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‘They stood their ground!’ – Professional Gangsters in South African Indian Society, 1940 - 1970

by Damon Heatlie

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Johannesburg, August 2019

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own original work. Where use is made of the work of others it is indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. It is submitted towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by creative project and dissertation at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.



……

Damon Heatlie
9 August 2019

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Research for the thesis was also partially funded by an Oppenheimer Memorial Trust Award, which enabled a sabbatical project of creative research at the University of East Anglia in 2015.

This research was additionally made possible by a grant from the Faculty of Humanities Research Committee, University of the Witwatersrand, and a grant from the Anderson Capelli Fund, administered by the University of the Witwatersrand, both awarded in 2015.

Much of the genesis of this project came about from the collaborative experience of working with Riason Naidoo on our film *Legends of the Casbah* (2016), a documentary that arose out of his pioneering research into cosmopolitan South African Indian identities. It was through this process that I became interested in a further, more in-depth study of Indian gangsters in early apartheid.

I would also like to acknowledge the considerable inputs and support of my supervisors, Dr Cynthia Kros, Honorary Research Associate at the Wits History Workshop, as well as Prof Dilip Menon, Mellon Chair of Indian Studies and Director of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA) at the University of Witwatersrand. Their immense enthusiasm and consistent support has invigorated this project.

In addition, Dr Peter Bloore, who supervised me at the University of East Anglia, was instrumental in encouraging me think about alternative storylines for my screenplay.

I dedicate this thesis to my late father-in-law, Gopal Krishna Naidoo, who got me thinking with his stories that meandered into the night.

Lastly, I wish to thank my wife, Yavini Naidoo, for her considerable forbearance in what must have appeared to be a never-ending project.

Abstract

This thesis is one part of a Creative PhD that investigates the emergence of a new breed of South African Indian gangsters in Durban and Johannesburg in the early apartheid period. The second part, existing as a separate creative text, is a screenplay for a feature film loosely based on dynamics and events present in the Durban Indian underworld of the 1950s. In the thesis I argue that while prominent 'professional' Indian gangsters were similar to other 'non-white' gangsters in certain respects (their self-fashioning in relation to gangster films, for one), these 'gentlemen gangsters' were different in terms of their high level of social and economic integration into Indian society. Focusing on the Crimson League in Durban and Sherief Khan's gang in Johannesburg, this research comprises reconstructions from (and analysis of) interviews and written sources. It shows how these hustlers positioned themselves as protectors of the Indian community, but also cultivated reputations as punishers, capable of brutal violence if opposed.

In Chapter 1, I explore the world of changing South African Indian identity in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and the mobilisation of an 'Indian' identity by disparate groups to advance collective interests. In Chapter 2, I look at how subjugated Indian masculinity, a sense of vulnerable 'territory', and the rise of street gangs intersected in ritualised games of soccer and gang fights. Chapter 3 traces the rise of Durban's dominant gang in the early apartheid period, the Crimson League, a vigilante outfit that turned to illicit activities and thuggery. Chapter 4 looks at some of the adversaries that the League engaged and ultimately defeated, including the Salots and the Michael John Gang – I dissect the John murder trial to show how the Crimson League seemingly bent the law to their will. In Chapter 5, I move on to a description of Sherief Khan's rise to power over rival Old Man Kajee in the Indian areas of Johannesburg in the 1940s and early 1950s, culminating in an analysis of his gang's various 'business' activities. Chapter 6 finds Khan and company back on the streets in the 1960s - and examines a decisive conflict with contenders, the 'Malay Mob', that re-established Khan's reputation as 'South African king of the underworld'. In Chapter 7, I look at how mid-century Hollywood gangster films resonated with Indian gangsters, and how a convoluted conversation between *Drum* magazine, Hollywood films and Indian gangsters developed. Chapter 8 concludes the analysis with considering the thriving South African Indian cinema scene of this period, and how the cinemas functioned as multifaceted fantasy spaces for both gangsters and ordinary Indians.

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Introduction

As a creative PhD, this thesis consists of two separate but related components - a fictional film script set in Durban's Indian underworld of the 1950s, and a scholarly dissertation on prominent South African Indian gangsters from 1940 to 1970. Although undertaken simultaneously, it is hard to describe the precise relationship between these two research projects. The two components do not directly reference each other; they should rather be seen as parallel inquiries into the same topic which interacted indirectly with one another.

The creative component, a feature film screenplay based on actual South African Indian gangsters and documented events, has been extensively shaped and stretched by the scholarly investigation, which fed into the detail of the fictional story-world. The empirical research, consisting of interviews, archival investigation and media analysis, was however largely governed by historical interest. Nevertheless, it was occasionally influenced by the creative screenwriting agenda, as there was always the desire to know more about this or that character or dramatic situation. In addition, from historical analysis to the gangsters' own forms of self-representation, talking or writing about 'gangsters' is always to some extent caught up in the cinematic trope of 'the gangster' (the argument put forward in Chapter 7). What follows below is the scholarly dissertation - the screenplay is submitted as a separate document.

In terms of scope, the original intention was to undertake a comprehensive investigation of the many Indian types of gangs operating in Durban and Johannesburg during this period – this proved too large an ambit. The dissertation now focuses on the dominant professional Indian gangsters operating in Durban and Johannesburg in the early apartheid period. "Early apartheid" I use loosely as a shorthand for the period 1940 to 1970, a period which saw the rise and consolidation of power by the Crimson League and Sherief Khan's syndicate. By "professional" I mean those men for whom significant revenue streams were at stake, mostly through illicit networks and extortion. For the generally younger street gangs, often orbiting or aligned to the dominant professional syndicates, and fighting over turf and fighting reputation, the stakes were more symbolic - where there were material rewards, these were lesser and less consistent.

The thesis starts in Chapter 1 with exploring broadly contextual questions of shifting Indian identity in mid-twentieth century South Africa. My main interest here is how, in

a rapidly urbanising and cosmopolitan environment, various sub-ethnicities and classes consolidated under the banner of 'Indianness' to face the opportunities and threats of the early apartheid period. In this regard, while sifting through various illuminating views, I found Bill Freund's work, *Insiders and Outsiders*[1], an indispensable study. In Chapter 2, I focus more specifically on questions of South African Indian masculinity, violence and 'territory', in relation to the lively soccer and 'non-white' gang cultures of early apartheid. Taking into consideration Connell's influential theory of "hegemonic masculinities"[2] and Vahed's notion of a historically determined "indentured masculinity"[3], the chapter culminates in a comparison of the 'soccer player' and 'gangster' as competing types of aggressive Indian masculinity on offer.

The main body of the research - Chapters 3 to 6 - proceeds to trace the exploits of the Crimson League and Sherief Khan's Reef gang in some detail. This is largely my own reconstruction of events and activities through conversations with interviewees and a prolonged engagement with primary written sources, so as to illuminate little known or understood phenomena. Although dominantly 'empirical' in nature, these chapters on the preeminent professional gangsters do on occasion resort to analytical insights from Anton Blok[4] and Diego Gambetta[5] to draw comparisons with the workings of the Sicilian mafia.

The study culminates in the last two chapters with a more interpretative analysis of the relationship between Indian gangster performativity and popular culture. Although I come from a filmmaking and film studies background, as part of a creative and transdisciplinary PhD, this scholarly work only intermittently engages with film theory - the exception being these final chapters. In Chapter 7, I look at the pervasive effect of the Hollywood gangster genre on 'non-white' audiences, and specifically how Indian

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[1] Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910-1990* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1995).

[2] "There is generally a dominant or hegemonic form of masculinity, the vehicle of gendered power, which need not be (probably often is not) the most common form of masculinity." - Connell cited in Katie Mooney, '"Ducktails, Flick-knives and Pugnacity": Subcultural and Hegemonic Masculinities in South Africa, 1948–1960', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (December 1998): 6.

[3] Goolam Vahed, 'Indentured Masculinity in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910.', in *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*, ed. L Ouzgane and R Morrell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[4] Anton Blok, 'Reflections on the Sicilian Mafia: Peripheries and Their Impact on Centres', in *Organized Crime: Culture, Markets and Policies*, ed. Dina Siegel and Hans Nelen, Studies in Organized Crime (New York: Springer, 2008), 7–13.

[5] Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

gangsters were hooked by *film noir* narratives such *The Street with No Name* (1948). I also look at the deployment of cinematic gangster tropes in *Drum* and how Indian gangsters managed their reputations in the magazine – here I engage extensively with Mac Fenwick's analysis[6] of the 'gangster figure' in *Drum*.

In Chapter 8, the focus shifts to South African Indian cinema spaces - both the booming Indian cinema culture in the early apartheid period, and the pleasures of Indian cinematic identifications. I also show how the physical building of the cinema sometimes acted as a backdrop to dramatic show-downs; or, alternatively, as opulent palaces, evocative of a world that was very distant from the squalid ghettoes of Indian 'group areas'.

In this history of prominent Indian gangsters in Johannesburg and Durban consists, a large amount of original research has been done – much of the fieldwork comprises oral histories, most of which I found to be shot through with at least some measure of nostalgia and admiration for the gangsters. I came to this topic through the making of a heritage-based documentary film, *Legends of the Casbah* (2016); doing the research I was startled to find that my respectable in-laws had fraternised with Crimson League gangsters in the parallel world of Indian soccer. I could not fathom how these widely feared and violent men were so well integrated into respectable Durban Indian society - "Thorough gentlemen!" was a common epithet used to describe them. Many interviewees expressed the view that these 'gentlemen gangsters', whoever else they might have been, were powerful protectors of the community, people you could turn to in your hour of need. What fascinated me were the inconsistent set of roles and contradictory behaviours, the code of the gentleman gangster: 'respect' and 'reputation', achieved through measures of financial success, physical aggression, fighting prowess, bravery – but also courtesy and respect for family, helpfulness and immaculate self-presentation. Many a gangster was also a 'family man', often with relatives in the same gang cementing ties. The existence of these contradictions became a central question underpinning this dissertation – how to understand these respected gangsters fitting into their social contexts rather than just being repudiated by them.

From a creative point of view, I became convinced that a 1950s period-film dealing with Durban-Indian *mafiosi* presented a viable screenplay premise, both culturally and commercially. It would contribute to the telling of a local Indian history relatively

[6] Mac Fenwick, '"Tough Guy, Eh?": The Gangster-Figure in *Drum*', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22, no. 4 (1 December 1996): 617–32.

unknown in South Africa, and would resonate with multiple audiences, nationally and internationally, including India. In terms of scholarly historical study, my preliminary scoping of research indicated that there was hardly any research on Indian gangs in this period. Surveying existing research on gangs in South Africa, historian Gary Kynoch laments that the "vast majority of the literature was on black gangs" while "White and Indian gangs are virtually ignored despite frequent mention in newspapers and popular publications such as *Drum*".[7] This area of enquiry seemed to be a useful one to research from a scholarly perspective as well.

Methods and approach

My fieldwork involved 25 in-depth, open-ended interviews with what one might call 'elderly' Indian men and women. The main selection criteria were that these interviewees had direct experience (either as teenagers or young adults) of the period in question; and of course, that they had something to relate about Indian gangs or specific gangsters. I used what is called 'theoretical sampling', an incremental and flexible process of deciding who next to interview in the data collection process. Decisions are based on relevance as a 'theory' or 'narrative' emerges; as Flick explains, "Individuals, groups are selected according to their (expected) level of new insights for the developing theory, in relation to the state of theory elaboration so far".[8] Most of the interviewees were male - only two were female. Interviewees were given the option of anonymity before the interview; most of them, including public figures, wanted to remain anonymous in the finished text, even though only a few of them were directly implicated as ex-gangsters. Given that what we were talking about had occurred over 50 years ago, it seemed unlikely the choice to remain unnamed was about the fear of direct reprisal. Perhaps they feared being tainted by association with gangsters; or that in some way they were betraying a kind of open secret about their communities. Consequently, when quoting these reticent respondents' recollections, I cite them using pseudonyms that reference their initials.

In terms of archival research, I consulted court records from personal and public archives, but the main focus was on media reports from that period. Editions of *The Golden City Post, The Natal Mercury* and *Drum* magazine were accessed at the Bailey's African History Archive, the William Cullen Library at Wits University, and the Johannesburg City Library, while various documents, including issues of *The Leader,*

[7] Gary Kynoch, 'From the Ninevites to the Hard Livings Gang: Township Gangsters and Urban Violence in Twentieth-Century South Africa', *African Studies* 58, no. 1 (1 July 1999): 59.

[8] Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2005), 64.

were viewed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre. However, by far the majority of the gangster-related articles and interviews, and the textual material that I ended up working with most, were to be found in *Drum.* As discussed in my final chapters, 'crime' and 'the gangster' were a big part of what differentiated that magazine thematically.

I should explain my use of racial nomenclature in the thesis - I am aware that the continued use of these archaic apartheid-era terms might be seen as some kind of racial essentialising. I use the terms 'African', 'coloured', 'white' and 'Indian' without quotation marks to describe constructions of cultural identity, as they were ring-fenced and experienced under apartheid. When it comes to practices, groupings and experiences that cut across Indian, African and coloured lines, I deploy the term 'non-white' with quotation marks throughout, rather than the more contemporary term 'black'. I use quotation marks to highlight both the absurdity and the exclusionary charge of the term 'non-white'. Most Indians would not have thought or spoken of themselves as 'black' in the early apartheid period – "Non-White" or "Non-European" are the collective terms one usually finds in *Drum* magazine at the time.

At this point I need to briefly offer some reflections on my own position and 'voice' in this thesis – how *I* reacted, over and above the reception of audiences or readers, to the story and the rendition of characters. While this work proceeds from an official position of 'ambivalence' (in other words, seeing the 'good' and the 'bad', both appreciating and deploring the gangsters), as a narrator I nevertheless concede a propensity towards framing these Indian gangsters positively. If at times I seem to celebrate the 'achievements' of a gangster (as on page 101), this has something to do with the tenacity with which they faced obstacles. When I show some delight in their 'dazzling' impunity, this could probably emanate from a sense of vindication on behalf of a group of people with whom I closely identify through family – a group who were oppressed and abused by the apartheid system, but who have also lost out in post-apartheid narratives of the struggle and resistance. At the same time, there is probably also something of the shape-shifting 'trickster' archetype in the gangster figure that gives it a universal and trans-historical appeal.

In developing the more narrative style of the chapters on the League and Khan, I asked myself, what ways are there of telling this kind of story, and what way is right for the writer *and* the subject? I began to feel I had found a narrative voice of my own, a kind

of racy yet critical style that alternately supported and deconstructed the cinematic tropes that so moulded the actions, reports and anecdotes of the gangsters at that time. On one level I felt I had to be true to the 'original' story; it wasn't that I felt I owed a debt to my interviewees or other sources – I rather felt an obligation to the life-stories of these 'characters' and their sometimes desperate, sometimes valiant ploys.

In terms of approach, I would like to locate this study within a social history tradition that tries to bring repressed South African histories to the surface – but with a difference. Following the pioneering work of the 'Birmingham School' on working-class subcultures, Glaser suggested that township gangs were important areas for inquiry because they represent rare challenges to the 'contrived' consent inherent in apartheid hegemony.[9] This echoes van Onselen's focus on the activities of outlaw gangs and the Reef's 'lumpenproletariat', championing a social history interested in "the various ways in which the newly proletarianised resisted the stifling embrace of the 'total institutions' " of mine compound and prison.[10] These studies concentrated specifically on African gangs – but do the Indian 'gentleman gangsters', emerging out of less socially alienated, and more accepting communities, represent the same form and level of 'resistance' to the colonial order and apartheid stratification?

It seemed that the approaches to South African gangsterism mentioned above appeared to be grounded in a historical master narrative of struggle against oppression. I wanted to move beyond reading these disturbances of the social order as essentially some kind of semi-conscious collective 'resistance'. Bill Freund's study of Durban's Indian working-class in the twentieth century, emphasising "the inseparable mixture of oppression and opportunity"[11] confronting the survivors of indenture, resonated with my perspective. Professional Indian gangsters can also be seen as pragmatic opportunists, exploiting apartheid's deprivations, motivated to improve their economic and social positions. Theirs was not the resistance to the *status quo* that Glaser finds in the African *tsotsi* gangs, nor the 'social banditry' that van Onselen finds in his criminals. Integrated into their social environments, the gentleman gangsters strategically leveraged the apartheid context to suit their own interests, taking

[9] Clive Glaser, 'Anti-Social Bandits: Culture, Resistance and the Tsotsi Subculture on the Witwatersrand during the 1940s and 1950s.', vol. 278 (African Studies Seminar Series, African Studies Centre, Wits University, 1990), 3.

[10] Charles van Onselen, 'Crime and Total Institutions in the Making of Modern South Africa: The Life of "Nongoloza" Mathebula 1867–1948', *History Workshop Journal* 19, no. 1 (1985): 63.

