

Co-opting Durban's Black African Urban Dwellers: the establishment of the Durban Bantu Social Centre

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"I feel that this club will assist you to take an additional amount of pride in your race and I hope that, with the assistance of your Committee, you will take what is best from the European¹ civilization around you. It is the endeavour of the European in Durban to make you good citizens of the town." **Councillor Percy Osborn: Mayor of Durban**²

"We do not want to be europeanised; we want to be civilized and remain Bantu people" **Revd. A. Mtimkulu**³

The above quotes by some of the key stakeholders in the formation of the Durban Bantu Social Centre (DBSC), a separate, racialised social space for Durban's black African urban dwellers, point to the social, political and identity tensions inherent in Durban's character in the 1920s and 1930s. Such tensions were inevitable given the political order and social organization of the era. Fuelled by a desire for social order, political notables and City Fathers of the time pushed for the establishment of the DBSC. The centre was supposed to civilize the black African citizens of the city and keep them in check. This paper shows that the Bantu Social Centre and its counterparts elsewhere in the country, far from controlling the Africans, planted the seeds for political mobilization by allowing an educated black African elite yearning for freedom to mingle with ordinary black Africans.

¹ For the purpose of Historical accuracy words such as Bantu/s, Native/s, European/s, White/s, Indian/s, Coloured/s, Natal, Zululand, etc will be used in this study.

² Osborn, P., Mayor of Durban. The Natal Mercury, Saturday, October 21, 1933 (This is part of the speech that was delivered by the Mayor addressing attendees (specifically black attendees) at the opening of the Bantu Social Centre on the 21st of October 1933)

³ Mtimkulu, A., Rev of the Durban Methodist Church and Member of the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee. The Natal Mercury, Saturday, October 21, 1933 (here he was addressing the attendees at the opening of the Bantu Social Centre on the 21st of October 1933)

But the larger purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons for the establishment of the DBSC, the prevailing thinking of the time and the chief role players. It also examines the social structure of Durban and highlights glaring disparities that existed among its people.

Origins

It is important in the first instance to note that the Durban Bantu Social Centre was established through the efforts of the members of the Rotary Club with the assistance of the Durban Town Council and the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives. In furtherance of the objectives for the formation of the Durban Bantu Social Centre, the Constitution of the Durban Bantu Social Centre was looked into and it reinforced the reasons for such a formation as follows: “Mutual help as between the Bantu and Europeans; a Centre where the Bantu may meet for social, educational and recreational purposes; a Centre where Bantu men may spend leisure time instead of roaming the streets; and a Centre where all the Bantu athletic bodies can meet.”⁴

The formation of the Bantu Social Centre began with the establishment of a Steering Committee (that comprised of representatives of the Rotary Club, Durban Town Council and the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives). The Steering Committee consisted of about 24 members. Among whom were social and political notables of the time such as Albert J. Luthuli (teacher at Adams College 1921 to 1935, later Chief of Groutville Mission (1936), founder member of the Zulu Society, first black African to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (1960) and African National Congress (ANC) Natal president in 1951, ANC President General from 1952 to 1967 and advisor to Zulu King Cyprian Bhekuzulu Nyangayezizwe kaSolomon) from Groutville American Board Mission (KwaNonhlevu), Reverend M.J. Mpanza (pastor of the Milne Street Lutheran Church (Emapulangweni), Chairman of the Durban Branch of the Natal Native Congress, author of *Icala Elidumileyo* (1927) and *Uguqabadele* (1930), brother to Charles Mpanza⁵ (Secretary of the Zulu Society)),

⁴ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (22 March 1933 Meeting)

⁵ Charles Mpanza was the first Radio Zulu presenter. Incorrectly popular memory says it was K.E. Masinga.

Mr. D.G. Shepstone ⁶ (Lawyer and grandson of Sir Theophilus Shepstone) and Reverend A. Mtimkulu ⁷ of the Durban Methodist Church⁸ The Steering Committee discharged its duty with distinction and was responsible for the election of the Executive Committee.

