THE ETHNIC CONFLICT IN MANGAUNG AT BLOEMFONTEIN IN 1957

Charl le Roux[1]

Abstract

The conflict in Mangaung on 27 October 1957 was not the first of its kind in the township. Ethnic clashes had been reported at two previous occasions. These clashes were summarily ascribed to ethnic animosities between the Basuto and factions of the Nguni people, more in particular the Bhaca and the Zulu, being migrant workers. In fact, the Mangaung conflict, like the Sotho conflicts on South African mines, had nothing to do with any traditional history of hostility between two or more ethnicities, nor with the misuse of liquor or the company of immoral women, but had a very great deal to do with the tensions arising between exceptionally oppressed workers and relatively favoured ones within the local industrial environment. The city councillors and municipal officials, amidst limited working opportunities, deliberately manipulated the Basuto and Nguni factions on the basis of job differentiation, which amounted to the oppression of these ethnic factions. Circumstances of secondary importance contributing to the Mangaung conflict were the dislocated social life of the Nguni and Basuto factions and lack of proper accommodation and cooking and recreational facilities. Ostensibly the local authorities did not realise the serious impact which their unnatural living conditions exercised on their minds that had already been deeply afflicted by the unfair work divisions of their employers.

---

1. INTRODUCTION

The conflict in the Mangaung township in Bloemfontein in October 1957 was not the first of its kind. Ethnic clashes had been reported at two previous occasions. These clashes were summarily ascribed to ethnic animosities between the Basuto and ethnic factions of the Nguni people, particularly the Bhaca and the Zulu. The fact that a few months previous to the Mangaung conflict in 1957 clashes occurred between the same ethnic groups at mining compounds in Johannesburg, Benoni and Boksburg, involving material matters like employment, wages and proper accommodation, necessitates a closer look at the causes of the Mangaung conflict. What made this conflict critical was the loss of life. A Commission of Inquiry was appointed by the City Council of Bloemfontein on request of the Native Advisory Board of Mangaung,[2] to investigate the circumstances which had played a role in

---

1   Research Fellow, Department of History, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. E-mail: leroux@shisas.net

2   Free State Archives, Bloemfontein (FAB), MBL 1/2/4/1/60, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 10 April 1958, p. 19. (Notes of Commission of Enquiry taken on 13 February 1958 and 1 April 1958 on conflict in Mangaung, 27 October 1957.) The Native Advisory Board consisted of 14 blockmen, popularly elected in the 14 wards of the township to represent, in an advisory capacity, the interests of black inhabitants at meetings with the township manager. There was also

the outbreak of the conflict. The Commission consisted of four members of the City Council, the manager of the municipal Department of Native Administration, his township superintendent and the town clerk, together with his assistant.

The refusal by the conflicting ethnic groups to take responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict and contradicting reports by the South African Police, municipal officials and the Native Advisory Board of the township manager, only aggravated the task of the Commission of Inquiry to come to a clear conclusion as to the root causes of the conflict and necessary remedies to prevent a similar conflict in future. The aim of this article is twofold: Firstly, to investigate the different viewpoints on the causes of the ethnic conflict in Mangaung and, secondly, to evaluate the effect of background information such as political trends at national level, like legislation on separate development and municipal legislation impacting negatively on the employment satisfaction of the migrant contract workers who were involved in the conflict. This article seeks to come to an acceptable conclusion about the causes of the conflict, not only relying on the simplified view that some ethnic factions clashed over interests which they viewed differently due to their different ethnic backgrounds. Relevant considerations are the disrupted family life of the contract workers due to influx control measures, discriminatory employment appointments and wages, improper housing and the lack of recreational facilities, alcohol abuse and immoral relations with local women.[3]

Appropriately for South African society, ethnic conflicts are related to perceived group inequality within a single state. The researcher, addressing problems of conflict among ethnic groups, however, cannot ignore the underlying socio-economic and political conditions of these conflicts. Different ideological representations of historical events such as the Marxist, liberal sociological and Afrikaner Nationalist, underline the complex nature of ethnic conflicts. It would seem that only through a sustained historical analysis of socio-economic, political and cultural issues the complexity of ethnic relationships can be captured. Indeed, ethnic identity is a claim against government for recognition and special treatment. In particular, the multi-ethnic nature of South African society raises a question regarding the potential for ethnic conflicts.[4]

Marxist sociologists propose methodological realism as their approach to the study of South African society, looking further than dissatisfied ethnic formations. Class, race and state are the three fundamental ideas of the Marxist representation of historical events. Whereas class is an objective concept, race is viewed structurally

---

a Native Affairs Committee – the responsible Committee of the City Council tasked to oversee the proper execution of Council policy with regard to township management.

3   *Ibid.*, pp. 19-39.

4   K Moodly, "Political violence, tribalism and Inkatha", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30(3), 1902, pp. 484-510; S Bekker, *Ethnicity in focus. The South African case* (Centre for Social and Development Studies, University of Natal, 1993), pp. 101-103, Chapter 6.

as imposed by the state, supportive of capitalist interests and therefore inimical to working-class interests. They draw attention to the black working class, irrespective of its ethnic compilation, confronting capitalism and white racial domination, being its opponent in an identifiable socio-economic crisis. Identifying class interests as a fundamental theme of its methodology, socio-economic considerations like appalling living conditions, low wages, unfair job divisions, inadequate transport, health, educational and recreational facilities confronted the white dominating class. Applied to the conflict in Mangaung, being part and parcel of capitalist South Africa, two broad themes need to be considered: Firstly, an analysis of capitalist action and strategy, in particular with regard to the convergence of capitalist and state interests, be it on a local or central level. Secondly, an analysis of emergent worker consciousness, worker action and strategy. The consistent image in scholarly Marxist thought on modern South Africa is that of a conflicting capitalist society which fashions the incompatible interests of white capitalists and black workers.[5]