[11] Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 10.

advantages of both gaps and opportunities in their marginalisation. My sense is that South African writers of history need to find new ways of telling stories (both creative and scholarly) about South African experiences 'under' apartheid, unburdened of the exhausted tropes of 'victim' or 'resistor' of apartheid.[12] Hopefully this account of Indian gangsters has partly subverted the assumption that all 'non-whites' were psychologically defeated by the state (or, alternatively, triumphed over it).

Gangsters and the apartheid state

Although resisting the 'resistance to apartheid' logic, my interpretation does still place emphasis on contextual examination, including the state, and it is worth providing some introductory thoughts on the broader socio-political context of the rise of the Indian gangs. While they had their own unique social context, they were also part of a larger street-level phenomenon. In a rapidly urbanising mid-twentieth century South Africa, 'non-white' urban areas saw an upsurge in public violence and various forms of gangsterism. The coloured Globe Gang from Cape Town's District Six emerged in the 1940s as a vigilante street gang, fighting rival youth gangs, but by the early 1950s, had expanded into extortion and other criminal activities. The Crimson League arose within a similar timeline and 'vigilantism-to-extortion' arc in Durban's Indian ghetto around Grey Street. On the Reef, Indian extortionists, *tsotsi* street gangs, the *Marashea* gangs and the vigilante Civilian Guards were at each other's throats in 1950s, while numerous street-corner youth gangs mushroomed in 'non-white' areas. What had happened to the state's putative monopoly on violence?

At first it seemed useful to me to differentiate between 'strategic' (or micro) and 'contextual' (or 'macro') factors – where the former would describe active choices and identifications made by violent gangsters, and the latter, less conscious reactions to circumstance. However, it seems that several of the factors or reasons for the culture of violence are both strategic or intentional *and* contextual or unconscious – thus for example 'lack of proper policing' is both a condition of apartheid and a 'microeconomic' opportunity for extortionists trading on a monopoly of local violence.

[12] In the same vein, Jacob Dlamini seems to be offering a fresh approach in reimagining a previously 'homogeneous' black experience under apartheid, this time seen from positions of agency and idiosyncrasy rather than just of the demoralised victim - Jacob Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2009).

Kynoch offers a functionalist framework in which contextual and strategic factors are layered in a quasi-causal model for understanding what he calls an urban 'culture of violence':

> The poverty, social dislocation, and institutionalized racism that stemmed from state policies governing African urbanization laid the foundations for a violent environment; however, policing, criminal gang activity and vigilantism directly determined the patterns of violence over several generations of political, economic and social change. The nature of township policing encouraged both criminal gang activity and the emergence of vigilante organizations. These three dynamics became inextricably intertwined over the years and were a driving force behind the culture of violence that developed in the townships.[13]

In this three-tiered model we have the very broad context of the apartheid state's exclusionary policies as a "foundation" of social deprivations, which produced practices of poor policing, which in turn encouraged violent vigilantism and criminal opportunism. Whether this 'non-policing' was simply a deprivation due to under-resourcing or a strategy to keep 'non-whites' on the back foot is of course debatable (see, for example, the discussion of the 1949 riots on page 18).

Indian gangsters could operate with impunity because policing in their zones of operation was arguably a token gesture – and because the people they lived off knew this all too well. Kynoch points out that 'non-white' ghettoes "have suffered from criminal violence and vigilantism since their inception."[14] Apartheid-era policing in these deprioritised areas was largely ineffective and symbolic in the 1950s – "Passes and documents were checked, raids for illicit liquor conducted and illegal squatters evicted, all while murder, rape and gangsterism flourished".[15] This is corroborated by expressions of indignation at police lethargy from the time. When *Drum* gave voice to some 'non-white' frustrations in the early 1950s, one of the earliest complaints was the unchecked state of criminal activity. The article 'Clean up the Reef!' was directed at apathetic apartheid policing: "All over Johannesburg and the Golden Reef there are streets, corners and whole districts where law and order are openly flouted, and crime and violence is bred."[16]

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[13] Gary Kynoch, 'Crime, Conflict and Politics in Transition-Era South Africa', *African Affairs* 104, no. 416 (July 2005): 497.

[14] Kynoch, 494.

[15] Brewer cited in Kynoch, 498.

[16] 'Clean up the Reef!', *Drum*, March 1953, 11.

Additionally, many Indian gangsters were in cahoots with the police, giving them information on rivals and petty criminals. Old Man Kajee, a big Indian gang boss in the 1940s, concedes that he worked routinely with the police as an informer.[17] Police exploited and supported criminality, gangsterism and the rule of violence by taking bribes from gangsters but also taking sides in inter-gang conflicts and warring vigilante groups - sometimes even getting involved in gangster "jobs". As one of my interviewees, EP, notes, Sherief Khan's gang had, already in the 1950s, "[…] a reputation for working very closely with the police. You couldn't go around stealing things!"[18] This collaboration eroded trust in the police's ability to defend communities against gangsters or criminal elements, which in turn strengthened the gangster or vigilante's hand. It was within this upside-down world of the 'gangster state' - in which private networks dominated public life - that modern South African Indian identity took shape, a process examined in the following chapter.

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[17] Old Man Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: II', *Drum*, June 1953, 27.

[18] EP, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2017.

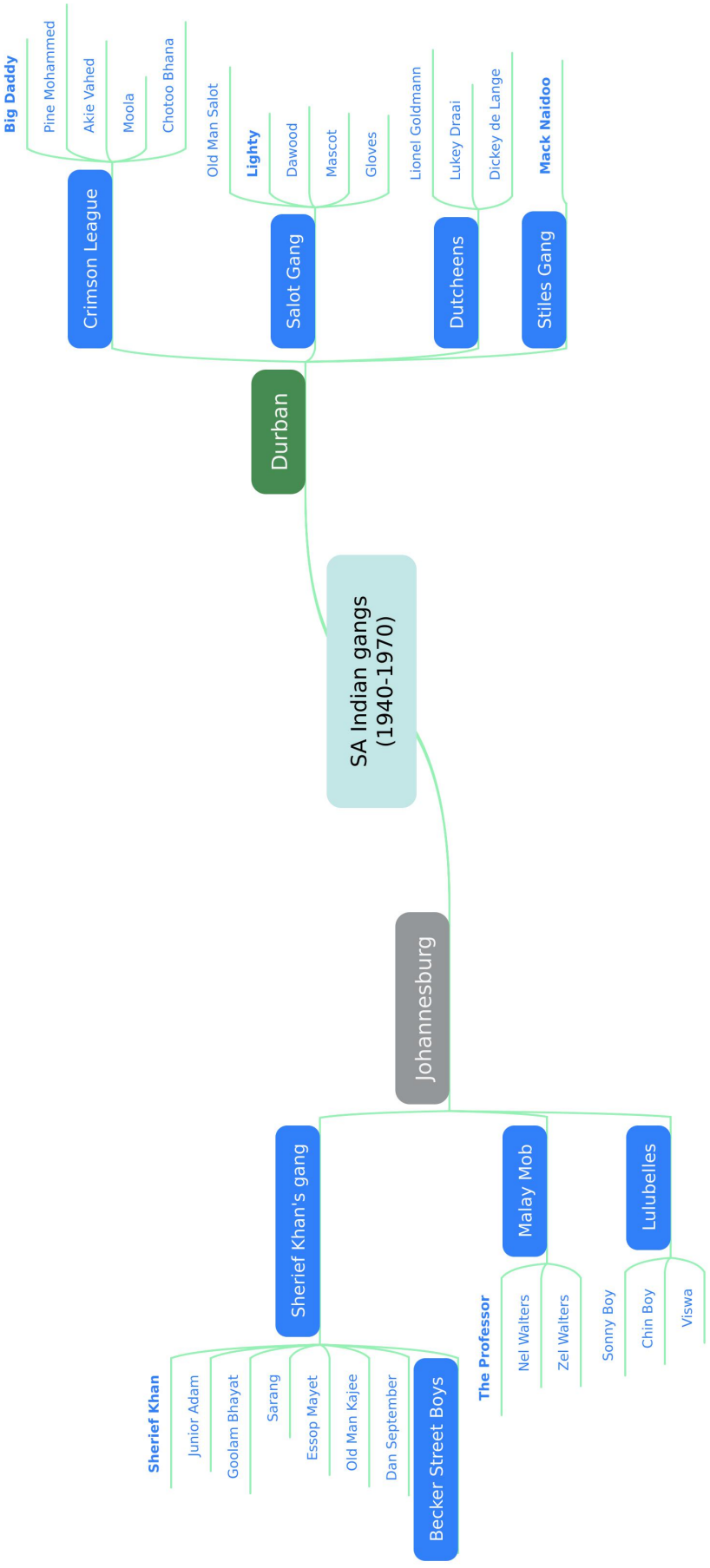


Figure 1 - South African Indian gangs referenced in the research

Chapter 1 - South African Indian identity in early apartheid

> "If one gazes over the twentieth century one is struck by the way "Indian" identity has been constructed, deconstructed and re-made" - Vahed & Desai[1]

Introduction – a gangster's dilemma

For those who could afford it, the 'visit to India' created a space for reflection on national identity and spirituality. Old Man Kajee, a famous mid-century Indian gangster in Johannesburg, set up a mosque and madressa in his hometown of Surat in 1947. When things got heated back home, he would disappear to India for a bit. In 1953 he had this to recall of a sojourn to the motherland a few years before:

> I did not know what my plans were. I did not know whether I was going to remain in India or come back. But like all South Africans who love their land, there's something in you that can't stay away from the country you've known as home. I often think that if people knew of this feeling they wouldn't talk of sending Indians away so glibly.[2]

His anecdote is richly illustrative of so many contradictions of the Indian professional gangster and South African Indian identity more generally. First, 'the devout gangster' - socially integrated rather than on the margins of his world; India is a place where the Johannesburg gangster can expunge his criminal identity and reap the spiritual dividends of his material gains. Then the dilemma around 'belonging'; but did Kajee ultimately choose South Africa as home for "love" – or because of the economic opportunities presented to Indians in the post-war years? Additionally, the "talk of sending Indians away" is an implied reference to the repatriation designs of the government, a threat hanging over all South African Indians (or Indian South Africans, as they might also be imagined) at the time.

This chapter outlines some of the formative events and processes in the reshaping of South African Indian identities from the 1940s to the 1960s. The mid-century period saw the consolidation of a new cosmopolitan Indian identity, critical to an understanding of the rise of South African Indian gangsterism. With a shift to urban, multicultural neighbourhoods and the advent of popular culture through new media,

[1] Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai, 'Identity and Belonging in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Case of Indian South Africans', *Journal of Social Science* 25, no. 1–3 (2010): 1–12.

[2] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: II', 26.

Indians were simultaneously losing aspects of their various traditional ethnic identities, while a cultural homogenisation of a new 'creole' South African Indian identity was taking place.[3] This was partly also the result of political manoeuvring under the banner of 'Indianness' to confront hostile South African socio-political realities.

I would like to highlight the three main points made in this chapter: Firstly, that there was no common Indian identity or experience to begin with. The term 'Asiatic' - or 'Indian' – was a colonial catch-all that masked ethnic and economic differences; secondly, that, paradoxically, political mobilisation, shared urban spaces, and 'Westernisation' in time all contributed to a more hybrid, constructed 'Indianness'; and thirdly, that a hostile and violent South African environment forged a protective Indian sensibility that would pave the way for gangs and gangsters.

Oral historian Alessandro Portelli[4] has provided a useful analytical tool for understanding how people see themselves in different social contexts - one that seems particularly useful for grappling with multi-layered South African Indian identity. Analysing interviewees' accounts of their life experiences, Portelli found that their narration of personal and public events continuously modulated between three spoken narrational "modes":

1) The 'institutional' mode relates to "the sphere of politics, government, parties, unions, and elections", with its spatial referent, the nation and the world;

2) the 'collective' mode speaks to "the life of the community, the neighbourhood and the workplace";

3) the 'personal' mode narrates "private and family life", things that take place in "the home".[5]

The three modes "are never entirely separate or discrete, since they all run simultaneously and mix together in the way people think and tell their lives."[6] These

[3] Frederic Landy, Brij Maharaj, and Helene Mainet-Valleix, 'Are People of Indian Origin (PIO) "Indian"? A Case Study of South African Indians', *Geoforum* 35, no. 2 (March 2004): 206, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2003.08.005.

[4] *Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 1991).

[5] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, 70.

[6] Portelli, 70.

separate modes would nevertheless allow for different even contradictory Indian selves to co-exist in the same mind.

Different 'Indians'

South African Indian people had been adapting their ideas of who they were or to what identities they related since the first importation of Indian indentured labour to Natal in 1860. In this grand migration over 50 years, 150 000 people were transplanted - over two-thirds of the immigrants were brought from three localities: the Madras Presidency, the Provinces of Agra and Oudh, and the Bengal Presidency. A minority of 'passenger Indians' from mainly Gujarat, followed on their own steam to trade and start businesses in South Africa. Arriving as British subjects with independent means, this group were keen to differentiate themselves from the lowly "coolies", as the farm labourers were called by many whites. However the initially strong class and cultural differences between 'passengers' (mostly Muslim) and indentured labourers (predominantly Hindu), would slowly dissipate through massive urbanisation over the first seven decades of the twentieth century. While at the turn of the century, 75 percent of Natal's Indians were rurally based, this had declined to only 5 percent by 1970.[7]

Language, perhaps the most resilient marker of identity, is an indicator of the cultural mutation that took place. Indentured life on the sugar plantations meant interacting with different cultures and languages – Tamil, Hindi, Zulu, Fanakolo, English and Afrikaans were to impact on a "distinctive South African Indian English".[8] Similarly, the trader class was interacting with different ethnic groups. Nevertheless, Indian vernaculars persisted. At the beginning of the 1950s, only seven percent of Indians spoke English at home - but in just 30 years this had shifted to 75 percent, indicating a veritable shedding of vernacular languages.[9] Indians in the 1950s were therefore still quite attached to their 'mother-tongues' in the private space of the home, even as they embraced more Western activities in the spaces of the neighbourhood and the city.

[7] Landy, Maharaj, and Mainet-Valleix, 'Are People of Indian Origin (PIO) "Indian"?', 207.

[8] Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, ed., *From Cane Fields to Freedom: A Chronicle of Indian South African Life* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2000), 14.

[9] Landy, Maharaj, and Mainet-Valleix, 'Are People of Indian Origin (PIO) "Indian"?', 208.

Cosmopolitanism

Even a cursory look at South African Indian newspapers or magazines from around the 1950s gives one the sense (in retrospect) that at least younger Indians were caught in the middle of some kind of protracted 'identity crisis', pulled between traditional roles and more Western identities. Freund calls it their "bipolar cultural universe".[10] One of the more visible indications of cultural transformation was the adoption of Western clothing and hair-styles, as well as leisure activities such as cinema-going, soccer, boxing and ball-room dancing.[11] Freund claims that gambling activities for Indian men in the multicultural city also created opportunities for cross-cultural interaction.[12] Less apparent to anyone looking back (at least superficially)[13] was the changing set of economic opportunities and public roles for women. As just one example, Dr Goonam's autobiography[14] reveals the prominent political part women played in the frontlines of 1940's Indian resistance to colonial oppression.

New attitudes and desires were made available to younger generations by increasingly global forms of industrial culture - movies, magazines and popular music were the most influential modes of consumption (see page 139). As Adorno and Horkheimer dramatically put it, "the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry."[15] In their parallel universe, the 'Ducktail' white youth subculture was similarly "committed to 'style, music, leisure and consumption'."[16] Popular culture was simultaneously enabling new rebellious identities in white and Indian youth, even though they were segregated. On the other hand, the boundaries between coloured and Indian communities were more porous[17] – in Durban and in Johannesburg there were mixed residential neighbourhoods, as well as recreational intermingling and even intermarrying amongst young people. It is quite probable that this shoulder-rubbing

[10] Indians were "drawn as by a magnet into a new South African urban culture" - Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 39.

[11] See Riason Naidoo, *The Indian in* Drum *Magazine in the 1950s* (Bell-Roberts Publishing, 2008).

[12] Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 37–39.

[13] With reference to the visual record of this period, photographs typically show men dressed up in Western suits and hats, with women still dominantly wearing Indian saris.

[14] *Coolie Doctor: An Autobiography* (Durban: Madiba Publications, 1991).

[15] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, 1997), 126.

[16] Mooney, '"Ducktails, Flick-knives and Pugnacity"', 797.

[17] Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 40.

with the coloured community facilitated the weakening of traditional Indian identities and accelerated assimilation of Western cultural characteristics.

