

**PART THREE**

**MKHUMBANE, THE 'HOTTEST PLACE IN DURBAN'? STRUCTURES OF DAILY LIFE, CLASS,**

**LEADERSHIP AND POLITICS IN MKHUMBANE 1949-1961**

## Introduction

The land occupied by Africans in Cato Manor Farm was contested space in which various parties claimed authority. Apart from the area being Indian-owned and within the municipal boundaries, it was also an area which became ever more central within the state's plans to allow the spatial and social features of Durban. It was within this very area African shack dwellers had created their own society. Whilst this shackland society was not to conform to the 'social order of state hegemony', as Cooper writes about shack settlements in general, shantytowns like Mkhumbane were, as Cooper maintains "rarely as anarchic as the terms used to describe them suggest - 'irregular', 'spontaneous', 'illegal' ..."1

A central characteristic of shantytown life in the Mkhumbane area during the 1950s was the way in which certain structures of everyday life acquired a virtual immutability. At this level the routines of daily life seemed to be perpetuated in an unchanging fashion. In describing these routines Bourquin commented that "you could walk around the shacks in the day and things were very normal. Just the constant hum of flies and music."<sup>2</sup> However other aspects of shack life were susceptible to change. Colin Shum remembers,

There was those moments when you could just sense that things were not right. On the surface of everything was OK, but there was an edge to peoples' voices. Later you would hear that so-and-so had been killed, or someone's shack burnt down and that people had become edgy. It was then that things could easily turn nasty. For everyone, I must say, not just me.<sup>3</sup>

Such changes could occur either dramatically or in a less obvious fashion over a longer time span. Often such changes would neither be initiated nor controlled by shack residents themselves. Whilst the shack residents had in many ways created their own social structures, society was often unstable. Daily routines could easily be disrupted.

Such tensions produced a social fabric in which the shantytown residents were faced with particular forces which both compelled continuity and initiated change. The shebeen queen, the tsotsi, the shacklords and the ordinary worker all have their own history; periods of crisis and stability, and differing life experiences. However none of the residents of the shacklands could remain completely autonomous or removed from the constraints which shantytown life imposed on them.

As a result of their material impoverishment and their life in an area still very much a contested terrain, shack dwellers sought to maintain a regularity in their daily existence. Daily life became dominated by routine practices. If, as Braudel has written in a different context, people "usually remained within the limits of the possible, it was because [their] feet were sunk in this clay."<sup>4</sup>

---

1. Cooper, *Struggle*, p 32.

2. Interview with Mr S Bourquin, 8 September 1980.

3. Interview with Mr C N Shum, 20 June 1985.

4. F Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800*, (London, 1974), p ix.

After the riots, residents' discussions about their future in Mkhumbane always involved some consideration of the role which the municipality might play. With the development of the Emergency Camp, residents would still discuss their ability to achieve certain strategic gains through either negotiating or aligning with the municipality. Nevertheless, attempts to accomplish these aims were to occur in a completely different context: the increasingly poor conditions in an Emergency Camp where there was no prospect of ensuring permanent African ownership of the land and housing of Mkhumbane.

For long the lives of shackland residents had been dominated by the desire to sustain their livelihood in the city, ensure to the permanence of their residence in Mkhumbane and exert a decisive influence over the very nature of shackland society. Rooted in the very nature of shack life was a political culture: the struggle to reduce or control the adverse effects of proletarianization. Sustained within the context of a broader proletarian populism, throughout the later 1940s shack residents attempted to gain increasing material and political security both within Mkhumbane and the city.

From the riots of January 1949, shack residents' struggles to achieve these goals was to be made substantially more complex. Already ridden with internal contradictions, during the 1950s various features of both shantytown life and the relationship between the shacklands and the city in general changed in important ways. Many elements of material life remained immutable. Aspects of daily life had acquired a changed in ways which affected various residents in very different and often highly contradictory ways.

For shack residents, the riots of January 1949 were of the utmost significance. It was during these riots that shantytown residents believed they had liberated Mkhumbane. If the area had not been finally won, then their claim to own land and property in the area had surely been very forcefully made. However in addition to the fact that legal tenure to the land had not been changed, it was after the riots that the municipality became ever more determined to both control and ultimately destroy the shacklands.

