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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG
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STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

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TITLE: THE MARK OF ZORRO
Sexuality and Gender Relations in the Tsotsi Subculture on the Witwatersrand, 1940 - 1960

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During the late 1930s a distinctive youth gang subculture emerged amongst the permanently urbanised black population of the Witwatersrand. The subculture arose against a backdrop of massive youth unemployment, grossly inadequate schooling and recreation facilities, unstable family units and severe overcrowding in the townships. Male youths took to the streets and developed a "city slicker" style with its own distinctive codes of dressing, language, entertainment and criminality. During the war years the gangs became a common feature of South African township life. In the early 1940s these gangsters became known as "tsotsis". The word originally described a style of narrow-bottomed trousers which was particularly popular amongst the black urban youth of the time. Gradually the connotation of the word broadened to incorporate the whole criminal youth gang subculture. Tsotsi gangs became a nation-wide phenomenon in the urban areas but this paper focuses specifically on the Witwatersrand. During the 1940s and 1950s, it would appear, the vast majority of permanently urbanised black youths on the Witwatersrand were involved, to a lesser or greater extent, in tsotsi gangs. It was a central element in the experience of township youth. In fact, those urbanised male youths who escaped gang life completely were marginal. (1)

There were five key elements in the identity of tsotsi gangs on the Witwatersrand. Tsotsis were black, generally working class, urbanised, young males. In other words, they had a clear identity in terms of race, class, geographic location, generation and gender. This paper explores the masculine identity of the tsotsi

subculture. The masculine identity is a social construct which exists, almost definitionally, in antithesis to the feminine identity. A study of masculinity, then, becomes a study of gender relations. How, I will ask in this paper, was tsotsi masculinity defined and what role did women play in the subculture? Why were females were strikingly absent from the central concerns of gang life? These questions can only be answered through a systematic gender analysis of the subculture.

Subculture and Sexuality

Surprisingly little has been written on the specific issue of sexuality in Twentieth Century youth subcultures. It is surprising on two accounts. First, on a purely observational level, it is clear that the assertion of masculinity is a central feature of these subcultures. It is also clear that females appear to be marginal to youth subcultures, whether in post-war Britain and the United States, Weimar Germany or post-independence Zaire.(2) Second, over the last two or three decades, particularly in the United States and Britain, substantial bodies of literature have been generated on both youth gang subcultures and gender/sexuality. Yet the two issues hardly ever seem to intersect in a systematic way. Although the issue of sexuality creeps unavoidably into many studies of youth subcultures, it appears as though only two worthwhile pieces have been written on the specific intersection of sexuality and youth subculture: the first is a paper entitled "Girls and Subcultures" by McRobbie and Garber (1976); the second is a chapter entitled "The invisible girl. The culture of femininity vs masculinism" in

Mike Brake's The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subculture (1980).(3)

Brake argues that it is essential to focus on sexuality because "on the whole, youth cultures and subcultures tend to be some form of exploration of sexuality".(4) Both articles are concerned with the "invisibility" of girls from youth subcultures. McRobbie and Garber are not satisfied with the argument that females are simply "peripheral" or "marginal". They prefer to characterise the female's position as subordinate. Females, they argue, "are central and pivotal to a subordinate area, which mirrors, but in a complementary and subordinate way, the 'dominant' masculine arenas".(5) In other words, youth subcultures are dependent on the role of females, despite the fact that females are excluded from the more prestigious, high-profile and power struggle elements of the subcultures. Males are the active subjects while females are the passive, but necessary, subordinate objects within the subcultures.

"Girls are present in male subcultures," Brake agrees, "but are contained within them, rather than using them to explore actively forms of female identity."(6) Women tend to be the rewards, the trophies for male successes. Apart from providing sexual and domestic services to males, they are the symbols of status to be won or lost in the male-exclusive spheres such as fighting. Perhaps the most important role of females is to provide the baseline of antithesis, to provide a model for what males are not, because "you cannot really define masculinity apart from femininity".(7) Women, then, are often understood to be marginal

to subcultures because they do not figure in the sensational, high-profile, high-status spheres of the subculture. Broadly, McRobbie and Garber are correct, and their observations appear to be valid in the case of the tsotsi subculture. Nevertheless, their argument should not be overstressed because there is a very genuine element of female marginality in youth subcultures: girls spend much less time in the gangs and their gang membership is far less formal. Time is a key concept here: it is essential to ascertain how youths allocate their time in order to understand youth subcultures. Whereas unemployed young males have an enormous amount of free time at their disposal, girls are drawn far more effectively and strictly into the domestic sphere. As Frith points out: "Parents control girls' spare time much more closely ... girls have to assume an apprenticeship for domestic labour which begins at home".(8) These broad observations on youth subcultures, I will show, have strong resonances with the tsotsi subculture on the Witwatersrand.

Masculinity is, of course, a shifting concept. Male prestige and status are defined in different ways from culture to culture and from era to era. In middle class culture, for instance, professional skills, intellect and earning capacity are emphasized, whereas physical skill and strength tend to be emphasized in working class culture. Common to all versions of masculinity, however, is male assertiveness and fierce inter-male competitiveness alongside relatively passive, domestically oriented females. Most forms of masculinity also involve a need to control and be "in control", whether intellectually or

physically.(9) This paper will attempt to illuminate the specific nature of tsotsi sexual identity.

McRobbie and Garber and Brake focus on the continuities in sexual socialisation between the parent culture and the subculture. Sexual roles and stereotypes inculcated through the home and school environments, and reinforced by the mass media, are continued in youth subcultures. Rather than acting against sexual hegemonic norms, youth subcultures tend to, if anything, exaggerate them. Sexual stereotyping and role differentiation seem to be all the more starkly enforced.(10)

As I have shown in a previous chapter, most subcultural behaviour seems to involve a reaction against the hegemonic cultural order, a denial of social consensus. Why, then, in the sphere of sexual identity, do youth subcultures tend to conform? One possible way of answering this is to argue that youth subcultures do not really conform sexually. Witness, for example, promiscuity and disrespect for marriage and family life. In fact, marriage, or an ostensibly monogamous commitment, usually signals the exit from a youth subculture. But this argument begs the question of sexual identity: masculinism vs femininity. Not only is the stark separation of gender identities radically conformist, but the active/passive, public/domestic, aggressive/nurturing poles conform to hegemonic sexual stereotypes. Promiscuity represents a challenge to moral or religious norms rather than norms of sexuality. Conformist subcultural sexuality, it seems, can only be explained by tracing the historical continuities in sexual

socialisation.