Riason Naidoo sees Indian identities in the 1950s and 60s as progressively multicultural and cosmopolitan[18], referencing Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism as "a fluid coexistence among people of different cultures living in one place".[19] Echoing Portelli's 'modes', Landy *et al*. see the cosmopolitan self as co-existing in the same individual alongside a traditional cultural self: "complex identity changes can be seen very differently if they are considered at home (where identity may look rather conservative and 'traditional') or in public (where a Westernised South Africanisation has taken place)".[20]

Consolidation of 'Indianness'

We need to address the very category of 'Indian'. Naidoo has argued that apartheid-aligned discourses constructed a "homogenous" textbook 'Indian' (and he uses these quotation marks continuously in his writing to indicate his wariness of the term), perpetuating a stereotype of "simplified" otherness that does an injustice to the myriad of real identities and differences it subsumes.[21] In the same vein, Freund points out that white 'racial nationalism' in Natal "reinforced the sense that 'Indians' were a common category of people with whom it was only natural for law and custom to deal as a race apart".[22] However, he also maintains that this was not just a projection from without. Against the pull towards a hybrid, urban identity, one tendency from *within* South African Indian experience was towards an "inward-looking ethnic community within which the four-fold identification of race, religion, language and family served to define one's place in the world".[23]

Similarly, Landy *el al*. argue that the original heterogeneity of Indian identity was blurred: "In South Africa, an ethnicity which may be called 'Indianness' was progressively built by combining many identity patterns, some of which have faded

[18] 'The Indian in *Drum* in the 1950s' (2007), http://mobile.wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/6187.
[19] Naidoo, 53.
[20] Landy, Maharaj, and Mainet-Valleix, 'Are People of Indian Origin (PIO) "Indian"?', 209.
[21] Naidoo, 'The Indian in *Drum* in the 1950s', 18.
[22] Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 38.
[23] Freund, 38.

away, while others have been strengthened, forming a 'neo-Indian Creole identity' (Freund, 1995, p. 8)."[24] The characteristics that contributed to a South African Indian identity also constituted differences within 'Indianness'. Hypothetically, someone's 'Tamilness' (region, language, inflection of Hinduism) would mark them broadly as 'Indian', but also differentiated them to some degree from a 'Hindi' person, even if they were probably also Hindu. In South African Indian English, Hindi marks a Hindu cultural grouping defined broadly as 'North Indian', as opposed to the majority 'South Indian' or Tamil identity.

Paradoxically, negative colonial stereotyping of the 'Asiatic menace' and apartheid efforts at legislating 'the Indian' as a racial type, with specified neighbourhoods and rights, helped consolidate a group identity. Dhupelia-Mesthrie points to how "[…] waves of anti-Indian sentiment would sweep through various parts of South Africa at various times, and restrictive legislation did not discriminate between Indians. This would ultimately serve to unite Indians".[25] Class, religious and linguistic-ethnic differences were diminished in this imposed 'Indianness'. From their side, even though there were internal tensions, Indians developed and began to mobilise as an interest group, resulting in "a 'made-in-Natal' Indian consciousness" from 1894 onwards, with the inception of the Natal Indian Congress.[26] The initially conservative South African Indian Congress (SAIC) had superficially promoted an overarching Indian identity since its inception in 1923.[27] When Monty Naicker (Hindu) and Yusuf Dadoo (Muslim) took over and radicalised the Congress in 1945, the unifying effect of this amalgamated 'Indian' leadership bolstered their continued emphasis on a common identity.

Grouped together, Indian people of different kinds also lived together in what became culturally mixed neighbourhoods. Freund says of Durban's Indian areas, "class interpenetration powerfully reinforced bonds of commerce and service that linked people up and made the community a resource-rich human network".[28] Vahed quotes a personal recollection of life in Durban in the 1940s that describes this cohesion: "what

[24] 'Are People of Indian Origin (PIO) "Indian"?', 206.

[25] Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *From Cane Fields to Freedom*, 14.

[26] Goolam Vahed, 'Indians, Islam and the Meaning of South African Citizenship – A Question of Identities', *Transformation* 43 (2000): 30.

[27] Vahed, 30.

[28] Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 37.

was remarkable was the camaraderie that existed between Muslims and Hindus, who lived cheek-by-jowl with one another. I was not aware of any differences between us".[29]

South African nationality

For decades the question of national identity and belonging was a major uncertainty and ambivalence for Indians in South Africa[30], one that was only settled in the 1960s. Back in 1925 the Minister of Interior, D.F. Malan, had quite baldly stated that "the Indian, as a race in this country, is an alien element in the population."[31] From the 1920s to the 1940s, Indians faced a barrage of projections, anxieties and racist vilification from whites, who felt that Indians were muscling in on their economic opportunities. The years 1946 to 1948 saw mass action of South African Indian 'Passive Resistors' protesting Smuts's 'Ghetto Act' (the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act, legislated in 1946), which deprived Indians of the right to own land in newly designated 'whites-only' areas.

As the political situation for South African Indians worsened, they would have witnessed India itself undergoing tumultuous transformation. 1947 saw the perceived motherland, India, gaining independence from British rule and the dramatic conflicts ensuing from partition. Vahed and Desai claim that for South African Indians, there was some pride in an independent India: "South Africa was home and India homeland".[32] But independence must have also made them more acutely aware of their own state of 'unfreedom'. Vahed points out that "Indians were drawn together because they had the same legal status and the threat of repatriation hung over all until 1961", when they were finally made permanent residents of South Africa.[33] Carim, on the other hand, describes an increasing sense of his primary 'Moslem' identity in his Ferreirastown (Johannesburg) Indian community around the time of partition, culminating in him participating in an anti-Hindu march on Diagonal Street.[34]

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[29] Sewlall cited in Vahed, 'Indians, Islam and the Meaning of South African Citizenship – A Question of Identities', 30.

[30] Vahed and Desai, 'Identity and Belonging in Post-Apartheid South Africa'; Edward Ramsamy, 'Between Belonging and Alienation: The Indian Minority in South Africa', in *Minorities and the State in Africa*, ed. Michael U. Mbanaso and Chima J. Korieh (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010).

[31] Malan cited in Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *From Cane Fields to Freedom*, 15.

[32] Vahed and Desai, 'Identity and Belonging in Post-Apartheid South Africa', 5.

[33] Vahed, 'Indians, Islam and the Meaning of South African Citizenship – A Question of Identities', 30.

[34] Mohamed F. Carim, *Coolie, Come Out and Fight!* (Johannesburg: Porcupine Press, 2013), 64–65.

But did these geopolitical events not also generate anxieties around 'homelessness' for Indians, a sense of being forsaken in a hostile land? Ramsamy[35] argues that even if a 1948 Nationalist Party election slogan[36] explicitly promised Indian repatriation, this was not feasible by the mid-1940s. Dhupelia-Mesthrie however, suggests that the Group Areas Act (1950), in its total disregard for title deeds and 'occupancy rights', was the most calculated piece of apartheid legislation, partly intended to unsettle Indians: "repatriation was still the fundamental goal of the National Party and the Group Areas Act was designed to make life unbearable".[37] The question mark over the legal right to stay in the country must have been deeply unsettling and alienating for Indians already battling various legislated exclusions.

No protection - '49'

On top of all of this came the traumatic anti-Indian violence that erupted in parts of Durban in what became known as the 1949 riots – with this one surely has a recipe for massive distrust of the state and other ethnic groups. Growing tensions between Africans and Indian in the greater Durban area, particularly in the mixed suburb of Cato Manor (where many Africans were tenants of Indian property owners) exploded into horrific violence. Over a few days in January 1949, African mobs attacked Indian people, looted shops and set residences alight; looting, raping and killing (almost 150 Indians and Africans died) were part of this terrible ordeal.

The Cato Manor riots of 1949 unsettled the notion of an already precarious South African Indian or Indian South African identity, and quite literally displaced half of Durban's Indian population. '49', as it became known, was to become a key marker in the collected narrative of the Natal Indian experience, as well as a formative, traumatic turning point in many individual life-stories. While, as Soske[38] points out, the 1949 violence instigated a rethinking of African nationalism within the ANC Youth League and a closer relationship with Indian leaders in the 1950s, ordinary Indians came out of

[35] Edward Ramsamy, 'Between Belonging and Alienation: The Indian Minority in South Africa', in *Minorities and the State in Africa*, 2010, 53.

[36] 'Die Kaffer op sy plek en die Koelie uit die land' ['The Kaffir in his place, and the Coolie out the country']

[37] Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *From Cane Fields to Freedom*, 18.

[38] Jon Soske, *Internal Frontiers: African Nationalism and the Indian Diaspora in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017).

this feeling profoundly vulnerable and 'unprotected' by the state.[39] The 1949 attacks on Indians, aptly described as a "pogrom" by Pinnock[40], were encouraged by the sluggish response of the police, with some commentators alleging that white inciters (hiding their malignance under blackface) were involved in stoking African hostility towards Indians.

We should not see violence simplistically as just a symptom of apartheid. It was the very life-blood of apartheid, and it is instructive to see how the whole sorry story of "separate development" exploited this '49' spasm of violence as its 'inciting incident'. The state strategically exploited the instance of 'interracial' violence to justify the whole upcoming project of racial segregation. Pinnock points out the government inquiry report into the Ghetto Act (involving Indian property rights) referenced the recent interracial "tension and strife" of the '49 riots to prepare the ground and essentially justify the Group Areas Act of 1950 – and "[i]n its final two chapters can be found the keystone of spatial apartheid".[41] The chaos of Cato Manor, a mixed residential area shared by Indian and Zulu households, was, according to this twisted logic, proof of how the 'races' could not feasibly live together and demonstrated why "total segregation of the racial groups" was needed.[42] What is illustrated here is how the apartheid state cynically manipulated 'non-white' violence rather than protecting or compensating its victims. Opportunities were however created by the state's cynicism and withholding help and support for the victims. SN explains how Crimson League gangsters in Durban used the situation to position themselves as helpers of the victims, and more generally 'protectors' of a community in need of protection into the future.[43]

Given these circumtances, Landy, Maharaj, and Mainet-Valleix's assertion that 'Indianness' was a kind of laager-mentality seems feasible: "The preservation of Indian culture in South Africa is less due to the will of keeping roots alive than to the necessity of keeping a group identity amongst other groups […] The reasons are to be found in South Africa itself rather than in India."[44] 'Indianness' was maintained for the purposes

[39] SN, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2015.
[40] Don Pinnock, *Gang Town* (Cape Town: Tafelberg - NB Publishers, 2016), 31.
[41] Pinnock, 31–32.
[42] Parliamentary report cited in Pinnock, 32.
[43] SN, Interview with author.
[44] Landy, Maharaj, and Mainet-Valleix, 'Are People of Indian Origin (PIO) "Indian"?', 209..

of surviving in a space of ethnic contestation and economic competition. It was in this space of ‘racial’ vulnerability that the gangs found their shadowy legitimation.

Chapter 2 - Territory, masculinity, soccer and gangs

"They stood their ground in Sparks Road. Stood their ground!" Crimson Leaguer on the rival Salot Gang[1]

Introduction

A submission by the conservative Natal Indian Organisation to the judicial commission investigating the 1949 riots presents the 'weak' position of Indian landowners renting to African tenants, who profit from subdividing and subletting the space:

> In many cases the African tenants do not pay the monthly rental. These shacks are profitable to the African tenants, so much so that it is difficult to evict an African shack dweller even with the aid of the police. In some cases Africans have trespassed on to Indian owned land and erected shacks without the knowledge or consent of the Indian owner.[2]

In this light, the 1949 Durban riots might be seen simplistically as a fight over contested resources in the biracial township of Cato Manor. But we know from African accounts that, performed in this violence, there was also a more symbolic upstaging of the 'foreign' yet 'dominating' Indian. This violent assertion of identity against an-other within a shared locality is a pattern one finds performing itself in many different scenarios in the early apartheid period.

Territorial contestation, a universal gang characteristic, featured widely across 'non-white' street gangs from the 1940s onwards. While professional gangsters might have clashed over markets, Saloojee (who grew up in Sophiatown) tells us the gang fighting in township spaces was essentially about protecting one's turf and asserting dominance within it to gain or maintain "territorial control":

> So you lived in that territory where you had to assert yourself, and in that assertion you became the leader of your group, that kind of thing. So you have a situation where one group, to prove your superiority over the other, you *fight*!"[3]

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[1] GG, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2011.

[2] 'Statement Submitted by the Natal Indian Organisation to the Chairman and Members of The Judicial Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Durban Riots (1949)' (n.d.), 12–13, HASSIM SEEDAT PAPERS, Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/?inventory/U/collections&c=AD1710/R/.

[3] Yussuf 'Chommie' Saloojee, Interview with author, Audio recording, February 2016.

A sense of identity, status and reputation were clearly at stake – but how should one read this power play in the context of the age of segregation, so concretised by the Group Areas Act of 1950? Racial classification and ethnic identity were intrinsically bound up with designated spaces and positions. If fighting was part and parcel of 'asserting' yourself as a young man within a given territory, it was probably also a way of negating a sense of racial 'inferiority' through attaining what Saloojee calls "superiority".

In the colonial era Indian men had been subjected to a kind of "systematic violence", including beatings from white managers and owners on the sugar plantations.[4] The slave-like relations of power inherent in the system of indenture allowed little room for sustained resistance to physical abuse from plantation owners or foremen. Vahed's study of 'indentured masculinity' posits that an often-violent domination of Indian men (by white and African men) was "critical in framing their [Indian] masculinities".[5] An 'inferior' or 'subordinate' masculinity would need to be exorcised.

If fierce rivalry on the soccer field was partly about achieving that 'winning' feeling, it was also, less consciously, about the fragility of 'non-white' neighbourhoods in a time of uncertainty, a symbolic defence of territories. Saloojee's "territorial control", whether on the street or field, was in this sense also about playing out the dominant national spatial logic of 'separateness', forced removals and ghettoisation, and the subsequent township projects of making place out of space. It is worth considering this logic of physical and spatial domination more extensively. This chapter examines the complex, dynamic interaction of masculinity, territory, soccer and 'non-white' street gangs in the 1950s and 60s, concluding with a comparison of competing forms of soccer and gangster masculinity.

Fragile boundaries, vulnerable communities

Following Peter Alegi's seminal history of South African soccer[6], McGhee describes the positive energies at work in early black soccer culture. In the multi-cultural migrant

[4] Ashwin Desai and Goolam H Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860-1914* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010), 2.

[5] Vahed, 'Indentured Masculinity in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910.', 239.

[6] Peter Alegi, *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004).

centres of the early twentieth century, soccer allowed black men to create new social networks, and laid the basis of later political agency - "soccer was a leisure activity for men attempting to establish new lives with unfamiliar people in unfamiliar locations."[7] Not only was it socially constructive, but it facilitated the beneficial development of new black urban masculinities in adverse (colonial) conditions, and McGhee claims, "The experience of participating in football clubs helped affirm their self-worth within their communities".[8] Soccer teams, like youth gangs, provided a field of connection which was not just about winning, but also about shared trials and tribulations, thereby creating a platform for solidarity and social interaction.

Jeffrey's historical study of early-apartheid football culture in the African township of Sharpeville argues that dynamics of 'neighbourhood rivalry' and local patrons drove a mushrooming of street-based soccer teams and youth gangs.[9] Involving fieldwork over four years and engaging over thirty Sharpeville soccer teams, his research leads him to claim that even established football clubs in the township "have their roots deeply entrenched in the local street teams".[10] The youths of local communities marked our territories and defended them vigorously. But he goes on to point out the strange contradiction of township territoriality: "In Sharpeville, as with other townships in South Africa, territory is predetermined and therefore fixed by the authorities through forced removals."[11] While Jeffrey doesn't elaborate much on this, the suggestion seems to be that a collective redefinition of space was possible: even if 'I' (individually) have to accept the overall arbitrariness of my new locality, 'we' (collectively as team/gang) can still mark out the internal boundaries of the township space and make the local neighbourhood space 'our own'.

This was not however just an African experience - as we have seen, even prior to the Group Areas Act, the so-called 'Ghetto Act' of 1946 had targeted Indian land ownership. By limiting further Indian acquisition of land in newly designated

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[7] Sarah McGhee, 'Masculinity, Sexuality, and Soccer: An Exploration of Three Grassroots Sport-for-Social-Change Organizations in South Africa' (PhD dissertation, University of South Florida, 2012), 3.

[8] McGhee, 4.

[9] Ian Jeffrey, 'Street Rivalry and Patron-Managers: Football in Sharpeville, 1940 - 1985.', in *Structure and Experience in the Making of Apartheid*, 1990, http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10539/7825/HWS-199.pdf.

[10] Jeffrey, 4.

[11] Jeffrey, 3.

"controlled" areas, spaces deemed 'central' in the city were reserved for whites. From the 1950s, the logic of relocation was always one of marginalisation, moving people out of the centre. Forced or encouraged removals to dislocated, distant townships (like Chatsworth and Phoenix in Durban, and Lenasia in Johannesburg) involved geographical and economic marginalisation as well as disconnection from the past. Writer Don Mattera contends that the Group Areas Act, the "cornerstone of apartheid", was the most feared and detested aspect of apartheid for black people, because it "uprooted people" from where their families had lived for generations.[12] One could argue this was not just an effect but an intention of apartheid, part of an ideological strategy of racial demoralisation. It has been asserted that "the National Party government's true goal in destroying District Six[13] [in Cape Town] was not simply to supply whites with a prime piece of real-estate but to remove one of the only symbols of coloured pride and identity".[14] Although it is unlikely one would find any evidence of this as an intentional or stated "goal", it could also be argued that demoralisation is implicit in any project of sustained racial oppression.