A Lijphart, a liberal political scientist, linked with the Marxist sociologists, pronounced race and ethnicity as tools of minority rule and the suppression of the majority. The National Party government mainly represented a single cohesive minoriy ethnic group – the Afrikaners – whereas the opposing majority was divided into a large number of black ethnic groups. Since unity spells strength and division weakness, it was just as logical for the government (including local government) to stress ethnicity as for the opposition to play it down.[6] Ethnicity is based on ethnic groups, being smaller human subdivisions of race. A group derives from an ancestral group, but it can be changed by changing behaviour. Ethnicity, unfortunately, used to refer to negative and divisive forces, consisting of the examination of problems such as discrimination, exploitation, prejudice and racism. In South Africa, especially, ethnicity was employed as a divisive force. It was part of government policy to divide and rule – the enforced separation of members of racial and black ethnic groups. The members of various ethnic groups within a race, such as those under discussion – Sotho, Zulu and Xhosa – look very much alike. Their differences are based on cultural divisions such as language, citizenship, religion, food habits, clothing and so forth. (The term "ethnic" is preferred to "tribal". As D Moodie remarked, the Europeans introduced the idea of ethnic groups when colonising Africa, but they called it "tribes" in Africa.) But first it is necessary to discuss some views on ethnic conflicts in divided societies to gain a more informed perspective on the nature and causes of ethnic conflicts.[7]

---

5   Bekker, pp. 2-8, 12-15, 46-49.
6   *Ibid*., pp. 49, 74.
7   HW van der Merwe and D Welsh, "Identity, ethnicity and nationalism as political forces in South Africa" in J Dofry and Akiwowo (eds), *National and ethnic movements* (SAGA Publications, California, 1980), pp. 263-264; P Spickard (ed.), *Race and nation. Ethnic systems in the modern world* (New York, 2005), pp. 11, 19.

2.   VIEWS ON ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

DL Horowitz pointed out that ethnic conflicts are at the centre of politics in divided societies. Ethnic divisions posed challenges to peaceful relations, not only among states, but also within states at local level, as was the case with the conflict in Mangaung. The correct and creative handling of the tensions which arose from ethnic differences is of course the supreme test of statesmanship in most countries of the world, be it at local or national level.[8]

Ethnic conflict is a worldwide phenomenon that has become the leading source of lethal violence in international affairs. There is an increasing tendency among black political leaders in Africa to rely on ethnicity to promote their cause. Such tendency indicates that the effectiveness of ethnicity should by no means be underestimated. It found expression in violent conflicts in the Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Then, of course, there is the horrific outcome of ethnic atrocities conducted by the Hutus on the Tutsis in Rwanda in the 1990s. In KwaZulu-Natal the impact of ethnicity in the outbreak of widespread political conflict and death between the multi-ethnic African National Congress (ANC) and the Zulu-inspired Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) should not be discounted. These conflicts may extend over many months or even years or, like the conflict in Mangaung in 1957, occupy one day only. But ethnic conflicts are not necessarily violent. An analysis of civil wars between 1945 and 1999 reveals that ethnic diversity does not make a country more prone to large-scale violence.[9]

Some common precipitators of ethnic conflicts can be conveniently classified as economic (e.g. conditions for employment and wages), political (voting rights, control of territory, municipal cleansing services, housing) or cultural (persistent discriminatory treatment and disrespect, threats to the free practice of language or religion). Economic determinists argue that ethnic conflicts are at their roots economic – access to control over, and the employment of economic resources. Disputes over what appear to be political power involve, at a deeper level, power over economic resources. Indeed, one of the major problems facing African states is the competition between their component ethnic groups for the resources of the state. Almost by definition, ethnic groups are competitive in respect of the strategic resources of their economic region. This occurs because these groups are socio-economic entities which consider themselves biologically, culturally, liguistically and socially distinct from each other and most often view their relations in actual or antagonistic terms. The nature of ethnic groups in such region is determined by their

---

8   Bekker, pp. 2-5.
9   "Narsisme van verskille", *Beeld*, 1 March 2007, p. 19; "Rwanda after the bloodbath", *Mail and Gaurdian,* 19 February 1995, p. 18; HJ Esman, *An introduction to ethnic conflict* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 6, 11-12.

history and the resources they seek to control, like the resourceful Sotho-speakers who will be discussed in connection with the causes of the Mangaung conflict.[10]

Typical of the multi-ethnic society, each ethnic group occupies a separate role in the economy. Often this is a form of economic and social stratification – one group, for instance the Sotho, monopolising an elite role in white urban areas, while the other groups are relegated to inferior positions. Again, such situation is a global phenomena, for instance in Quebec in Canada, where senior and middle class management positions in the corporate sector were the domain of Protestant English-speakers while foreman workers on the factory floor were almost entirely Catholic French-speakers before 1960. Another consideration is the labour preferences of the host country as was the case in the United States of America before 1965. The USA welcomed immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, while strictly limiting immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe – reminding of the labour preferences of the City Council of Bloemfontein at the time of the Mangaung conflict. Such practices only serve to indicate that governments, including local authorities for this matter, play an important role in the lives of people within their boundaries, be it citizens or migrant workers. The rules and policies they enforce and the resources they allocate can have a critical impact on the status, opportunities and well-being of members of ethnic groups.[11]