The Durban Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee members were: D. G. Shepstone, Maurice Webb⁹ (Chairman of the first Advisory Board of Adams College), A. de Charmoy, E. Whitcutt, A.F. Baumann, S. Stewart, Rev. A. Mtimkulu, A.J. Sililo, C.P. Motsemme, L. F. J. Radebe, E.H. Mabaso and E.C. Jali.¹⁰ The Executive Committee, for the purpose of harmonizing racial tension, consciously struck a significant racial balance of six black members and six white members. However Positions stood as follows: Chairman: Mr. D.G. Shepstone, “European” Vice Chairman: Mr. Maurice Webb and “Bantu” Vice Chairman: Rev A. Mtimkulu.

The first proposed building chosen to house the Bantu Social Centre was in Queen Street¹¹ but four firms that were in close proximity to the Queen Street building lodged objections to the Town Clerk and Licensing Officer against the utilization of the Queen Street Building for a Bantu Social Centre. ¹² The Durban Town Council with the approval of the Minister for Native Affairs authorized an expenditure of £500 for the carrying out of the necessary internal alterations, equipment and furnishing of the premises in number 63 Victoria Street¹³; to be used for the purpose of a Bantu Social Centre and that such alterations be done by the Native Administration Department. ¹⁴

Subsequently, on 28 June 1933, the Chairman of the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee, Mr. D.G. Shepstone, was duly authorized by the Executive Committee to sign the lease of the premises at number 63 Victoria Street for the purpose of the Social Centre.

⁶ In 1940 he was elected to the Durban City Council and held office for more than three years as the Chairman of the Finance Committee of the Council. In 1948 he became an Administrator of Natal.

⁷ Rev Mtimkulu was the father of Donald Guy Mtimkulu the first black man to teach English at Adams College. Rev Mtimkulu was also the President of the ‘Bantu’ Methodist Church.

⁸ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (10 March 1933 Meeting)

⁹ In 1922 he founded the Durban Library group and was its Chairman for 15 years.

¹⁰ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (2 March 1933 Meeting)

¹¹ Denise Hurley Street (New Name)

¹² Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (2 March 1933 Meeting)

¹³ Bertha Mkhize Street (New Name)

¹⁴ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (28 June 1933 Meeting)

In terms of the plan and arrangement occupation was to be taken as from 1 August 1933, on terms and conditions embodied in the offer of Fowle & Whytock, Ltd dated 1 February 1933.¹⁵

Membership

Members of the Social Centre consisted of white South African men and all Associations, Companies or Institutions controlled by white South Africans and black South African men belonging to one or other of the black South African ethnic groups and all Associations, Companies or Institutions controlled by black South Africans, who were eligible for election. The annual subscription fee for black South Africans was 5s and for white South Africans was £1 but any white South African member was eligible for election as a life member upon the payment of £10.¹⁶

According to the Constitution of the DBSC females were not permitted to be on the premises of the Centre except on guest nights. However a “lady” guest could come to the waiting room and stand at the entrance where refreshments would be provided.¹⁷ This practice was clearly a perpetuation of gender bias and female exclusion. However, during the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee meeting of 31 August 1933, Reverend Mtinkulu the “Bantu” Vice Chairman of the Executive Committee mentioned that all “Native” Dance Halls within the area of Durban had been closed. As a consequence of that, he argued, a number of black women should be expected at the Centre on certain occasions. He called for the provision of basic amenities for females. On the basis of this information, the Executive Committee agreed that although the Social Centre was restricted to mainly males, arrangements should be made for one of the amenities to be reserved on any occasion when females were “likely” to be in attendance.¹⁸

On 15 September 1933 Mr. E. C. Jali was appointed the first Honorary “Bantu” membership Secretary for the DBSC. In terms of election for membership, the method was

¹⁵ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (28 October 1933 Meeting)

¹⁶ ILanga Lase Natal 20 October 1933

¹⁷ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (12 October 1933 Meeting)

¹⁸ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (31 August 1933 Meeting)

straightforward: members of the DBSC Executive Committee proposed candidates.¹⁹ In practice, membership to the Social Centre entitled one to attend any concert or function being held at the Social Centre free of charge upon producing his membership card and each member was given a small badge to be worn in the buttonhole.²⁰