Acknowledging the disruptive nature of forced removals, we also need to consider that sometimes there was a continuity of neighbourhood ties in what could end up as whole-sale transplantation of communities. Recalling his move in the 1960s to the Greyville section of the new Indian township of Lenasia 30 kilometres south of Johannesburg, TJ recalls the instant 'social fabric' of the new space:

> The cohesion was there, as soon as people were dumped there. Say, people from Vrededorp for example, would be put in the same extension, as they called them. So you knew your neighbour, who'd be somebody you knew for a long time.[15]

It is important then to consider the spatialised aggression in the Indian soccer game or gang fight, in at least the early apartheid era, as partly a ritualistic 'group' performance of territorialisation - one which mobilises certain aggressive-defensive impulses around collective identity and locality. As a reaction to the instability, precariousness or

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[12] Don Mattera, *Memory Is the Weapon* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 10–11.

[13] District Six, a multiracial neighbourhood close to the city centre, was designated a white area and demolitions of the 'slum' started in 1968 as residents were sent off to outlying areas.

[14] McGhee, 'Masculinity, Sexuality, and Soccer', 103.

[15] TJ, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2015.

newness of one's everyday space, it allegorically expresses the desire to defend and define one's community in relation to some 'other'.

Alongside this positive, 'collective action' ethos there was also the antagonistic and aggressive side to the sport. A *Drum* article from the 1950s recollects one of the earliest South African Indian teams with a photograph of the 'Pirates of India Football Club' of 1897.[16] This name, like that of the later African team, 'Orlando Pirates', connoted a domain of violence and rebelliousness, along with the defiance of authority. One aspect of Indian and African football was, from the beginning, already on the cusp of violence, presenting itself as edgy and transgressive - but like any successful gang of 'pirates', organised and hungry to raid.

Indian gangs and soccer

By the 1950s and 60s, South African Indian soccer teams were closely related to gangs in their connection to specific spaces and constituencies. In Durban, both the Dutcheens and the Stiles Gang were local street gangs renowned for their 'hardmen', or 'streetfighters' as Hassim calls them[17] - but they were not professional criminal gangs (like the Crimson League and the Salots) in the business of defending large illicit revenue streams. These essentially territorial gangs had corresponding neighbourhoods and soccer teams which they supported and controlled to varying degrees.

Sometimes the relationship between gang, team and club was so close that it was hard to differentiate the entities. The Crimson League gang, which grew to be a professional syndicate, had actually grown out of a soccer team, the Crimson League Football Club (see page 43). While there were common team and gang members, not all players were gang members. Nevertheless, the gang was seen to be the controlling entity: "The people who owned them [Aces] were Crimson League."[18] This was not specific to Aces

[16] G.R. Naidoo, 'The History of the Indians in South Africa: Part 1 - Hard Work - and Too Few Women.', *Drum*, July 1959, 66.

[17] Hassim describes the streetfighters reverently as guardians of the Indian community: "We need to give some thought to the icons of yesteryear - the likes of Bud Gengan, 'Longjack' (Pckree Charles) and Chotoo Bhana. All three were renowned fighters and our protectors" – comment on Facebook site: *Grey Street Casbah*, written on 15 Jan 2012.

[18] TJ, Interview with author.

- as Moga Naidoo recalls, "Aces was owned by the Crimson League, Berea was owned by the Dutcheens"[19], while the Stiles Gang was associated with Manning Rangers.

The presence of Durban's Indian gangs at Curries Fountain is oddly side-lined by Rosenberg *et al.* in their largely pictorial book[20] on the famous soccer stadium at the heart of Indian social life in the post-war decades. Perhaps this is because it was seen as incommensurable with the underlying heritage agenda of the book: to memorialise a site at which non-racial sport and political resistance were conjoined on "hallowed ground".[21] But as the underside (or at least unspoken side) of Indian and coloured soccer in the 1950s and 60s, the gangs need to be understood as an integral aspect of the institution of Curries Fountain, and of the Indian soccer scene more generally in this period. Durban Indian Soccer Association teams came from and represented specific neighbourhoods, as did the gangs, who would come to Curries Fountain to support their team. Supporters were expected, if not compelled, to support their home team.

Rafs Mayet, who grew up in the Warwick Street triangle near Curries Fountain, mentions how "being from the district, you had no choice but to support Berea."[22] Badsha spells it out even more dramatically, linking the gangs to turfs and teams:

> There was no way I could dare sit anywhere other than with the Berea [local team] and Ducheens [local gang] supporters. The grass banks behind the goal posts at the far end of Currie's Fountain was what defined who I was and what I could and could not do in 'town'. I was born in Douglas Lane and that was Ducheen territory and our team was Berea. There was no escaping that definition. It was a passport through some territories and a quick get away from others.[23]

Badsha's recollection of his youth evokes the fixedness of identity at the level of neighbourhood – even if you didn't belong to a gang, you were permanently marked by your home turf, which in turn was defined in opposition (and even conflictual relations) to other territories. TJ - a 'soccerite'[24] who also grew up in the Dutcheen - observes that

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[19] Moga Naidoo, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2015.

[20] Leonard Rosenberg, Sumboornam Moodley, and Goolam H Vahed, *Curries Fountain: Sport, Politics and Identity* (Durban: Durban University of Technology, 2013).

[21] Curries is presented as "legendary public space" whose historical significance has not yet been "officially recognised - Rosenberg, Moodley, and Vahed, 5.

[22] Badsha in Leonard Rosenberg, *Wellspring of Hope: The Legacy of a Sports Field* (Durban: Durban University of Technology, 2007), 23.

[23] Rosenberg, 16.

[24] A local term for a soccer player (or official).

some of the Dutcheen gangsters even played for Warwickshires/Berea.[25] Indeed, the Warwickshire's team apparently came from 'the Field', a triangular piece of land in the neighbourhood on which soccer was played - "all these gangsters would play football on that field."[26] This interplay further cemented the nexus of gang, team, supporters and territory.

Aces (later becoming Aces United), from the central market trading area in Durban, was in the 1950s and 60s, managed and coached by Crimson League 'big boys' – 'Big Daddy' Naidoo, Pine Mohammed, and Crash Morgan were all involved in managing the team at various points. But lesser tough guys associated with the gang were also playing in the team. TJ explains: "Sonny Morgan played for Aces, Aces United - now that's a very strong link with a gang. Not just an ordinary gang. They were mobsters, Crimson League."[27] Daddy Naidoo, leader of the Crimson League gang from the same inner city area, became the Aces coach in the late 1950s – eventually going all the way to Real Madrid in 1962 to augment his coaching techniques. Similarly, Manning Rangers was associated with Mack Naidoo's Stiles gang from Overport. Mack and his brothers were managers of the soccer team and Mack's own renowned fighting stamina was supposedly developed in soccer training. A match at Curries between teams was thus invariably a rivalry between territories, and paralleled gang hostilities on the streets.

On the Reef, one also finds a connection between Indian street gangs and soccer teams. Unlike Durban, the professional 'mobsters', Khan and Kajee, did not seem to want to associate themselves or act as patrons for their local neighbourhood soccer teams.[28] However, the Becker Street Boys, the street gang from Ferreirastown, was configured around the Dynamos soccer team. This constellation was made up of mostly Muslim youths - important players here were Ismail Pahad of the politically-inclined Pahad family, Tossie and the Adam brothers. Further out in Lenasia, the tough 'Hindi' Singh brothers controlled Swaraj ("they were not basically a gang - [but] they were tough"[29]), while the Tamil-based Lulubelles gang was the corollary to the Blue Belles and

[25] 'Shires' became Berea, while Carlton Athletic was the amateur team from the area.

[26] TJ, Interview with author.

[27] TJ.

[28] Although Khan's right-hand man, Junior Adam, did apparently in later years vigorously support and hang out with the Dynamos team.

[29] Saloojee, Interview with author.

Moonlighters soccer teams. These Transvaal teams and their gangs tended to be more ethnically defined and 'representative' of South African Indian sub-groups than their Durban counterparts.

Soccer, aggression and masculinity

It is worth considering how the use of aggression in soccer differed from its use in gangs – and where the respective protocols got blurred. Soccer required a form of regulated aggression - the game has rules to manage physical contact and a referee to decide the levels of acceptable aggression. When a tackle is dangerously aggressive, the offending player can be shown the red card and sent off the field. This however did not deter players like Crash Morgan, the Durban Indian soccerite who played for Crimson League Football Club in the 1940s, who later managed Aces, and who was also understood to be part of the Crimson League gang. Crash got his name for "dirty" play, Moga from Durban relates. 'Crashing' into opponents, "He broke a couple of people's legs, on the football field. Very hard footballer - very strong footballer. I saw him play."[30] Given the long involvement with his team, there was clearly a place for this approach to the game.

McGhee maintains that while soccer has the possibility to promote respect for others on the field, a 'gangster' style of play can make its way onto the pitch. However, overly aggressive play is symptomatic of a socially-endorsed performance of masculine domination:

> Messner asserted that male athletes use excessive physical force or violent tactics that often result in injury for an opponent (and sometimes themselves) as a way to gain respect among other players, their coaches, and as a way to anchor their "masculine identity" (p. 96). Dominance by men in sport is used as a tool to construct a naturalized dominance over women even though the athletic male body is the product of social practice, not nature.[31]

It is interesting to see how the second sentence follows, somewhat disjunctively in my view, from the observation on 'foul play'. McGhee's study is interested in the soccer field as a 'masculinised space' in which "women take on the role of visitor rather than

[30] Naidoo, Interview with author.

[31] McGhee, 'Masculinity, Sexuality, and Soccer', 92.

welcomed participants"[32] and how "violent" physical sports such as soccer are "used to support patriarchal claims that men are naturally superior to women."[33]

In this general approach, soccer is seen essentially as a vehicle for establishing what Connell has proposed as 'hegemonic masculinity'. This means that while in any given social formation there are multiple masculinities ordered in a hierarchical system of identities, the dominant or hegemonic masculinity "embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men."[34] The limitations of this view, is that it proposes a single dominant system of values in any given culture where there might be several competing masculinities vying for ascendancy (see discussion of the 'soccer player' versus 'the gangster' below). It also seems to essentialise physical masculinities as ultimately and primarily preoccupied with dominating women and legitimating patriarchy – certainly a common behaviour, but arguably not its only interest. As we have seen, one of soccer's thrills is a sense of solidarity and organisation in the membership of a team, while another is 'taking out' an opponent.

An Indian performance of masculinity

A specific set of rules prevailed at Durban's Curries Fountain stadium during Indian soccer matches – it was "hallowed ground", a space of performativity for a ritual-rich culture. In a regime in which Indian men were systemically emasculated, and largely denied competitive opportunities in the economy (as well as in other traditionally 'masculine' arenas such as war[35] and the sports field[36]), soccer at public spaces such as Curries Fountain afforded Indian men and women alike the simple pleasure of being able to watch fit young Indian men excelling and winning. Beyond the staging of prime 'specimens' of physical masculinity, soccer matches were also about balance. Soccer

[32] McGhee, vi.

[33] McGhee, 16.

[34] Connell & Messerschmid cited in McGhee, 25.

[35] Indian South African men were allowed to serve in support positions in the South African army in the Second World War, but were not allowed to carry arms.

[36] Fatima Meer, amongst others, recalls the pleasure of watching coloured cricketing legend Basil d'Oliviera at Curries: "it was exciting watching him play; D'Oliviera was never allowed to play in the South African cricket team but he joined the English cricket team and did very well for England." - Rosenberg, *Wellspring of Hope*, 17.

ritualised a primordial oscillation between personal and collective identities in player and team – players had to negotiate these dual identities on and off the pitch. But soccer also enacted a basic social tension between angry/aggressive (goal-oriented) and considerate/cooperative (rules-based) behaviours. Playing required a constant negotiation between competing drives in the soccer player's 'moves' - in Freudian terms the classic struggle between id and superego, or 'instrumental' (subject-object) versus 'communicative' (subject-subject) action from a sociological perspective.[37]

Aggression and excitement levels also need to be managed by spectators in the stands. The late Maniraj Singh, famous captain of the Avalon Athletics team, explains in *Legends of the Casbah*[38] how even the gangs, while they might be fighting on the streets, contained their aggressive tendencies when they came to Curries Fountain. Gangsters generally 'behaved themselves' in this important Indian public space. Another old-timer recalls, "you could have had *huuuge* trouble at Curries Fountain when the teams met; but [amazingly] those were the guys who kept control"[39] – it was the gangsters who actually kept the peace.

However, this code of restrained behaviour, apparently based on a sense of Indian publicity (and of being on display to others within one's community), seemed to only strictly apply to Indian matches. In the 1950s, SA [South African] Indian sides periodically played SA Coloured and SA African teams in what were called 'interrace fixtures' – these were occasionally marked by crowd violence. In the short but remarkable non-racial South African Soccer League period from 1961 to 1967 (when there were matches between African and Indian-owned clubs as well as genuinely mixed or 'non-racial' teams), big matches could still sometimes end in unruly behaviour, and violent clashes between supporters could occur on or off the pitch. In these scenarios, ordinary people became 'gangsters', unleashing pent up aggression and frustration. Alegi maintains that in the 1960s, fixtures were sometimes strategically disrupted by violent 'spectators' to swing a result – this could simply be for emotional reasons, or to achieve a required gambling score-line.[40]

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[37] See Jurgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1971), 90–93.

[38] Riason Naidoo and Damon Heatlie, *Legends of the Casbah* (Big Daddy Films, 2016).

[39] Ronnie Govender, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2016.

[40] Alegi, *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa*, 130–32.

Sometimes even relatively insignificant local matches could involve spectator violence. TJ recalls one such 'pitch invasion' in Fietas:

> Like the one day when we were playing Dynamos, when we used to play amateur football in Vrededorp […] we were playing on a Saturday afternoon, and their supporters stood on the line, and they invaded the pitch to attack us. But the Vrededorp guys, they used to call us [Bluebells United] 'Lens High', because we were all Lenasia High students - one or two adults - we were scholars, young kids, teenagers playing against grown men. And the style of football we played was appreciated by the guys, the Vrededorp guys, predominantly Coloured and Malay guys. And they disliked Dynamos. So we were adopted by them. And so when those guys came onto the field, the Vrededorp guys met them, halfway!"[41]

In this scenario the "Vrededorp guys" are not even defending their own turf or team – mapping themselves onto (or "adopting", as it is described) a distant Lenasia team, they use this alignment to take the fight to their close rivals from Ferreirastown.

It is worth delving into this idea of gangsterism on the side-lines, always on the edge of a disciplined yet aggressive form of Indian masculinity. If the gangster is to be seen as one kind of unregulated 'hegemonic' masculinity, a violent, dominating way of feeling like a man, then this being was attracted to, and always quasi-present at soccer matches where physicality and assertiveness was also on display. There was also the threat of a pitch invasion, where 'real' gangsters, or regular supporters turned 'gangster' temporarily, would run onto the field to disrupt the match and assault people. Players were not immune from these eruptions of violence. TJ recalls an incident involving his friend, a promising soccer player, Haroun Patel, also associated with the Becker Street Boys from Ferreirastown – "Haroun was knifed on Fietas grounds".[42] At that time of the attack he was actually playing for Joburg City, "but he's a former Dynamo's player, so there was that hatred, you see."[43]

In addition, there was the threat of a player or official - or even a whole team - turning 'gangster' in their playing style, and playing 'dirty' or dangerously. "Here's a story", recounts KN: Crimson League Football Club were playing a Clairwood team in the 60s, and a penalty was awarded against them. Pine Mohammed, the coach at the time, walks

[41] TJ, Interview with author.

[42] TJ.

[43] TJ.

up to the striker about to take the shot: "You score, and see what happens…", he says.[44] Here Pine was exploiting the general knowledge that he was both a Crimson League gang boss as well as the Crimson League Football Club coach.

The soccer player and the gangster – competing masculinities?

Serious soccer players were required to have a high level of fitness, strength and agility - their athletic conditioning meant that players could become ruffians off the pitch, using their primed physicality to beat up less athletic men in scuffles and brawls. Indian soccer and gangsterism understood each other as competing yet similar forms of aggressive masculinity, two sides of the same coin.