General explanations or simple policies to prevent or resolve ethnic conflicts are virtually non-existent. Members of certain ethnic groups being in conflict was a constant feature of life in the townships, mining compounds and in the agricultural areas of colonial Southern Africa. Typical of these conflicts, spokepersons for both sides present elaborate arguments to rationalise their behaviour. Within this stratified hierarchy of power, pride and jealousy and what political consciousness existed, was expressed by one group, protesting against its exclusion from the privileges granted to another group in their work environment. Migrant workers of ethnic communities may adopt different strategies such as conflict, negotiations or deputations to assert their right to obtain, for instance, better employment conditions.[12]

Employers always denied that such conflicts resulted from unsatisfactory industrial conditions, attributing them to alleged "traditional tribal animosities". However, in the light of research done by labour historians and himself, TO Ranger pointed out that, for instance, the Sotho conflicts on South African mines and the Ngoni and Anguru sugar cane workers in the compounds in Mozambique, had nothing to do with any traditional history of hostility between two ethnicities, but a very great deal to do with the tensions arising between exceptionally oppressed

---

10   Bekker, pp. 49, 74; Esman, pp. 70, 72, 78.
11   Esman, pp. 13-15.
12   TO Ranger, "Race and tribe in Southern Africa" in R Ross (ed.), *Racism and colonialism* (The Hague, 1982), pp. 131-132.

workers and relatively favoured ones. His references to a series of Sotho faction fights with Shangaan and Tembu on South African mines and in particular the most serious – the Jagersfontein conflicts, only about 60 km west of Mangaung, in 1914 – demonstrated significant industrial grievances. These instances pertained to intra-working class conflict such as brutality of white miners towards their black assistants and competition within the working class for limited working opportunities, while government and the mining authorities deliberately manipulated ethnic factions on the basis of job differentiation, which amounted to the suppression of class or ethnic factions. The outcome was the manipulation of ethnic groups at the work place by categorising their wage levels, length of service, place of residence and type of job, causing divisions within the working class. In the South African context such manipulation remained alive, perpetuated by a stubborn white National Party government, despite arguments by black political organisations, like the ANC, to remove these ethnical traps.[13]

The criterion in most democratic countries for solving industrial/economic grievances is individual competition relating to the merit system – a criterion doomed to fail in the case of South Africa, being non-democratic for the period under discussion and its black inhabitants not being politically represented in local and central government. Authoritarian governments, like the National Party government (or local government), may intervene to channel resources and opportunities to members of the less favoured ethnic group or groups to reconcile them with their subordinate status. Violent conflict may be settled locally without any involvement of central government as was the case in Mangaung in 1957. The bottom line is that authoritarian regimes are prepared to use coercive means to maintain their domination over dissident and potentially dissident ethnic factions by repressing opposition when it does emerge. In the end the maintenance of peace depends on the political skills of government officials and on the capacity of the police to enforce order when it is threatened.[14]

The sociologist, L Kuper, reiterated the significance of economic processes in ethnic/racially divided societies like South Africa and Algeria, characterised by extreme economic exploitation and inequality. The Algerian conflicts of 1959 and 1963 were sparked off by French colonisation, resulting in serious economic consequences such as the decay of the traditional peasant economy, and the large movement of migrant workers to French and Algerian cities where they remained on the margin of employment. It reminds of the South African context, where white political power exploited black labour and manipulated ethnic group differences. The failure of class solidarity between black workers of different ethnic groups

---

13   *Ibid*., pp. 132-134.
14   Esman, pp. 92, 82, 174-175, 194.

is most marked due to ethnic cleavages and the absence of political power. Nonetheless, political domination provided a basis for interclass solidarity.[15]

3.   POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DOMINATION AND BLACK REACTION

The political domination over the black people of South Africa was formally structured with the ascendance to power of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party in 1948. Apart from the ethnic character of conflicts in the multicultural society of the country, the fortunes of the black workers' class cannot be severed from the socio-economic and political machinations of the National Party, organising for the safeguarding of white racial interests. The ethnic factions engaged in the conflict in Mangaung in October 1957 were naturally effected by these machinations. In an era in which world commodity prices were high, the National Party ensured that there would be a marked increase in the labour available to white farmers and a significant decline in the wages of urban blacks. The result was a substantial increase in the profits of all capitalist enterprises – clearly indicating that those who gain political power use it to secure economic advantages for themselves and their followers at the expense of their adversaries. (Likewise, in the case of Rwanda in 1957, conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups was both socio-economic and ethnic – the basic problem being the monopoly of political power enjoyed by the Tutsi, awarding economic benefits to their supporters.)[16] This raises the question of fair and appropriate criteria for the allocation of scarce benefits like municipal jobs, wages and proper accommodation – issues which were also at stake in the Mangaung conflict between local government and the Basuto, Zulu and Bhaca.

To secure white domination and capitalist accumulation the South African National Party government designed a set of measures to curb the increasingly militant black working class. It resolved to implement the apartheid policy as recommended by the Sauer Commission in 1947, entailing the revitalising of eight traditional black structures of control in the rural areas in terms of the Population Registration Act, Act 30 of 1950 and the Promotion of Bantu Self Government Act, Act 46 of 1959. These included the following eight ethnic groups: Zulu, Xhosa, South Sotho, North Sotho, Tswana, Swazi, Tsonga and Venda. This classification of ethnic groups by extensive apartheid legislation, being to a great extent unwritten custom before 1948, stirred up emotions already stressed by economically

---

15   L Kuper, *Race, class and power. Ideology and revolutionary change in plural societies* (London, 1975), pp. 255-262, 225.