An imperfect power balance

All subscriptions and monies received were handed over to the Town Treasure for custody. All disbursements, after being properly countersigned by the Chairman of the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee, Mr. D.G. Shepstone, and the Superintendent of the Bantu Social Centre, Mr. S.W.B Shepstone, were forwarded to the Town Treasurer for payment. The DBSC Executive Committee decided that the Town Treasurer should be the Honorary Treasurer for the Bantu Social Centre's fund.²¹ It is important to note that the power balance from the point of view of positions and responsibilities was skewed in favour of the Town Council. This power imbalance was intended for the control and retention of power and administration. Such power tactics were further mirrored in the appointment of Mr. A.A Whitaker of the Town Clerks Department as Secretary for the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee. Reverend Mtimkulu, the "Bantu" Vice Chairman of the Executive Committee, was given very little powers: he could, for example, only convene unofficial meetings after securing permission from the "European" Chairman Mr. D.G. Shepstone.

On 7 September 1933 Mr. S.W.B. Shepstone was appointed the "European" Superintendent of the DBSC at a rate of £10 per month with an indication that the whole position would be reviewed at the expiration of four months. Applicants who were interviewed for this position included Colonel C.W. Lewis, Mr. F. Brickhill, Mr. Fynn and Mr. S.W.B Shepstone. It is noted in the Executive Committee minutes of 7 September 1933 that after he was interviewed Mr. S.W.B. Shepstone requested permission from the Executive Committee to address the "Bantu" members of the Committee in Zulu. The permission was granted.²²

¹⁹ ILanga Lase Natal 20 October 1933

²⁰ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (19 October 1933 Meeting)

²¹ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (6 October 1933 Meeting)

²² Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (7 September 1933 Meeting)

On 12 October 1933 Mr. A.A. Kumalo was appointed to be the first “Bantu” Assistant Superintendent of the Bantu Social Centre at the rate of £5 per month with no expectation or guarantee that the salary would be reviewed.²³ The fact that Mr. S.W.B. Shepstone was appointed at the rate of £10 per month with an indication that the whole position would be reviewed, whereas his colleague Mr. A.A. Kumalo equally prominent was employed at the rate of £5 per month with no expectation or guarantee that the salary would be reviewed clearly pointed to glaring disparities and inequalities that existed during that era. It’s ironic that such a disparity would affect someone of Kumalo’s luminous stature. “Alfred Assegai Kumalo’s professional career oscillated between such diverse occupations as transport rider between Charlestown and Johannesburg, municipal clerk, and building contractor... In 1929 Kumalo had formed the Zulu Male Voice Party, one of the best known classical choirs in Durban.”²⁴

Furthermore, it is important to mention that Mr. A.W.G Champion (Mahlathi Amnyama – Dark Forest) also applied for the position of first “Bantu” Superintendent of the Bantu Social Centre, a testament to the new institution’s ability to trigger interest among the black elite. When he sent his application Champion had already established a stellar reputation of being a pioneering black trade unionist (he was the founder member of the Industrial Commercial Workers Union (ICU) in 1919). He was the founder in 1920 of the Transvaal Native Miners Clerks Association. He was the founder President of the Exempted Natives Association of South Africa (with the motto: Birds of the Same Feather Flock Together²⁵) He was the founder and Leader of the ICU yase Natal. Champion’s application was tabled at a meeting of the DBSC Executive Committee held on 6 October 1933.²⁶ It came as no surprise that his application was unsuccessful because during the planning phase of the Bantu Social Centre he was in Johannesburg, having been exiled from the whole of Natal and Zululand, except Newcastle, Dundee and Utrecht, by the Minister of Justice under the Riotous Assemblies Amendment Act 19 of 1930 for his involvement and leadership of riots

²³ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (12 October 1933 Meetings)

²⁴ Erlmann, Veit. *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p91

²⁵ La Hausse, Paul. *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-C.1936)*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000, p171 – 172

²⁶ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (6 October 1933)

and political disturbances during the 1920s specifically the 1929 “Native” Beer Boycott Riots. It’s interesting to note that in the 1920s his Organization, the ICU yase Natal, had more members than the Natal Native Congress led by Rev Dr John L. Dube²⁷ (Mafukuzela) and the Natal African Congress led by J.T. Gumede who became ANC National President in 1927. No doubt Champion’s controversial political profile compromised his application to the DBSC. His ICU Hall, with its deep political objectives, was regarded by City Fathers as the antithesis of what the new Social Centre stood for – a tool of control disguised with good intentions.