With the development of the Cato Manor Emergency Camp the municipality assumed direct ownership of the land of Mkhumbane and endeavoured to restructure the basis of shack life. Focussing immediately on breaking the power of the African shacklords as the means to reconstitute the nature of tenancy within the shacks, the municipality initially desired to resettle all shack residents into single-site, single-tenant homes built according to specified standards. However the complexities of land ownership, shack ownership and tenancy arrangements in Mkhumbane constituted a considerable impediment to such policy. In many other ways municipal policy was however far easier to implement. For some, the development of the Emergency Camp led to an improvement in material conditions of shack life. A direct result of other municipal actions in the area led to a general deterioration of living standards in the Emergency Camp. From the late 1950s onwards the problems of population density, housing, health and sanitation in Mkhumbane were more serious than those evident in the Mkhumbane of the later 1940s.

There was also a far larger canvas to the changing relationship between Mkhumbane and the city. Although the residents of the area had always expressed the need for improved residential facilities, the vast majority opposed removal to single-site, single-tenant, nuclear-family and hostel residence Kwa Mashu. Likewise, throughout the 1950s, the changing nature of capital accumulation in the city and the nature of state

intervention in urban African life affected various residents of the shantytowns in different ways. Growing evidence of the pervasive influence which the state and shack residents' growing awareness of just how determined both state and capital were in assuming greater control over their lives led to varying responses from shack residents.

Coming alongside and steadily more intertwined with both municipal development of the Emergency Camp and broader moves by both the state and capital to transform African labour and residence in Durban came increasing indications of growing class consciousness amongst the shackland residents. Significantly, the first real indications of such developments came with the rise of African entrepreneurs and the development of the Emergency Camp.

The shantytown leaders of the late 1940s were mainly shacklords, shackshop traders, co-operative leaders, other small scale entrepreneurs and those 'bush lawyers' and 'nobodies' who gave intellectual substance to proletarian demands. Yet the very waning of populist fervour in the shantytowns was directly related to the very manner in which many such persons acquired increasing material wealth and sought legitimacy through municipal recognition of their leadership positions in Mkhumbane. Despite initial municipal attempts to control their power, many shacklords, who during and immediately after the riots of January 1949, had expanded their renting activities, kept unto themselves a substantial measure of power. Similarly, with the municipality allowing some African entrepreneurs to legalize their operations, many of the shackshop and co-operative leaders became prosperous business operators. In many ways the very fact of municipal authority in the area allowed such persons to gain that increased measure of control over some of the material resources essential to residential life in Mkhumbane that they had been unable to achieve during the later 1940s. Other shack residents both perceived and resented the growing wealth and political ambitions of what was clearly a new trading class.

However shack life had its own inherent internal contradictions. Against the social tensions within shack residents was balanced the residents' all too evident awareness of the need for community unity. The constant struggle to both create and ensure to the continued viability of a shackland community was often uppermost in peoples' minds. For this reason, residents could hardly ignore a leadership element, despite these persons' increasing distance from the ordinary shack dweller. In the same way, although during the 1950s many shack residents became involved in struggles over issues only tangentially related to residential life, the very nature of an insecure domestic and residential environment made the need for a community unit all the more pressing.

There were however deeper more fundamental reasons for the emergence of increasing class conflict within the shacklands. The shantytown population was a heterogeneous one within which a sense of populist unity was an attempt to bind people together in a sense of community unity. Populism also gave a meaning to the material inter-connections which developed through the shantytowns' own internal productive and redistributive economic structures. But as many recalled, by around 1949, the 'fertilizer' which sustained such an economic structure had gone. As wages were further reduced during the 1950s and with the increasing influence which the new African trading class gained within the shacklands, the struggle to make ends meet

produced increasing signs of class conflict within Mkhumbane. Along with a process of accelerating social differentiation occurring between hostel and township residents came social differentiation within Mkhumbane. This was a process which was particularly skewed in Mkhumbane. As the 1950s progressed it became apparent that by far the majority of men resident in the shantytowns and fully employed worked in various forms of unskilled labour. Further, the tensions between a need for community unity and social differentiation was compounded by the growing numbers of unemployed, youths and other dependents resident in the shacklands.

