

**COMRADES, CATS AND COUNTRY BOYS: YOUTH STYLE, CITY STREETS AND THE POLITICS  
OF HOME IN EAST LONDON'S TOWNSHIPS, 1950-1998**

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## Introduction\*

This article focuses on the changing identity politics and social position of youth in the townships of East London in the Eastern Cape between the 1950s and the 1990s. African social and cultural life in this city was famously described and analysed by Philip Mayer and his colleagues in the *Xhosa in Town* Trilogy, which were published in the early 1960s (cf. Reader 1960; Mayer 1961; Pauw 1963). One of the central themes in this work, and in the subsequent writings of Philip and Iona Mayer in particular, concerned the way in which ideas about the urban and the rural were used in everyday assertions of identity and difference in the Eastern Cape. This article seeks to develop and extend this early anthropological work by tracing different urban and rural threads in youth identity politics in the city's townships between the 1950s and the 1990s. The paper is thus centrally concerned with the fluid and changing relationships between different categories of youth in the cities locations over time. Three categories of youth receive particular attention in the analysis below, the *oobrighty* or fashion conscious urban youth (also known as the Cats), the comrades or *amaqabane*, the political youth of the 1980s and 1990s, and the rural youth, that flowed into the city from surrounding homelands. In exploring the complex relationship between different categories of youth in East London, I draw on the recent historical work of Ntsebeza (1993) and Mager (1999), as well as on my own fieldwork in East London's townships and surrounding rural areas during the 1990s.

There is already a large literature on South African urban youth politics in the 1980s and 1990s, which stresses the rise of the comrades (*amaqabane*) as a political phenomenon (cf. Lodge 1983; Mayekiso 1996; Sitas 1992; Seekings 1992, 1993; Carter 1992). Most of these works concentrate on the organisational structures and political ideologies underpinning the nation-wide mobilisation of youth in the 1980s and on the politics of the liberation movements and the emergence of democratic civic structures in the townships during the 1980s and 1990s. Other more sociologically-oriented studies focus on the pavement politics and street masculinities associated with the rise of the comrades (Bundy 1987; Xaba 2001), while a third stream in this literature, associated with scholars like Catherine Campbell (1994), explores the impact of violence on youth identities. The latter work often explores the domestic situations and life histories of comrades as a means of assessing the impact of the political involvement on family life and personal identity construction. The three streams have run along parallel paths, seldom intersecting in meaningful ways. Those interested in political formations have generally kept out of the sociology of the street, whilst those dealing with issues of violence and identity have focused mainly in the home and the intimate social relationship within youths' lives. One of

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the ways in which these different layers of research can be brought closer together, I suggest below, is through a more sustained engagement with cultural analysis of youth identity politics both on the street and in the home.

Another problem with the analysis of urban youth formations in the 1980s and 1990s is that the critical role that rural youth in urban social transformation is often underplayed. In the case of Soweto and the Reef townships generally, Glaser (2000) has argued that pre-existing urban gang structures laid the social foundation on which the comrades established new articulations of power and authority at the street and neighbourhood level. In this context, he suggests that the comrades quickly developed a “distinctive subculture with its own style and ritual” that fused “politicised student and gang subcultures” in the city (*ibid.*: 187). The image that emerges from Glaser’s work on the Reef is that the comrades emerge here as a specifically urban phenomenon that weld together different aspects of urban youth experience to form a tightly-knit social and political formation that bears the social imprint and values of earlier gang brotherhoods. The idea that the new political identities that emerged amongst the youth in South African cities were specifically urban identities has also been developed in the work of Mamdani (1996). He argues, rather more optimistically, that the political culture of the urban youth embraced the values of civil society and liberties, and was specifically constructed in opposition to the undemocratic traditions of patriarchal power and entitlement associated with customary system in rural areas. This formulation, which is based largely on his reading of the secondary literature on political developments on the Reef during the 1980s, is then generalised to characterise the political identities of urban youth across the country.

The problem with these formulations is that they shut out the critical role that rural youth played in shaping the comrades as a social formation, and thus reproduce the idea that urban and rural youth are still deeply divided in their social and political outlooks and orientations. While old divisions might have lingered on the Reef, one of the reasons why the comrades in East London were able to consolidate power with such force in the 1980s was precisely because they were able to address and break down older barriers. I also attempt to show how the convergence of urban and rural youth identities and styles was reflected in the reconstruction of youth domesticity, especially with the large-scale adoption of *ukuhlalisana* (living together outside of marriage) as the preferred domestic style amongst both urban and rural youth in the 1980s. This process not only narrowed the gap between disparate groups of youth, but also set a new agenda for how youths related to their parents, responded to existing notions of authority and social obligation and ultimately how they related to one another. By shifting my analytical lens between the street into the home, I hope to deepen our understanding of the cultural dynamics of youth identity politics and the nature of urbanism in a single South African city.

## Rural and Urban Youth in the 1950s

In the *Xhosa in Town* Trilogy very little reference is made to the youth as a distinct social category. In these texts, the role of the youth is generally dealt with as part of the larger narrative of the construction of Red and School identities and life-styles in the city. Different categories of rural youth, therefore, feature as carriers of these identities, and are presented as fulfilling social roles required for the social reproduction of Red and School responses to urban life. Nevertheless, the Mayers reported that in the East Bank of the 1950s, urban and rural-born youth formed two opposing categories where “the glaring contrasts in dress, in speech, in manner, are only the outward signs of completely different values” (1971: 188). While town-bred youth “put the accent on smartness, rather than trying to be smart” and embraced a wide range of cosmopolitan styles and influences, the country-born youth, whether Red or School, were seen to show a lack of urban sophistication in their dress styles and general social behaviour. The reason for this, as the Mayers argued in their later work on youth socialisation in the Ciskei and Transkei, was that rural youth had been socialised in a very different way to urban youth.<sup>2</sup>

In rural areas around East London where Red families predominated, the Mayers (1970, 1972) reported that rural youth were taught to respect rank or seniority, to show respect for tradition, the law (*umthetho*) and to eschew urban values and life from an early age. At about the age of twelve they started to attend *umtshotsho* meetings, which involved dancing, sweet-hearting and stick play. These activities encouraged age solidarities and were regulated by certain norms – contraventions of which were dealt with by the *umtshotsho* group as a whole. The *umtshotsho* groups were organised on a strictly territorial basis and proved to be a great attraction for both girls and boys in rural areas. As boys went through initiation and became young men (*abafana*), they joined *intlombe* groups, which placed strong emphasis on traditional dress, on debate amongst men and on dancing and singing. These groups were said to be the “schools” of the Red people and were widely evident in rural communities in the East London hinterland in the 1950s, and were noted in many rural communities through to the late 1970s (Mayer 1970, 1972; see also McAllister & Deliwe 1994). Former East Bank residents said that the influence of Red youth culture was seen in the *intlombe* groups that sung and danced at beer drinks in the location and in the ubiquitous stick fighting that occurred amongst youth. The latter fights sometimes broke out in the backyards of houses, but were most commonly seen at the weekend when groups of youths from different rural areas were involved in stick-fighting competitions in the bushes surrounding the location.