An account of a Durban interaction between a youthful Sherief Khan, who will one day rule the Johannesburg underworld, and a tough young soccer captain, later to become his right-hand man, illustrates this thematic tension between what can be read as competing masculinities. The story is told anonymously in *Drum* magazine from the soccer player's point of view, and is a tale of toughness and rectitude. It starts with a teaser that proclaims the protagonist's credentials as a pugilist: "I gave Sheriff Khan a hiding which he probably never received in his life. And because of this unforgettable fight, I became one of Sheriff's best friends and confidants".[45] The soccer captain is approached by Khan just before an important match, and told to 'lose' the game:

> I had a light tap on my shoulder and when I turned around, I noticed a slim, handsome and masculine man smiling down on me. "I'm Sheriff Khan" he said […] "If your team wins today, your mother will not recognise you". I was not used to threats and I certainly wanted my team to win.[46]

Although he doesn't qualify what he means by 'masculine' it is revealing that the narrator drops the very word we are interested in. It seems, given the story that follows, that he is alluding to Khan exuding a kind of cocky bravado, a form of hyper-confident assertive masculinity premised on physical domination of other men. Khan had evidently been employed by the opposing team to ensure their victory. This interaction sets up the key dilemma of the story – to win, and face the already notorious Khan, or to

[44] KN, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2011.

[45] 'Go Straight Sheriff Khan!', *Drum*, June 1956, 57.

[46] 'Go Straight Sheriff Khan!', 57.

lose, and face indignity. With true sporting colours, the athlete defies the gangster and wins the soccer match for his team.

When the soccer player's friends query his bravado – "You have made a fool out of the man who chased German West out of Natal!" - he decides he cannot hide from his destiny, resolving to stand and fight should he meet the famous street-fighter. And when Khan does catch up with him, he doesn't run - even though he knows his adversary could draw a knife or a gun, "I stood my ground"[47] - a metaphor still appropriate to the code of a soccer player. What follows is represented (somewhat typically) as an epic fist fight, which only ends when the police arrive and arrest the youths for public violence, neither of them yet the victor.

The twist in the tale is that the adversaries then become the best of friends - "I like men like you who have guts"[48] says Sheriff Khan to the soccer player. How 'true' this story is, is not important; what is revealing here are the protagonists of this 'tough guy' play-off, with their respective and competing 'value-spheres' of integrity versus corruption, pitted against each other in a rivalry in which neither backs down. Against the shameful backdrop of what Vahed calls "indentured" or beaten Indian masculinity[49], both types of men are presented legitimately 'heroic' and offer assertive, redemptive modes of manly behaviour. For this reason, it seems, neither masculinity should be compromised by the dénouement, and so end up complementing one another in a bond of friendship.

But the hyper-masculine roles of gangster and soccer player were not always disaggregated. An illustrious example of this can be found in the legendary figure of Sonny Morgan - at one point captain of Aces United soccer team, but also known as a Crimson League gangster (and one of the accused in the Michael John murder trial). Many interviewees testify to Morgan's extraordinary physical toughness on and off the field. "Sonny Morgan was not the greatest footballer alive – but he was nicely built. He had guts – he didn't back down from a fight", observes RG.[50] A Crimson Leaguer who used to hang out with Morgan had this to say of his friend - "But I tell you what, I've seen a lot of people fight – bare hands he could handle *annnybooooody* - physically.

[47] 'Go Straight Sheriff Khan!', 57.
[48] 'Go Straight Sheriff Khan!', 57.
[49] Vahed, 'Indentured Masculinity in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910.'
[50] Govender, Interview with author.

That's how strong he was. Because, playing soccer, training every day, so that made him stronger".[51] RG's logic suggests that 'physique' and 'bravery', while more critical for a fight, were still valuable attributes for the soccer field, both as playing mentality but also in terms of intimidating the opposition.

KN from Prince Edward Street in Durban remembers how Sonny's dual reputation was enough to stop a street corner fight:

> One time, the coloured boys on the next corner were after Dan [KN's brother], led by this big fella, Colman - I went to call Sonny Morgan four streets away. He arrives to sort it out: 'I want you leave him alone - you don't touch him, otherwise you answer to me, right? Off you go!' Without lifting a finger, they disappear. Sonny is a big boy, you see.[52]

Sonny's pre-eminence on the streets was due to his multiple factors: his physique, fighting prowess, soccer status and his League connections. SN, an Aces teammate, explains the 'natural' leadership ascendancy of the Aces skipper.

> Now who are we? Ordinary Tom Dick and Harry, Chinsamy, Moonsamy, and all that now - and anybody sees, first thing, this big Sonny Morgan, Crash [Sonny's elder brother] is our manager, so he held that position, so automatically he becomes captain! Because of his influence. And furthermore, we all respected him for that. He's one of the big boys! So rather than him subjecting himself to us, we subjected ourselves to him, and this was done spontaneously.[53]

Again, personal 'bigness' and social connectedness (rather than raw skill or strategic ability) are merged to make Morgan a 'big boy' who deserves respect – his captaincy is naturalised.

Paradoxically, while potentially reinforcing one another, these masculine roles were differentiated. In the early 1960s, the Aces United team captained by Sonny Morgan was comprised of both 'gangster' and 'gentlemen' players. SN, a teacher from a family steeped in Tamil cultural values, belonged to the latter group, explains how the different roles were kept separate.

> We knew there was a Crimson League. We knew they were this gangster crowd, and we knew they were this soccer crowd… but we didn't know

[51] JP, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2015.

[52] KN, Interview with author.

[53] SN, Interview with author.

> how they both gelled together! They play a different role as these people, and they played a different role as gangsters.[54]

With friends in both grouping, SN claims that on the soccer pitch or training field there was never even any mention of gang-related affairs. When Crimson League boss, Big Daddy, came to coach the team, "he will come there with his soccer kit and everything, and he only talks soccer!"[55] Even though conjoined at so many levels, gangster and soccer identities were formally kept apart for their respective arenas.

While gangsters and soccer players were closely related and often inhabited the same body, their masculine codes were different. The view that soccer is essentially a "violent" or "combat" sport, which mobilises the "body-as-weapon"[56] does not fit the Indian soccer scene of early apartheid. Gangs, hits and street-fights were the sphere in which violence could legitimately take place. Soccer, on the other hand, was understood to be a place of managed aggression, where competitiveness and physical assertiveness could be practiced within a framework that largely precluded violence, but where physicality was still valued.

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[54] SN.

[55] SN.

[56] Messner cited in McGhee, 'Masculinity, Sexuality, and Soccer', 170.

Chapter 3 - The rise of the Crimson League

"With their most powerful rival eliminated the Crimson League today holds unquestioned power" 'Crimson League', *Drum* (January 1953)

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a broad overview of Durban's post-war gangland before tracing accounts of the Crimson League's early mutation from a football club to a vigilante gang - and then into what seems to have been some kind of mafia-style extortion network with a host of illicit activities. At the outset I should emphasise that much of the content in this chapter (and indeed the next three) is a result of my own reconstruction of events through conversations with interviewees and engagement with written sources – as such, it should not be interpreted as an attempt towards providing a conclusive or 'factual' account of the gang. Given that primary sources such as *Drum* were already highly narrativised, and to some extent fictionally embellished (see Chapter 7), this reworked account should really be read as a sort of 'bricolage' - a stitching together of diverse and often conflicting narratives.

The Crimson League was an Indian gang that emerged in the central Indian business district in the 1940s as a vigilante outfit, but grew to major prominence and notoriety in the 1950s and 60s. Their status grew mainly through a feud with their main rivals, the Salot Gang from Overport. Two notorious killings amplified their reputation as the 'crime bosses' of Durban, partly through their publicisation (and sensationalisation) in *Drum* magazine. While the feud with the Salots had simmered and erupted periodically over several years, things changed rapidly in the mid-1950s when high-profile murders hit the headlines. The sudden, brutal killing of Salot gang leader Lighty Salot in 1954, and then of the new rival, Michael John, in 1955, himself an ex-Leaguer, rocked the Indian community in Durban. These seismic events would feature as 'serials' in *Drum*, the dramatic stories unfolding over several issues (see page 129 in Chapter 8 for an analysis of the magazine's crime-fiction strategy).

The League was the dominant gang in the Grey Street complex from the late 1940s to the 70s, when their influence began to wane. Their notoriety extended beyond Durban - according to a *Drum* article, "League is a household word in Natal", and even children

identified with its power.[1] While the name itself connoted some kind of dark contract, perhaps part of the mystique and power of the signifier was also in the gang's exclusive Indian membership, with hints of 'Oriental' wile and conspiracy for at least a non-Indian public. Dwight Smith points to the way in which criminality was conveniently 'othered', projected into Italian ethnicity in the USA under the sign of 'the Mafia'.[2] Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* texts consolidated this public view of foreign 'Italianness': "the public was ripe for a book that represented organised crime as an evil, alien, conspiratorial entity comprised of Italians wearing the 'Mafia' label."[3]

Historian Soske describes the Crimson League in passing as a "small-time Durban street gang"[4], but they were actually a large and formidable grouping that controlled street gangs. These were the "big boys"[5], the most powerful gang in Durban[6], who, according to a police detective, could muster a war party of up to 300 young men if required.[7]

The gang ecosystem in Durban's Indian neighbourhoods

In this early apartheid era, the smaller street gangs who also operated in the central business area paid homage (and usually some form of 'tax') to the League. The novelist Aziz Hassim describes the pyramid of gangster levels in the Grey Street complex, with the Crimson League sitting at the top, controlling the whole illicit economy:

> It's like a military hierarchy. The *scotens*, who are way down the ranks, depend on the runners for their living, the runners in turn dance to the tune of the street gangs, and street gangs that make their money off the small stuff have to play ball with the League.[8]

What this points to is that while the various gangs had their internal pecking orders, with some of the more powerful networks there was an internal stratification based on class. The official police analysis of the respective gang compositions indicates that "The Salot Gang is composed of the Salot brothers, and includes Indian, African and

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[1] David Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', *Drum*, January 1953, 14.

[2] Dwight C. Smith, *The Mafia Mystique* (Basic Books, 1975).

[3] Smith, 277.

[4] '"Wash Me Black Again": African Nationalism, the Indian Diaspora, and Kwa-Zulu Natal, 1944-1960' (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 2009), 206.

[5] SN, Interview with author.

[6] Rosenberg, *Wellspring of Hope*, 184.

[7] 'The End of Lighty Salot', *Drum*, February 1955, 55.

[8] Aziz Hassim, *The Lotus People* (Johannesburg; London: Real African Publishers, 2002), 337.

Coloured criminals, whereas the Crimson League is composed of Indian males of the working and business type".[9] As mostly business owners, the League bosses in particular had access to many forms of power, and were differentiated from their subordinate working class members, and the satellite street gangs that paid homage to them. The Salots, with their taxi fleet and other dubious revenue streams, were relatively wealthy as well, economically distinct from their lumpenproletarian underlings. The image conscious 'Mascot' Salot was able to buy the finest clothes and fanciest cars[10], while their henchmen lived like "dogs".[11]

Then there is the question of the gangs' diversity and ethnic composition. According to Hassim many of the gangs were multiracial – "mainly Indian and coloured, [although] there were a few African members within each grouping".[12] One would need to be careful, however, about presenting this as a general characteristic. Although most gangs seemed to be ethnically diverse to some degree, a gang like the Crimson League was exclusively Indian.[13] In terms of religion, some of the gangs brought individuals from different religious-cultural backgrounds together. In the League leadership, one finds Daddy Naidoo (Hindu Tamil) alongside Pine Mohammed (Muslim Gujarati), along with strongman David Jack (Christian Tamil). Following Portelli's modes of identification, if in the personal-family space you 'were' Tamil/Hindu, at community levels of identification (which included gang membership) you would still able to share a consolidated 'Indian' identity with people from other ethnic or religious sub-groupings. On the other hand, a family-based gang, like the Salots (a Muslim Gujarati family), had a homogeneous religious–cultural identity at the top-level. Beneath them, however, they had a diverse coterie of African, Indian and coloured henchmen.

Durban's Indian gangs were rooted in particular areas and were fiercely territorial - the Dutcheens, for example, a proletarian 'petty-criminal' gang made up of Indian and coloured hustlers and dagga dealers, "reigned supreme in the Old Dutch Road and Warwick Avenue complex".[14] For this reason Hassim asserts that "feared gangs seldom

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[9] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 55.

[10] "They loved their posh cars, these old American 'juke-boxes' […] I know the Salots owned a Lincoln, they owned a Buick - they owned a Pontiac." AN, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2015.

[11] Katie George, 'My Life with the Salots', *Drum*, May 1955, 61.

[12] Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 194.

[13] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 55; Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands'.

[14] Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 194.

ventured on each other's turf, except when, in street parlance, they set out to "declare" [war]".[15] Much of the territoriality of the gangs found a regular, non-violent expression in parallel soccer rivalries. Teams in Durban and Johannesburg leagues were aligned to specific localities or neighbourhoods, as were the gangs – both were expressions of 'turf' (as discussed on page 22). Gangs aligned themselves to their local soccer teams and would come to matches to support (and occasionally fight for) their players.

A common code of violence?

> If you cracked a gangster, he would tell you: "I am going to get you for this". But he never stood up and fought like a man. He ran to his gang and about twenty of them turned up. – Old Man Kajee[16]

Although the different gangs had different activities, compositions and codes, one common characteristic seems to have determined their durability on the streets – their capacity for violence.[17] Hassim recalls the rule of the jungle governing Durban's informal street gangs - "regardless of which race group predominated, the leader was also the best street-fighter or the most fearless and daring amongst them. In the school grounds it was these leaders whose names were mentioned in awe and a touch of hero worship".[18] If leadership in the more junior street gangs was based on fighting prowess, this was often also the case with the high-level professional gangsters. Daddy Naidoo, Pine Mohammed, Dee Salot were all proven physical fighters[19] – Daddy, for example, was allegedly a gunman, but additionally he is described as an ex-boxer who "knows how to use himself"[20], an expression meaning to be able to fight physically.

The distinction between youth street gangs, and their emphasis on individual fighting prowess, and the more discreet criminal professionalism of the Crimson League has resonances with Feldman's distinction between personalised and collective violence. He describes the Irish 'hardman' as the enactor of a specific form of violence, distinct from

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[15] Hassim, 194.

[16] Old Man Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', *Drum*, May 1953, 27.

[17] "The head of such street squads is almost the most daring and physically powerful amongst them. When such an individual gains notoriety, and his reputation spreads beyond his district he is respected by other gangs and the influence of his own comrades is enhanced" Leonard Rosenberg et al., *The Making of Place: The Warwick Junction Precinct, 1870s-1980s* (Durban: Durban University of Technology, 2013), 184.

[18] *The Lotus People*, 194.

[19] SN, Interview with author.

[20] JP, Interview with author.

the ‘gunman’, associated with collective paramilitaries: “the ‘hardman’ was the local bare-fisted fighter intimately associated with specific neighbourhoods, though often enjoying a city-wide reputation.”[21] Breckenridge posits that if “the hardman risked severe bodily injury in a direct confrontation with another individual to secure personal renown, ‘the paramilitary is concerned with the anonymous collectivisation of violence.’”[22] The Crimson League certainly had its ‘hardmen’, who were celebrated as such, but a particular strength was its ability to mobilise such ‘collectivised violence’. It was the sheer numbers of the League hit-squads that eventually overwhelmed the hardy Salots, as Dee Salot concedes.[23] Seven young men went on trial for the Michael John killing - the League team dispatched to deal with him was supposedly even bigger.

The anonymity of the collective attack is worth focusing on as well. If the Crimson League presented itself to the community, and to itself, as a primarily vigilante gang maintaining law and order and dealing with petty criminal elements, then the collective enactment of violence would have performed a legitimation function. Not only was guilt around an assault or killing distributed across a team of agents rather than an individual, but it bestowed the violent act with the stamp of social authority – a quasi-public act of justice rather than an orchestrated, self-interested move by gangsters.

Although the 1950s saw the publicisation of Durban’s Indian gangs, it would appear that gangs and gangsterism were a feature of Grey Street street-life going back to the 1930s. This is certainly the picture painted in Old Man Kajee’s confessional ‘memoirs’, published in *Drum* in 1953 over several issues as a series of regretful recollections of his life of crime. After a sojourn in India, the aging gangster returned to Durban in 1949 to find a different kind of gangland – one in which the individual status of ‘the gangster’ has been undermined by the collective ‘gang’. This was the period when the Crimson League were coming to power, and bringing its ‘anonymous’ collective brand of force to the Indian neighbourhoods.

> Grey Street had changed considerably. It had taken on a greater air of respectability. The taxis were still there, and the billiard saloons, but gone were many of the citizens, who, though of dubious character, gave the town a romantic colour. New gangs had come into existence, but none of them

[21] Feldman cited in Keith Breckenridge, ‘The Allure of Violence: Men, Race and Masculinity on the South African Goldmines, 1900-1950’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 673.

[22] Feldman in Breckenridge, 673.

[23] Dawood Salot, ‘The Salots - 2’, *Drum*, April 1955, 65.