Continuities in sexual socialisation

Following the general pattern of youth subcultures, tsotsi notions of sexual identity conformed to those of its parent ghetto culture as well as the wider consensus hegemonic order. It is difficult to find a general explanation for youth subcultural conformity in the area of sexuality, but, in the case of tsotsis, perhaps one tentative explanation can be advanced before moving on to tracing specific historical continuities. I have suggested earlier that the tsotsi subculture had a clear identity in terms of race, class, generation and gender. As black, working class youths, tsotsis were structurally subordinate in terms of race, class and generation. But, as males, tsotsis were structurally dominant. Gender was the one sphere in which they found themselves "naturally" dominant. Hence the need to assert their masculinity and sexual difference. They defended their one area of privilege vigorously.(11) An analogy can perhaps be drawn here with the white working class in South Africa: subordinate in class terms, yet dominant in racial terms, the white working class is anxious to assert racial difference in order to preserve its terrain of superordination.

The tsotsi phenomenon, as a recognisable subculture, only really emerged on the Witwatersrand in the early- to mid 1940s. It is important to stress that tsotsis were permanently urbanised youths who tended to have minimal recollection of, or contact with, the countryside. The emergence of the tsotsi subculture

coincided with the emergence of a large second generation urbanised youth population on the Witwatersrand. This constituency reached substantial proportions in the early 1940s, following a massive escalation of permanent urbanisation in the second half of the 1930s. Although tsotsis were alienated from the custom and culture of the countryside, there were noticible continuities between rural age regiment systems and urban youth gang organisation. It is reasonable to assume that the recently urbanised parents of tsotsis retained substantial elements of rural socialisation and that their attitudes towards parenthood had not shifted significantly. Although the social context had changed dramatically with the dwindling of extended family networks and tribal controls and the innovation of wage labour, parental attitudes and expectations remained fairly constant. Newly urbanised parents had experienced the tightly organised, traditional age regiments which allowed adolescent boys to explore their sexuality and assert their independence while simultaneously reinforcing generational hierarchy and preparing them for the responsibilities of adulthood. (See, for example, the Mayers' account of Xhosa age regiments and initiation rituals as well as Peter Delius's work on early twentieth century Pedi society). (12) So adolescent boys were expected to be independent, to cluster in groups outside of the home environment and to assert their masculinity. Girls, on the other hand, were expected to remain close to the home environment, to carry out domestic chores and learn domestic skills. In the absence of traditional age regiments, and virtually unsupervised by parents,

male urban youths asserted their masculinity in their own way: they clustered into gangs with their own distinctive style and ritual. But, in the cities, generational hierarchy broke down. The parents lost control.

This rural/urban continuity is important to the issue of urban youth sexuality in two ways. First, rural socialisation provided the baseline for gender identities. As in the countryside, adolescent girls were expected to be passive, domesticated and marginal to the social hierarchy. As in the countryside, boys were expected to be independent, assertive competent fighters who were active outside of the household. Second, the independence and free time available to young boys ensured that males, and not females, would establish the parametres of the new urban youth culture. Females were drawn into a male dominated subculture, on male terms.

Westernised urban images and influences served only to reinforce rural sexual stereotypes. Girls' schools encouraged female domesticity and submissiveness; movies and comics, which were so influential in tsotsi style and imagery, provided numerous macho role models for boys and conventionally beautiful, and helpless, role models for girls; advertisements in magazines and on billboards encouraged a tough, independent image of masculinity; sports, particularly boxing and soccer, which were extremely popular in the townships and which excluded females, encouraged male physical prowess and competitiveness.

The tsotsi masculine role model

The tsotsi masculine identity hinged around fighting skill, independence, daring and law-breaking, stylishness and success with women. Adeptness in these areas determined a tsotsi's status and prestige as a "man".

A man had to be a good fighter, not only for protection, but also to earn respect. Boxing gymnasia were extremely popular in the townships; if there were no formal facilities around, youths would work out in backyard facilities.(13) A young man's status and reputation was enhanced through winning fights. Gang leaders were generally the best fighters. Mattera recounts a story of how he, as gang leader of the Vultures, defeated the leader of another gang in a one-to-one fight. This precipitated the incorporation of the members of the defeated gang leader's gang into the Vultures.(14) Their respect was transferred to the victorious fighter. The notorious Alexandra gangster, "Zorro", developed a large following of adoring young boys because of his skills in the martial arts. He was virtually unbeatable in hand-to-hand combat.(15) An Alexandra ex-tsotsi commented that at the age of 13 to 15 "Our heroes were the boys who could steal and stab. The more stabbings they did, the bigger they were. The biggest shot of all was the one who had killed somebody - either with a knife or a gun".(16) Movie images, of course, reinforced these attitudes. It was inconceivable to have a hero who was a poor fighter. The toughest, most violent screen characters became their role models. Nicknames such as "Jesse James", "Dillinger" and, of course, "Zorro" abounded amongst the tsotsis.

To be independent a tsotsi had to have his own means of income. Money was necessary to attract women and keep up with the demands of subcultural style. Wage labour, as I have shown in a previous paper, was scorned. Young men who worked from 9 to 5 were considered "sissies".(17) It was considered demeaning and degrading to work for someone, especially a white. It was also necessary to assert financial independence from parents, who, in any case, generally could not afford to support their sons' often extravagant tsotsi lifestyle. Stealing or gambling, then, were considered the only acceptable masculine ways of obtaining money. It followed that success in stealing became a status symbol in itself. Being independent also involved separating your life as far as possible from the family and the household. The household was the terrain of girls. Urbanised adolescent boys tended to come home only to sleep or have meals (at which they were serviced by their mothers or sisters). Those who were successful enough at being independent avoided even this.