Undeterred by his failed application to the Durban Bantu Social Centre, in 1940 he founded the Bantu Social Centre yaseNanda, and, from 1946 to 1951, he was Natal President of the ANC and was a newspaper columnist (column title: *The Views of Mablathi*). He also wrote the following books: *Asalibele (We still remember)* and *Izwi Lo Memeza Eblane (The Voice in the Wilderness)*.

Prior to the opening of the Bantu Social Centre, the Superintendent was granted permission by the Native Administration Department to visit various “Native” institutions, hostels and barracks to address the envisaged potential members. The word “inmates”, with its obvious and noxious prison connotations, is used in the Minutes of 28 September 1933 to describe potential members the Superintendent addressed.

One of the reasons the Superintendent visited the hostels and other institutions was to tell ordinary black Africans that the planned Centre was going to be for everyone and not merely the exclusive preserve of the educated black African elite. During these visits, the Superintendent addressed his audience in fluent Zulu, ensuring that his message reached all and sundry. In fact, the Superintendent took pride in his command of the “Native” language. That is why in his job interview on 7 September 1933, he had addressed the “Bantu” members of the Executive Committee in Zulu, even adding in his address – for no discernable reason other than flourish – that his Zulu name was Mxakaza.

²⁷ The Founder and Editor of Ilanga Lase Natal in 1903. The founder of Ohlange Institute in 1901. The first President of the African National Congress in 1912. The Leader of the Natal Native Congress 1920s to 1940s. Advisor to Zulu King Solomon Maphumuzana ka Dinuzulu and Regent Prince Mshiyeni ka Dinuzulu.

In the early 1900s popular places where people could meet for social purposes were Churches such as the Milne Street Lutheran Church (Emapulagweni) under the Reverend Petros Lamula²⁸, the Beatrice Street²⁹ Congregational Mission Church (Ezihlabathini) under the Reverend W.J. Makhanya and the Presbyterian Native Mission (Ngomqibelo) under the Reverend Frank Caluza. These Churches were regarded as places of worship, social and cultural centres.³⁰ The Durban black African elites were the black Clergymen (“the cultural apex of black African elite society”), entrepreneurs, petty traders, general brokers, interpreters, clerks, teachers, messengers, skilled craftsmen and izinduna.³¹

Durban with its huge turnover of Zulu migrants rivalled Johannesburg in providing countless young men with their first experience of wage labour. Between 1913 and 1921 the Durban black African “population grew from 20, 302 to 29, 011.” In 1916 over five thousand men were registered as togt day labours on the docks, whilst some seven thousand young men and youths worked as domestic workers. Besides those who applied for Licences as ricksha pullers or washer men most were employed as unskilled labourers or as store hands in small shops surrounding the city centre. The City Fathers made efforts to control the black African labour market and at the same time police the lives of migrant workers. In 1909 a municipal monopoly (Durban system or Native Beer Monopoly) on utshwala or sorghum beer was enforced, income derived from this source was used to erect compounds/hostels for workers and finance their policing.³² The Durban Municipality established a structure to control black people in Durban. This structure was built on the revenue generated from the Municipal beer monopoly. The Municipal beer monopoly

²⁸ According to Paul La Hausse, Lamula was a prominent advocate of self help, pioneering Zulu historian, architect of the first Inkatha organization, leader of the radicalized Natal Congress movement and founder of an independent church.