16   S Marks and S Trapido (eds), *The politics of race, class and nationalism in twentieth century South Africa* (London, 1987), pp. 20-21; CFJ Muller (ed.), *Five hundred years. A history of South Africa* (Pretoria, 1981), p. 449.

discriminating regulations. It served to implement apartheid socio-economically, residentially, culturally and politically in segregated areas, which was intended to divide and rule the black people who were the majority racial group in the country. It streamlined labour controls, making strikes illegal and tightened the pass laws imposed on women for the first time, to counter continued urban unrest, protest marches and riots from 1942 to 1946 countrywide – protesting about low wages, unfair job divisions and critical accommodation facilities.[17]

Renewed campaigns of resistance and riots against the discriminatory apartheid legislation ensued after the Communist Party had been banned by legislation in 1950. The blacks showed increasing signs of dissatisfaction with their inferior position in the country. This dissatisfaction manifested itself in speeches made in the Native Representative Council of Government, in the activities of the ANC and other black organisations, and finally in strikes, boycotts, protest marches and disturbances in the course of the 1950s. The campaign of resistance organised by the ANC and the Indian Congress in 1952 culminated in the Freedom Charter in 1955 in which a socialist democracy with equal rights for all races was demanded. The propagation of these revolutionary concepts did not at all please the National Party government. Leaders of the black ethnic groups, as well as Indian and white leaders, were arrested on charges of treason in December 1956, only ten months before the Mangaung conflict.[18]

For blacks in the 1950s the daily arrests for purely statutory offences were a reminder of the coercive omnipotence of the white racial government. Outbursts of political violence and organised crime exhibited strong repulsion of economic exploitation by the white local and central authorities. Violence and lawlessness were at the heart of the daily experience of township residents and migrant workers. Confronted by these insecurities of township life, residents resorted to vigilante groups to protect their property. In Mangaung and the townships at the Rand and other large urban centres instability and insecurity were compounded by pressure on virtually any kind of urban service and resource.[19]

Organisation at the workplace was inhibited by the unskilled nature of the workforce and the limited number of industrial workers. Conflict was internally directed and the working class fractured along lines of ethnicity and differential access to jobs and housing which hampered working-class and popular organisation. The lack of coherent popular, let alone working-class, consciousness, inhibited sustained large-scale political mobilisation by black political organisations. Ethnic associations among workers were documented as far north as Central Africa, having a potential for conflict within a workforce where job division along ethnic lines

---

17   Muller, pp. 482, 489-490.
18   *Ibid.*, p. 482.
19   Marks and Trapido, pp. 50-52.

emphasised such differentiation. The major strikes on South African mines before and after the Second World War indicated that particularist associations in the workforce, for instance on account of unfair job divisions, included the possibility of united working-class action.[20] Such action, however, soon proved to remain a possibility only in view of the labour policy of the South African government, becoming increasingly repressive in the 1950s, putting expectancies of migrant workers under heavy pressure. Firstly, any recourse migrant workers had to black trade unionism was hampered by legislation, though such prohibition failed to prevent considerable worker unrest by an increasingly skilled and militant black workforce in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1953, only four years before the Mangaung conflict, the National Party began unfolding its legislative programme, including the extension of influx control, the establishment of labour bureaux and declaring strikes illegal. Giving legal force to white job reservation practices and depriving black trade unions of the right to sit on wage determination boards in 1957, on the eve of the Mangaung conflict, only served to put more pressure on the expectancies of migrant workers and workers locally.[21]

Legislation apart, economic conditions in the 1950s were less favourable for the employment of migrant workers and the development of black trade unions. The second half of the 1950s experienced a contracting economy, impacting negatively on workers in townships. Discontent again mounted as living costs soared and the employers being unable to meet the demand for increased wages. Economic growth slackened, unemployment increased and the value of wages declined: Between 1948 and 1957 a 25% average wage increase in the industrial sector was outstripped by a conservative estimated 44% increase in the cost of living. Desperate competition for the barest necessities led to an ethnically informed gang warfare at townships in the Rand (now Gauteng) where the scene of warfare between gangs, made up of Sotho, Zulu and Xhosa speakers, signalled the ethnic divisions of the Rand's hard-pressed black populace. These divisions represented the rallying cry against white socio-economic and political exploitation – economic circumstances which certainly did not pass unnoticed in other townships like Mangaung – where the residents felt they were discriminated against in terms of job diversification, wages and proper accommodation. The author, Tom Lodge, concluded that the weakness of the working-class identity, trying to protect its sectional interests, produced feelings of anger and fear which pervaded the black community.[22]

---

20   *Ibid*.; W Beinart, "Worker consciousness, ethnic particularism and nationalism" in Marks and Trapido, p. 306.

21   Marks and Trapido, p. 53; T Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, 1983), pp. 188-189.

22   Lodge, pp. 188-189.

4.   THE ETHNIC CONFLICT IN MANGAUNG IN 1957

The conflict in Mangaung broke out on Sunday afternoon, 27 October 1957, amidst a contracting economy, soaring costs of living, campaigns of resistance and riots against discriminatory legislation countrywide. The clashes between the Basuto and members of the Nguni people – the Bhaca and the Zulu – started at about 14:00 and carried on until about 18:00. These blacks numbered about 3 300 of whom about 2 000 were engaged in the conflict. They were migrant workers, mostly in the service of the City Council, and accommodated in the municipal hostel and temporary huts erected by the Council on the premises of the hostel.[23]

The conflict occurred sporadically over a wide area in the township – a fact which prevented the police and township manager, GJ Viljoen, from quelling it effectively. A police force, consisting of about 40 members, armed with rifles, heavy riot clubs and sten guns, were deployed. At one stage, when one of the instigators was apprehended, a mass of blacks charged the police – an act which obliged the police to shoot – killing six blacks. About 30 were taken to the National Hospital for medical treatment, whereof 15 remained in hospital under police custody. Viljoen reported the next day that the conflict had serious consequences, whereas the press described it as the most serious conflict in Mangaung for many years.[24]

