these women were also harsh. Harriet M lived in her employer's flat for ten years, sleeping in the kitchen, until she was able to be registered and to move to Thokoza hostel, not far from her place of work.

While most of the women interviewed had little or no assistance from male kin or boyfriends but in turn looked after men, some of the younger women in the sample were able to get work in the city through male contacts. Veronica M came to work in Durban with her boyfriend in 1980 in order to support her small children in Transkei. She and her boyfriend initially stayed with friends in the large township of Kwa-Mashu outside Durban and Veronica worked for a Coloured family in the nearby Coloured

township of Newlands East. When the boyfriend was forced to leave the household 'because he wasn't working' Veronica managed to find lodgings with an *induna* (Zulu headman) who found her a job working at a beachfront hotel in Durban. The hotel manager wrote a letter to the Thokoza hostel management enabling Veronica to get accommodation there, much nearer to her work than Kwa-Mashu. Veronica and other mostly younger women, who managed to find work as cleaners or tea-makers in businesses were better paid and had shorter working hours than those who worked as domestics for white families.

Most of the women interviewed displayed considerable resourcefulness and initiative in their efforts to find work in the city. Domestic work was (and is) notoriously badly paid (Cock 1980:28) but there were few alternatives available to black women who, under apartheid laws, were classed as foreigners in South Africa because they were born in labour reserves designated as 'homelands' for African people which were granted a spurious 'independence'.

One alternative which some women tried was work as a nurse aide. Mary H, aged 57, decided after 15 years of working as a domestic helper for a white family to train as a nurse aide. She applied to the St John Ambulance society and completed her training while working at a nursing home for the elderly. Mary said that while her pay at the nursing home used to be good in comparison with domestic service, it was less so with the present high rate of inflation. Mary felt that working conditions for nurse aides were poor, and said she might have to work for 14 days continuously in order to get one day off and that she was not given any food at work. Dorcas, who trained as an enrolled nurse in the Transkei, came to Durban because of the appallingly low wages paid in Transkei (only two or three rands a month in 1960). Dorcas worked at a hospital in Durban and also at a centre for mentally handicapped children but left in 1983 'because there was no free time', only Fridays and the nursing assistants were refused a free weekend. Significantly, Dorcas said nursing was not something she chose to do, it was a means of earning a living.

Cock (1980:307) described domestic service as a 'strategy of survival' for her informants in the Eastern Cape, 'they are propelled into domestic service in order to support themselves and their families'. Yet she also writes that 'push and pull factors are closely intertwined' and that



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among the 'pull' factors 'the most obvious are the opportunities for earning money in towns, and a desire for a degree of independence and prestige not available in the rural context'. The desire for independence, financial or otherwise was not mentioned by women I interviewed. None said she had come to Durban willingly. A similar attitude is evinced by migrant women elsewhere in Africa. For instance, Bryceson (1985:144) writing about Tanzanian migrant women says 'events of a personal nature in the lives of women migrants, reinforced by social pressures within the village, provided the final impetus'.

Although only 5% of the women in my sample were married at the time of the interviews, 90% had children and a number had grandchildren. These family members had to be left behind in Transkei in almost all cases and could only be visited during the annual holiday of a few weeks around Christmas time. 'I like Transkei but I have to come here, they got no work there, nothing' was a typical response to the question whether the interviewee preferred living in Transkei to living in Durban. Another respondent said she could only go 'home' when her youngest child was able to work, 'otherwise there is no one to support the others'. Several respondents made remarks such as 'I don't know when I will go back (permanently) but I want to go'. However, Bank's research in East London among male migrants revealed that those migrants who were most vociferous about wanting to return permanently to their rural homes were in fact the least likely to do so and often those who returned least often on visits. 'Home' was a marker of ethnic identity, a reference point of who one was, rather than a realistic point of return.