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1. Youth are not dealt with as a specific social category in the Trilogy. It was only after the completion of these studies that the Mayers took an active interest in youth socialisation and identity politics, which emerged as their major research interest in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1972, they produced a two-volume report, “Report on Research on Self-organisation by Youth among the Xhosa-speaking Peoples of the Ciskei and Transkei” for the Human Sciences Research Council. These volumes were published at this time probably because of the heavy criticism

In their analysis of School youth who came from areas like Keiskammahoek, the Mayers found local groups similar to the Red *umtshotsho*, known as *inhavu*. These groups did not mature into *intlombe* groups after initiation. In School areas, they noted that young men did not automatically belong to the territorially *intlombe* groups, but could choose to participate in one of a variety of voluntary groups, known as “parliaments” or “meetings” at which youths discussed various issues and drank beer together (*ibid.*). These activities were often not approved of by seniors and provided a forum where young men developed identities that were not necessarily in keeping with those of the older generation. The “parliaments” were also structured along western lines, with a leader, a secretary (who recorded the minutes) and a treasurer. Western-style dress was worn and education valued, but the poorly educated were not excluded (*ibid.*). The Mayers go on to report that, unlike the *umtshotsho* meetings of the Reds, the parliament get-togethers could be unstructured and competitive and often ended in drunkenness and violence, as men squabbled. In the Khalana district near East London, where Red youth associations flourished, the Mayers found that these meetings, by contrast, were elitist affairs where tea was preferred to beer and where a great deal of discussion centred on the value of education and *ukhongo* (enlightenment) (*ibid.*). Variations on the “parliament” form have been noted in areas like Mount Ayliff and Pondoland in the former Transkei, where youth groups known as *indlavini*, with a strong urban influence, also existed at this time (cf. O’Connell 1980; Beinart 1991).<sup>3</sup>

When the urban-born youth of East Bank used the term *imixhaka* (meaning “country bumpkin”) to denigrate rural youth in the city, they referred not only to the Red youth but to School youth too, who were also distinguished from them in their dress styles, accents and forms of association. If the rural-born youth of East Bank constituted a differentiated and a general category, so did the urban youth. Ntsebeza (1993), in his work on the urban-born youth of East Bank, reports that they were divided into *iingxungxu* (“those with temporary jobs”), *tsotsis* (“criminal youth”) and *oobrighty* or bright boys (“fashion-conscious youth”) who mingled with *tsotsis*, but were not necessarily involved in crime. The Mayers also refer to the *oobrighty* youth at one point as “flashy and irresponsible” rather than “criminal” like the *tsotsis* (1971: 198). These categories were generally distinguished from the *amasinala* (educated youth or senior students), a highly influential category in 1950s East Bank. Most came from prominent East Bank families and attended the local Welsh High School, with its strong academic traditions and range of clubs, societies and sports to stimulate the youth and “keep them off the streets”.<sup>4</sup> While the *amasinala* youth formed networks across the location as a whole, the

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leveled against their earlier work, but they nevertheless contained very valuable descriptions and analyses of the rural youth’s social life and organisational forms.

2. Mager (1999) also analyses the changing position of rural youth in the former Ciskei, but is less concerned with the categorical distinction between Red and School than with issues of sexuality, gender oppression and entrenchment of patriarchal power in rural locations in the Eastern Cape during and after the 1950s.
3. Welsh High students were exposed to organised sports training, music and choir lessons, and learned debating and other skills that enabled them to excel in their different fields of interest. The skills this cohort of youth learnt were transferred to the location streets, enabling youth in general to domesticate the broader cultural influences (cf. Bank 2000a).

less well-educated but fashionable *oobrighty* youth formed their own groups in particular neighbourhoods and streets.

The *oobrighty* youth consisted of a mixture of owners' and tenants' children and spent more time on the streets than at school or in the community hall, or on extra-mural activities like scouts or choir practice. They liked jazz and were regular supporters of musical and dance events at the Peacock or Makambi Halls. They engaged in competitive style-making and were always on the look-out for new influences "to show off their new styles" (cf. Bank 2000a). This quest for style was, however, not restricted to male urban-born youth. In fact, as the Mayers (1971: 201) point out: "(T)he girls too go in for smart styles, though sometimes combining these with beads worn around the ankles; some like to use lipstick, and to powder their cheeks with pink face powder." The association of young townswomen with fashionable styles is also noted by Mager (1999) who points out that female *tsotsis*, known as the *amatsotsikhazi*, were also seen on the streets of East Bank dressed to the nines themselves (1999: 123).

Despite the differing styles and social upbringings, former East Bank residents suggest that the urban youth, also known as the "borners", were generally united by their common interest in cosmopolitan dress styles, jazz music and sport. As Ben Ntamo explained:

All the urban youths in those days were interested in sport and music. And when it came to picking the best team it did not matter which street or area you came from. Everyone pulled together to get the best results for the club. And on Saturday afternoon when the youths went to Rubusana Park to watch matches, they would mix freely, thinking only of their sports team, hoping for a win ... There were also lots of tournaments where East Bank teams played others from King Williams Town or Alice. At these events the youth also stood together behind their players.

Jazz was the other things that united us. Local bands like the Havana Hotshots, The African Quavers, The Swingers and many others enjoyed a strong following in the location. And when it came to talking about jazz and listening to it, the urban youth in those days all spoke the same language. It was the style they liked and everyone could relate to it.<sup>5</sup>

The integrative power of sport and music was also seen in the extent to which Coloured youth, born and brought up in the location and who lived mainly in the Moriva and Tsolo sections, were also incorporated into the social activities of the urban youth. They played in bands and rugby teams, and belonged to the same

gangs and social groups as African youth. In fact, as I learnt while working on the East Bank restitution case, there was far less social distance between Coloured and African youth in East Bank in the 1950s than there was between urban and rural youth in the location.

In a context where urban and rural identities were relatively clearly marked off from one another, the scope for cross-over from one category to another was limited. But this did not mean that rural youth, who found themselves ostracised on the streets, did not attempt to seek access to urban street or neighbourhood cohorts of urban youth. These attempts were obviously much more common amongst School youth from rural areas like Keiskammahoek, where they had lived under the influence of mission education and mainstream churches. This tendency is noted in a section of *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (1971: 188–191), where the Mayers report on Red youths who try to break links with their *abakhaya* in town. They call these youths “half-Reds”:

The ex-Red recruit to a town clique will fall over backwards in his own eagerness to cut himself off from everything that is Red. Whether out of insecurity or ineptitude, ‘half-Reds overdo everything’. In his own room the young man may be living with the rough and ready furnishings typical of poor Red homes, may be sleeping on a mat on the floor, but with the gang he is all out to impress. To this end he exaggerates his dress; he is all for using the special slang of the town; to him a girl is always *icherry* and a detective *iturkey* (*ibid.*: 189).

They go on to state that, “some of the low-class ‘urban’ girls may [also] be Red girls in disguise, who find it possible to keep up the pretence in low-class company, but not in ‘respectable’ circles where they constantly risk being given away by small points, such as their inability to serve tea in the proper manner” (*ibid.*: 190). In the above quotation the Mayers inadvertently allude to something important in the way in which urban youth cultures were constructed in East Bank in the 1950s, namely the social distance between the house and the street. In the cases they quote of half-Reds, they hint at the disjuncture between home-life and street-life: between the capacity of youths to adopt and perform particular identities and styles on the street that were not necessarily sustained in the home. This tendency was certainly not confined to half-Reds seeking access to street gangs; it was a common feature of the experience of urban youth in general.

On the streets, urban-born youths pretended to be free agents making their own destinies, they displayed a cocky self-confidence and independence to their rural counterparts, which many knew had no place in their homes and would not be tolerated by their social or biological parents. Kulile Radu explained, “as far as our parents were concerned, the attitude we had on the street was not the attitude they wanted to see in the house,

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4. Interview, East London, 13 January 1999.

where they demanded respect and that we behave in a proper manner”.<sup>6</sup> In most cases, urban youth lived in extended family situations where their parents or other senior kin owned the houses in which they lived. This placed adults in a position of power over youths who could not realistically consider moving out of home before finding casual or full-time employment. The relatively high degree of residential stability among urban youth was in contrast to that of the working rural youth who lived with their *abakhaya* or in *intanga* groups. The domestic situations of urban and rural youth placed them in different social positions vis-à-vis the power and authority of adults in the home.