²⁹ Charlotte Maxeke Street (New Name)

³⁰ La Hausse, Paul. *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-C.1936)*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000, p52 - 53

³¹ La Hausse, Paul. *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-C.1936)*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000, p48

³² La Hausse, Paul. *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-C.1936)*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000, p47

criminalized all small producers of liquor and turned them into ‘unlawful’ liquor traders. The beer monopoly generated for the Municipality significant revenue, which, in turn, was used to finance the development of the local state apparatus of control. Profits from Beerhalls made possible the founding in 1916 of a Municipal Native Affairs Department.³³ At the beginning of 1930, the City Council formed a Native Welfare Committee to deal solely with issues relating to black South Africans and appointed a Native Advisory Board consisting of four City Councillors and ten black South Africans drawn as representatives from Durban’s political and Church organizations as well as the barracks. The City Council also appointed a Welfare Officer whose responsibility included investigating complaints, grievances, and organizing social entertainments, sports and recreation. Sports and recreation became the main part of the strategy for diffusing unrest.³⁴

The new Centre opens

In his letter to the editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal* published on 20 October 1933 Mr. S.W.B. Shepstone, publicizing the opening of the Bantu Social Centre, wrote that the objectives of the Bantu Social Centre were to “help the Bantu men to devote their leisure time to the best advantage in healthful recreation and good citizenship; the development of worthy character; and the promotion of a real sympathy between the Europeans and non Europeans in South Africa.”³⁵

Although the DBSC had been operating unofficially since 9 October 1933, it was official opened on 21 October 1933. An article published in *The Natal Mercury* of 23 October 1933 was captioned as follows: BANTU CENTRE OPENED: NATIVE PRAISE OF DURBAN VENTURE “WILL REDUCE THE NUMBER OF SKEBENGAS”. According to the newspaper article there was a large and distinguished gathering of “Europeans” present at the opening ceremony³⁶ and the Mayor of Durban Councillor, Percy Osborn, was introduced by the Chairman of the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee Mr. D.G. Shepstone. In his speech the Mayor said “the need for a club of this sort had long been felt

³³ Maylam, Paul and Edwards, Iain (ed.), *The People’s City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*: Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH and University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996, p6

³⁴ Marks, Shula, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth –Century Natal*. Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986, p82 – 83

³⁵ *Ilanga Lase Natal* 20 October 1933

³⁶ *The Natal Mercury* 23 October 1933

in Durban... he assured the Natives of the interest of the Town Council in the venture.”³⁷ The next speaker was Mr. Harry Camp Lugg (Gwaza AmaZulu), the Chief Native Commissioner for Natal, who spoke in fluent Zulu rich in Zulu idiom³⁸. Lugg spoke Zulu at the opening of the Centre because during the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee meeting of 12 October 1933, it was suggested and agreed that Mr. Lugg should be asked to address the gathering in Zulu.³⁹ In his speech Mr. Lugg said “it was desirable that as the Native had come into contact with the European a place like the Bantu Social Centre should be created.”⁴⁰ “Your original customs are dying away in the towns and it is desirable that some form of recreation should be provided for you when you have finished your work. You may come here instead of roaming the streets. It will, I hope, reduce the number of skebengas. If such places do not exist you may go down into the mud and drag the European with you. We want the native people to rise.”⁴¹ The next speaker at the opening of the Centre was Reverend John L. Dube who said, “wherever there is identity of interest there must be cooperation... We have one God, one King and one Country.”⁴² Reverend A. Mtimkulu, the “Bantu” Vice Chairman of the Executive Committee, told the gathering that the “Bantu” were not asking to be Eurocentric, “but they wanted to be civilized and remain Bantu people.”⁴³

According to an *Ilanga Lase Natal* editorial column that was published on 27 October 1933, there were distinguished “Bantu” people at the opening of the Bantu Social Centre, including Rev. and Mrs. Caluza, Rev. Nxumalo of Maputoland, Rev. M.J. Mpanza, Mr. and Mrs. Ngazana Luthuli⁴⁴, Mr. and Mrs. W.M. Nxaba and Mr. B.W. Vilakazi (The colossal man of letters. The first black South African to obtain a Doctorate in Literature, poet, essayist and novelist, he was described by H.I.E Dhlomo as the “cultural Bhambatha of his people”; he wanted his times to be called the Vilakazi Age in African Literature). *Ilanga* goes further