The Zulu and the Bhaca were taken under police guidance to the terrain of the municipal stables, quite a few kilometres from the hostel where the Basuto remained. Manager Viljoen did not regard it safe to allow the Bhaca and the Zulu to return to their huts at the hostel, requesting permission from the City Council to erect temporary accommodation for them at the stables. Obviously this arrangement was a wise one because ill feelings between these groups were still rife two weeks after the conflict when the Bhaca and Zulu still refused to return to their huts at the hostel.[25]

Viljoen kept a close eye on the volatile situation, relying on his Native Advisory Board, departmental officials and the local police to keep him posted. The Native Advisory Board, representing the interests of the township residents, after a lengthy discussion of the conflict requested Viljoen to call upon the responsible Native Affairs Committee to appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the causes of the conflict. Viljoen supported the request in view of the complexity of ethnic relations in Mangaung and the possibility that ethnic conflicts could erupt again in the near future.[26]

---

23   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/59, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 28 October 1957, p. 1.
24   *Ibid.*; "Ses naturelle dood in stamgeveg", *Die Volksblad,* 28 October 1957, p. 1.
25   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/59, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 28 October 1957, pp. 1-2.
26   *Ibid.*, 6 November 1957, p. 13 and 28 November 1957, p. 10.

5.   CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

Township manager Viljoen, his superintendent, CM Du Plessis and hostel superintendent (unknown), Viljoen's Native Advisory Board and members of the South African Police delivered evidence relating to the possible causes of the conflict, to the Commission of Inquiry. Superintendent Du Plessis remarked that conflict between ethnic groups or factions within such groups involving irreconcilable interests like land, cattle or domestic matters like women, resulting in loss of life, were not uncommon in the reserve areas of the country. The fact that members of ethnic groups from these areas easily turned to conflict to solve their differences only served to contribute to the difficult task of local authorities to keep peace and order in the urban environment.[27]

Evidence depicted relations between the Basuto and the two Nguni groups – the Bhaca and the Zulu – as traditionally hostile, ascribing it to cultural differences with respect to psychological and work preferences. The Basuto were depicted as haughty and belligerent on account of their successful development as a nation by the hand of their able paramount chief, Mosheshwe, and practical experience as farmers, agriculturalists and gold miners. They prided themselves as being "the lions of the mine", working as shaft sinkers and rock shovelers.[28] They were more dexterous and gained competitive advantages over the other groups within their region such as the Bhaca and the Zulu. The Basuto developed their own ethnic system and identity, not merging with other rival groups. In the white urban environment they became increasingly entrenched in senior clerical and supervisory positions. Due to their versatility as workers, white employers in the municipal, industrial and domestic sectors employed Basuto – a practice much resented by members of the Bhaca and the Zulu in Mangaung. The latter were obliged to perform the much lower-graded functions in the municipal cleansing services – at the cost of their self-esteem.[29]

The historical experiences of deprivation by the Bhaca and the Zulu, such as their lack of occupational training in mining, established feelings of ethnic inequality, gravitating towards conflicting inter-ethnic relationships with the Basuto. Being ridiculed by the Basuto for performing these humble tasks and employers neglecting to diversify job opportunities fairly amongst all the migrant contract workers, fuelled the growing feeling of resentment amongst the Bhaca and the Zulu factions. Such unfair diversification of job opportunities resulted in lower wages,

---

27   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/60, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 10 April 1958, p. 23. (Notes of Commission of Enquiry taken on 13 February 1958 and 1 April 1958 on conflict in Mangaung, 27 October 1957.)
28   Spickard, pp. 329-330.
29   *Ibid.*

coercing them to lower living standards in terms of nutritious food and beverages, clothes and recreational practices like sports participation in township matches and the entertainment of women. These material and psychological considerations were, indeed, responsible for intensifying conflicts, escalating distrust into collective hatred and lethal violence, impeding the task of achieving and maintaining compromise settlements.[30]

Social historians like TO Ranger emphasised the effect of ethnic hierarchies in urban areas on job differentiation and a divided working class in their writings on urban employment practices in Southern Africa. In his classic treatment of ethnicity, JC Mitchell referred to the correspondence between the hierarchy of job prestige and of ethnic reputation in Zimbabwian townships in the 1980s. Men from one ethnic group consistently obtained clerical jobs, men from another group semi-skilled jobs and men from groups like the Chokwe accepted employment in unskilled or "dirty" jobs such as the removal of human excretia – functions which reminds of the Bhaca and the Zulu in Mangaung. Ranger pointed out that the established hierarchy of ethnic repute in Central and Southern African townships had less to do with traditional practices like military prowess (the Basuto or Lozi in Zimbabwe) or specialised work experiences (Basuto miners) than with the manipulative fragmentation of the black working class by white employers. Such ethnically stratified work force – best jobs to the ethnic group with the highest reputation – were used by white employers to keep black workers in order by playing the groups off against each other.[31]

Members of these ethnic groups who were remote from markets in which they could sell their agricultural surplus were compelled to accept particularly dirty or low-graded jobs because they had no alternative but to sell their labour. They came to be typecast at the bottom of the urban prestige scale as happened to the Zulu from Natal and the Bhaca from the Eastern Cape employed in Bloemfontein. The City Council of Bloemfontein made use of the disadvantaged position of these groups to obtain cheap manual labour as blacks permanently resident in Mangaung were unwilling to work for the low wages paid to migrant workers. This practice of employing migrant workers reinforced the correlation between the type of job and ethnic identification.[32] This was indeed what happened when the Commission of Inquiry debated the recruitment of Basuto and Nguni people for specific types of work in the urban area after the conflict. Limiting the intake of Nguni people could jeopardise the labour needs of the City Council and industry in view of the

30   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/60, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 10 April 1958, pp. 24-25, 34-35. (Notes of Commission of Enquiry taken on 13 February 1958 and 1 April 1958 on conflict in Mangaung, 27 October 1957.)
31   Ranger, pp. 124-125.
32   *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 131.