Particularly daring feats of law-breaking were admired. Pickpocketing and mugging were commonplace for tsotsis. Armed robberies, murder and fighting with police were highly prestigious activities. A real tsotsi had to show that he was not scared of the police. In this respect, it was "Zorro", one of the great tsotsi idols, who again epitomised tsotsi machismo. In the mid 50s, I was informed, he hijacked a police car. During the ensuing car chase he radioed through to all other police cars, telling them of his whereabouts and challenging them to come and get him. He warned them that he was "Zorro"; that he was armed

and dangerous. There appeared to be no motive for this stunt other than to create a stir and enhance his reputation.(18)

In order to be an acceptable male within the subculture, a young man had to be "with it", he had to be in style. He had to dress and speak stylishly, he had to hold his liquor well and smoke dagga and he had to be seen at the right places.(19) As far as clothes were concerned, the most admired men were those who could immitate American gangster style, as portrayed in American movies, most effectively. This involved obtaining flashy and expensive clothing which usually could only be achieved by the bigger, established gangs such as the Americans or the Spoilers. Gangs were extremely fashion conscious and competitive about their clothing. Members of the Americans apparently ordered imported clothing through up-market clothes outlets such as Markhams and Levisons. They would make a deal with these outlets not to sell any more of these items in Johannesburg in order to create exclusivity.(20) A flashy limousine made in the USA would be a highly prestigious possession. American movies set the trends in tsotsi fashion. As Don Mattera puts it: "If you didn't talk like an American, or have an American name or something, you weren't in that set".(21) Fittingly, it was the Americans gang which represented the height of tsotsi fashion on the Witwatersrand. All the poorer, less famous gangs tried to emulate their style. Of course, most of them could not afford to do this. Nevertheless, the basic elements of style had to be there. The tightfitting zoot trousers were essential. And speaking tsotsitaal was essential. Every self-respecting tsotsi had to be

familiar with tsotsitaal on pain of being branded a "sissie" or a "moegoe" (a country bumpkin). Like clothing, tsotsitaal was subject to fashion shifts. In order to be "with it", a tsotsi had to be familiar with all the latest slang and language innovations. Although most urbanised township girls were also generally familiar with tsotsitaal, being out of touch with the language did not involve a threat to their sexual identity.

As in all male-dominated cultures, possession of women represented a crucial status symbol. The beauty and quantity of a tsotsi's girlfriends were an indicator of his success in other fields of masculine accomplishment. Fight victories inevitably attracted women. "The conquest obviously brought lots of girls and having lots of women at the time said who you were."(22) High fashion also attracted women, thus it was the Americans who succeeeded in getting the really prestigious catches such as Miriam Makeba and Dolly Rathebe. In Sophiatown "many of the prettier girls, even at 16 or 17, would end up with the Americans, because the Americans were flashier, they wore the best clothes, they had the most money".(23) Tsotsis competed furiously over "beautiful women" which often led to attractive women being harrassed. "You were in trouble if you were a beautiful women," comments Queeneth Ndaba.(24) It was particularly important for a gang leader to have an attractive and sought after girlfriend. Inevitably, "the prettiest girls were ... lovers of gang leaders".(25) It was also prestigious for tsotsis to have children as a sign of their manhood. Thus Norris Nkosi was extremely proud to have a child at the age of 16

with his 15 year-old girlfriend. "We used to boast about our kids," says Nkosi.(26) It was, however, unusual for a tsotsi to help support his children.

From as early as the late 1930s, township administrations as well as the white liberal establishment tried to promote the Boys' Club and Boy Scout movements as an alternative to tsotsiism. According to the constitution of the Dube Boys' Clubs Association, "The general aim of the Association shall be to promote the mental, physical and spiritual well-being of boys".(27) In effect, they were trying to create an alternative masculine role model for township youths, a model which emphasized social responsibility and godliness. Although the African Boy Scout' Association claimed a nation-wide membership of over 10000 by 1953 (28), the movement's impact on the tsotsi subculture appears to have been negligible. The Boy Scout constituency overlapped almost entirely with the schoolgoing constituency; the movement seemed to have little success in recruiting outside of the schools.(29) This is not surprising, since it promoted a masculine image almost in antithesis to the tsotsi image. The ideal Boy Scout was law-abiding, hard-working and God-fearing. He rejected alcohol, dagga, promiscuity and violence; he respected adults and accepted adult supervision. There were only two areas of commonality: one was an emphasis on physical fitness and health; the other was a promotion of the domesticity and passivity of girls (as epitomised in the Girls' Club and Girl Guides movements). Tsotsis rejected the Boy Scout image because their particular brand of machismo was inextricable

from a subcultural challenge to hegemonic cultural norms.

The absent girls

If township girls and young women were in fact marginal to the tsotsi subculture, how did they allocate their time? All indications point to the fact that unemployment was worse amongst female youths than amongst male youths on the Witwatersrand.(30) Although jobs were available as domestic servants, domestic service was extremely unpopular amongst township girls. They did not like the loneliness and isolation entailed in working in the white suburbs. A few young women became teachers and nurses but the numbers were insignificant in overall terms. A handfull of young women made a career for themselves in the entertainment world; they were amongst the few women who made a name for themselves in the townships.(31) Many girls were involved in full-time or occasional prostitution, work which usually went hand in hand with waitressing at shebeens. Young women who were formally employed were very much the exception. As I have shown previously, township children tended to leave school at a very early age; this applied to girls and boys alike. Nevertheless, girls were generally kept off the streets. Unlike boys, girls were tied to the household. In a memorandum written in the early 1950s, Ellen Hellman summed up the situation:

> Occupational opportunities for female juveniles, apart from professional openings, such as teaching and nursing, barely exist apart from domestic service. There is little unemployment among female juveniles [because] ... although there are practically no recreation facilities open to non-school going girls, they are kept busy in the home, have less leisure time than the boys and are consequently not so affected by this disability.(32)

"Fathers and mothers were more strict with their daughters," observes Don Matlera. They usually were kept at home and did housework.(33) Gertrude Twala recalls that, as a girl in her early teens growing up in Orlando in the late 1950s, her parents would never let her out at night. Her parents tried to stop her coming into any contact with the tsotsis, though it was often unavoidable. She would have to do a lot of work in the household. Sometimes a friend of hers would come over and spend the night. This seemed to be a fairly common pattern amongst her female peers.(34) Lynette Leeuw, who was a teenager in Krugersdorp during the 1950s had similar experiences. There was a great deal of work to be done in the household, she recalls. She had to fetch water and wood (at which points there was often unavoidable contact with tsotsis), clean the house and help look after the younger kids.(35) According to Norris Nkosi, parents would allow their daughters to go out at night as long as they had finished off their household chores and were accompanied by a boy who they knew and trusted.(36) It was in this way, it would appear, that girls made contact with the gangs.

Apart from domestic duties, many teenage girls were tied to the home because they were already parents. Girls often fell pregnant. Generally, their boyfriends made little contribution to bringing up the babies; teenage mothers would stay with their parents and their children would become part of their parents' households.(37) Teenage girls were young enough to fall under the discipline of their parents although they were very often parents themselves.

The feminine identity in the tsotsi subculture

Girls spent very little time in the gang as such. They were outside of the mainstream of gang activity. They never got involved in gang fights and it was extremely unusual for them to be involved in activities such as mugging or gambling. The girls would be present when there was a "do". "They were the gangsters' molls. They moved around with them at parties."(38)

Girls, or young women, involved in the gangs were generally referred to as "molls". They were the personal girlfriends of gang members. They went around with their boyfriends to gigs and parties. They had to entertain the tsotsis and come across as attractive as possible so as to bolster the masculine egos of their boyfriends. They were "showpieces". "The poor creatures," comments Mattera in retrospect, "they had no options really ... they were also victims."(39) Molls were sometimes used as spies. If a member of a rival gang took an interest in one of them, her boyfriend sometimes encouraged her to get involved with the rival in the hope that she would get access to gang secrets and strategies. This infidelity was tolerated because the boyfriend continued to feel in control of his girlfriend and the rival was being duped.(40)

Some girls were drawn peripherally into tsotsi criminal activity. They were known as "moasisas". They were used as scouts, shoplifters and decoys.(41) They would distract pickpocketing vitims or help to "case the joint" before robberies. Mattera

remembers one Sophiatown noasisa named Stololo. She was a beautiful young woman with large breasts. She would go up to a shopkeeper and distract him by "opening herself up". She would scream that the shopkeeper was trying to rape her. During the commotion the tsotsis would take the till.(42) The noasisas, though, were left out of the prestige spheres of criminal activity: planning robberies, holding the gun or knife, seizing the loot. The men were in control. The activities of the noasisas were acceptable precisely because they were peripheral.

On occasions, it seems, girls were involved in inter-gang fighting but, once again, they were a side-show. They would only fight girls from other gangs. They would take on the rivalry of their boyfriends or brothers.(43) Apart from a few exceptional women, on whom I will focus in the final section, it was unheard of for a woman to fight a man in a gang war.

Clothing styles involved a very clear differentiation between males and females. There was certainly no androgenous experimentation in the tsotsi subculture. All the elements of style that were associated with the subculture were worn by men alone: the tightfitting zoot trousers, the floppy overcoats, the wide-rimmed hats, the flashy shirts and ties. Female styles were far more varied. They wore skirts and dresses, never trousers. "Pants weren't in" for women yet. As with the males, their style was influenced by the movies. "There were trendsetters" who would try to keep in touch with the latest Hollywood fashion.(44) There was no particular style, then, which clearly identified females as being part of the subculture, or members of a specific

gang.

Females who were involved with the gangs accepted the masculine status and prestige structures. In other words, they accepted as prestigeous the same achievements that the males did. In effect, they acknowledged their own low status; their own status could only be defined indirectly, according to the status of their boyfriends, their possessors. It was prestigeous to have a boyfriend who was a good fighter, who was stylish, who was, in short, respected by other men. Mattera describes the rise of his gang, the Vultures, in Sophiatown during the mid 1950s:

> Territorial gains had been made. Younger gangs had been usurped. The police had been put in their place. The girls were moving after us ... these were the guys you had to marry, these were the guys you had to be lovers with.(45)

Godfrey Moloi recalls that the women who hung around with the gangsters in Orlando during the 1940s and 1950s saw non-gang members as "sissies".(46) According to Motjuwadi, the molls "would have no respect for a guy who worked at a nine-to-five job for a pittance". Generally, the girls of Sophiatown "didn't respect nine-to-five men as much as those who lived by their wits".(47)

Although gangsters were extremely demanding and often brutal towards their girlfriends, there were definite benefits attached to having a gangster as a boyfriend. Apart from the prestige, it often offered a high standard of living and, more importantly, protection from other gangsters. As long the girlfriend accepted that she "belonged" to the gangster and remained faithful to him,

she would receive presents of food and clothing and she would be protected from the harassment and molestation of other gangsters.(48) As Mattera puts it:

> Some of the women became property of the guys. So much so that if you were seen talking to that girl you would be attacked, either by the gang or by the guy himself. Because some of the women wanted to be property. There was security in being property. And there was clothes, money, food ...(49)

Motjuwadi makes a similar observation:

> And sometimes he [a gangster boyfriend] might even be nice and gentle to her. He could buy her some of the nicest things which an ordinary worker can't, he can take her to the movies when other guys are going to work and they attend parties. And the important thing is that no gutter-snipe can take chances with her because she belongs to someone who is respected.(50)

Queeneth Ndaba was once sought after by one particularly nasty gangster. She was "saved", she feels, only because another gangster, a member of the Otto Town Gang, was in love with her and protected her.(51)

Objectification and Violence

> Zorro had several places where he kept his molls, the most important of which were two at 7th and 8th Avenues. All the girls who belonged to the gang were branded with the "Mark of Zorro" ... the letter "Z". This mark was scratched on with a knife on the shoulder, arm or forehead. Some of them, still up to this day, carry the "Mark of Zorro".(52)

This extract appeared in a 1958 edition of Drum. In a sense, all women involved in the tsotsi subculture were branded with the Mark of Zorro. The mark was symbolic of their macho, movie-inspired overlords, it was symbolic of their objectification and, perhaps most starkly of all, it was symbolic of the violence which underpinned their sexual subordination.