The urban youth, who seemed so free on the streets, were often exposed to close control in the home. The stories of former East Bank residents suggest that the activities of young women were particularly tightly controlled. Thenjiwe Ngcebetsha recalled that, “in those days we had to listen to our parents and obey their instructions. We could not just go where we wanted and do what we wanted like the youth of today. At home there were lots of rules, and chores to do”.<sup>7</sup> She related her story about parental discipline in terms of township courting rituals and the restrictions her parents placed on her evening outings:

In those days, you could not just go out with your boyfriend on a Saturday night without your father’s permission. The young guys were too scared to just knock on the door and come into my house in case my father was there. They would wait in street and whistle to attract my attention ... I remember how, on Saturday nights, we would sneak out of our rooms after they went to sleep to meet up with our boyfriends on the street corners. I used to carry my high-heeled shoes and tiptoe down the passage so as not to make a noise in the corridor. When we got back late at night from the dance-halls, we sometimes used to sleep on the veranda so as not to wake our parents up. It was a constant cat and mouse game ... If we were caught sneaking out there would always be extra chores and even a beating. My father believed in giving us a good hiding with his belt if we misbehaved.<sup>8</sup>

Other women recalled their heavy household workloads. Tumi Majola recalled that it was her duty to milk the three cows that her father pastured on the East Bank commonage and every day bring milk to the house before getting ready for school.<sup>9</sup> This work, she said, was in addition to helping her mother with chores around the house. Zinzi Bata, who lived with her grandmother on Camp Street, recalled that the domestic load placed on teenage girls was no lighter in female-headed household: “My mother and my grandmother

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5. Interview, East London, 5 October 2000.

6. Interview, East London, 20 June 2000.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Interview, East London, 26 September 1999.

would give the orders all the time. It felt like we had no time to ourselves. We were always in the house working, and had no choice but to obey them, especially my grandmother, who was very strict”.<sup>10</sup>

Young men had greater freedom to roam the streets and to get on with their business. They often managed to stay out until after dark and operated on the premise that domestic work was for girls. But, as Ndyebo Momoti recalled:

In those days our fathers still had respect and authority. They would watch how we behaved and, if word got around that you were getting out of hand, they would call you in and give you a hiding. The best thing to do was to show them the necessary respect and then just get on with your own business. But there was a fine line that could not be crossed. If you got into trouble with the police or with a girl, there was a lot of explaining to do and many visits were made between families to sort of the problem. The worst-behaved young men, who became *tsotsis*, were usually ones who had no fathers in the location. They would not listen to their mothers and had much more freedom than us. We were often envious of them because they did what they liked.<sup>11</sup>

The situation, of course, varied from family to family. But the general picture that emerged from interviews with former East Bank residents was that the sense of freedom and power that urban-born youth enjoyed on the streets in the 1950s did not extend into the home, where they had to respect their parents and obey house rules. This disjuncture between the space of the street, where urban-born youth identities and power was celebrated, and the space of the house, where established notions of generational authority and respect were enforced, created tension in the 1950’s East Bank. In the 1950s, when youth had adopted increasingly radical political positions, sometimes colliding with those of their parents, this opposition between power on the street and in the home came into sharp focus. Yet it was never fundamentally undermined. Even when groups of rural migrant men were urged by state agents to take to the streets in 1958 to enforce discipline and clear the location of criminal and *tsotsi* elements, they enjoyed limited support from most urban-born parents.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Interview, East London, 10 September 1999.

10. Interview, East London, 10 September 1999.

11. Mbhuti Adonsi explained that, “while some people supported the action of migrants, saying that the youth in the location were getting too big for their boots, the majority of our parents [that is, of urban-born youth] felt that discipline was a family matter and disagreed with the action of the migrants”. Cf. Interview, East London, 14 May 2001.

## Changing Youth Styles and the Rise of the Comrades

During the 1960s, when the streets of the new Duncan Village had fallen silent while rumblings of government bulldozers echoed in the distance, rural youth were pushed out of the township. In this period, *tsotsism* and street gangs were also eradicated and were only prevalent in pockets in C-section, as the focus on youth social activities now moved from the streets to the new run-of-the-mill Bantu Education schools, such as Ebenezer Majombozi and Qaqamba High.

However, by the mid-1970s, people living in the new neighbourhoods had come to know each other better and there was a growing spirit of resistance, especially to the continuing forced removals. In this period, the urban youth started to reappear on the streets in greater numbers. Rising youth unemployment also contributed to this trend as the new groups of youth, known as *iingxungxu*, forged themselves into neighbourhood gangs, socialising together and using the streets to play football, drafts and other games. *Tsotsis* now also roamed the streets in increasing numbers, and for the first time since the 1950s, *oobrighty* youth were seen again in Duncan Village.

The *oobrighty* group was divided into two main groups, the *iikati* (cats) and the *ivies*. Tlali Ratshi, who grew up in Duncan Village (Proper) in the 1970s, claimed that the name *iikati*:

... referred to the ways they treated themselves. They were clean cut and well groomed, and loved to dress in bright clothes. They wore tight, stovepipe trousers, known as “zoots”, which were slightly short in length to reveal their brightly coloured socks. They also liked to wear *oomabotshwecelani* (shoes with laces at the side) and often had their shirt sleeves pushed back to the elbow. This was even done when they wore jerseys. They also permed their hair in the S-curl style and were known to be highly successful womanisers.<sup>13</sup>

To a large extent, as Tlali also explained, the *iikati* modelled themselves on the black American pop idol, Michael Jackson, whose music they and other *oobrighty* youth favoured. The availability of portable hi-fi systems from the early 1980s contributed to bringing their music and dress style onto the streets. The *iikati*'s outfits were not expensive, although those with money did prefer to “wear designer labels”.

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12. Interview, East London, 8 June 1996.

The *ivies*, who comprised somewhat better-educated youth, introduced another fashionable street style that reflected their presentation of themselves as the township's "Ivy League". Their look was less shiny, bright and colourful than the *iikati*'s, as they adopted more subdued colours in a more expensive range of shirts and pants – the pants with a looser fit and the shirts smarter and usually buttoned up to the top. They also fancied themselves as womanisers. Mtelele Sam, who later became a leading figure in the DVRA, explained:

While the *iikati* thought they had style that could attract the ladies, they had nothing on the *ivies*. These guys were the real *izifebes* (womanisers) and the women flocked to them. They had expensive tastes and gave everyone the impression that they had money to back up their fashionable look. This is what the girls were after and the *ivies* were generally disliked because they had the reputation of being lady snatchers.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike the *iikati*, which were a local group, the *ivies* of Duncan Village appear to have emerged as an imitation of a fashionable Sowetan style with the same name, which first appeared on the streets in the 1960s and grew in popularity in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> In East London, the *tsotsis* and the *ivies* often clashed over women and were known to dislike each other. One of the obvious differences between the two in stylistic terms was that, while *tsotsis* wore their trousers on the hips, the *ivies* generally wore theirs above their belly buttons.

The movement of the school-going youth, now calling themselves *comrades*, onto the streets of Duncan Village in the 1980s placed them on a collision course with the *oobrighty* youth, especially the *ivies* and *iikati*, as well as the *tsotsis* and small-time *iingxungxu* youth gangs. The comrades had no time for dressing up (*ukunxibisa*) – they viewed dress as very functional, and sported t-shirts, track suits, jeans and sneakers that enabled them to remain mobile and elusive. As one former comrade explained: "We travelled light, no heavy suits and fancy shoes, because we were always on the move, fighting the *system*<sup>16</sup>". The last thing the *amaqabane* wanted, he explained, was to be conspicuous on the streets and to draw the attention of the police. But because comrades liked to be associated with workers, they also sometimes sported two-piece, blue overalls or work suits, and on official occasions they often wore khaki trousers and shirts to adopt a militaristic look. In line with the clothes they wore, the *amaqabane* would sometimes refer to each other as *msebenzi* (worker) or *msebenzi wehlabathi* (worker of the world), leaders were referred to as *nkokheli* (leader) and rank and file street activists often just as *soldier*. The term *ukurhabulisana*, which means sharing or drinking from the same vessel, was also adopted amongst comrades in Duncan Village (it was also

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13. Interview, East London, 14 April 2002.

14. Glaser (2000: 108) defines the Reef *ivies* as follows: The "ivy" style was clean cut and dandyish, even prissy; it emphasised, for instance, particular makes of aftershave and deodorant. "Ivies" were heavily influenced by elite American fashion and saw themselves as more classy than the "clevers". "Clevers", with their particular brand of urban machismo, generally regarded the *ivies* as "good boys" and "sissies".