³⁷ The Natal Mercury 23 October 1933

³⁸ The Natal Mercury 23 October 1933

³⁹ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (12 October 1933)

⁴⁰ The Natal Mercury 23 October 1933

⁴¹ Lugg, H.C., The Chief Native Commissioner for Natal. The Natal Mercury, Saturday, October 21, 1933 (This is part of the speech that was delivered by Mr. Harry Lugg addressing attendees (specifically black attendees) at the opening of the Bantu Social Centre on the 21st of October 1933)

⁴² The Natal Mercury 23 October 1933

⁴³ The Natal Mercury 23 October 1933

⁴⁴ Ngazana Luthuli from 1900 to 1915 one of the first black educators at Adams College and from 1915 to 1943 editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal* and coordinator of Ohlange Institute.

saying there were many respectable ladies at the opening: Mrs. R.T. Caluza, Mrs. Sosibo, Ms. Mahonga⁴⁵ (a teacher at Inanda Seminary and very active prominent member of the YWCA), Ms. Mpulo, Ms. Sililo and Ms. Mali of Inanda.

Other prominent men present were: Mr. L.H. Msimang of Driefontein, Mr. A.F. Matibela, Mr. A.C. Maseko, Dr. Innes. B. Gumede⁴⁶ (one of the first five black medical Doctors in South Africa and the second black medical Doctor in Natal after Dr Nembula and a graduate of Birmingham University in 1930), Mr. H. Ngwenya⁴⁷, Mr. B.B. Cele, Mr. Z.A. Khumalo and Mr. E.C. Jali.

According to the same editorial “the programme was excellent” and diverse. It goes further by listing the performers as “distinguished European” Musician Mr. Slessor Whyte who played a solo; accompanied by Ms. Walters who also played solo, Ms Faith Caluza accompanied by an “Indian” Lady Ms Lazarus, Mr. Khumalo’s (the “Bantu” Superintendent of the Bantu Social Centre) Zulu Male Voice and Lucky Stars Troupe.⁴⁸

Co-opting black African urban dwellers

According to Veit Erlmann in his book: *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance*, “the Bantu Social Centre represented a more openly defined attempt at co-opting Durban’s black urban dwellers... the list of paid up members included the pinnacle of Durban’s black society, names like Frank Caluza, W.F. Bhulose, J. Dube, Ngazana Luthuli, Jack Malinga, William Msekeleku, Benedict W. Vilakazi.”⁴⁹ Added to this list are H.I.E Dhlomo⁵⁰, R.R.R. Dhlomo⁵¹, Reverend Posselt Gumede⁵², Chief Albert John Luthuli, Dr. Innes B. Gumede,

⁴⁵ My Grandmother

⁴⁶ My Grandfather. He wrote the foreword to B.W. Vilakazi’s *Inkondlo KaZulu* (1932)

⁴⁷ Choir Conduct and Football organizer

⁴⁸ *Ilanga Lase Natal* 27 October 1933

⁴⁹ Erlmann, Veit. *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p91

⁵⁰ A true man of letters, Dhlomo was one of the foremost dramatists of his era. Dhlomo also wrote poetry, short stories and essays. He was an educator, librarian, politician, actor, and violinist. His way with words was legendary. On Dhlomo’s death Martin L. Khumalo, a columnist for *Ilanga lase Natal*, said Dhlomo had been a writer whose “magic pen could transform ordinary phenomena like the rain into some mysterious occurrence that would hold you gaping for a long while, wondering why you did not appreciate this treatise any earlier”.

⁵¹ R.R.R. Dhlomo was the editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal* from 1943 to the late 1960s, he was a brilliant author.

A.W.G. Champion, Ruben Caluza, C.J. Mpanza, Jordan K. Ngubane, Charles Dube (American-educated teacher and trader⁵³) and Martin L. Khumalo⁵⁴ etc.