Tsotsi gangsters generally regarded their women as property.

According to Mattera, they were seen as "chattle".(53) They were ornaments and showpieces with which tsotsis displayed their own masculinity. Queeneth Ndaba recalls that a women's name would get "suggested" by tsotsis. Before meeting the woman a tsotsi would claim her as property and then seek her out. It would often be considered a favour from one tsotsi to another to "suggest" an attractive woman. Often a tsotsi would pick himself a woman after seeing her photograph or catching a glimpse of her. Generally, the woman had little option but to accept the advances of the man. She was extremely vulnerable unless she was attached to another gangster who commanded some respect.(54) Tsotsis liked to dress women up the way they (the tsotsis) liked; they would pick out the clothes and adorn their possessions as they saw fit. Women had little option but to accept the image that was imposed upon them. Often they would have to hide these clothes so as to conceal their involvement with tsotsis from their parents.(55)

A gang's possessiveness over women generally coincided with its territoriality. A woman who lived in a gang's territory was assumed to be the property of that gang. A woman would not be allowed to have a boyfriend from a rival gang's area "otherwise the boys come and hit you".(56) "A girl couldn't have a boyfriend from the other side." (57) Similarly, it would involve enormous risk for a gangster to wander into another gang's territory to court a woman. "It was showing no respect. You'd get beaten up. Even if no one in the gang was in love with the girl." Only occasionally, perhaps as a favour to a friendly gangster, an outsider would be allowed to court a local woman

through a special "gentleman's agreement".(58)

Women were passive recipients of a males' affection. The tsotsis chose their lovers; it was extremely unusual for a woman to make an active choice about her partner. Furthermore, once she was involved with a tsotsi, she was expected to remain loyal and faithful. A relationship could only be terminated through the man's choice. I asked Norris Nkosi, who was a member of the Spoilers during the 1950s, what would happen if a woman decided she did not love her boyfriend anymore. He replied:

> We hit them. She won't say she doesn't love you. Not during those days ... She didn't have a choice. Our girlfriends, they didn't have a choice. That's why, in those days, our girlfriends had to make sure, if they were involved with somebody, not to do anything wrong. She must know: if I love this man, I love this man. She mustn't say tomorrow I don't love him ... You must make sure that you love this man.

Then I asked him what would happen if the man decided that he did not love his girlfriend anymore. "He's the master of them all," Nkosi replied, "He'll just leave the girlfriend. He'll tell her to vamoose." According to Nkosi, it was only considered legitimate for a woman to drop her boyfriend under one circumstance: if the boyfriend went to jail. It was felt that, under these circumstances, the girlfriend was entitled to become involved with another man. In fact, argues Nkosi, the new boyfriend would be doing the imprisoned man a favour. "Rather let her be protected by a decent guy," he reasons, "than leave her totally unprotected."(59) Nkosi's recollections of Spoiler attitudes are substantiated in a 1959 Golden City Post feature on the Spoilers. According to the feature writer, "A Spoiler could just pick out a woman ... She was sure to be his girl - like it

or not".(60) But these sexual interactions were ertainly not restricted to the Spoilers It was a general tsotsi phenomenon. Magubane has similar recollections about the Berlins of Sophiatown:

> With Berlins, they propose and you refuse, you've had it. They hit the hell out of you. You've just got to submit. Say "Yes, I love you" even though you know you don't. It was hard for young girls to grow up in that area.(61)

Queeneth Ngaba, who grew up in Orlando East but spent a great deal of time in Sophiatown during the late 1940s and 1950s, recalls a particular tsotsi method of picking up women. A woman would be walking in the streets. A fleshy car driven by a tsotsi would pull up alongside her and the tsotsi would get out. He would open the passenger seat door and stoop to pick up a stone. This was an indication that she had no option but to get in. It was a ritual; in this instance, the violence was suggested rather than carried out.(62)

Women, particularly young unattached women, had remarkably little freedom of movement in the Witwatersrand townships. They were in constant danger of being molested and harassed by gangs of tsotsis (or individual tsotsis). Women never went out at night without male escorts. But during the day women had to go about their daily business: collecting firewood, fetching water, washing clothes and, in the case of many teenage girls, going to school. It was at these points that tsotsis waited for their opportunity to waylay women. Schoolgirls were particularly vulnerable. Throughout the 1950s, the Golden City Post, probably the newspaper most in touch with events "on the ground" in the townships, was punctuated with reports of schoolgirls being

waylaid by "gangs of youths". Throughout the Witwatersrand, schoolgirls were threatened, harassed and, occasionally, raped while on their way to or from school.(63) In July 1959 a resident of Orlando East II, W.S. Ndhlovu, wrote a letter to the manager of the West Rand Administration Board complaining that gangs of township youths, with names such as "Benzine Boys", "Sputnik" and "Spoilers", were waylaying schoolgirls. When school came out the gangsters "threaten, molest and sometimes rape" girls of 15 to 17 years old. Ndhlovu followed this letter up in October of the same year complaining that no action had been taken against these young gangsters "even in obvious cases of rape and assault".(64) At one school in Sophiatown the problem was so serious that the headmaster was forced to organise an escort of bigger boys, "weightlifters and boxers", for the girls.(65) Sometimes an individual gangster would fixate on one particular woman, after perhaps having seen a photograph of her, and follow her around. He would watch her every movement, become familiar with her routines and wait for an appropriate moment to pounce. "Desirable" women were particularly victimized in this respect. According to Queeneth Ndaba, it often became a burden to be considered an attractive woman. Eventually she and her friends cottoned on to the idea of walking around in drab clothing. "To look glamorous was too dangerous".(66)