15. Term used to refer to the police, special branch and other apartheid structures.

apparently used on Robben Island to refer to the political sessions and discussions held amongst political prisoners themselves).

The language of struggle also drew heavily on the slogans and manifestos of the main anti-apartheid political formations of the time. Catch-phrases such as “each one, teach one” (used mainly by the Congress of South African Students or COSAS), “an injury to one is an injury to all” (promoted by the South African Allied Workers Union or SAAWU), or “*asinamali*” (meaning “we have no money”, that is, to pay their rents), were widely used as short-hand markers of identity. Knowledge of liberation songs, which punctuated proceedings on street marches and at political meetings, was also important. Some of the popular choruses sung in the 1980s included the following:

*Rolihlahla Mandela,*

*Freedom is in your hands*

*Show us the way to freedom*

*In this land of Africa*

*Epalamente siyaya noba kubi*

*Siphuma eSoviet siphethe ne Bazooka*

*Siyaya noba kubi*

We are going to parliament even if it is bad

We are from the Soviet and we have Bazookas

We will be there no matter what

*He wena Koornhof, He wena Koornhof*

*He wena Koornhof Sukudlala ngomnt’omnyama*

*NguMkhonto Lo oweSizwe*

Koornhof, Koornhof

Don’t play with black people

We are MK (Soldiers of Mkhonto weSizwe)

*Basebenzi manyanani*

*Yiyole intlangano yabasebenzi*

*A basebenzi bomZant’ Afrika*

Workers unite

Here is the workers union

Workers of South Africa

*Weena Mugabe Uyinkokheli ye Zimbabwe*

*Sicel ‘usiph’ndawo*

*Siz ‘ongena ePitoli*

Mugabe you are the leader of Zimbabwe

Please give us a base, a refuge.

So that we can enter Pretoria

Comrades also accumulated cultural capital through attending political meetings, workshops, and rallies, and proudly wearing the t-shirts and satchels distributed at these events – indicating their struggle connections

and commitment. On the streets, the comrades would taunt the *iikati* and *ivies*, teasing them about their clothes and implying that their fashions were effeminate. They also chastised them for their lack of political ideology and direction. From the outset, the comrades associated themselves with a macho, risk-taking attitude that set them apart from certain categories of *oobrighty* youth. But while comrades teased the *oobrighty* youth, they had stronger terms for collaborators, terms like *umdlwembe*, derived from the Zulu, meaning “sell-out”, and *ukungwakuza*, meaning someone that was politically ill-informed and illogical, almost to the extent of being mentally ill.

While the interactions between different categories of urban youth, as well as students and workers, had a critical influence on the formation of the comrades as a social and political phenomenon, it would be misleading to see this movement in Duncan Village merely as an amalgam of urban influences. The re-entry of rural youth in the township in the 1980s also left a profound mark on the cultural and political orientations of the *amaqabane*. Studies of rural youth in the Eastern Cape in the 1970s show that important changes had occurred in youth identity politics since the 1960s. In the late 1970s, O’Connell identified three categories of rural youth in the Mount Ayliff district of the Transkei: the Reds; the Rascals or *indlavini*, seen as rural equivalent of the urban *tsotsis*; and Gentlemen or *amanene*, who were better-educated and aspired to *impucuko yesilungu* (western ways and life-styles). He reported that Red youth style was receding rapidly and had “virtually disappeared in Nzongisa”, while the Rascals and the Gentlemen, who were “inclined to be defiant, violent, uninterested in the community, and often criminally orientated”, were growing (O’Connell 1980: 297). The picture that emerges from O’Connell’s research is one of increasing conflict, violence and disarticulation between the rural youth and the older generation.

In Shixini on the Transkei coast, McAllister and Deliwe (1994) also argue that, by the late 1970s, the Red organisational frameworks of *umtshotsho* and *intlombe* had begun to break down, and that there was increasing evidence of ill discipline and violence amongst the youth. By the 1980s, they claim that a new form of social gathering and entertainment for the youth had emerged, namely *potsoyi*, which grew out of the existing *intlombe* groups and was said to resemble a “shebeen party” (*ibid.*: 27). It took the form of a beer drink where liquor was sold for cash and where music was provided, usually by a disc jockey called *masikanda*. These authors go on to argue that:

Elders denigrate *potsoyi* for a variety of reasons, including its reputation for violence, but principally because it ignores the seniority principle, which is still important in rural Xhosa life, with uncircumcised boys and circumcised young men attending together. There is also no discrimination between girls who never had a child (*noswananye*) and *amakhaza* (women or girls who have had illegitimate children and who may even have been married briefly ... As a result, Shixini elders refer to *potsoyi* disparagingly as

*kwamanisipala* (the Municipality). This implies an association with urban life-styles, but there is more to it. Just as a municipality offers a variety of services to people of an area, so is the *potsoyi* all things to all people.

Similar trends have been noted in areas closer to East London, whence many of the youth that entered the township in the 1980s came. In traditionally Red areas, like Mooiplaas, located 45 km. outside the city, *umtshotsho* and *intlombe* organisations fell by the wayside in the mid- to late 1970s, and a widening gap had emerged between youth and elders in many villages (see Bank & Qambata 1999; Bank 2002b).

By the 1980s, the former distinction between Red and School youth had largely fallen away and it was increasingly evident that, like urban youth, rural youth in the Eastern Cape were becoming politically active. In the early 1980s, rural youth from areas like Mooiplaas, Chalumna, Newlands, Kwelera, and Nxarhuni, all on the city's outskirts, had also been engaged in political struggles with the Ciskei Bantustan authorities over plans to forcibly remove communities and enforce homeland consolidation. Youth from these areas had taken up the cudgels against headmen and state officials in anti-removal campaigns, which had in some cases resulted in significant political victories (see Bank 2002b). Involvement in these struggles brought these rural youth into direct contact with various anti-apartheid movements and groupings, like the United Democratic Front and the ANC Youth Congress, the last of which was increasingly active in the rural Eastern Cape by the mid-1980s (Southall, Segar & Donaldson 1992).

With their shared commitment to political transformation in the city, rural and urban youth soon found common ground, with the former quickly absorbed into the DVRA and other local-level political structures. Represented on the DVRA's street and area committees, they also played a critical role in establishing people's courts, transferring rural idioms of popular justice into the urban setting. Rural youths, who generally had little formal education and lacked the political sophistication of some of their urban counterparts, made their mark on the streets rather than in the classroom. They proved themselves fearless street fighters; often being the first to confront heavily-armed security policemen and *casspirs* (armed cars) with little more than stones. Their bravery and commitment earned them the reputation of being amongst the township's most valued comrades. Many attributed their skills as combatants to the gruelling initiation they had gone through in rural areas and their experience of village stick fighting. Vuka, a politically- active youth from Chalumna, explained:

In the village there are no shortcuts to manhood; no comfortable initiation lodges on the edge of the township. Out there you encounter the real thing and you learn to be tough and self-reliant, how to survive when the chips are down. This experience served us well when the teargas and the *casspirs* came to the streets of Duncan Village. We had no other

way to survive except to live on our wits. There was no more talk of *umxhaka* (country-bumpkins). We were all *amaqabane*.<sup>17</sup>

Duncan Village's *amaqabane* therefore did not emerge as the kind of distinctive sub-culture that Glaser (2000) has suggested had emerged in Soweto. Duncan Village's *amaqabane* constituted a much broader category, incorporating various youth types, all of whom were able to express a common cultural *style*, in the sense that Ferguson (1999) defines the term. Above all else, being *iqabane* meant acting like a comrade, being able to perform a certain identity, to speak in a certain way, to have some command of the new struggle rhetoric, to adopt appropriate codes of behaviour and styles of dress. In order to perform the style convincingly, it had to be practised and cultivated over time. But it did not mean having to share a particular upbringing in which certain values, cultural competencies and social orientations were inculcated from an early age. And it was precisely because the *iqabane* identity was more of a stylistic orientation, rather than a distinctive fully-fledged sub-culture, that it was possible for rural youths to access it and to influence its development.