Basuto who were not prone to carry out low-graded jobs like cleansing and abattoir services. The Commission eventually resolved to recommend to the Council to limit the recruitment of Nguni people to these low-graded jobs. The limited intake of Nguni could then be accommodated as lodgers at the homes of township residents whereas the much larger number of Basuto, employed at a variety of higher-graded jobs, could be accommodated at the hostel where proper cooking, washing and recreational facilities would be supplied.

It is obvious that the Commission intended to continue the manipulation of the migrant workforce to suit the labour needs of the white employers, believing that the famous national history and work experience of the Basuto proved them to be more effective workers than the Bhaca and the Zulu who disposed of similar work potential but were relegated to lower-graded jobs. The policy of separated accommodation facilities and cheap labour for low-graded jobs thus had to prevent a future ethnic conflict.[33] The Commission was supported by the government Department of Native Affairs, promulgating as early as 1954 that township and school planning had to be conducted along ethnic lines to facilitate self-rule according to ethnic traditions and the eventual introduction of black municipal control of the township. However, the Department acknowledged that ethnic conflicts in the past were not sparked off by animosities between members of ethnic groups, but by ethnic separation for the sake of convenient administrative purposes.[34]

The Native Advisory Board criticised the Commission's recommendation to the Council, pointing out that the Board had always been against the grouping of ethnic groups, be it with respect to hostel accommodation, at residential homes or at school (for the purpose of mother tongue instruction). Grouping caused friction, even among school children who fought on their way to different ethnical-based schools. Board members reminded the Commission that there was no grouping of ethnic factions in the suburb of Batho, one of Mangaung's oldest suburbs, and also no ethnic conflicts.[35]

Arguing along the same lines as the Native Advisory Board, political authors P Banner and R Lambert pointed out, after investigating conflicts and strikes at industrial and mining centres at the Rand, that these conflicts reflected an urgent quest to secure the barest necessities of life like a job or accommodation. These resources were in desperate short supply in all the major urban centres after the Second World War (1939-1945) due to the urbanisation of blacks on a large scale, discriminating labour legislation and the unfavourable economic conditions in

---

33   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/60, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 10 April 1958, pp. 21, 28 (Notes of Commission of Enquiry taken on 13 February 1958 and 1 April 1958 on conflict in Mangaung, 27 October 1957); FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/71, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 6 March 1963, pp. 13, 21-22.

34   FAB, BOD 284, File 6/4/4/1/2/3, General Circular 46/1954, pp. 1-3.

35   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/71, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 6 March 1963, pp. 13, 21-22.

the 1950s. It was, indeed, to control these resources that much of the so-called faction conflicts resulted. Lacking unions to negotiate a possible arrangement with the authorities, ethnic groups, be it Basuto, Bhaca or Zulu, grouped themselves into ethnic factions for collective security in an effort to coerce a better work dispensation from the relevant authority. The basic thrust of the argument is that the scale and rapidity of black urbanisation, the consequent lack of basic services and resources and the multiple lines of fracture in the populations of larger townships, like Mangaung, ensured that popular energies would be absorbed in communal struggles aimed at meeting basic wants minimally.[36]

Closely linked to the dislocated economic life of these migrant workers were their socialising practices with immoral women, the accompanying misuse of strong liquor and the excessive use of large quantities of beer, illegally brewed by these women. Manager Viljoen, his hostel superintendent and police representatives, sustained the claim of township superintendent, Du Plessis, that the rivalry between the Basuto and the Nguni factions for the company of immoral women and liquor abuse were the main causes of the Mangaung conflict. These migrant workers, divorced from their families who were virtually trapped by the homeland policy of Government in rural enclaves, were only able to visit them once a year, sometimes even less due to strict employment conditions and limited wages to pay for travel expenses. Influx control measures of local authorities made it virtually impossible for their families to join them. Almost 75% of the approximately 3 300 inmates were separated from their families, a few hundred kilometres off. They were used to family life and domestic functions like the washing of clothes and the preparation of food performed by members of the household. In the hostel and huts they were obliged to perform these functions themselves – functions which made them more tense as time went by. At the time of the conflict they ended up in a frame of mind which became upset by the least provocation. Township superintendent CM Du Plessis referred to similar conditions in military camps, eliciting feelings of stress by white inmates and generally regarded as a significant contributing factor for conflict. Indeed, the hostel, not to speak of the adjacent huts, did not dispose of sufficient wash basins, nor necessary cooking facilities and eating venues – the latter two conditions barring them from enjoying properly cooked food of nutritious value. Their low wages, blamed on unsympathetic white employers, disabled them to buy meals or to upgrade their dire living circumstances generally. The eventual outcome was diminishing labour power due to poor health conditions, amounting to increased stress and dissatisfaction with their living environment. Up to the hour of

---

36   F Banner and R Lambert, "Batons and bore heads: the strike at Amato Textiles 1958" in Marks and Trapido, pp. 345-347.

the outbreak of the conflict the inmates experienced no helping hand from the local authorities to alleviate their social plight.[37]

They were further angered by legislation controlling their access to land, ethnic identity being used to limit them to their homeland (ethnic land) for permanent employment and accommodation. They were compelled to foster their links with their particular ethnic authority, making welfare payments to these authorities – a practice only serving to open up possibilities of corruption.[38]