Women were never safe from the gangs, even when escorted by men or in public places. Abduction of women was an extremely common township phenomenon during the late 1940s and 1950s. The Spoilers were notorious for going around to shebeens and gigs and

kidnapping women. They forced young girls into cars and often held them for weeks. They would be taken to hideouts and sexually assaulted. In one incident, a band of Spoilers raided a Reef hospital and abducted several learner nurses for the night. They were intimidated into remaining silent about the incident.(67) Kay Manana, a prominent township musician during the 1940s and 1950s, recalls that Spoilers often disrupted gigs and parties and took girls away with them.(68) This was not a practise confined to the Spoilers; it occurred throughout the Witwatersrand. The ubiquitous Zorro, for instance, was known to have abducted women for up to a week.(69) Even the "more respectable gangs", such as the Americans, would drag a girl away against her will. The Americans would consider it a personal insult if women resisted abduction.(70) One Sunday afternoon in the mid 1950s, Manana and his band, who were stationed in Alexandra, went to play at the Odin in Sophiatown. A few local Alexandra women went along with his band to watch the performance. During the show, one of the Alexandra women was abducted by the Americans. "They wanted to keep her. They wouldn't let her go". Manana and his band went to plead on her behalf. She was begging and pleading not to be left behind. Only out of deference to the musicians the Americans eventually agreed to let her go.(71)

During the tsotsi gang era, rape was more prevalent than usual in the Witwatersrand townships, particularly amongst juveniles. Between 1936 and 1939, an average of 5 or 6 rape or attempted rape cases appeared before Johannesburg Juvenile Court. By 1950, this figure had risen to 57; between 1953 and 1955, juvenile rape

cases reached a peak with figures of 93, 106 and 118 respectively.(72) Of course these figures do not come anywhere close to reflecting the overall extent of juvenile rape on the Witwatersrand. The vast majority of incidents went unreported and without prosecution because of intimidation, personal complications and lack of evidence. Nevertheless, the Juvenile Court statistics do provide some sense of the escalation of the phenomenon during the 1950s. In 1955, Councillor Lewsen, after extensive discussions with Advisory Board members about tsotsi crime in the townships, commented:

> These men tell me - and I believe them - that no decent man or woman is safe in his or her own home. Wives and young girls are raped in the streets and on their way home from work. Some are even raped in their own homes in front of their families, who are too terrified to report to the police for fear of victimization.
>
> These gangsters rule the townships at the point of a knife or pistol ...
>
> They consider themselves invincible and show no fear even for the police. They boast openly that the police are so intent on liquor and pass-law offences that they have no time to give to the activities of the tsotsis.(73)

In September 1955 a teenage girl from Orlando was assaulted by two 20 year old local Orlando tsotsis. They pinned her down and said: "his girl is cheeky". Then, with a knife, one assailant scarred her severely on her face and breast.(74) It was a seemingly motiveless assault. The girl was paying for the crime of being "cheeky". She had probably resisted their, or some other tsotsis', advances. Or she had spoken back to them. "Cheekiness", or insolence, essentially involves a breach of understood or "natural" hierarchy. When "natural" hierarchies are challenged, rebels are disciplined. Rape and other forms of sexual assault

are assertions of power, assertions of hierarchy. Ultimately, violence lurks behind every hegemonic status quo but, in the tsotsi subculture, there was unusually little subtlety in the enforcement of sexual hegemony. The sanction of violence and coercion was always highly visible.

Were women merely passive victims of male domination? Were young women able to build any defense mechanisms, to improve their strength and bargaining power within the subculture? There is little evidence to suggest that young women established any kind of effective defense networks. Their only protection came from within the family, within the household. Church-based woman's associations and stokvels involved older, married women. However restrictive and repressive itself, marriage, withdrawal from the youth subculture, was often a young woman's best line of defense. Marriage represented a shift from the street into the domestic sphere. Here a woman had some protection and bargaining power, particularly if she earned crucial supplementary family income through beer brewing, washing or prostitution. But within the tsotsi subculture itself, save for a few individuals, it is difficult to find evidence of young women being anything but passive victims. More research needs to be carried out in this area.

The rogue women

There were a few individual women in the Witwatersrand townships who took tsotsis on at their own game. They were tough, independent fighters who managed to forge for themselves a

certain amount of respect and personal discretion over their sexual lives.They were prepared to defend themselves with their fists, knives and guns. In order to retain their independence and sexual freedom, they had to assume what amounted to a "masculine" identity. In Sophiatown these women were referred to as "brekgat" or "wildeperde", interestingly enough terms almost synonomous with "virgin". In other words, they were women who were able to exercise sexual choice and prolong their virginity if they wanted to. They were thought of as "women who don't want to be touched by men".(75) For the most part, they were loners. There was no sense in which they tried to organise women against their oppression. They resisted only on a personal level.

It appears as though at least one Witwatersrand gang had a "woman's wing": the Berliners of Sophiatown. It appears to be the only instance in which a gang actively organised and trained women to fight alongside the men. The women in the "women's wing" were not molls; they participated in fights and they wore the gang tattoo, the swastika, along with the men.(76) The women's wing, however, fell under the command of the larger male gang in much the same way as the "youth wing" (for those less than 14 years old) did. It did not seem to involve any kind of exploration of female sexuality, nor did it in any way challenge the dominance of men within the gang. Nevertheless, at least two well-known "wildeperde" emerged from this women's wing. The one was Mamang, who was regarded as the boss of the women's wing; the other was a woman called Sinna.