But while there were clearly significant points of intersection between urban and rural youth in Duncan Village in the 1980s, which fed on the ability of the youth to draw distinctions between themselves and other social categories, such as migrants, there were also lingering differences amongst the youth. It is important to emphasise these in order to understand the complexity and fragility of the comrade identity in Duncan Village and to avoid assuming that the intersection between rural and urban youth identity politics simply evolved as a linear process of blurring, where old differences simply fell away. In the section below I attempt to highlight some of these differences, paying particular attention to the fraught relationship between rural youth and urban-born *com-tsotsis* in the township in the late 1980s. I also consider the role of collective male violence as a means of counteracting these centripetal tendencies.

### **Rural Youth, *Com-tsotis* and Masculinity**

By the late 1980s, the *iikati* and the *ivies* styles had faded from the scene and were now replaced by the increasingly popular *amapansula* style, which had its origin in Soweto in the mid-1980s. Drawing on the assertive urban youth identity politics of the time, the *amapansula* style bore the imprint of a hardened street masculinity and expressed a machismo not seen in the styles of the *iikati* and *ivies*, who often said to be slightly effeminate. It was a style that was much more acceptable to some urban-born comrades, despite its emphasis on conspicuous consumption and flashy clothes. In Duncan Village, the *amapansula* brought the *tsotsis* and the comrades closer together and contributed to the making of the *com-tsotsis*, a category that

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16. Interview, East London, 12 December 1997.

made its appearance in Duncan Village after 1985. Mcebisi Qamarwana explained that one of the distinctive features of the new *oobrighty* youth was their insatiable appetite for expensive clothes:

They liked shiny expensive shoes and low-slung, heavyweight trousers. They disapproved of the shiny lightweight stovepipes of the Cats, calling them “cheap”. These youth would often carry their neatly-ironed trousers on hangers over their shoulders so that everyone could see their expensive outfits. They would also sit outside their houses for hours, shining their shoes and listening to their own brand of music.

The *pansulas* also liked hats. They would wear “eight piece” caps with their outfits. Some older *pansulas*, who were circumcised, wore Stetsons as a mark of their seniority. They also liked Muffler and Ray-Ban sunglasses and shopped at places like Modern Man, That Man, Judges, Canons, Strands, Bryants and Dan Watson in East London. Some also went to Zola’s Fashions in Mdantsane. They liked upmarket brands of shirts like Pringle, Pierre Cardin and Darks, while the best cuts in trousers were the Cutwoods, Punchwood and Cutrite brands. *Pansula* were also very fussy about their shoes. Crocket and Jones, Medicus Royal, and Flosheim were regarded as the best brands, followed by Barker and Jordan shoes.<sup>18</sup>

Music was also at the core of the *pansula* style: South African artists like Paul Ndlovu, Chicco Twala, Mercy Pakela and, of course, Brenda Fassie, the female icon of this largely male style, were all popular. The *amapansula* were also soccer-mad and were great fans of the two Soweto glamour clubs, Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates.

For many rural youth in the city, the enterprise of playful style-making on the streets and the associated conspicuous consumption of clothes and fashion, seemed frivolous, irrelevant and even reactionary, in relation to the broader political challenges they faced. They also objected to the arrogant attitudes of the urban-born *oobrighty* youth, whom they said lacked discipline and had scant respect for organisational rules and regulations. The concerns of the rural youth and other comrades came to the fore after the declaration of a State of Emergency in June 1986, when dozens of senior DVRA comrades and activists were arrested. In this period the power of the residents’ association to control the streets suddenly weakened and there was a period during which urban street gangs and *tsotsis* ran riot in the township. As one resident explained in a letter to the *Daily Dispatch* (7 August 1986), following the escalation of incidents of violence and crime in the township in 1986:

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17. Interview, East London, 10 October 2001.

Many of the horrifying petrol bombings and stonings in Duncan Village have been perpetrated by teenage gangs running riot in the township. Most of the youths are not connected with pupils' or residents' organisations and roam the streets in pursuit of excitement and a sense of power. Some residents are angry and frustrated at being powerless to stop them.

By mid-1987, it was confirmed that the actions of these youth gangs – referred to as *comtsotsis* – had ensured that the crime rate in Duncan Village had increased by 250 % since June 1986 (*Daily Dispatch* 3 August 1987). The *oobrighty* and *tsotsi* street gangs, who were only partially integrated into local-level political structures, used the uncertainty created by the arrests of 1986 to pursue their own objectives. Rural youth, by contrast, who still felt insecure in the township because of their recent arrival and were not well integrated into neighbourhood networks, remained loyal to the DVRA. They believed in accountable civic structures and were angry at the way in which the gangs were using their status as “comrades” to take advantage of township residents and to feather their own nests. Dumisane, a politically-active rural youth from the Mooiplaas location who arrived in Duncan Village in 1985 explained: “The situation was totally, totally not right, we were now at the mercy of these teenage thugs, most of whom had not even reached manhood.” Dumisane explained that rural youth felt that the problems of the gangs could not be addressed via meetings and political education, “we were calling for discipline, order and respect – we demanded that those who abused the struggle be punished”.<sup>19</sup>

Many rural youth said that it was no good having street committees and other structures if they did not have the power to enforce discipline. They demanded that people's courts, which were already operating in some areas, be developed and expanded to restore effective control. This in itself required education, as Tops explained:

The school-going youth did not know how justice worked in the rural areas. They had to be taught that there had to be law (*umthetho*), and those who did not obey the law needed to be dealt with severely and publicly. People had to see what would happen to them if they did not respect the comrades.<sup>20</sup>

In the period prior to 1986, the comrades had introduced certain laws in the neighbourhoods: one of these was that comrades were not allowed to drink and to patronise shebeens. Some migrants and *oobrighty* youth defied these measures without being punished. Many rural youth argued that the comrades had shown weakness in their handling of this issue. They pushed for harsher punishment not only on this issue but also

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18. Interview, East London, 5 July 1996.

19. Interview, East London, 18 July 1996.

on rape, which they specifically associated with the activities of the *com-tsotsis*. As Mandisi Jekwa, a DVRA branch committee member, explained, by the late 1980s the interventions of rural youth had delivered results:

As comrades, we agreed that women were vulnerable on the streets and we did not want them to be exposed. It was a war and it was our job to protect the women and children from pain and suffering ... We wanted them off the streets for their own safety ... But rape was not something that was tolerated at all. There were three things we started punishing severely as comrades: crime, rape and drunkenness. Comrades who came to meetings drunk would, for instance, have to take what we called a “Cool Aid” and “half a loaf” (that is, a tin of water and Omo (washing detergent) and half a loaf of Sunlight soap). Those who were caught for rape got a lot worse than that!<sup>21</sup>

While older divisions between urban and rural youth still lurked below the surface, there was nevertheless a significant convergence and consolidation of the generational power of male youth in Duncan Village in the late 1980s. In fact, as discipline was restored after 1986 with regular flogging and beating being meted out by people’s courts, the comrades became increasingly intoxicated by their own power and were feared by other township residents. In this period, public violence, especially against *umdlwembe* (spies) or *abanqwakuzi* (political opponents) elements, served not only as a warning to those who did not obey the comrades, but as political rituals which renewed the youth’s unity and their commitment to struggle. Mandisi’s account of an incident where three alleged police informers were found living in a shack in his area gives a good sense of the mood that prevailed on the streets of the township in the late 1980s:

No one who lived in Duncan Village in those days [late 1980s] could escape the wrath of the comrades. They were so powerful and dominant that people lived in terror of them. I remember as a kid seeing many horrific acts of violence, of old men being beaten up, of girls being raped and even of necklacing. I remember I was walking home from school through Bebelele and there was a huge commotion because the comrades claimed that they had found a shack with three police informers. As I passed, I could see the accused men were standing on the roof of the shack with the crowd below baying for their blood. The men were being interrogated by some of our leaders; they were denying their involvement in any police-related activity. I remember that, as they were screaming and shouting, one fell off the roof and was almost instantly beaten to death as he fell to the ground. The noise and commotion had alerted the police who had brought a helicopter overhead. They started speaking through the megaphone demanding that the crowd disperse and that the men on the roof be left alone. This allowed the men to flee and