Through both characteristics of local capitalist production and the very commonality of daily experience in the shacklands, there was a sense of proletarian identity, which whilst opposed to the position of the new shantytown elite, nevertheless made little distinctions within the proletariat. However by mid-1950s from within the shacklands came increasing indications of a new working class consciousness. In many ways taking advantage of some of the improved facilities provided by various outside institutions or organizations, and often with the working class often now living as municipal tenants, this new working class identity was based around the increasingly more difficult struggle to secure a livelihood within the city. Accepting the notion of industrial labour, upholding concepts of sobriety, decency and normality often heavily fostered by women, an African working class began to develop a broader range of strategies to resist their exploitation. Many saw in industrial unionism the key to their future power within the city.

But the level of politicization amongst many ordinary residents of Mkhumbane was still low. The constraints of daily life and the nature of African labour within the city made for many ambivalences within all aspects of proletarian consciousness. Through changes within the shantytowns and between the shantytown and the city, the heady days of the later 1940s were long since gone. Further, the growth of organized trade unionism under SACTU was slow. Organizationally SACTU was often weak while many of this organization's strategies failed to correctly reflect the attitudes of a working class resident in Mkhumbane. This was to change in dramatic ways, but only after the removals to Kwa Mashu.

One of the central themes in the historiography of the ANC during the 1950s concerns the issue of why this organization was so unable to gain increased support among urban Africans during a period when conditions seemed to be so opportune.<sup>5</sup> During this period Africans faced increasing material hardships and their workplace and residential lives were being restructured in ways more dramatic than in any other period in the history of industrial capital in South Africa. Furthermore neither the state nor employers indicated any real eagerness to seek, let alone gain, any legitimacy for established authority within this very African population.

Yet in many ways the question can be considered falsely posed, suggesting that the very aims and strategies of a well developed organization should have gained adherence within the African proletariat. Throughout the 1950s, the ANC was beset with financial and administrative problems. The reasons for the organization's failure to establish a powerful support base among the proletariat in the shacklands of Mkhumbane prior to the June 1959 beerhall riots are however more complex. The constraints of daily life in the

---

5. For similar analysis see Lodge *Politics*.

shacklands were such that shackland political consciousness was often both ill-developed or introverted. For various reasons many shackdwellers objected to various aspects of ANC policy or organizational structure.

African political activity within shantytown and city was to be dramatically altered with the outbreak of sustained rioting during and after the June 1959 beerhall riots in Mkhumbane. The riots were partly led by the ANC, but in the main initiated by the underclasses - illicit entrepreneurs and women for whom municipal shack demolition and removals posed an absolute threat to continued city residence. Conditions of daily life within the shantytowns and years of frustration, arising from the failure to secure permanent residence in Mkhumbane, had moulded a particular characteristic within shack life. As with the later 1940s, the January 1949 Riots, during the later 1950s, shack residents attempted to assert their desire to remain in the area through the long resorted to strategy of the violent overthrowing of established authority. In January 1949 Indian landowners had borne the brunt of such tactics. In 1959 and 1960 shack residents saw their chance to fulfill a long held desire: the overturning of established power in the city.

The possibility and then the eventuality of the destruction of shantytown life and relocation to Kwa Mashu threatened the very social fabric of Mkhumbane. It was during these removals that the people of Mkhumbane realized how fundamentally the state and capital were intending to refashion urban African life. The very direct threats which removal posed to the domestic fabric of urban African life produced tragic personal consequences. Yet it was through the very way in which the destruction of shack life and forced resettlement to Kwa Mashu made the very nature of a shack life which the residents of Mkhumbane had struggled so much to create so vulnerable that politicization occurred. From the crisis over daily life and concern over their future in the city came a shantytown rebellion. This was a rebellion which both gave considerable momentum to and itself drew from an albeit short-lived revolt which spread throughout the city. It was during this revolt that the ANC and SACTU gained that large and loyal support base which they had sought for so long. Within this revolt the people of Mkhumbane played a dominant role. By this time however most were already living in a township. For the people of Mkhumbane, the roots of their support for the ANC lies not in the years of Mkhumbane, but in the destruction of Mkhumbane and the early years of life in Kwa Mashu: that period immediately prior to and then the years after the ANC was banned.