The link with the rural home was mainly made by my women interviewees through the money they remitted to Transkei. In most cases, but not all, the monthly sum was intended to pay school fees or buy food and clothes for children, grandchildren or siblings' children. In some cases elderly parents were also supported. Again, this appears to be the case elsewhere in Africa. Bryceson writes that in Tanzania, 'in the case of the death of a parent, especially a father, responsibility is thrown on the adult offspring to ensure the economic well-being of a widowed parent ... daughters as well as sons are solicited by their parents' (1985:144). Eva S. aged 54, came to Durban after her father died initially to earn money to support her mother. Her elder brother was disabled and unable to work while

the younger brother had absconded and the family did not know his whereabouts. During her stay in Durban Eva acquired a boyfriend, a Xhosa man, by whom she had three children. However, he later deserted her, 'he just ran away' as she put it. Thus even after Eva's mother died she was forced to continue to work in Durban to support her children who were being brought up at her home in Mount Fletcher. Eva found a woman there to care for the children, 'not a relative but someone who was living at the family homestead as part of the family'. Eva's two elder children passed Matric and trained as teachers in Mount Fletcher, the youngest is still at school. Although not obliged to send as much money home now as formerly, Eva said she still does so when it is necessary 'for instance when they are ploughing'. Bank (1995) noted that for migrants with stable jobs in East London, being able to contribute to a ploughing team in the rural area was an indicator of commitment to the rural extended family more than about the extent of the migrant's resources, 'those who claimed that they hired tractors (or had stopped ploughing altogether) usually did not visit their homes very frequently'.

Despite the many years of working in Durban, 95% of the women I interviewed said they intended returning to their homes in Transkei at some unspecified future date – 'when I get a pension' or 'when my children are working'. It was apparent, however, that residents of Thokoza did not retire to Transkei but ended their lives in Durban.

Dumisani confirmed that the women finally returned to Transkei only for burial 'their relatives always come to collect them' she said. The women were reluctant to admit that their position as elderly women in a rural homestead would be more precarious than at the hostel in Durban. Dumisani noted that in the rural areas, the elderly have to pay others to collect firewood and water for them when they can no longer do so themselves. Phumeza, a married woman living in a rural part of Transkei had this to say when interviewed by Leslie Bank in 1994:

I can forget the rural areas. If it was my choice I would sell the livestock and give up the homestead for a life in the city. There is always a shortage of food in the rural areas. There is nothing a woman can do except send requests to her husband and hope that he will respond. It is truly a miserable life.

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David Coplan writing of Basotho migrants notes that upon marriage a woman passes from the jural control of her father to that of her husband or agnates. While a man's identity derives from the chief who controls the land where he homesteads, as Chief Jobo said in 1873 'a woman has no chief but her husband' (Duncan 1960:5, quoted in Coplan 1994). Similar sentiments were expressed by Pondo king Ndamase Ndamase at his wedding in September, 2011 'I love my wife very much but MaDosini ought to know that here there is no democracy. As a man I am the head of the family and my wife is to play a supporting role'<sup>1</sup> Coplan comments that while to Basotho men migration meant wage bondage, to a woman paradoxically South Africa represented something like freedom, '... town is the only place where a woman's chief might be herself, rather than her husband' (1994:171).

The women I interviewed did not say that they could count on support from their children in their old age. Annie N was still working as a domestic at the age of 67 to support herself and a daughter still at school in Transkei. Her married son had supported her for three years some time before when she was ill and unable to work, but she said she would not automatically expect him to do so, although he does give her money if she asks for it.

Edna H, aged 50, was perhaps typical of these middle-aged women when she said 'I do intend to go home one day because I need my own house' but she was not sure if her children would support her. One was studying to become a lawyer, although she did not know where, and the other was a teacher. Out of her meagre earnings of R70 per month in 1985 Edna continued to send money home for food for her children in their holidays and she had paid for their education. Wages were so low in Transkei that even if an adult child did manage to find employment, the wage was often not enough to support a parent as well. Flora J was a widow of 59 with a son who worked at a general dealer's store at Bizana in Pondoland. From her monthly earnings of R120 Flora sent home R50 to an aunt whom she supported. She said she would prefer to live in Transkei but that there was no one there to support her and that she would have to continue working in Durban as long as she was physically able to do so.