The sociologist, W Beinart, doubted the validity of the statement made by superintendent Du Plessis and his colleagues as to the decisive role of immoral women and liqour abuse in the outbreak of the Mangaung conflict. Generally speaking, researchers had no experience of ethnic conflicts reflecting sexual tensions in centres for migrant accommodation such as hostels and compounds during those years. The sexual practices of migrant contract workers were only pastimes in the absence of their own women from the rural areas and recreational facilities. Working-class activities were sustained by the growth of a more generalised urban working-class culture which was characterised by heterosexual, cross-regional relationships, breaking down ethnic particularism. Women at home were consequently not necessarily opposed to heterosexual relationships conducted by their lovers or husbands, but did warn them of the dangers of venereal disease. Indeed, men without women were also less likely to form permanent liaisons in town – a fair indication that sexual relations were not reason enough to start a conflict between ethnic groups. A sociological survey of a mixed population, resident in a black slum yard at Johannesburg, revealed a high proportion of cross-ethnic marriages, lacking particularist ethnic networks in the 1940s. Indeed, the boundaries of ethnic identity are fluid and have constantly shifted in response to political and socio-economic circumstances.[39]

Members of the Native Advisory Board tended to concur with the afore-mentioned authors by not rating heterosexual relationships as a decisive cause of the Mangaung conflict, when questioned by the Commission of Inquiry. The Board rather regarded the absence of an official body, which would have enabled elected representatives of the migrant workers to represent their grievances about their poor living conditions to the City Council, as a major cause for conflict. Accommodating the Bhaca and the Zulu factions in September 1956, about one year before the conflict in October 1957, in ill-equipped temporary huts on the hostel premises, due to insufficient hostel accommodation, failed to pacify these factions. The

---

37   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/60, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 10 April 1958, pp. 23, 25. (Notes of Commission of Enquiry taken on 13 February 1958 and 1 April 1958 on conflict in Mangaung, 27 October 1957.)

38   Marks and Trapido, p. 53.

39   W Beinart, "Worker consciousness, ethnic particularism and nationalism" in Marks and Trapido (eds), pp. 61, 295.

Basuto received preferential treatment when hostel accommodation was allocated, ostensibly due to their larger numbers and higher-graded employment and wage positions. About 700 blacks were accommodated in huts, all using the congested amenities of the hostel, each paying 3/6 monthly for such concession, whereas the inmates of the hostel, mostly Basuto, paid 18/-. This arrangement obviously angered the Basuto, including the hut dwellers, seeing that all of them had to suffer from insufficient and unhygienic amenities. In addition there was a complete lack of eating and recreational facilities.[40]

Manager Viljoen acknowledged the need for hostel representation on an official body to keep his department posted as to the needs of the inmates. Ostensibly Viljoen and his superintendents did not realise the unnatural living circumstances of these people, necessitating representatives from their own surroundings, who were cognisant of and sympathetic to their grievances with respect to accommodation, employment conditions and recreation. Members of the Native Advisory Board actually doubted the ability of the hostel superintendent to deal with the complaints of the hostel inmates, not being conversant with the Sotho language and responsible for the ejectment of inmates and hostel staff members. In reply to the suggestion of the Board to bridge the lack of proper communication between the municipal Department of Native Administration and the hostel inmates, Viljoen recommended to the Commission to appoint two representatives of the Basuto and Nguni inmates respectively on the Board to create an opportunity for them to discuss their grievances. To overcome the problem of hostel representatives being only temporary inmates, Viljoen proposed that they be elected on a rotating basis. He, however, criticised his Advisory Board for neglecting to investigate the living conditions of the hostel inmates and to report their expressions of dissatisfaction to him. He reminded the Board of its duty, in terms of Section 21 of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, Act 25 of 1945, to consider and report on any matter specifically affecting the interests of the inhabitants of the township. He had various meetings with the inmates of the hostel and huts on the premises on the day before the conflict. They expressed their dissatisfaction with their living conditions. Their reference to the conflicts in the townships on the Rand did not surprise Viljoen because he suspected that their dissatisfaction was to some extent instigated by the conflicts between black miners and the mining authorities over poor accommodation and working conditions. Shortly before the conflict in Mangaung, Zulu from Johannesburg and Basuto from Welkom arrived in Mangaung, obviously to instigate feelings of discontent with their living circumstances among the inmates of the huts and hostel.[41]

---

40   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/57, Monthly Report Township Manager, September 1956, p. 1.
41   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/60, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 10 April 1958, pp. 21, 29-30 (Notes of Commission of Enquiry taken on 13 February 1958 and 1 April 1958 on conflict in Mangaung,

The beer question was also a contentious matter which contributed to the outbreak of the Mangaung conflict. However, this question as a cause for conflict, has to be qualified. The conflict was not waged by intoxicated blacks, as Viljoen pointed out, but by angered inmates of the hostel and huts receiving no concession from the Council to practise beer brewing on the hostel premise. They were also not informed by the Native Advisory Board that residents could continue brewing beer in prescribed quantities if a beer hall was to be erected. The inmates felt marginalised by the Board and township management for not being kept posted about matters affecting their social life, actually disregarding their presence in the township, reminding them that they were only migrant workers – temporary sojourners. Without heeding the advice of the Native Advisory Board, Viljoen and his Department of Native Administration, the local police and railway authorities proceeded with arrangements to municipalise beer brewing and the selling thereof at the hostel and in the township. Such an arrangement would enable them to exercise proper control over the brewing and consumption of beer, curbing visits to dubious drinking venues and women in the township. The local authorities were so convinced of the success of such a venture that they neglected to consult the inmates of the hostel and the huts as well as the township residents about the matter at a public meeting. Beer brewing was indeed a customary practice among black people. The residents were opposed to beer halls, fearing that the City Council would monopolise beer brewing for financial gain. The police raids on the premises of the huts and hostel, as well as houses in the township, suspected of illegal liquor trafficking and the excessive home brewing of beer, only served to aggravate irate feelings in the months preceding the conflict on 27 October 1957. The inmates of the hostel and huts concluded that the local authorities and the Native Advisory Board were not sympathetically inclined towards their plight as they were deprived of socio-economic and representative rights. They had to face social barriers due to the lack of family and friends who, because of strict influx control measures, were not allowed to live with them.[42]