Mamang was a boxer, weightlifter and gambler. She was a tough fighter. Peter Magubane recalls that she once felled him with a powerful blow. As far as Magubane could make out "Mamang was no one's lover".(77) Sinna, who came from neighbouring Meadowlands, was known as "Madipela". Mattera remembers her clearly:

> She was a member of the Berliners Gang ... and she fought side by side with the men. No men messed around with Sinna. Sinna was too powerful. And beautiful ... Sinna was never touched by men ... nobody dared to propose to Sinna. You had to be a special kind of a guy.

After the Sophiatown removals, Sinna returned to Meadowlands, which was an extremely dangerous and violent place at the time. People gathered around her for protection and she eventually established a new gang which ruled over the area for some time.(78)

Balissa was another Sophiatown "wildeperd". There were a few women who "liked to be free like Balissa," recalls Mattera.

> She was a four-and-a-half, five foot girl ... Balissa was a free spirit. She hit men with rights ... Balissa carried a knife, she gambled, she moved free, she went to shebeens, she had a drink. No man touched Balissa ... she was a free spirit ... she belonged to no guy. And I would like to think that, even until 1955, Balissa was a virgin. She was not a loose woman. She knew what she wanted out of life and she had to be strong.

In the late 1950s, Balissa became involved a man with whom she eventually had children.(79)

One informant, Henry Miles, remembers a "tough lady" called Sponono who led a gang which operated in 8th Street Alexandra during the early 1950s. Sponono was "short, fat and stout... but she was the fastest thing with a knife". She was about thirty years old when she led the gang, which was made up of males

ranging from their late teens through to their late twenties. The gang was based at her house in 8th Street which was used as both a shebeen and a gambling den. Sponono never settled down with one man. Men were apparently scared of her and rarely risked refusing her advances. "The boss takes who she wants". Men respected her knife skills and nobody wanted to be "left holding their intestines".(80)

Perhaps the best known of these "free spirits" was a woman who operated in the late 40s and early 50s known only as "Bitch Never Die". She fought with men. Bitch Never Die was a loner, though she sometimes seemed to have a few "side-kicks who hung around her". Most men respected her, recalls Stan Motjuwadi, "No men wanted to be humiliated. She was a real toughie. If she fancied you, she just took you".(81) According to Lynette Leeuw, "she did everything that the men did"; she used to smoke, drink and use a knife. "Even the men were scared of her.". Other women were confused and non-plussed by her; she did not have children or family and never married. She was "a real wild creature who belonged to nobody".(82)

In an environment dominated by men, then, it was conceivable for a woman to make a space for herself, to establish a certain amount of respect and sexual freedom. But she had to fight for it, literally. And she would probably always be regarded as an outcast and eccentric.

NOTES

(1) For more detail on the socio-economic background of the tsotsi subculture, see Glaser, C, "Students, Tsotsis and the Congress Youth League 1944 - 1955", Perspectives in Education, 10, 2, Summer 1988/1989; Bonner, P, "Family, Crime and Political Consciousness on the East Rand 1939-1955", Journal of Southern African Studies, Volume 15 No 1, 1988 ; Hyslop, J, "'A destruction coming'. Bantu education as response to social crisis", Social Transformation Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 21 April 1989. The introductory chapter to my forthcoming MA thesis will deal with these issues more thoroughly. For more detail on tsosti style and a discussion on "tsotsiism" as a subculture, see Glaser, C, "Anti-Social Bandits. Culture, Hegemony and the Tsotsi Subculture on the Witwatersrand during the 1940s and 1950s", unpublished Masters seminar, Department of History, University of the Witwatersrand, August 1988.

(2) A powerful machismo spirit and the absence of females are recurrent themes in studies of youth subculture.
For post-war American examples, see Cohen, AK, Delinquent Boys. The Culture of the Gang, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956; Gibbens, TCN & Ahrenfeldt, RH (eds), Cultural Factors in Delinquency, Tavistock Publications,1971.
For an excellent overview of post-war British subcultures, see Hall, S and Jefferson,T (eds), Resistance Through Rituals, Hutchinson of London, 1976.
For an interesting examination of youth cultures in post-First World War Berlin, see Rosenhaft, E, "Organising the Lumpenproletariat: Cliques and Communists in Berlin During the Weimar Republic" in Evans, RJ(ed), The German Working Class 1888 - 1933, Croom Helm London, 1982.
For a study of youth gangs in Kinshasa during the early post-independence period, see La Fontaine, JS, "Two Types of Youth Group in Kinshasa (Leopoldville)" in Mayer, P (ed), Socialization. The Approach from Social Anthropology, Tavistock Publications, 1970.

(3) McRobbie,A and Garber,J, "Girls and Subcultures" in Hall,S and Jefferson,T (eds),Resistance Through Rituals.
Brake,M, The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

(4) Brake, ibid, p vii of Introduction.

(5) McRobbie and Garber, "Girls and Subcultures", p211.

(6) Brake, The sociology of Youth Culture, p141.

(7) Easthope,A, What a Man's Gotta Do. The masculine myth in popular culture., Paladin Grafton Books, p7.

(8) Frith, quoted in Brake, The Sociology of Youth Culture. p141.

(9) See Easthope, What a Man's Gotta Do, pp35-60.