Despite their apparent inability to retire to Transkei, most of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Daily Dispatch*, 5.9.11 p. 3.

women I spoke to did manage to spend their annual leave of two to three weeks there which was their main way of maintaining their links with their rural homes and families. Evelyn M, for instance, sent R60 each month to maintain her property at Qumbu. The money went towards paying for the dipping tank for the cattle, for hiring a tractor, for ploughing and for taxes. Evelyn said she owned four cows. Maria H said she sends between R100 and R50 each month out of her wages to her son in Lusikisiki to maintain her home there. Although she described her son as an assistant manager at a store in Lusikisiki, Maria did not expect him to support her if she went home and said she would apply for a disability pension, 'then I will go home, I like it better at home'.

Catherine Cross has suggested that agriculture in the homelands often acted as an emergency backstop for the rural household economy but that it was not a viable alternative to wage employment because of the high risk involved in the unpredictable environment. There was a relatively high demand for working capital, an irregular and inconvenient demand for labour, difficulty in marketing crops and unpredictable cyclical returns instead of a regular cash income. Cross commented 'even for a person with the necessary skills, either wage work or many forms of informal activity were seen as preferable to farming' (1985: 6). This comment is supported by Maria M's observation that she would like to be a hawker in Transkei when she got her pension and returned there. She felt that that would be a good way of making money to supplement her pension which was barely enough to live on.

While for most of the women interviewed their rural homes were viewed as 'safety-nets', they were clearly not a refuge they hoped to have to use. It was clear from the little they knew of their children's circumstances that they had not seen them recently or had rare contact with them and their real support lay with the women they worked and lived among in the city. At the same time, the Transkei was their birthplace and they were keen to impress on me that they thought of their rural homes as their only 'proper' home and felt they ought to be there, circumstances having propelled them to the city. These views were associated with the city being seen, even in 1985, as a potential place of moral ruin where young women from the countryside could easily be led astray and fall victim to men who would impregnate them and then disappear. Some of the women said they would not allow their

unmarried daughters to come to Durban, because the city was not a suitable place for unmarried girls.

### **Life in Thokoza Hostel**

Fourie (1976: 55) noted that the older, more conservative women were more dependent on the hostel and its activities, than the younger women residents. In the case of women over 55 their ties with their rural homes had faded, and even when they had adult children they had to remain in the hostel as their children 'did not want them'. These women had either never married or were widowed. Thokoza was essential to their lives, and they found friends and entertainment mostly inside the hostel. Prayer meetings were held every night in the hostel, attended by the older residents, and there was also a branch of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) which taught members to cook and sew and also was engaged in fighting the Natal Code for African Women which aimed to force black women to carry the hated pass books.

My interviewees said that church attendance took up what little free time they had. Annie M said she attended Church of England services in Montclair, 'the same church as at home (in Transkei)'. Other denominations included Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist and Presbyterian. Such established or mainline churches have a long history in Transkei (cf. Mayer and Mayer 1961). Given the 'school' background and comparatively high level of education of the women in my sample *vis-à-vis* most domestic workers of the time, it is not surprising that the women maintained their church affiliation on moving to Durban. Sunday and weekday services provided an opportunity to meet friends in a congenial atmosphere while choral singing was considered an enjoyable recreational activity. Most of the women were also members of the various mother's unions, known as *manyano*, run by their churches and employers were expected to give their domestic workers Thursday afternoons off to attend these meetings. Only one woman interviewed was a member of a Zionist (syncretistic) church where services were held 'around the corner (from Thokoza) in the park', although Zionist churches are known to recruit their members from the poorest paid workers such as domestics (Kiernan 1976). There was also only one respondent who said she did not attend any church as she was 'red' or *iqaba*.

This designation was applied to Transkei men and women who rejected western ideology and education and who could be recognized by the red clay they used to smear on their faces and bodies. Clara N said neither she nor any of her five siblings was sent to school because her father disapproved of western education.

The companionship of friends met either through church or at the hostel was obviously very important to the women I interviewed who came from the Transkei. Only a few women who were under forty said they had boyfriends in Durban. A typical response from the older women was ‘I don’t have a boyfriend. I don’t like them’. There was certainly an impression that sexual relations were inappropriate for older women but in almost all cases these women had been abandoned by the fathers of their children or widowed. They were therefore forced to become not only self-supporting financially but to support members of their own or extended families. The hardships and trauma suffered in their lives made them understandably wary of men and inclined to turn to women friends for emotional support and friendship. Ethnic affiliation did not seem to play a role in the choice of friends as a majority said they had both Xhosa and Zulu friends, although, as I describe later there were many examples of women stereotyping each other at the hostel recorded by Fourie.