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20. Interview, East London, 15 March 1996.

escape, but I heard the next day that after the police had left they [the three men] had been tracked down by the comrades and murdered.<sup>22</sup>

In much the same way as sporting events and musical shows constituted “tournaments of value” in the 1950s, political rallies, public floggings and people’s courts served that function in the 1980s and 1990s. These public expressions of collective violence also resonated with rural traditions of stick fighting, where village youth would display their prowess and dominance in public displays of violence. It was the public squares, bus terminals, street corners and church buildings, rather than the dance-halls and sports grounds, that were now critical sites where male youth expressed their power. These spaces provided nodes where the political and social values cultivated on the street and in the schools, could be expressed in concentrated performances of power and style. But what was expressed through street violence was a very masculine power. Indeed, as the struggle in Duncan Village moved out of the schools and onto the streets, women’s struggle roles changed. In the classroom, female students had played key roles in debates and in formulating political strategy. But once the struggle moved onto the street, the comrades increasingly moved female youth out of the firing line, requiring them to operate on the fringes: to provide support for their men on the “front line” (Glaser 2000).<sup>23</sup>

The forging of new masculinities on the township streets was central to the project of the comrades. Xaba (2001: 108), for instance, uses the term “struggle masculinities” to refer to the type of masculinity that became dominant amongst young, urban Africans in their struggle against apartheid. He defines struggle masculinity as a “socially-constructed collective gender identity”:

Its main characteristics were opposition to the apartheid system (which included Bantu Education, exploitation of workers and communities, high rents and rates, and the suppression of protest) and political militancy. Because many older African people (particularly men) were seen to be complicit with apartheid, such opposition assumed a posture that was anti-authority. Since struggle masculinity existed side-by-side with *street masculinity*, which was disparaging towards women, struggle masculinity was tainted by some of the negative attitudes and behaviours towards women (Xaba 2001: 109).

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21. Interview, East London, 12 April 1998.

22. In 1995-1996, the power of the comrades was on the wane, but the people’s courts that they had set up were still very active in the township and meted out severe beatings, and even death, as punishment. In 1995, at least three people were killed and many others injured as a result of the workings of people’s courts in the township (*Daily Dispatch*, 24 July 1995). Over the same period, it was reported that there had been more than 25 murders and hundreds of house-breaking incidents, rapes and serious assaults reported in the township (*Daily Dispatch*, 27 October 1997).

Xaba's definition of "struggle masculinity" echoes Glaser's (2000) earlier comments on the links between comrades and urban street gang sub-cultures in Soweto. Both accounts present these forms of masculinity as derived from urban experience. But such a proposition is difficult to sustain in Duncan Village where "struggle masculinities" seem to have emerged as a complex amalgam of rural traditions, social memories and definitions of masculinity and discipline, as well as those associated with street gangs. The evidence from Duncan Village thus suggests the co-existence of different and even contradictory tendencies in the way in which youth masculinity was articulated and expressed during the 1985 to 1995 period.

It was precisely the existence of these contradictory tendencies that made the comrade identity both so volatile and so fragile. It was an identity that constantly needed to be renewed and reaffirmed in order to reassure those who shared it of their common interests and orientations. The evidence presented above problematises the notion that the youth-identity formation evolved as a linear process where old differences between urban and rural youth simply dissolved in the city as rural youth became incorporated into urban-based political struggles against the state. The evidence suggests that, although rural youth had left earlier forms of youth socialisation and self-organisation behind, they nevertheless drew on ideas associated with older forms of youth organisation in their critique of the behaviour and practices of the *com-tsotsis*. This section has also shown that the process of convergence of interests amongst the youth was often situationally-driven and that once conditions changed as they did in the 1990s, it was always possible for older distinctions to re-emerge in new forms. This is precisely what happened when terms like *igungqayi* (meanings 'those with a rural outlook') emerged again in the 1990s to refer to rural youth who were still coming into the township to partake of the meagre rewards for which the comrades had struggled so hard in the 1980s. But the social and cultural differences between urban and rural youth were less pronounced than in the 1950s and 1960s, when rural youth were discarded as country-bumpkins. In the 1990s, it was to simply claim that rural youth lack sophistication, political credentials and were 'out of touch' with the mainstream cultural trends.

In the late 1990s, the youth of Duncan Village remained much more united than they had been in earlier decades. The end of apartheid and the collapse of political structures at the street and neighbourhood level destroyed the power of the comrades as a controlling force in the township. In Duncan Village, street and neighbourhood committees have continued to operate in many areas but they lack power and influence, which now resides with various ANC elected representations on the city council and in the provincial government. The collapse of the comrades as a unified force on the streets of the township has left a power vacuum, which in the late 1990s was increasingly filled by criminals and *tsotsis* groups who roamed the streets with knives and guns terrorising ordinary citizens and even former comrades. In the current period, a more strongly consumerist and explicitly anti-political ethos has set in amongst certain sections of the township youth. Kwaito music, with its mix of local and global influences and its association with black American styles, is very popular on the streets. A new wave of fashion-conscious *oobrighty* youth have come

to the fore in the appearance of the well-groomed *ama-tsawu-tsawu*, known for their use of bright colours, smart clothes and their desire to attract attention, and the *ama-mdantsantas*, who are said to be the new cats of the street corners. The older *pansulas* from the 1980s are also visible and influential again, as are the *tsotsis* groups, which have increasingly swallowed up the disenchanted elements amongst the comrades. Outside of these fashion conscious groupings, the majority of township youth try to eke out a living by combining a range of formal and informal economic activities. With limited formal sector jobs available, many have resorted to street trading, to selling belts, sunglasses, chips, loose cigarettes and other odds and ends to earn money. These operators are often referred to in the township as *oo masitshaye*, literally ‘let us smoke’. Amongst those who have joined the ranks of the *tsotsis* there are also now the *amaginsta* (from the English “gangster”) with their gold chains, rings and bracelets. The *amaginsta* are *tsotsis*, who are said to have connections with “big time” drug and money rackets in Johannesburg, and are joining forces with local *tsotsism* to commit crime in the township.

The changing patterns of youth identity politics since the mid-1990s clearly require more attention than we have space for here. But the story of the convergence of urban and rural youth and the deepening rift that exists between generations would be incomplete without some explorations of the new domestic environments into which the youth moved in large numbers since the political upheavals the 1980s. In the final part of this paper I want to move off the streets and into the make-shift, shack homes of the youth and discuss the social dynamics of *ukuhlalisana*, the domestic form of choice amongst the urban and rural youth in this period. To begin this discussion we need to return briefly to the 1950s.

### ***Ukhlalisana and the Politics of Home***

In the 1950s, when youth political activism was on the upsurge in East Bank, the majority of urban and rural youth in the location still lived in domestic environments where they were under some level of parental or adult control. In the case of the urban youth, they mainly lived in the homes of their parents or relatives, while most rural youth, especially Reds, found themselves having to comply with the rules and regulations of the senior *abakhaya*, who often acted as their guardians. In the 1980s and 1990s, urban and rural youth found themselves in a very different situation. In this period, most urban and rural youths were no longer under the authority of older-generation men and women, but lived in backyard and free-standing shacks, where they had created their own households. Most of them lived as couples in *ukhlalisana* relationships, which formed the basis of a quarter of all households in Duncan Village in 1995. The emergence of *ukhlalisana* relationships in urban areas and their connection to the changing politics of the youth is a topic that has not received close analytical scrutiny, but is one that I believe is critical to an understanding of the comrades as a social and cultural phenomenon.

In Duncan Village, *ukuhlalisana* was not just another domestic option into which urban and rural youth were pushed as a result of the growing housing crisis in the townships. It was an option that they specifically sought out for themselves as they attempted to translate the power they experienced on the streets into the domain of the home. It constituted part of the style of the youth. In Duncan Village in the 1980s and 1990s, such relationships became emblematic of the youth's desire to achieve social and political freedom. The comrades associated *ukuhlalisana* with rejection of older forms of family structure and obligation. They viewed it as a vehicle for the expression of their newly-found freedom and sense of liberation from existing social and political structures. As one youth explained: "It was one of the ways in which we tried to show our parents that we were committed to something new."