> threatened the old order, either in guts or numbers. The difference was that in the old days, a single man threatened a whole gang.[24]

Kajee celebrates the bygone days of boxer, Diamond Jack Moodley, who "thrashed 12 men single-handed." In contrast the gangs these days display cowardice in their modus operandi of attacking individuals as a group: "I never met a single man [in 1949], who like some of my contemporaries of those days [in the 1930s], would defy any army."[25] Kajee goes as far as belittling the new gangsters in terms of their physical stature – "they were smaller in size […] They looked weak and skinny. And they carried guns too. But in our days fists were used".[26] Here, Kajee nostalgically paints a lost era of the 'hardman' gangster, when personal toughness, bravery and resilience were crucial to one's reputation rather than membership of a gang – but he also hints to a shift towards a more 'organised' mafia-style violence.

Origins of the Crimson League

As we have just seen, the Crimson League did not bring gangsters to Durban's Indian community. According to Old Man Kajee, in the 1930s and early 40s, Grey Street was "a little Chicago and gangsters dominated it".[27] He recalls some of the ruthless characters of this lawless epoch: Abdie Hassan and Jama of the Jama gang – Jama a "hulking giant who always carried a bottle in his hand, and loved a fight, when he was as merciless as a savage", Willie Amos, who fought with "a knife in each hand", and "big-shot" Tommy Moonilall, whose crowning glory was the rape of a "white girl".[28]

The 1953 *Drum* exposé entitled 'Crimson League', purportedly researched over several weeks, argues the gang was formally constituted in 1945 as an "intensely nationalistic" and exclusively Indian gang.[29] Supposedly written by 'David Hancroft', an investigative reporter brought in from the Cape, it seems likely that this was just a protective pseudonym for *Drum* reporter, Gonnie Govender.[30] The article doesn't explicitly

[24] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', 27.

[25] Kajee, 27.

[26] Kajee, 27.

[27] Kajee, 7.

[28] Kajee, 7.

[29] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 12.

[30] Gonnie's brother, Ronnie, recalls a League exposé in *Drum* his brother wrote that got him into hot water with 'Big Daddy' - Ronnie Chris Barron, 'Obituary: Gonny Govender, *Drum* Veteran Who Stood His Ground', *Sunday Times*, 26 June 2016, 19. The 1953 exposé was the only one published.

ground the gang's founding logic in 'vigilantism', as narrated by Hassim and others, but rather suggests they were a bunch of bullies for hire. Led by small business traders from the Victoria Street market and taxi industry, the gang was a "mixture of the respectable and the disreputable: men of high standing in the Indian community and thugs who could not have sunk lower".[31] Hancroft goes on to posit three kinds of stakeholders: wealthy financiers who sought protection and henchmen, the gang leaders, and the rank and file members. Assault was a key activity from the beginning, according to this account: one of the League's first commissions was allegedly beating up a problematic bus driver for a bus owner, after which "the League's reputation soared".[32] The article then focuses on the financial support that differentiated the Crimson League from less resourced networks from the start – when members were charged with assault, the leaders were quickly able to rustle up the funds from Indian businessmen for bail and to pay top white lawyers.

Hassim recounts a slightly different story of the formation and founding rationale of the Crimson League, one with an ironic twist. Indian shopkeepers, experiencing a sustained "crime-wave" of theft and extortion in the 1940s, got together and commissioned a defence force to protect themselves:

> They enlisted amongst themselves four stalwarts whose function it was to form a vigilante committee for the sole purpose of putting an end, once and for all, to the maniacs who were tormenting them.[33]

After a protracted war in which the vigilantes accumulated a number of henchmen, the League finally won over the thugs. In Hassim's view, "the vigilante committee had served its purpose", but now wanted to retain its status, and "a new wave of terror, much more sophisticated was about to begin".[34] Five leaders emerged as the "undisputed crime kings of the Casbah", with 'Big Daddy' Naidoo as the kingpin.[35]

According to Hassim, only one of the four 'businessman' committee members remained, "the others had opted out almost as soon as the fighting started".[36] The top

[31] 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 12.
[32] Hancroft, 12.
[33] Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 196.
[34] Hassim, 196.
[35] Hassim, 196.
[36] Hassim, 196.

five members of the victorious vigilante force met in Cross Street to create a more permanent organisation – they were "clear on one thing: the contributions from the shopkeepers represented a lucrative source of income and the Casbah was under their control".[37] These leaders, who formed the Crimson League as a permanent gang, became known as 'the Big Five', and "were now the undisputed crime kings of the Casbah".[38]

Durban-born playwright Ronnie Govender, who knew these gangsters as a young man in the 1950s, has a slightly different take on the League's beginnings. He maintains that one of the main reasons for its formation was the protection of Indian females.[39] Young girls who went to Dartnet Crescent High School would walk along Grey Street, then via Leopold Street, where there were lots of Indian taxis "and some of the guys were guys who would molest these girls", with "stories of them being abducted, pushed into their cars, etc".[40] This is similar to an analysis in the Hancroft article[41], which links this molestation threat more specifically to the Salot Gang, who owned several taxis. "So the Crimson League was formed to protect these girls. One of the reasons. One of the ostensible reasons", concludes RG.[42] But like Hassim's narrative, a genuine social need gets twisted towards selfish ends -"[…] once they got into power – and they knew their power… when power corrupts, so then they got into the business of extortion. Now people went to them for protection!"[43] At this early juncture, however, it should be noted that the 'protection' being described here is still sought by the customer, rather than imposed by the supplier (we will come back to this ambiguity).

Strangely, the 1953 *Drum* article, 'Crimson League', makes a clear distinction between the Crimson League Football Club, the Crimson Cricket Club and the "notorious gang" of the same name, stating declaratively that "there is no connection between the gang and the sporting bodies".[44] It seems the author wants to clear the 'respectable' sporting bodies of all criminal connotations. This disconnection is misleading – back in the day,

[37] Hassim, 196.
[38] Hassim, 196.
[39] Govender, Interview with author.
[40] Govender.
[41] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands'.
[42] Govender, Interview with author.
[43] Govender.
[44] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 12.

opposing gang leader, Dawood Salot, linked the three, saying that what once was an 'innocent' soccer team hived off a gang - it was precisely the Crimson League Football and Cricket Clubs as thriving "social activities" that allowed the gang leaders to draw on its bountiful members, he says.[45] But apart from this partisan perspective, it was common knowledge that Big Daddy, Crash Morgan and Pine - the younger Crimson League gang leaders of the 1950s - were directly involved with managing and coaching Aces in the latter part of the 1950s and 1960s.[46] And according to SN (who played for the team under Daddy's leadership) Aces was the flipside of the Crimson League Football Club.

Aces played on Sunday, whereas Crimson League played on Saturday - same players, different leagues. Although some footballers played in quite geographically separate teams from different neighbourhoods,

> most of them [Crimson League players] also played for Aces on Sunday. Gradually the [Crimson League] officials controlled Aces, gradually they took over Aces, and then – the both leagues amalgamated…the Saturday League and the Sunday League. They formed one league.[47]

Crimson League F. C. was thus subsumed into Aces, which became known as 'the gangsters' team'.[48]

But the connection goes back before Daddy and Pine in the 1950s and 60s. In a photograph of a 1947 Crimson League '5-a-side' team[49], the older Crimson League gang leaders 'Akie' Vahed and 'Max' Moolla (at that point both already middle-aged) are seated on either side of the field-kitted younger players. They are clearly patrons and/or managers of the team – a young Crash Morgan, another butcher from the Victoria Street market who will later be associated with the gang, is one of the featured players.[50] It appears that, rather than there being no connection between the entities, the

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[45] Salot, 'The Salots - 2', 65.

[46] A photograph in a book (Rosenberg, Moodley, and Vahed, *Curries Fountain: Sport, Politics and Identity*, 169.) shows Pine Mohamed, Crash Morgan, and Sonny Morgan - all associated with the Crimson League gang and football team back in the 1950s and 60s - celebrating the short-lived resuscitation of Aces United in 1982 after a period of dormancy.

[47] SN, Interview with author.

[48] SN.

[49] posted on the 'Grey Street Casbah' Facebook site on 1 May 2015 by H. Vahed

[50] This ambiguity of the name seems to have been common. When questioned about Michael John's affiliation with the Crimson League gang at his murder trial, the widow of the slain man only recalls that "her husband told her that he belonged to the Crimson League Football Club… "I don't know the

gang actually derived its name and impetus from the association of its members with the football club.

Another point of view on this is that the continued 'contribution' to soccer administration was a way for the League gangsters to remain respected social figures, and to garner support from the poorer parts of the Indian community. SN, ex-Aces player, posits "that's one reason why these gangsters were very popular with the common people; because in some way or the other they helped them. 'Oh, you're a good footballer? 'You're a good cricketer?' It was so interwoven."[51] What of course Hancroft's differentiation does gesture towards is the formal separation of duties and roles in 'gang' and 'team'. While some soccer players were also members of the Crimson League gang, other players claimed complete ignorance of their sister 'gang'. SN recalls:

> Every top team they had their own little thing - we had it in central town, Aces – Shires had it in Warwick Ave, Lutman Rd; Stella, top club, had theirs in Umgeni Road […] Somehow or the other they were centred around businessmen or gangsters… and they had a lot of influence on the clubs. But believe you me, this gangsterism did not infiltrate into clubs as such, you know - they always kept it apart. This was something else that the big boys [did] - you know, blackmailing, doing this and doing that… We had nothing to do with that. And they didn't even get us involved.[52]

If we are to unpack some of what is revealed here: while some of the players could claim complete innocence and relative ignorance of the gang, the club would also have benefited administratively and financially from the association.

Crimson League leaders - the Big Five?

While Hassim withholds their identities for the most part, tactfully referring to them as the "*Motas*" (elders or big men in Gujarati), Farook Khan names the League leaders explicitly as "Big Daddy Naidoo, Pine Mohamed, Chotoo Bhana, Achmat Vahed and 'Mad' Max Moolla".[53] Mobilising 'Akie' Vahed as a minor character in his book,

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activities of the Crimson League" she said" - G.R. Naidoo, 'Dramatic Trial of Seven Men', *Drum*, January 1957, 50.

[51] SN, Interview with author.

[52] SN.

[53] Farook Khan, *The Goodwill Lounge* (Durban: Farook Khan, 2014), 61.

Hassim does also identify him as one of the 'Big Five', along with Big Daddy - but Bhana, Mohammed and Moola remain unnamed in his narrative.[54]

All sources that I interviewed concur that Big Daddy Naidoo was the leader of the Crimson League, although there is less agreement on the other *Motas.* GG, a gambling school owner related to Daddy Naidoo, clarified that while Naidoo, Mohammed and Vahed were the founders of the gang, Daddy "was the main man actually. Big Daddy, they called him - Big Daddy!"[55] While the adjective suited his reputation, it seems he derived this name partly because of a 'Small Daddy' butcher operating in the same market (incidentally also associated with the League).[56] GG goes on to reveal after Daddy married his relative "they stayed in Botanic Avenue, the only Indians among the whites. […] Daddy Naidoo came from a very rich family. But he was the only black sheep of the family. They owned butcher shops".[57] How exactly Daddy became the 'black sheep' was not clarified.

Running a thriving offal stall in the busy Victoria Street market during the day meant that Big Daddy was a respected businessman in his own right. Another view on this however, is that the legitimate operation functioned as a front for illicit gains. Regardless of why he was there, this is where Daddy was to be found. GG declares proudly of his relative: "He was the Don. The Don. Sit back and give instructions".[58] GG goes on to recall that while Big Daddy was immaculately dressed in the market "in a tie, collar and suit, all the guys would come and talk to him, what happened there, what happened here… they'd report".[59] His presence in the market was pivotal it seems – he had successful legitimate business there, it was a respectable public stage which served as a literal or social alibi, and it was a space which acted as the nerve-centre of the gang, where he could be consulted, gather information, and give instructions.

VP, a stallholder in the same market, represents Daddy as a physically fit man, "running" and "weightlifting"[60], while GG recalls his interest in boxing: "Daddy

[54] Hassim, *The Lotus People*.
[55] GG, Interview with author.
[56] KN, Interview with author.
[57] GG, Interview with author.
[58] GG.
[59] GG.
[60] VP, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2015.

Naidoo was a boxing promoter with Pumpy [Naidoo]. Daddy Naidoo actually *made* [Louis] Joshua[61] – gave him his first fight, and was his manager".[62] JP, a young Crimson Leaguer in the late 50s, describes Daddy as "Number One!" - "He was a simple guy, but took no shit. He could handle himself, he was an ex-boxer".[63] The "handle himself"' expression is widely-used by an older Indian generation to describe the ability of tough men to physically defend themselves or fight their way out of a situation.

The 1953 *Drum* article describes the second leader of the gang, who from the description, most probably was the 'big-sized' Pine Mohammed:

> S.P., a Moslem, is thick-set and bull-necked. He looks like a heavyweight boxer, does not smoke and drinks very rarely. Greatly respected in the underworld because of his strength, he is bestial as a footballer; he plays in big games where 'rough stuff' is necessary.[64]

Mohammed was, like Daddy, a soccer administrator (manager of Aces) and a trader. SN recalls hanging out in Mohammed's hardware shop in Warwick Avenue on Saturday mornings during the early sixties - "Just go and sit down. He liked to have his players around. Boys from Warwick Avenue would come round there".[65] According to this Aces player, although he never saw this, Pine Mohammed was understood to be part of the "muscle" of the League. Only encountering a highly respectable, well-groomed Pine in the soccer context, the violent, "aggressive side" was whispered about on the grapevine: "That's what we hear!"[66]

Along with Moola, Achmat 'Akie' Vahed was one of the older League leaders. According to JP, "Akie was a tailor, then he went to Jo'burg, and that's how he met Sheriff [Kahn]. So that's how the connection came between Sheriff and Akie. Akie was a rep for Tiger clothing [but during the 1950s], he was running a gambling school", which would have been his main source of income at that time.[67] JP goes on to explain that Vahed played a key role in acquiring funds for the League – "Akie would go to

[61] An Indian South African boxing champion of the 1950s

[62] GG, Interview with author.

[63] JP, Interview with author.

[64] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 13.

[65] SN, Interview with author.

[66] SN.

[67] JP, Interview with author.

Avalon Cinemas, the owners – 'Ok, Akie, what you want?' 'I need 20,000 Rand'. This was not extorting - you know. This was family and friends that help them financially".[68] What is revealing here is that ordinary League members, such as JP, were aware of monies coming in to the gang's coffers, but saw this income as donations. This is discussed further below.

According to more than one account, the older Max Moola, a snooker saloon proprietor, shop owner and fah-fee[69] operator also functioned as a key 'business' link between the gang and the moneyed Muslim traders around Grey Street. According to SN, Moola was "not one of the guys who were involved in the aggressive side of things. The aggressive side was Daddy, Pine and all"[70]; SN maintains that:

> When it came to extortion, they (the League) got it a lot from business people… and now our friend Max Moola, was also a businessman. So now, when the League boys wanted to go to certain guys, they got their henchman, Max Moola - just told them, "Guys, this is about us, etc. etc. etc. We're protecting you, we do this for you - if you don't come… Well, I tell you, this is what the consequences are, this and that - so this is how now, so eventually they came into this…[71]

The last sentence suggests that Moola was instrumental in communicating with rich businessmen the League sought 'protection' monies from, particularly with the initial approach.

Who the fifth leader (if there was one at all) was seems less clear. Chotoo Bhana was a less prominent 'tough guy' from Victoria Street, around whom my interviewees seem to know the least about, or remember more vaguely as someone hanging around in the background. Although considered by Farook Khan to be part of the Big Five, according to three sources (JP, AN, and SN), Bhana was not a key player – he was more of a League henchman, "one of the strongmen - but not in the top, not in the running of the Crimson League".[72] Indeed, JP rather puts 'EB' from Simon's Café, one of the League meeting places, above Bhana in the upper echelons of the gang. AN concurs with this view of Bhana: "he was also a thug, he would hang around the billiard saloons as well.

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[68] JP.

[69] A form of street lottery with a daily draw.

[70] SN, Interview with author.

[71] SN.

[72] JP, Interview with author.

And he controlled, he had a sort of enclave in Queen Street, etc., I think he lived over there … Ja, a ruffian, he didn't have the finesse and class of the others".[73] Nevertheless, Hassim remembers him as a street-fighter of extraordinary resilience.[74]

Crimson League spaces

According to GG the Crimson League was a bit like a club and mostly an after-hours commitment: "everybody during the day was business people – but after five, you know, they met. There were so many – there a lot of members, lot of members".[75] The evening sessions were held in a large suite of rooms in a building on the corner of Prince Edward Street and Cross Street – "they had a clubhouse there, and that's where they would pay extortion."[76] Presumably what is meant is that League's 'clients' would pay their protection fees here; laughing, GG adds that the League paid no rent for these premises. The composition of these larger League gatherings echoes Hancroft's "mixture of the respectable and the disreputable".[77] GG explains that "there was guys that drank, one side, the guys that smoked dagga, one side, and the guys that don't smoke and drink, this side. Those were the main guys. But they all listen".[78] This concurs with the police's understanding that League was composed of workers and business owners.[79] The leadership would however also meet at smaller more intimate venues: Simon's Café - also on Cross Street and close to the Victoria Street Market - was another place where you might find the 'big boys' gathering.[80] JP remembers Moola's snooker rooms as a League hangout, but mentions another lesser known League building: "… bottom end of Short Street, there was a Mr J__ . All the guns were in his house."[81] Apparently, when Daddy and followers went out on a mission, this is where they picked up their firepower. The idea with this secret arsenal was that no gang member involved in an attack would be caught with an incriminating weapon.