Age was a different matter. Fourie described attending the annual Christmas party organized by the Matron and hostel committee each year. Only the older women, together with children who stayed in the hostel during the school holidays, took part in the singing and dancing. Fourie records (1977: 57) ‘Not many young women were present at the Christmas party, and none of them actively participated in it. Some said ‘It’s for the older people’ and ‘why are men not allowed?’’ Younger women, under thirty, had a very different view of the hostel to the middle-aged residents. They spent a major part of their leisure time with their boyfriends, and since they were not allowed to bring the men to their hostel rooms, (men were allowed in the foyer area of the hostel and into the main lounge) they often slept with them in nearby Indian hotels, the boyfriend paying for the room. For these women, the hostel was only a place to keep their possessions, and do cooking and laundry.

The ability of my Xhosa informants to make friends with Zulu women may have been aided by common residence in Thokoza hostel. Fourie

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records that in 1975 a third of the hostel residents were Xhosa speaking and two thirds Zulu (1977: 30). Thokoza is not only the only hostel for African women in the magisterial area of Durban, but its location within walking distance of the city centre, near Indian shops (which sold goods more cheaply than white owned ones) and close to a large vegetable market, made it a desirable place to stay for women who worked in the 'white' areas of Durban. Records suggest that Thokoza hostel was first occupied in 1927 and that it was built on the site of a school for African children run by St. Faith's Anglican Church.

Thokoza was not the original name of the hostel, which was the Native Women's Hostel. Fourie records that the matron at the time she conducted her interviews (and who had been matron for 25 years) encouraged residents to vote for a new name. Thokoza (meaning 'happiness') was chosen and submitted to the Durban Corporation. Thokoza was managed by the Durban Corporation for most of its history, although in 1984 it was administered by the Port Natal Bantu Affairs Administration Board.

Deborah Gaitskell, writing on church hostels for African women in Johannesburg between 1907 and 1970 (1979) notes that these hostels 'were in a sense attempts to set up Christian compounds for girls, centres of accommodation which would limit the free movement (especially at night) and supervise employment of African females, most of whom were domestic servants'. Key differences between these church hostels and those of the mine compounds were that the former were intent on providing not only safe accommodation but constructive use of leisure time under the supervision of a 'kindly Christian matron' so as to avoid the temptations of sexual corruption prevalent in the cities. These Christian hostels, replicated in Cape Town and Pretoria, aimed to assist in replacing African male domestic servants with females for white families. Accommodation in the hostels avoided the 'backyard shacks' which were believed to expose young girls from the countryside to the temptations of men and drink. These Christian hostels were modelled on the late Victorian 'Girls Friendly Society' in Britain which aimed to function as a domestic workers employment bureau in addition to keeping working class women 'off the street' (Harrison cited by Gaitskell 1977: 47). African leaders such as Sol Plaatje, responding to questionnaires regarding the 'Black Peril' of African men working in close proximity to white women responded by alleging that white women on

occasion assaulted black men ‘There are more Potiphar’s wives than we care to believe in Johannesburg tho’ not many Josephs’ (ibid. 49). Olive Schreiner drew attention to the peril to black women of working in close proximity to white men, a different sort of ‘White Peril’.

One of the early hostels for African women in Johannesburg was the Helping Hand Club for Native Girls in Fairview, started by the Congregationalist American Board which provided accommodation and general recreational facilities for young African women. Efforts to build more hostels for African women in Johannesburg’s suburbs nearer to where the women worked were met with fierce resistance from white homeowners, who, despite employing the very same women who would be accommodated in the hostels held rowdy meetings where members of Rate Payers Associations opposed such plans and shouted ‘Not in Norwood’. Similar opposition occurred in Orange Grove and elsewhere (Gaitskell 1977: 55).