*Ukuhlalisana* relationships, of course, were not new in Duncan Village in the 1980s. They had existed in East Bank in the 1950s, but on a much smaller scale, and were also noted in homeland towns during the 1970s (Mayer 1971; Manona 1980).<sup>24</sup> Manona, however, argues that the trend among the rural youth in the Ciskei, especially after the 1950s, was towards a form of informal marriage known as *ukuthwala* (literally, "to carry"). This form of marriage deviated from the custom of careful negotiations between families, elaborate marriage rituals, and the transfer of *lobola* cattle from the husband's family to the wife's family. In the case of *ukuthwala*, the couple usually eloped without parental consent and the prospective husband paid compensation known as *inkomo yokuthwala* to the wife's family (Manona 1980: 189). With *ukuthwala*, the expectation was that a full traditional marriage would follow and that proper *lobola* negotiations and marriage rituals would eventually be undertaken. However, this did not always occur (*ibid.*: 202).

*Ukuhlalisana* was different from *ukuthwala* because it did not acknowledge the rights of the families involved. It represented a much stronger assertion of independence from parental authority and power on the part of the youth. The decision to "stay together" was taken independently by the youths, without any negotiations between families and there was no transfer of cattle or cash. In Duncan Village, the adoption of *ukuhlalisana* on a large scale indicated that the male youth, in particular, did not feel that their parents had a significant role to play in their choice of partners. *Ukuhlalisana* was also different from *ukuthwala* in the sense that it did not necessarily anticipate marriage. In Duncan Village, living-together relationships often lasted for years without *ukuthwala* or formal marriage being transacted. This had important implications for the position of women in these relationships, because without cattle changing hands, they could not – at least

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23. The Mayers note that *ukushweshwa* or "staying-together unions" were quite common in East Bank in the 1950s. They "involved town unions in which the woman comes to stay with the man without being married to him, and they live in a room as one domestic unit" (1971: 257). *Ukushweshwa* is therefore an older term for what is today normally called *ukuhlalisana*. The main difference between the practice of "staying together" in the 1950s and that of today is that in the 1950s the practice was mainly confined to married migrants who already had country wives, while today it is dominated by unmarried youths. See Mayer 1971 : 257-261 for details.

in customary terms – be expected to take on the roles of wives. *Ukuhlalisana* partners, unlike *ukuthwala* brides, could not don German-print dresses, black headscarves and the *uxukatho* neck-scarf characteristically worn by a new wife (*makoti*) after an *ukuthwala*, or customary marriage. One of the problems with *ukuhlalisana* relationships was that, while they were easily appropriated as symbols of youth independence, they offered no clear cultural definition of the roles that men and women were expected to play within these relationships.

As a result, *ukuhlalisana* relationships in Duncan Village were characterised by high levels of gender tension and conflict. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, the impulse towards living together came unequally from men and women. Young men, who led the rebellion against the state in the 1980s, were more eager to break away socially from their parental homes, whether in town or country, than were young women, who were often ambivalent about setting out on their own. The 1980s political struggles had been softer on the relationships among women within domestic units, than they had been on those between men, especially in rural areas where male-generational conflict had really come to the fore in the 1980s. Cross-generational relationships among women in rural areas were less severely damaged in this period than they were amongst men (Cf. Bank 2002b). However, young women also realised that if they wished to find the right man, which many hoped they would eventually marry, they would have to accept the risks of moving out of their natal homes and shacking up with their partners. Young women spoke a great deal about the art of finding “the right man” to “shack-up” with. They tended to agree that “looks” were not the only, or the most important, consideration. As one single woman explained:

There are three kinds of men that cause real problems, those that drink too much, those that have extra-marital affairs and those that don't bring home their wages. For me the ideal man is not very good-looking, he doesn't drink, he won't squander money. But in life one cannot always be fortunate enough to choose: love is a strange thing.

Secondly, while young men were keen to break away from the formality of conventional kinship and marriage relations, they relied heavily on older ideas about the obligation of women in marriage to inform their relations. This slippage between ideology and practice was indeed a major reason why *ukuhlalisana* relationships were notoriously unstable and fraught with tension in the shack areas. In many cases, men quickly adopted patriarchal roles by trying to treat their lovers as if they were their *ukuthwala* wives: expecting them to behave “like wives” in taking responsibility for domestic matters and by tending to their men's needs and sexual desires. Women in these households often found men's demands excessive and argued that, if they were expected to behave “like a wife”, they should be treated like one. Many said that if men wanted their loyalty, they should at least pay *inkomo yokuthwala*. The desire of young women to

transform living-together relationships into informal marital ones, and the desire of men to avoid marriage at all costs, exacerbated the tensions within these relationships.

In *ukuhlalisana* relationships sexuality thus emerged as a central issue. Duncan Village men saw sexual conquest as an essential component of their assertion of successful masculinity. Issues of initiation, penis size, and virility were part of men's everyday discourse as were their sexual conquests and desires. The ability to simultaneously entertain several sexual relationships was seen as highly desirable and something older youths bragged about in front of younger boys. Sexual fidelity was, in contrast, regarded as a state that women constantly tried to impose on them. It was not a characteristic to which men aspired. As Tops worded it: "Being loose, mobile and unattached was something we had become used to; as comrades we were always on the move and did not need to account for our whereabouts. It was now difficult for us to get used to being in one place, always at home, and this was something our girlfriends did not understand. They wanted loyal and responsible fathers for their children, men who like their father brought home a pay packet at the end of the week."<sup>25</sup>

In an environment where cross-gender socialising was kept to a minimum, sexuality constituted an important social act of exchange whereby identities were constructed. In living-together relationships, women felt vulnerable to excesses of male sexuality. Among their peers, women were acutely embarrassed if they were regarded as being unable to hold onto their men, whom they valued as economic and social resources, potential household bread-winners and a male presence in the home. Many believed that it was much easier for a man to find a woman than for a woman to keep her man. Young women thus went to great lengths to hold onto their men. Many invested in love potions, believed to be able to beguile and bewitch a woman's lover and enhance her sexual attraction and performance. These women would pay up to R400 to local herbalists – sums they were willing to spend even when they had access to very little money. Love potions used in Duncan Village's shack areas in the 1980s and 1990s included those known locally as *ivamna* ("listen to me only") and *bhekaminandedwa* ("look at me alone"). They were said to enable a woman to hold onto men or to lure them from other relationships. Usually comprising a mixture of herbs and the woman's body fluids (vaginal secretions, blood and nail scrapings), made into powders or pastes, they were either added to the man's food or applied to the woman's body or the man's penis. Male youths seen doing what other young men considered to be "women's work" were often said to be under the spell of these potions. Men said that they only used love potions very occasionally, often in a fit of jealousy and to prevent their woman from having affairs with other men. The male potions were usually applied to the penis before sex in order to prevent other men from getting an erection if they tried to have sex with one's woman.

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24. Interview, East London, 18 July 1996.

Young women in the shack areas also used various cosmetics to enhance their attractiveness. During the day, these included camomile cream, applied to the face as a sunscreen to prevent the skin from darkening. A light, fresh skin was said to make a woman more attractive to men. Some women also used *Eskamel* (a powerful anti-acne cream) that peeled away the surface layers of the skin, exposing the lighter layers underneath. Application of skin creams, in both shack and formal areas, was not merely part of women's beautification kits. It was also an important marker of women's domestic roles. Wearing a pinafore or old clothes around the house and in the mornings, when men were out of the house working or seeking work, and whitening one's face with heavy doses of creams, signified to other women that they were attending to their domestic responsibilities. Once afternoon came, and women went out to attend to things outside the house or were waiting for their men to return from the city, they changed out of their old clothes and removed the creams. Many young women now applied cheap perfumes and dressed up in better clothes. The application of skin creams and cosmetics was, therefore, not only a sign of the desire to enhance attractiveness and sexual appeal, but served as a marker of association with the home and domestic roles.