Some of the abovementioned notables consciously elected to refer to themselves as the New Africans. “New African was itself an innovative reading of an old idea first outlined in 1912 as the New Bantu and further developed in the popular struggles of the late 1920s as the New African.⁵⁵ According to H.I.E. Dhlomo⁵⁶ (Librarian of the Ndongeni Bantu Library⁵⁷ at the Durban Bantu Social), “the New African knows where he belongs and what belongs to him; where he is going and how; what he wants and the methods to obtain it... What is this New African’s attitude? Put briefly and bluntly, he wants a social order where every South African will be free to express himself and his personality fully, live and breathe freely, and have a part in shaping the destiny of his country; a social order in which race, colour and creed will be a badge neither of privilege nor of discrimination.... He is opposed to such well-entrenched traditional institutions as the Ministry of Native Affairs and the Native Affairs Department with their spawn of petty ignorant chiefs, Native Representative Council, the Bhunga System, separate systems of education, of revenue and taxation, etc., etc. He knows the evils and contradictions and waste brought about by this system. He knows that Councils chosen undemocratically by Government puppets cannot represent African thought, attitudes, progress; he knows how they prevent progressive Africans from leading their own people. He is determined to expose and battle against these contradictions and dangers.”⁵⁸ New African intellectuals embraced modernity. They believed that the contact between Africa and other parts of the world was not going to end but rather would

⁵² My Great Grandfather pastor of the American Board Church (UCC) at Inanda and founder member of the Natal Native Congress in 1900

⁵³ La Hausse, Paul. *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-C.1936)*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000, p13 Charles Dube was brother to J.L. Dube.

⁵⁴ A columnist for *Ilanga lase Natal*.

⁵⁵ La Hausse, Paul. *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-C.1936)*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000, p269

⁵⁶ Before joining the Durban Bantu Social Centre Library Dhlomo was the first Librarian – Organiser under the Transvaal Committee of the Carnegie Library Service for Non-Europeans.

⁵⁷ Dr. Maurice Webb, a member of the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee, was instrumental in the establishment of the Library at the Durban Bantu Social Centre.

⁵⁸ Dhlomo, H.I.E, “Racial Attitudes: An African View-Point” *The Democrat*, November 17, 1945; “African Attitudes to the European,,” *The Democrat*, December 1, 1945.

advance. They felt very strongly that this contact had to be celebrated and its benefits amassed.

According to noted author and academic Ntongela Masilela the New African intellectuals were preoccupied with how to transform European modernity, which was constituted by the trinity of Christianity, modern education and European civilization in South Africa, into New African modernity. In his monograph *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E Dhlomo*, he speaks of the Zulu Cultural Renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s that was the precursor to the Sophiatown Cultural Renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s. The proponents and pioneers of the Zulu Cultural Renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s were members of the Bantu Social Centre. These notables are people such as the Dhlomo brothers (H.I.E and R.R.R), B.W. Vilakazi⁵⁹, Jordan Kush Ngubane (Journalist)⁶⁰, Ruben Caluza (Music Composer)⁶¹, Walter M.B. Nhlapo⁶², Anton Lembede (the first President⁶² of the ANC Youth League), A.A. Kumalo, Martin L. Khumalo⁶³, Chief Albert Luthuli, Ngazana Luthuli to mention but a few.

The Bantu Social Centre, with reference to its Constitution was a place where “the Bantu could meet for social, educational and recreational purposes; a Centre where Bantu men could spend leisure time instead of roaming the streets.” According to Mr. S.W.B Shepstone, this was indeed a place to which everybody belonged and was most welcomed. The objective of the Rotary Club was honorable. In 1929 the Rotary Club advised the Durban Town Council to develop “Native” recreation on structured basis and offered financial assistance both for this and for the appointment of a Native Welfare Officer.⁶⁴ For all intents and purposes, it sought to find and fund a place for entertainment mainly for black African urban dwellers after work.