The similarity of Thokoza to these mission hostels lay in the vision of the white matron to have the residents of the hostel ‘treat it like a home’. This unlikely eventuality she tried to promote via instituting a residents’ committee to oversee personal interactions in the hostel, formulating rules ‘which are oriented to help the crowded living conditions’, fund raising for the annual Christmas party and the invitation to members of the Inkatha Women’s Brigade to speak at the hostel, resulting in the formation of a branch of the movement at the hostel (Fourie 1977: 18). The Women’s Brigade was the female section of the Inkatha Freedom Party, a Zulu nationalist organization founded and run by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi which promoted conservative Zulu values and was a valuable associate of the Nationalist apartheid officialdom through dominance in the mine hostels by male Inkatha supporters. The dying years of apartheid saw a virtual civil war, centred around the mine hostels but extending into the countryside between Inkatha traditionalists and supporters of the still banned African National Congress.

Despite the matron’s wish that Thokoza be regarded as a home rather than an institution by its residents, it was an unremarkable grey painted three storied building in the so-called ‘Indian’ area of Durban, Grey Street built around an open courtyard with one entrance for the occupants and a separate one for the matron’s car, which she parked inside. The matron occupied a flat on the premises but her interaction with the women was



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limited to members of the 'committee' whom she occasionally invited to her flat and, somewhat incongruously, from time to time to go to the races with her.

In 1975 Thokoza had 677 beds in dormitories and some rooms, with three beds in each, but women also slept in the courtyards and passages. In 1975 women paid 5c per day to live in the hostel but this had risen to R17.50 per month for a bed in a room in 1984 at the time of my interviews. Facilities at Thokoza, the numbers of bathrooms, showers, toilets and kitchen hot plates, Fourie found were considered generally inadequate for so many people but they were kept clean by residents and the management committee of residents, and fourteen staff supervised by the matron.

Two of the residents prepared food in the kitchen for sale as a means of making a living and there was also a shop on the premises. Any resident who was caught consuming alcohol in the hostel or who swore or fought with other residents was evicted or 'asked to leave' as the hostel regulations put it. Apart from dormitories and rooms the hostel also had a lounge with tables, chairs and a radiogram. This was the place where meetings, either religious or of various clubs, and concerts were held.

The overcrowding had one positive advantage as far as the residents were concerned, which was that pass books were seldom checked as that 'would have been an impossibility for those in authority, considering the number of residents in the hostel' (1977:13). It was thus possible for unregistered women to live at Thokoza and not worry about being deported back to Transkei as was often the case for those living in their employer's back yard. Some of the women I interviewed were brought to the hostel by kin already living there, but most gained admission after their employers had written letters to the Matron asking for them to be admitted. Fourie records that 'a woman may enter the hostel if she has a job in Durban or surrounding areas and has no other place to stay, either in Durban or the African townships' (1977: 12). The major advantage of being able to live at Thokoza was the relaxed atmosphere of the hostel with the only formal rule being 'no fighting or swearing allowed' according to one resident (1977:32). Residents could come and go as they wished at any hour of the day or night and did not need passes to leave the hostel. Fourie noted that this relaxed form of administration contrasted strongly with that of the mine hostels.

While overcrowded, the neatness of the spaces inhabited by the

women appears to contrast strongly with Ramphele's account of municipal hostels for migrant workers in Langa in Cape Town (1993: 30). In Langa the prevailing impression was of a sordid existence with pervasive garbage and dirt as well as overcrowding indicative of squalid, degrading facilities. Ramphele notes that hostels may be seen as one example of what Goffman has called a 'total institution', erected to fulfil the demands of the apartheid state for a compliant labour force. While most of the hostels in the Cape and the Witwatersrand catered for a male migrant work force, a large proportion of the inhabitants of these hostels were women and children. This was not the case at Thokoza, where, although men were allowed to visit residents, they were not allowed to stay. Children, on the other hand, were allowed to stay with their mothers for short periods in school holidays. Thokoza was, in effect, a female world, and in this aspect resembled the Helping Hand Club in Johannesburg and other church hostels, forerunners of the YWCA and YMCA hostels, and evidence of a Victorian belief in the necessity of separating unmarried persons of different sexes.