The disheartening living conditions were worsened by the absence of recreational activities. All the parties giving evidence in the hearings of the Commission of Inquiry, regarded the above as an important contributory factor to the conflict in the long run. Manager Viljoen reported on the serious lack of recreational activities, not only at the hostel, but also in the township. There was only one soccer field at the hostel to be used by more than 3 000 inmates. It was

---

27 October 1957); FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/59, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 5 July 1957, p. 32 and 28 October 1957, pp. 2-3.

42   FAB, MBL 1/2/4/1/60, Minutes Native Affairs Committee, 10 April 1958, pp. 20, 22, 33, 36. (Notes of Commission of Enquiry taken on 13 February 1958 and 1 April 1958 on conflict in Mangaung, 27 October 1957.)

unfenced, thus having no gates to collect money for improvements or to stage matches. The temporary huts on the premises of the hostel prevented the municipal Department of Native Administration to prepare more soccer fields. To aggravate the situation, no provision was made to enlist the inmates for soccer, boxing or cycling – the three most popular sports activities with blacks – as the social worker of the Department visited the hostel only on an irregular basis to assist with some soccer coaching. There were also no indoor activities like film shows, library and reading facilities.[43] Had the inmates of the hostel and huts been affiliated to the sports organisations in the township and a second black sports organiser appointed to promote sports participation and recreational activities at the hostel, much of the tension released in the conflict could probably have been absorbed by more amicable activities.

On the eve of the conflict the Basuto, Bhaca and Zulu inmates of the hostel and huts experienced a dislocated social life and lack of proper accommodation, cooking and recreational facilities. The expectations of the inmates were not unreasonable if taken into account that the railway authority in Cape Town, realising the importance of nutritious food for better work performance and satisfaction, provided food to its employees. The Commission of Inquiry realised that blacks, migrating to urban areas for employment, should be allowed to settle in the suburbs of the Mangaung township with their families or friends to contribute to better social care of migrant contract workers in terms of food, washing and companionship. All of these were important considerations, making these people more disciplined and obedient residents.[44]

6.   CONCLUSION

The conflict in Mangaung on 27 October 1957 represents the consistent image in scholarly Marxist thought on modern South Africa – namely that of a conflicting capitalist society which fashions the incompatible interests of capitalists and black workers. Mangaung figured as a typical multi-ethnic society with each ethnic group – Basuto, Zulu and Bhaca – occupying a separate role in the economy. One group, the Basuto, monopolised an elite role in the white urban area while the other groups were relegated to inferior positions – constituting a form of socio-economical stratification.

The Mangaung conflict indicated that the rules and policies enforced by the racially inclined City Council of Bloemfontein and the National Party government, within the context of labour and municipal legislation, exercised a critical impact on the status, opportunities and well-being of the members of these ethnic groups. Ethnically/racially divided societies like those in South Africa are characterised by

43   *Ibid*., pp. 23-24, 26-27, 37-38.
44   *Ibid*., p. 25.

extreme economic exploitation and inequality. The failure of class solidarity of the Nguni and Basuto factions, due to their ethnic cleavages and absence of political power, instigated the City Council and its municipal officials to exploit these black labour factions and manipulate ethnic group differences to suit the labour requirements of local government and the private sector. Authoritarian regimes like that of the National Party were prepared to use coercive means like the police force and the political skills of local government officials to maintain its domination over dissident ethnic factions and to enforce order.

The City Council of Bloemfontein neglected to diversify job opportunities fairly amongst all the migrant contract workers and this resulted in lower wages for the Nguni factions, coercing them to lower living standards and the ridicule of the Basuto for performing humble municipal tasks. The contracting economy, resulting in unemployment and low wages in the second half of the 1950s and discriminatory apartheid legislation, including labour and influx control legislation, led to a critical increase in the cost of living and desperate competition for the barest necessities among the urban black ethnic groups countrywide. The weakness of the working-class identity, failing to protect its sectional interests, produced feelings of anger and fear which pervaded the black community and which eventually also instigated the Nguni factions in Mangaung to confront the Basuto. These material and psychological considerations were responsible for escalating distrust into collective hatred and lethal conflict, impeding the task of achieving and maintaining compromise settlements.

In fact, the Mangaung conflict, like the Basuto conflicts on South African mines, had nothing to do with any traditional history of hostility between two or more ethnicities, nor with the misuse of liquor or the company of immoral women, but had a very great deal to do with the tensions arising between exceptionally oppressed workers and relatively favoured ones. As in the case of the Jagersfontein conflicts in 1914, demonstrating significant industrial grievances, the City Councillors and municipal officials, amidst a contracting economy and limited working opportunities, deliberately manipulated the Basuto and Nguni factions on the basis of job differentiation, which amounted to the suppression of these ethnic factions.

Circumstances of secondary importance contributing to the Mangaung conflict were the dislocated social life of the Nguni and Basuto factions and the lack of proper accommodation, cooking and recreational facilities. Ostensibly, the City Council of Bloemfontein and its municipal officials did not realise the serious impact their unnatural living circumstances – being deprived of their families and friends and no representation on local bodies to air their grievances – exercised on their minds, already deeply afflicted by the unfair work divisions by their employers. In the end they felt marginalised and neglected – left only with

the option of conflict to draw the attention of the authorities to their poor socio-economic living circumstances.