[73] AN, Interview with author.
[74] Aziz Hassim, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2011.
[75] GG, Interview with author.
[76] GG.
[77] 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 12.
[78] GG, Interview with author.
[79] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 55.
[80] JP, Interview with author.
[81] JP.

A range of activities

The various sources associate Crimson League with a number of illicit and illegal activities: extortion and vigilantism, sorting out romantic relationship problems, gambling dens and fah-fee, trade in dagga and taxi 'protection'. All of these in some way were underpinned by an aggressive defence of turf, muscling out anyone encroaching on their revenues streams or 'interfering' in their area of control. While the *Drum* exposé claims that "housebreaking, shop breaking, extortion, dagga smuggling and 'hired thuggery'" are League's chief activities"[82], no other sources refer to theft as being significant interests - it seems therefore sensible to ignore these 'petty criminal' charges. A few years later, Nxumalo reported that the League's "big profits come mainly from the pirate taxi racket[83], protection money from big business houses and individuals, and from a net of fah-fee [gambling] schools which send runners throughout the city".[84] These activities are examined below.

Extortion or vigilantism?

Hassim says that initially the League's main revenue model was extracting protection money from shopkeepers and stallholders. This is very much the tone of the 1953 *Drum* article on the gang, which alleges that "League's biggest income is from extortion. As much as £2,000 is collected in one month. Victims are rich Indian shopkeepers and merchants. These men are so frightened that they will not talk or complain to the police".[85] Initiating extortion was relatively easy given the League's reputation for violence. According to Nxumalo's source (renegade gangster, Michael John), "the big boys would walk into a shop, announce to the owner who they were, and tell him to cough up".[86] Hancroft's report however, concedes that the League is often "on the side of the law", protecting cinema patrons and shoppers from petty crime, and workers from exploitation by Indian traders: "thugs in Grey St and Victoria St have also been warned not to molest innocent people".[87] In this stereoscopic view, the League both

[82] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 14.

[83] In the years between these reports, the League had triumphed over the Salots, their rivals in the taxi business, hence the new revenue stream.

[84] Henry Nxumalo, 'The League Busts up a Club', May 1957, 57.

[85] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 12.

[86] Nxumalo, 'The League Busts up a Club', 57.

[87] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 14.

extorts from richer merchants and provides a beneficial security service to the Indian community where policing is weak, a kind of 'Robin Hood' scenario.[88]

On the other hand, a number of people interviewed and spoken to, remember them primarily as 'keepers of the peace', vigilantes who would accept sponsorships from their benefactors, but not seek 'protection' money. GG, a Crimson League insider, denies the allegations of extortion, maintaining that this is rather what their main rivals (and their *raison d'etre*) the Salots, were up to: "No - never extorting, only helping people. That's why the Salots ran away from town".[89] JP, another Crimson Leaguer youngster, also denies his fraternity were into extortion: "Crimson League, they never extorted people. What? They never extorted people! They were not there to take money off you. They had sponsors who were willing to give them money. What? Willingly."[90] In his view, the gang was essentially about "protecting the community the Indian community in Durban" and funded their activities through donations and harmless illicit activities. JP relates stories about visiting businesses for donations for the League to explain away the misconception about extortion.

> We didn't extort people! What?! I went with Goolam Boxer - by a company called United Produce. I tell you what they say in Gujarati, '*Saati saati*', 'Come in, come in'. Told the girl, 'Bring the tea'. 'I got some problems, my boys'. 'Okay, no problem'. Had the tea. Here's a parcel. Goolam takes care of the parcel. Went into the car, there was 10,000 rand in it. You see that was not extorting. That was a favour for the boys. Whenever you went to them - the owners of Avalon Cinema, right? Akie used to go there for the boys - 30,000, 20,000, 10,000… whatever. Ja! It had big money that time.[91]

What does one make of this genteel transaction, this "favour for the boys"? One can read this either as a veiled form of extortion, or more generously, as a genuinely voluntary contribution to an informal security service. Blok points out this ambiguity in the Sicilian mafia's relationship with the ruling elite, one which "involved mutual protection and the exchange of 'favours'. But the protection which mafiosi offered was sometimes difficult to distinguish from extortion and the boundaries between victim and

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[88] Paul Kooistra, 'Criminals As Heroes: Linking Symbol to Structure', *Symbolic Interaction* 13, no. 2 (November 1990): 217–39.

[89] GG, Interview with author.

[90] JP, Interview with author.

[91] JP.

accomplice were often likewise blurred."[92] This question around 'protection' is further interrogated in the following chapters. What seems fairly clear from the visit above is that there were established patronage networks of some kind, in which the show of force was not – or no longer – necessary.

Another reserve the League was able to draw on was 'contributions in kind' from the wealthier classes of the Indian community. Aces soccer player, SN, explains how Daddy and Pine (ostensibly as managers of Aces) could extract non-monetary resources or favours for their 'boys' from businessmen and shop-owners.

> 'Oh, you want money today? Okay, go to Baasa's - go to Mohamedees. Tell them I sent you - tell them to give you a jersey'. So what do you do? You see now that's how they are. So you went there, even when you went to these concerns, you went in a very sporting term. And these people: 'Is it sorted out, did you go there, did you get this?' Now they too now, to satisfy these 'big boys', as you might call them… this is how we were, so that's one reason why you found that we had the best of outfits! We didn't have to worry! 'Go here, go to this tailor, go to this wholesaler', so it didn't matter, you see? And the same thing happened now when we had transport problems – 'Okay, so-and-so will pick you up, so-and-so will take you out', things like that…[93]

Again, it is not clear whether these were supportive Aces fans providing goods or services, or fearful clients of a Crimson League protection scheme - perhaps it was somewhere in between. AN's view of the League is worth considering in this compromise perspective on the gang's mode of extraction – "… those gangsters were not the riffraff that you see, like 'The Jets' in *West Side Story*, and the gangsters of the Cape, who would walk around selling drugs and shooting. They were gentlemen. But they did it in a very sophisticated, subliminal, subtle way - they would extort".[94] In other words, the reputation of these 'gentlemen gangsters' preceded them – they did not have to act tough to get their way.

[92] Blok, 'Reflections on the Sicilian Mafia', 8.

[93] SN, Interview with author.

[94] AN, Interview with author.

Gambling and drugs

Farook Khan (who generally paints them pejoratively), declares the League pursued a wide range of illegal activities centred around gambling, a description that seems to want to testify to their voracious greed.

> From extortion to murder, the Crimson League called the shots and a bullet took care of anyone who stood in their way. They had their own soccer team, Aces, which gave them entry into the running of the game. They ran bucket shops, taking illegal bets on horse races and probably the largest number of runners in their fafi (pronounced fah–fee, the Chinese numbers game) operation.[95]

Whether or not the Crimson League was as diversified or as violent as the writer claims is open for debate - yet gambling was certainly a big part of their game.

Drum maintains that the gang "as a definite organised body" was formed from connections made between small traders and financiers sitting at the card tables of gambling dens - or "schools" as they were called - in the mid-1940s.[96] According to this source, by the 1950s the League operated its own "gambling den" out of their headquarters on Cross Street. They managed to double its income after wiping out a rival school – and further revenues were generated from extracting a tithe from the four other gambling schools in the Grey Street area.[97]

Fah-fee, originating in Chinese communities but enthusiastically adopted by Durban's Indian community as a kind of street lotto, was also a big illicit racket whose footprint was tightly controlled by the League's Big Five. Pine and Moola were both known as experienced fah-fee 'pullers'. Hassim tells us that the Big Five had set up a gambling den above the Victory Lounge on Grey Street in the late 1950s; but by the 1960s, a younger generation of hustlers had taken over and relaunched the 'Five Aces' as the upmarket gambling destination of choice.[98] According to both Hassim[99] and JP, five

[95] Khan, *The Goodwill Lounge*, 61.
[96] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 12.
[97] Hancroft, 14.
[98] Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 390–91.
[99] Hassim, Interview with author.

men owned it - Sonny Morgan, Jimmy Fredericks, Mohan Govender, Goolam Boxer and Zorro.[100] JP is careful to represent its 'decency':

> Remember in Five Aces, they did no drugs - purely gambling. The box men, you know, when they gamble they took a percentage of the betting […] Now Victoria Street was the same street. The Victoria Street boys were not allowed in Five Aces! Ja. Because those were riffraffs, and they had a better class of people playing there.[101]

According to League insider, GG, the Crimson League, a league of gentlemen, was not tainted by the era of drugs: "They never sold drugs. They may have sold dagga, that's the only thing".[102] Needless to say, this would not have been something that the top leadership of the League sold or controlled directly either – it was the lower echelons of the League who sold on the streets, as well as the street gangs aligned with the League that benefited from this trade. Following Hassim's understanding, the League would however have taxed these revenues as custodians of the underworld.[103]

'Domestic business': controlling women or managing sexuality?

Hancroft claims that a major dynamic within the League had to do with the controlling of romantic and sexual relations between young men and women of different ethnicities or religions. The dominantly Tamil membership believe that "Bunyas" and "Sulemans" [Gujaratis] "lock up" their women and "run around with other women, mainly Thamils".[104] The Crimson Leaguers would step in and punish this kind of interference with 'their' young women: "One Moslem was stripped naked and made to walk in the centre of town at night after he had been caught with a Thamil girl. The girl was severely reprimanded and told to go home".[105] It is worth noting here how the woman apparently gets off lightly, relative to her male counterpart. One imagines within *tsotsi* territories in Johannesburg – fields of dominance centred around the control and sexual coercion of women[106] - the "girl" might have been treated a lot worse.

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[100] JP, Interview with author.

[101] JP.

[102] GG, Interview with author.

[103] Hassim, Interview with author.

[104] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 14.

[105] Hancroft, 14.

[106] Clive Glaser, 'Swines, Hazels and the Dirty Dozen: Masculinity, Territoriality and the Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1960-1976', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 719–36.

According to GG, this conservative regulatory role would have accorded with the general norms of Durban Indian society of the time: "Well, mostly Indians didn't like it, you know what Indians are - Muslim guy can't go with a Tamil girl, Tamil girl can't go with a black guy".[107] This agrees with AN's recollection that Indians were socially very open to socialising with other Indian sub-groups, although this did not extend to marriage.[108] What is perplexing in this particular activity, is why the leadership of the gang (which was actually dominated by Muslims) would have pushed this 'Tamil-Hindu' ethnic agenda. One reason could be that it was driven by the rank-and-file Tamil membership - and therefore bought them grass-roots support. Hancroft mentions that the League gained a lot of public support from businessmen and residents in town when they pushed the Salots out (referred to in the report as the 'K Gang'), partly because Old Man Salot's boys where renowned for their misogyny and harassment of young women. In the public eye, the League became protectors of womanly virtue.[109]

League member JP concurs, arguing that this policing of youthful sexuality and dealing with elopement was in fact the main rationale for the League. He explains:

> What they did, let me explain to you… A girl runs away to Joburg. A Moslem girl and a Tamil boy. Which is not permissible, okay? Because two different, this thing. They would get in touch with Sheriff Khan - in Jo'burg. 'Sheriff, this is the position here, find these people for us – okay?' Sheriff would find them and put them on the next train, plane, to Durban. Vice versa, when Sheriff had a problem with someone running away to Durban, Crimson League would take over.[110]

This also clarifies that it wasn't just Muslim men that were targeted – any kind of 'miscegenation' that bothered affected families was dealt with. However, it seems that this policing of ethnic 'cross-pollination' also resulted in economic benefits for some members of the gang - in the form of blackmail. Nxumalo tells the story of how a Muslim member of the League's Big Five (possibly Pine) followed a Hindu businessman taking his Muslim girlfriend out for a drive, and observed the couple

[107] GG, Interview with author.

[108] "Muslims and Hindus had no feelings of animosity or problems between them, they lived together, our neighbours were Muslim […] there was total cohesion, social cohesion"- AN, Interview with author.

[109] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 14.

[110] JP, Interview with author.

"make love" – the next day "the businessman was threatened with being exposed" and blackmailed for £100.[111]

The Khan connection mentioned is also worth a short digression. The Crimson League, as the most powerful and resourceful gang in Durban in the 1950s and 60s, had a national reach if required. One source maintains the League "not only ruled the roost, but called the shots nationally"[112], but this seems unlikely though, given the strength of existing gangs in other major urban areas. According to both Farook Khan and GG (a League 'associate') the League had links with the dominant Globe Gang in Cape Town, as well as Fordsburg strongman, Sheriff Khan's gang in Johannesburg: "Sheriff operated there, they operated here – these [League] guys go to Jo'burg they get seen to".[113] In other words, basic reciprocity and understanding between the dominant gangs in the three cities was established.

Hassim suggests an even more formal business arrangement between the gangs. In 'fictional' dialogue between characters, he describes the criminal network built:

> Anyway, they've formed a syndicate with Sheriff's boys and the Globe Gang in Cape Town. […] Anything you want – from dagga to dames, from guns to gambling, from fixing a football match to foreign currency – they can provide at a moment's notice.[114]

Farook Khan[115] and JP[116] seem to think that the League's Akie Vahed was the main figure in establishing these linkages.

The business of violence

Certainly, accounts vary on the League's key business activity, yet no-one seems to contest that violence, or the threat thereof, was a critical instrument for the gang. Weapons used in attacks on rivals or victims would range from bare hands, to knives, axes and iron bars, and less frequently, hand-guns. An imprisoned member of the gang is described as "merciless with the knife, and knuckleduster".[117] While Hancroft alleges

[111] Nxumalo, 'The League Busts up a Club', 57.
[112] Rosenberg et al., *The Making of Place: The Warwick Junction Precinct, 1870s-1980s*, 84.
[113] GG, Interview with author.
[114] Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 332.
[115] Farook Khan, Interview with author, Audio recording, 28 January 2015.
[116] JP, Interview with author.
[117] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 13.

that ‘hired thuggery’ was a main staple of the gang (someone could be beaten up or assaulted for fifty pounds)[118], this might be a bit hyperbolic as other sources do not allude to this mercenary behaviour.

It seems fair to say that even though the Crimson League was careful to avoid literal witnesses to their violence, much of their esteem was built on a more symbolic ‘visibility’ of their violent potential. The spectacle of athletic masculinity on display with ‘their’ soccer team, Aces, was just one of their more subtle performances. JP, a Crimson Leaguer argues that because the Crimson League was fundamentally about protecting an under-policed Indian community it acted with restraint: “Again I must tell you, besides Michael John, and a few rough cases, there was no shooting and killing, nothing, nothing like that”.[119] The constant application of violence was not necessary. The League’s potential to back up their pre-eminence with violence (and get away with it) enhanced their ‘respect’ - the same way Blok tells us ‘respect’ was produced by the Sicilian mafia.[120] If however, they were forged in violence, as most accounts suggest, it would be an excessively brutal act of violence that would also be their undoing – or so Aziz Hassim alleges in the next chapter.

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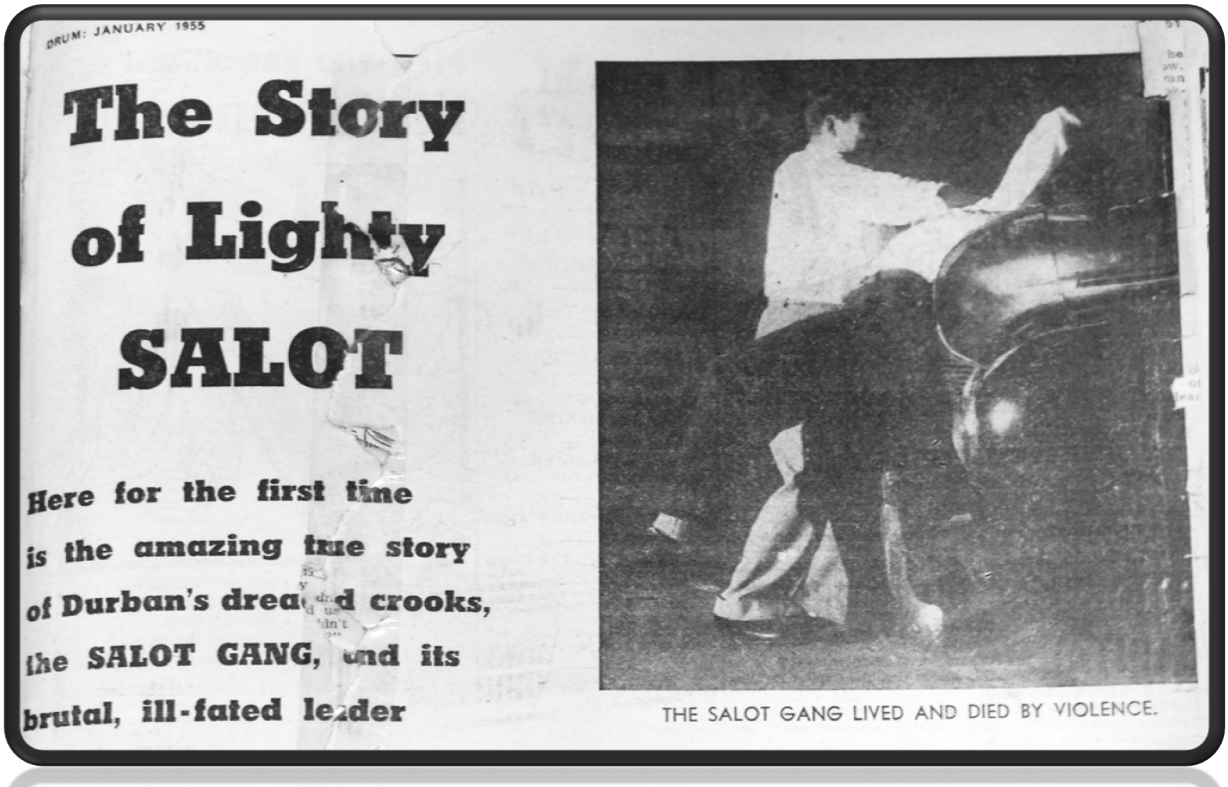
[118] Hancroft, 14.