(10) The British subculture known as the Mods, which was a major presence in the country during the late 50s and 60s, were perhaps something of an exception in this respect. Girls were certainly present in the subculture and they participated in the style of the subculture. Nevertheless, men still dominated the movement and most of the sexual stereotypes were consistent with other

subcultures, though it manifested itself somewhat less harshly. The quasi-Punk subculture which clustered around David Bowie during the late 60s, early 70s , was unique as a subculture in that it explored bisexuality to some extent. This should pferhaps not be exaggerated, though, since this exploration manifeted itself more in terms of style than practice. Although the style was often clearly androgenous, males dominated the subculture in much the same way as males dominated other subcultures.
(11) It could perhaps be argued that tsotsis were structurally dominant in that they were urban. Certainly the tsotsis themselves perceived it that way. It remains consistent to my argument that tsotsis always emphasized their "urbanness". They were extremely scornful of youths from the countryside who they saw as inexperienced and naive.
(12) Mayer,I and Mayer,P, "Socialization by Peers. The Youth Organization of the Red Xhosa" in Mayer,P (ed), Socialization.
Delius, P, "Sebatakgomo: Migrant Organisation, the ANC and the Sekhukhuneland Revolt", JSAS, Volume 15 No 4 (forthcoming).
(13) Interviews, Peter Magubane, Johannesburg, 7/9/1988 and Norris Nkosi, Soweto, 25/9/1988.
(14) Interview, Don Mattera, Eldorado Park, 10/7/1988.
(15) Nkosi 25/9/88; Drum August 1955.
(16) Drum November 1951.
(17) Interview, Stanley Motjuwadi, Johannesburg, 29/9/1988
(18) Nkosi 25/9/88 and Motjuwadi 29/9/88. Both informants told me this story independently. It is unclear whether the pIolice finally caught Zorro.
(19) See Glaser, C, "Anti-Social Bandits" for a more detailed account of tsotsi subcultural style.
(20) Nkosi 25/9/88 and Motjuwadi 29/9/88
(21) Interview, Don Mattera, interviewed by Tom Lodge, Johannesburg 1979
(22) Mattera 1979
(23) Mattera 1979
(24) Interview, Queeneth Ndaba, Johannesburg, 15/9/1988.
(25) Mattera, 10/7/88
(26) Nkosi, 25/9/88.
(27) Intermediary Archives Depot, Johannesburg , West Rand Administration Board Archive (IAD WRAB), file 219/4. Constitution of the Dube Boys' Clubs Association.
(28) IAD WRAB, 219/4, Clipping from Rand Daily Mail, 7 OCtober 1953.
(29) Interview, Jacob Nhlapho, Johannesburg, 12/5/1989; interview, Arthur "McCoy" Mdlalose, Johannesburg, 27/4/89.
(30) Report of the Inter-departmental Committee on Native Juvenile Unemployment on the Witwatersrand and in Pretoria, chaired by S.F. Viljoen, 1951, parag36
(31) Church of the Province Library, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand (CPL), South African Institute of Race Relations Archive (SAIRR), Quintin Whyte Papers, Memorandum: "Delinquent Urban Youth: Recent delinquents", undated (c1954), p10.
(32) CPL, Ellen Hellman Papers, File 51, Memorandum: "Early School-leaving and African Juvenile Occupational Opportunities", undated (c1951).

(33) Mattera 10/7/88
(34) Interview, Gertrude Thwala, Johannesburg, 21/9/88.
(35) Interview, Lynette Leeuw, Johannesburg, 23/9/88.
(36) Nkosi 28/9/88
(37) Mattera 10/7/88, Nkosi 25/9/88, Thwala 21/9/88.
(38) Motjuwadi 29/9/88. Nkosi and Magubane's recollections are similar.
(39) Mattera 10/7/88
(40) Interview, Godfrey Moloi, Soweto, 26/3/88; Nkosi 25/9/88
(41) Drum November 1951
(42) Mattera 10/7/88
(43) Thwala 21/9 88; see also an article on tsotsis in Golden City Post 7 September 1958.
(44) Motjuwadi 29/9/88
(45) Mattera 1979
(46) Moloi 26/3/88
(47) Motjuwadi 29/9/88
(48) Leeuw 23/9/88
(49) Mattera 10/7/88
(50) Motjuwadi 29/9/88
(51) Ndaba 15/9/88
(52) Drum August 1955; this story was borne out by Godfrey Moloi, who was unaware of the Drum feature. Moloi added that Zorro would often forget about "his girls" but claim them again some time in the future if he noticed the "Z" scratched on them.
(53) Mattera 10/7/88
(54) Ndaba 15/9/88
(55) Ndaba 15/9/88
(56) Thwala 21/9/88
(57) Magubane 7/9/88
(58) Motjuwadi 29/9/88
(59) Nkosi 28/9/88
(60) Golden City Post 26 July 1959
(61) Magubane 7/9/88
(62) Ndaba 15/9/88. Queeneth Ndaba's friend, Patricia, who was sitting in during this interview, actually reminded Queeneth about this ritual. They both seemed to have witnessed it independently.
(63) See Golden City Post 3 April 1955; 23 June 1957; 28 September 1958; 28 June 1959. These incidents took place in Germiston, Elizabethville (Orlando), Evaton and Orlando East respectively.
(64) IAD WRAB file 351/1, Letters from W.S. Ndhlovu to the Manager, 6 July 1959 and 26 October 1959.
(65) Motjuwadi 29/9/88
(66) Ndaba 15/9/88
(67) Golden City Post 26 July 1959; see also an article which appeared on 28 September about a splinter of the disbanded Msomis from Alexandra who were wreaking havoc in Evaton. This group also reportedly abducted women.
(68) Interview. Kay Manana, Johannesburg 21/9/88.
(69) Moloi 26/3/88; Lynette Leeuw has similar recollections about nameless tsotsi gangs.
(70) Motjuwadi 29/9/88
(71) Manana 21/9/88

(72) IAD WRAB file 351/2, Juvenile Court Statistics 1936-1960. Figures are unavailable 1940 until 1948.
(73) IAD WRAB file 351/1, photocopy of article from The Star 8 November 1955.
(74) Golden City Post 11 September 1955, p15.
(75) Mattera 10/7/88
(76) Magubane 7/9/88
(77) Magubane 7/9/88
(78) Mattera 10/7/88. Sinna eventually became a town councillor. "She was used by the state," in Mattera's words. She apparently now lives somewhere in Zone One.
(79) Mattera 10/7/88
(80) Interviews, Henry Miles, April-May 1989
(81) Motjuwadi 29/9/88
(82) Leeuw 23/9/88