⁵⁹ The immensely gifted Zulu poet and author Dr B.W. Vilakazi, whose works include “Inkondlo ka Zulu” (*Zulu Poetry*, 1935), “Amal’ E’zulu” (*Zulu Horizons*, 1945), a Zulu dictionary (with Professor C.M. Doke), as well as two novels

⁶⁰ Journalist Jordan K. Ngubane, a columnist for *Ilanga Lase Natal* (*Natal Sun*) and *Bantu World* and editor of *Inkundla Ya Bantu* (*Bantu Forum*);

⁶¹ Zulu music composer extraordinaire

⁶² Cultural Critic

⁶³ A columnist for *Ilanga lase Natal*

⁶⁴ Marks, Shula, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth –Century Natal*. Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986, p82 – 83

The individuals that sought to establish the Bantu Social Centre had in all intents and purposes noble intentions. They had seen a need for a place that was going to be for social, educational and recreational purposes. The extension of the noble objectives was to foster understanding between black people and white people in Durban and further diffuse political and racial tensions that were prevalent during the 1920s. Such could also assist in the prevention of social unrest. The other objective interwoven in the noble objectives of the formation of the Bantu Social Centre was social control and depoliticizing the black African urban dwellers.

The plan backfires

The Durban Town Council's aim was to co-opt the black urban dwellers from political activism and, according to eminent academic Paul Maylam; it was partly to counter the developing proletarian consciousness and organization that seemed to be embodied in the (ICU).⁶⁵ However, contrary to what the creators of DBSC had imagined, the educated black African elite exponents of the Zulu Cultural Renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s used the Bantu Social Centre to interface with the working class people. Consequently, the place became a platform for political meetings and brought further impetus onto the political objectives of the educated black political elite and people were mobilized and politicized.

The Bantu Social Centre was directly intended for leisure and indirectly intended for control of black African urban dwellers. However, it turned into a breeding ground for political ideas to spring up and develop and the centre became a great meeting place for the struggle notables of the mid to late 20th century.

Academic Bhekizizwe Peterson asserts that the only platform of expression that was available to the black intelligentsia were newspapers such as the *Bantu World*, and institutions such as the Bantu Social Centres. He argues that in these areas there were debates and so forth that harmonized collective imagining and helped blacks discover each other and developed a strong resolve to deal with their political struggles. "...the elite foregrounded the opportunities they felt entitled to. Since in the period under discussion the African elite

⁶⁵ Maylam, Paul and Edwards, Iain (ed.), *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*: Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH and University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996, p8

were relatively weak in most areas of social organization and power, it was largely on the level of ideology and cultural practice that they could will into being (even if imaginatively) their hopes for a better life.”⁶⁶

The Durban Bantu Social Centre played a pivotal role in the integration of the black African intelligentsia and Durban’s black African urban labour from the rural areas. The integration and interface of the aforementioned groups harmonized social relations, diffused class tensions and fostered a much needed unity against the colonial state and, later, apartheid state.

According to Ntongela Masilela “the Social Centres were intended equally and simultaneously to control and yet enlighten the African imagination by the powers that be. This is the paradoxical nature of modernity: oppress while at the same time and unintentionally provide the intellectual and political means for overcoming that oppression. The genius of H.I.E Dhlomo, R.R.R Dhlomo, Jordan Ngubane, B.W. Vilakazi, Charlotte Manye Maxeke⁶⁷, Bertha Mkhize⁶⁸, Selope Thema⁶⁹, Ruben Caluza and many others was to quickly unravel this great enigma and thereby completely confound the oppressors, who still talked about “Natives” and “Kafirs” while these New African intellectuals were inventing African Nationalism and New African modernity in order to overthrow oppression. The victory of 1994 emanates directly from the bowels of these Social Centres. When H.I.E Dhlomo listened to a portion of B.W. Vilakazi’s doctoral dissertation which Vilakazi read at the Durban Bantu Social Centre, he must have known or it dawn on him that oppression was going to be defeated much quicker”.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Peterson, Bhekizizwe., *The Bantu World and the World of the Book* in Barber, Karin (ed.), *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006, p253-254

⁶⁷ First black women graduate.

⁶⁸ Bertha Mkhize was a member of the Bantu Purity League, Daughters of Africa, ICU and ANC

⁶⁹ Editor of the *Bantu World* from 1932 to 1952.

⁷⁰ Email from Ntongela Masilela to Mwelele Cele (author) dated 18 May 2009, subject: Bantu Social Centre