Women discussed the elaborate strategies they had used to hold onto their men. These included initiating pregnancies even though doing so opened a woman to being taunted by her rivals with comments such as "*umntwana akayoring*" ("a child is not a ring"). Young women who adopted this strategy ran the risk of rejection because young men tended to shy away from the responsibilities of fatherhood, precisely because it brought with it increased pressure from the family to marry.<sup>26</sup> Yet this was precisely what most young women wanted because it was seen to secure their access to a man's attention and earnings. The transition from being a lover to a *makoti* was a major achievement, proudly symbolised in Duncan Village by the adoption of a new dress code. The standard outfit of a young *makoti* in the shack areas was a blue German-print dress or pinafore, covered by a towel, worn like a sash across the shoulder. On their heads, the *makoti* all wore the standard black scarves. As these women matured as wives, they tended to move the scarf further back on their foreheads and dropped the sash to the waist; soon also trading their blue German-print dresses for brown ones. With young men's proclivity to delay and even actively resist marriage, a young woman's transition from lover to wife was recognised as highly significant, not least because a considerable number of women doubted that they would ever marry.

When a woman became pregnant, it more often failed to lead to the marriage she desired, than it succeeded, and it often also marked the end of a living-together relationship. The stresses and strains that a child's arrival brought on the households of living-together couples were often so severe that break-ups commonly followed after a child's birth. Even during the pregnancy, men tended to start looking around, and by the time the child arrived, the erstwhile couple was often locked into a love triangle. As the new mother applied pressure for the

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25. For a detailed discussion of fatherhood in Duncan Village in the 1990s see Bank (1998).

man's stronger commitment to the relationship, so he tended to move away, often taking up residence with a new lover. A woman exposed to such behaviour found herself in a vulnerable position since she would frequently have defied her parents' better judgement when first entering the living-together relationship, and she now had difficulty returning to her natal home. Having left in disgrace, she was reluctant to return, and this placed her lover in a powerful position so that, in many cases, the relationship became physically abusive. Without close kin's support, such women had no means to control male-initiated domestic violence. According to the men, such experiences served to prepare their women for the hardships of marital life, including witchcraft accusations and verbal abuse from in-laws. By tolerating these abuses, while still in a relationship of cohabitation, the men claimed that women were proving their ability to prove that they could eventually become good wives – *umfazi uyanyamezela* (“to tolerate hardship of marriage”).

The everyday realities of male dominance, violence and abuse in living-together households recorded during my fieldwork confirmed the extent to which men held the upper hand in such units and were able to dictate the terms of their relationships with women.<sup>27</sup> By having separated young women from a support group of female kin, by having drawn them into an ideology of defiance of older forms of association and obligations, and by having confined them in make-shift wood-and-iron one-roomed shacks, they rendered these women vulnerable to domination and abuse. They created an environment in which they could express their sexuality and assert their masculinity, unfettered by the older generation's norms and sanctions. Young men's social power in this situation was clearly expressed in the ease with which they were able to shun their responsibilities as fathers and resist the demands of their women to make them respectable wives. But young men were also frustrated because they often lacked the economic resources to fulfil their fantasies of themselves as male bread-winners. Young women would often taunt their lovers by demanding that they prove their manhood by putting food on the table and supporting their children. They would often use men's weak economic position to threaten them, saying that if they did not support their families themselves and accept the need for marriage, they would have to find men who would. They would say that their lover could not expect them to stay at home “like a wife” when they could not fulfil the obligations of a “husband”. These struggles created enormous tension within households and resulted in high levels of domestic violence and in the instability of *ukuhlalisana* relationships, most of which broke down. Many young men, frustrated by their own inability to find regular employment in the city were also, by the late 1990s, finding it increasingly difficult to discipline their lovers, especially if they had a source of income of their own. The desire of men from both urban and rural areas to exert power and the increasing realisation amongst women that their own expectations of men as bread-winners were seldom realised, escalated the levels of tension and instability.

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26. Direct evidence of domestic violence was noted in approximately a third of the 20 detailed case studies undertaken with youth households during 1996 and 1997. My findings were documented in the evidence collected by ISER research assistant, Linda Qambata, in Duncan Village in 1998.

## Conclusion

This article has been divided into two main parts. In the first part, I explored the emergence of the comrades as a political and cultural style that drew equally on urban and rural traditions of youth mobilisation and expression. My discussion began in East Bank in the 1950s and then connected up to the literature on rural male youth associations in the Eastern Cape, much of which evolved out of the Mayers' own work on youth socialisation in the 1960s. I explored the different paths that urban and rural youth identity politics followed through the 1960s and 1970s and how these traditions had increasingly converged by the 1980s. By this time, the distinction between Red and School youths, with their particular forms of youth organisation and cultural expression, had not only blurred, but was also associated with a growing social and economic distance between young and older men in the rural areas. In the city, the flashy cosmopolitan styles of the *oobrighty* youth of the 1950s, which were so markedly different from those of the rural youth, also largely disappeared as the streets of Duncan Village were now more tightly controlled by the state. In the late 1970s, some of these styles were revived via influences from Soweto, but this did not significantly detract from the increasing convergence in the outlooks and orientations of urban and rural youth on the eve of the Duncan Village revolt of 1985.

It was in this context, I argued, that the rural and urban youth of Duncan Village were able to find common ground and unite under the umbrella of the comrades in the 1980s. I suggested that, unlike the situation on the Reef where the comrades seem to have emerged as a distinctive urban sub-culture, in Duncan Village they evolved as a complex blend of urban and rural influences, traditions, experiences and organisational memories, which sometimes sat rather uneasily together under one overarching identity. What bound these youth together was their commitment to the struggle and a shared cultural style, which was easily assessable and served to disguise differences in experience and upbringing. It was the looseness and inclusivity of this generational style, which fused politics and masculinity, that welded youth together into the politically cohesive force that drove the agents of the apartheid state out of the township and established in a new social order. In my discussion of the way in which the comrades consolidated power, I highlighted the continuing tensions between the urban-born *oobrighty* youth, who reconstituted themselves as *com-tsotsis*, and the rural youth, who threw their weight behind the civic, the DVRA, and its political allies.

The second part of the article has focused on the power held by the comrades on the streets and how this was translated into their homes in Duncan Village in the late 1980s and 1990s. I focused on the adoption and use of *ukuhlalisana* by the youth as a means to express their newly found freedom and power. In this section I suggested that young men generally entered these relations with high expectations, hoping to translate the exaggerated sense of power and control they enjoyed on the streets into the home. However, male fantasies of power often failed to materialise because of the very limited economic resources under the control of the comrades. Young women from their side were demanding that, if young men wanted to behave like powerful

patriarchal figures and wanted their lovers to behave like subservient Xhosa wives, they needed to support their families and enter into marriage transactions – even if these were only *ukuthwala* arrangements. The refusal of most young men to contemplate marriage and their inability to support their lovers, while they continued to “play the field”, created enormous tensions within many new youth households. This in turn undermined the stability of these relationships and the desire of men to consolidate their power. The outcome was the failure of young men to provide for their lovers and their children both in the home and on the streets of Duncan Village. Consequently, women increasingly sought other options outside of *ukuhlalisana* relationships.

The discussion above has hopefully highlighted the complex interplay between urban and rural identity politics in Duncan Village and its relationship to political transition in the city. I have attempted to show that the ideas and aspirations of the rural youth were not simply swallowed by the new urban politics of the 1980s, but rather that rural youth themselves contributed significantly to the making of new hybrid social identities during the period. The political victory of the comrades in Duncan Village in the 1990s was not, as Mamdani (1996) would have us believe, a triumph of the egalitarian and democratic values of urban civil society over the reactionary forces of customary power. It was rather more complex and subtle than this, and was centrally built on the ability of urban and rural youth to construct new identities, which at different moments absorbed and rejected influences from both urban and rural youth.

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