### **Ethnic Hostility among Residents of Thokoza**

Fourie records that in 1975 a third of the hostel residents were Xhosa speaking and two thirds Zulu (1977: 30), with the Xhosa women originating almost entirely from Pondoland and the Mount Frere area, those closest to Natal. The Xhosa women I interviewed also came from similar areas west of the Umzimkulu river. The matron spoke fluent Zulu and conducted all her dealing with residents in Zulu. Rules were also written in Zulu. Despite the use of Zulu, Fourie noted that the matron strongly disapproved of 'inter-tribal animosity' which was forbidden (1977:35).

'Inter-tribal animosity' seems to have been a code for physical fighting and the random allocation of beds was supposed to prevent ethnic groups forming which could have led to fights. The conclusion to the set of rules handed to residents was 'Help the Matron and Committee to make this hostel a place of happiness and think about others and be respectful and behave yourselves well and be clean'. Despite this injunction, Fourie records that the perpetual overcrowding in the rooms, along with competition for hot water and space on the washing lines led to friction which was often expressed in ethnic terms. One Xhosa informant said 'there is apartheid even

among the Africans' while both Zulu and Xhosa women characterized the other as being 'very fond of fighting'. Zulu residents characterized Xhosa women as 'very clever', while being at the same time snobbish, noisy and inconsiderate, while Xhosa women saw Zulus as 'savage' and believing too much in *abathakathi* or witchcraft. One Zulu long term resident who was a prominent member of Inkatha expressed the hope to Fourie that with the 'independence' of Transkei Xhosa would not be allowed to register as work seekers in Durban and they would all have to return home (1977: 65). It seems in the light of such remarks that the comments of the women I interviewed that they had both Zulu and Xhosa friends may have been an unwillingness to admit to me that ethnic stereotypes abounded in the hostel and that friendships were formed mainly along ethnic lines.

## **Conclusion**

The migrant labour system in South Africa drove women as well as men from the labour reserves to seek a livelihood in the towns and cities of South Africa. Rural life in Transkei was hard at best, but in times of drought and famine such as the 1980s unsupportable. My Xhosa female informants were comparatively well educated at government and former mission schools but unable to find any work near to their homes. Their journey to Durban ended with employment mostly as domestic servants in white households in the suburbs although sometimes as nurse aides or shop assistants. Challenges which the women faced included the notorious influx control regulations which obliged African women from the rural areas to have worked for one employer continuously for ten years before being able to obtain a 'pass' or permission to look for work in an urban area. Residence in Thokoza, the only hostel for African women in the magisterial area of Durban, allowed for some evasion of the pass laws and companionship among fellow migrants. The rules, restrictions and overcrowding of the hostel, while unpleasant, were clearly preferred to the poverty and harshness of rural life. Yet 'home' for these women was part of their identity, giving meaning to their construction of who they were in the context of a majority of speakers of different ethnicities. The opportunity to earn a wage, however small, in the city, enabled these women to 'build the homestead' in the sense of supporting relatives back home and contributing to what would normally be a

male preserve. The insistence of the women I interviewed on their commitment to financially supporting dependents in the homeland was accompanied by what appeared to be fragile ties between them and their children or relatives there, to the extent that many said if they went home they would have to depend on a pension as they could not rely on relatives to support them.

Thokoza hostel provided a place of safety for these Xhosa migrant women in a Zulu-speaking city, who had been extruded from the labour reserves by the death of a husband or father or the need to provide for children. The company of women of similar age and interests in the context of the hostel took the place of the family life they should have been able to enjoy among their relatives. Thokoza hostel was clearly modelled by the matron on similar institutions in Johannesburg and elsewhere run on similar lines to Victorian evangelical Christian institutions with the aim of keeping girls and young women away from the moral dangers of the city. At the same time the hostel's emphasis on divisions of age, education and ethnic groupings bore witness to the role of re-imagining rural tradition in town which has been commented on in most writings on the role of hostels in maintaining the labour migrancy system in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thokoza hostel no longer exists. With the ending of apartheid and the formation of a democratic government in South Africa the laws and regulations which maintained the labour migrancy system and consequent demand for single sex hostel accommodation ceased.

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