[119] JP, Interview with author.

[120] Blok, ‘Reflections on the Sicilian Mafia’, 8.

Chapter 4 - Opposition to the League

Introduction


DRUM: JANUARY 1955

The Story of Lighty SALOT

Here for the first time is the amazing true story of Durban's dread crooks, the SALOT GANG, and its brutal, ill-fated leader

THE SALOT GANG LIVED AND DIED BY VIOLENCE.

Figure 2 - (Anon) 'The Story of Lighty Salot'*, Drum*, 1955, Jan

This chapter continues to probe and explore the Crimson League's roles within Durban Indian society by examining its seminal conflicts with rival gangs in the 1950s. While the Salot Gang was the League's longest-lasting rival, and its defining nemesis, it was one of its own members, Michael John, who would lead a breakaway gang and threatened their hegemony most profoundly. Forced to deal decisively with John or lose credibility as 'protectors' of the Grey Street Indian community, the renegade gangster was brutally killed, most interviewees assume by the League, in 1955. I use the ensuing Michael John murder trial as a prism through which to examine the multifarious mafia-style workings and networking of Durban's dominant gang, who deployed, as Blok says of the Sicilian *Mafiosi*, "the private use of violence in public domains".[1]

[1] Blok, 7.

At the same time as retelling this exciting story - a process of reconstructing gang conflicts from primary sources - this chapter also illuminates how the story was being told and how gangster 'performances' were being received. Not only were Indian gangsters recuperating lost dignity and reasserting a 'downtrodden' masculinity for themselves, but the community that witnessed and read about their daring acts (even those who were their victims) was also receiving succour; Indians were in some way vicariously empowered through these tales of hyper-agency.

By the mid-1950s, *Drum* was already appropriating and deploying popular cinematic tropes from Hollywood gangster films in its own writing on crime (see page 121). In 1955 *Drum* initiated a series of articles on the Salot Gang, "Durban's dreaded crooks" with 'The Story of Lighty Salot'. In the lead paragraph's description of gang boss, Lighty, as a "brutal, ill-fated leader", readers are promised the tragic arc of gangster transgression. 'Non-white' and specifically Indian audiences were ambivalently connecting to local incarnations of gangster 'criminal heroes', the magazine feeding the appetite of its readers for gory detail and heightened sensations, while assuring them that justice will be done.

The Salot Gang

> "For years the name of Salot has been dreaded in Durban. The notorious Salot Gang has terrorised the city, waging war against its rivals, committing violence to obtain its ends, and intimidating everyone who gave evidence against them." – Anon. *Drum* writer[2]

The Salot Gang was a family-run operation that, from most accounts, was involved over several decades and generations in taxis, drug dealing, theft and extortion. But in order to do so, the band of brothers would also need to wage war with their major rivals, the Crimson League.[3] The two oldest brothers, Chappie and Lighty, ran a taxi business in the late 1930s - but when Chappie was stabbed to death in 1940, Lighty took over as head honcho of the four-car operation based on Grey Street. The Salots reputedly saw themselves as operators with special privileges: "If Lighty's taxi was in the rank, no other taxi was allowed to take passengers: if it did, the taxi owner or the passenger or

[2] 'The Story of Lighty Salot', *Drum*, January 1955, 49.

[3] Naidoo, 'The Indian in *Drum* in the 1950s', 117; 'The Story of Lighty Salot'.

both were beaten up. It was very simple".[4] This was to bring them into conflict with other taxi operators, and ultimately the League.

The Salot's Grey Street taxi business provided more than revenue: it was a façade of legitimacy, allowing them to start a dagga-smuggling "racket" in the centre of town, and providing the "centre point" for other illicit activities including burglary and extortion. *'The Story of Lighty Salot'*, a 1955 *Drum* exposé, alleges that the Salot brothers created separate 'squads' for dagga, stealing and gambling.[5] By the start of the 1950s, *Drum* reports the gang were the big hitters in the Durban underworld[6] - and continued to be the main rivals of the League even after they were driven out of the centre of town into Overport, an area they soon came to dominate.

The taxi wars – more than just the taxi ranks?

> "Since when did you take my place as the boss of Grey Street?" – Lighty Salot[7]

According to *Drum* and most oral accounts, it was the hotly contested taxi ranks on Grey Street that ignited a lengthy feud between the Salots and the Crimson League. Why these taxi ranks were so important, beyond just taxi fares, is worth deliberating on. Firstly, as mentioned, for the Salots, various illegal rackets were seemingly enabled in town through their lawful taxi presence. When the League and Salots came into conflict ostensibly over the ranks, a wider territorial battle for control of Durban's illicit revenue streams was in the balance. Secondly, taxis provided the gateway to tourism commissions and 'protection' of rich visitors to the port city.[8]

Who the 'aggressor' was depends on whose account you listen to. *Drum's* 'Crimson League' special report of 1953 claims that "for a long while they [the Salots] operated a 'pirate' service in opposition to licensed taxis[9]; the latter did not complain because they were afraid. But when the 'K Gang' [the Salots] tried to force them out, they hired the League".[10] The report goes on to say that after a three-month gang war in which 20

[4] 'The Story of Lighty Salot', 49.

[5] 'The Story of Lighty Salot', 49.

[6] 'The Story of Lighty Salot', 49.

[7] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 53.

[8] Khan, Interview with author, 28 January 2015.

[9] Dawood Salot explains the term 'pirate taxis': " "wise guys" who run taxis without licenses and pirate passengers from licensed taxis" - Dawood Salot, 'The Salots', *Drum*, March 1955..

[10] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 15.

people were injured, the League's strength prevailed and they eventually "drove [the Salots] out of town".[11] In this story, it is the Salots who disturb the equilibrium by trying to eliminate business rivals but eventually pay the price for their greed. *'The Story of Lighty Salot',* the first of four serialised reports published in *Drum* magazine in 1955 on the rise and fall of the Salot Gang, gives an equally unfavourable picture of the brothers. Here it is leader, Lighty, who in 1951 kicks off a chain of confrontations when his gang beats up a rival taxi owner, Essop, and wounds his passenger (who just so happens to be the legendary Sherief Khan's brother).[12]

A subsequent *Drum* article[13] presents a 1952 quarrel with Grey Street taxi owner, Dawood Shaik, as the main trigger – Shaik gets the League involved, and the battle for Grey Street escalates in a cycle of attacks and retaliations. Between all the beatings and stabbings, two assassination bids seem to have kicked the law into action with arrests and convictions: First, the ambushing of Dawood 'Dee' Salot in 1952, when he was lucky to escape with a bullet through the wrist; and later that year when Fishy, a Salot henchman, shot a League leader through the cheek. But when Lighty was finally murdered two years later it was a well-orchestrated hit which yielded no suspects, and 'confused' witnesses. Although conflicts continued to erupt between the gangs, the League had established its hegemony around lucrative Grey Street by the mid-50s.

A differing narrative that favours the Salots, and one they actively promulgated, was that they there were honest victims of League thuggery and greed. Veteran *Drum* journalist Farook Khan claims that "the Crimson League wanted to take over the entire taxi operation in the city, and they succeeded. The only family that stood up to them were the Salots".[14] Khan's view is the Salots were the legitimate (licensed) taxi operators who were merely defending their established business rights – the League-aligned taxis were actually the 'pirates'. This seems to be informed by Dawood Salot's innovative 'testimony' narrated in the first person. Their side of the story was presented as the latter two articles of the four-part Salot serial of 1955. A 'scoop' for *Drum,* they simultaneously gave the Salot family a chance to reframe themselves for the public

[11] Hancroft, 15.

[12] The article paints Lighty as a gormless gangster who fearfully acquiesces to an angry, dominant Sherief Khan.

[13] 'The End of Lighty Salot'.

[14] Khan, *The Goodwill Lounge*, 61.

through the media. As examined in another chapter (see page 135), the magazine was unique in how it provided opportunities for gangsters to reshape the 'crime' narrative and manage their own reputations.

Dawood ('Dee') Salot promises to give "the true and honest story", claiming that his brother Lighty, who "died at the hands of bloody gangsters was not the hoodlum he was supposed to be" and that their rivals had concocted this notion of a 'gang'.[15] Rather than a gang leader, Lighty is painted as a hard-working and law-abiding businessman, someone who, for the most part, patiently endures continuous and unprovoked attacks from criminal rivals. Dawood describes a situation where a grouping of pirate taxis, jealous of the Salots' success, "decided to get tough with us", assaulted their drivers and passengers, eventually even trying to extract protection money from the hard-working family operation.[16] It was only after the League attacked their drivers that the Salots finally "fought against the League in self-defence"[17], he claims.

The Salots also take the opportunity to take a sideswipe at the Crimson League, talking about how 'criminal' elements turned "an ordinary football club into a crime school", comprising hundreds of members. Appealing to sympathy for the underdog, Dawood asks "what could 15 of us do against 300? Not much, but we tried".[18] Blaming the League 'extortionists' for the bad reputation clinging to the Salot name – "these cunning crooked men blamed all the brawls on us […] they labelled us the "villains", and made people (poor, innocent, and very ignorant people) believe they were the vigilantes".[19] It is worth noting how the description 'vigilante' is used positively here, suggesting the common acceptance of a legitimate private use of violence in certain situations. Dee seems to concede that they have lost the public relations battle, and are the "villains" in most people's eyes. In his narrative, not only are the League "cunning" but they are cowardly tell-tales. He claims that "after assaulting our drivers, they would rush to the police with their casualties to lay a charge of assault against us".[20] This, however, is precisely the tactic the previous article had accused the Salots of inventing.

[15] Salot, 'The Salots', n.p.
[16] Salot, n.p.
[17] Salot, n.p.
[18] Salot, 'The Salots - 2', 65.
[19] Salot, 'The Salots', n.p.
[20] Salot, 'The Salots - 2', 65.

Taking into account the many and diverging representations, it seems likely that the Salots were not the innocent victims Dee presents them to be. It is worth considering what one might view as more 'removed' evidence established by a seemingly disinterested apartheid-era police investigation. A Detective-Sergeant Hendrie at the Lighty Salot murder inquest offers the following observation – "Investigations show that for several years the Salot gang has terrorised the Indian Community in the Overport and Durban Central Asiatic areas, by means of assault, extracting protection monies and extortion".[21] But it is also worth noting that after Dee's rebuttal and defense of the Salot brand, there is a fifth and final, and rather damning, *Drum* instalment on the Salot family for 1955. This time it is Lighty's 'widow', Katie, who speaks out to set the record straight - about "the man I feared and detested at the beginning"[22] and to "tell the *true* facts of the Salots".[23]

In this distressing tale she reveals how Lighty was the opposite of a 'gentleman' even in his private life, and makes no bones about him being a "criminal" and "gangster", and the problems this created for her family. If we are to believe her account - and there is no reason not to - Lighty treated her terribly. Not only did he force her into a premarital sexual relationship, but had four children with her out of wedlock, all the while deceiving her about his other wife at the Overport family home. Finally, when he took his young family back to the Salot stronghold, this was still without having married her. Her inside views, unpacked below, of the Salot 'Gang' – and she uses the term frequently – seem to dispel any notion that the Salots were honest brokers.[24]

Gang leaders - Old Man Salot & Sons Inc.

The 1953 *Drum* exposé, 'Crimson League' alludes to an 'Old Man' leading the K Gang (proxy for the Salot Gang). Subsequent reports, however, deemphasise his direct involvement, putting Lighty Salot and half-brothers 'Dee' (Dawood), 'Gloves' (Mohammed), and 'Mascot' (Ismail), as well as notorious henchmen such as 'Corduroy

[21] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 55.

[22] "… but the man I loved and adored in the later years of our life together" - George, 'My Life with the Salots', 59.

[23] George, 59.

[24] Here again one needs to mark the confluence between *Drum*'s desire to sell salacious stories to its readers and canny members of the gang (in this case Katie) using the magazine as a forum to present their versions – not to mention readers' appetites for sensational stories and insights into the lives of the gang and their associates.

Bobby', 'Sharkey' and 'Fishy', at the core of the gang in the 1950s. Lighty led the gang in the 1940s and early 1950s, with younger brother Dawood ('Dee') taking over when Lighty was killed in July, 1954.[25]

The sons were nevertheless supposedly influenced by their tough father, Moosa Ebrahim, 'Old Man' Salot, who had emigrated from western India. According to the first *Drum* report on the Salots, the Old Man's nickname was 'Bareen' ('bully' in Gujarati), his chief characteristic. GG, a League insider, remembers Old Man Salot as more than just a bad role model - "He was a bad bugger! When they sent him to India, the Indian government sent him right back again, didn't want him. That's how bad he was!"[26] He puts the Salot 'trouble' with his own League squarely on the shoulders of the father: "A lot of nonsense, that old man– a troublemaker. He told his children 'Attack them!' He was behind all that nonsense!"[27] This view of the inciting father is shared by Hassim in the documentary film, *Legends of the Casbah*.[28]

Gang activities – gambling, dagga, liquor and extortion

Katie George-Salot's 'insights' into her husband's Salot Gang activities are enlightening beyond his mistreatment of her:

> During the few years I lived at the Salot household, I had an insight into the Salot Gang [….] The members of the Salot Gang never did a day's work. They lived mainly on extortion and on the proceeds of gambling and dagga sales. They brought their gambling school patrons in their own cars and took them back late at night after fleecing them of their money. The place was well guarded. Two sentries were posted in the front and at the back to watch out for police […] A shebeen also produced small, but consistent, returns. The Salots ran a "general dealer's business" which was only patronised by their tenants. The tenants were required to pay prices well over the controlled prices for all purchases made.[29]

Overport neighbour AN confirms what Katie relates about the Salot 'shop':

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[25] In the 1960s and 70s Old Man Salot's daughter, Bebee Salot, came to the fore and played a more prominent role in running the family operations. She was "another thing", according to GG, "*hardegat!*" - "She had a guy, she was married, then she had a chap younger than her - that guy left here, ran away to England. She went and brought him back, hey! Brought him back!".

[26] GG, Interview with author.

[27] GG.

[28] Naidoo and Heatlie, *Legends of the Casbah*.

[29] George, 'My Life with the Salots', 61.

> Nobody bought; it was a front. It was just a masquerade, people were scared to go into the shop to even buy a pint of milk, or a loaf of bread, I mean, you hardly saw customers going in there […] The old man ran the shop, but what business was carrying on there, God knows.[30]

AN assumes this shop avoidance was because the Salots terrorised and extorted the people of Overport. Extortion ranged from charging a 'tax' on buses operating in Overport, while "[the] form of extortion that was most common with the Salots was that they tendered a shilling to a shopkeeper and had in return more than 25 shillings of goods".[31] This token transaction seems to have partially legitimated the act of extorting for the extorter – it's because you are so important that you get 'more bang for your buck'.

Misogyny, prostitution and henchmen – the use of others

Apart from revealing aspects of the gang, Katie George's story, *'My Life with the Salots'*, sheds some light on how the brothers viewed and treated women – the attitude described is nothing less than misogynistic. Katie, who describes herself as coming from "a respectable Coloured family" spends the first part of her account describing how Lighty stalked and 'hounded' her against her will, ultimately forcing her to date him with threats of physical violence. "Being violently afraid, I confided in a friend who advised me that I should go out with him".[32] Although promising to marry her, she describes how this only happened a decade after meeting her, five children later, in the year of his death - and after discovering he had already had a first wife at the Salot family home.

This predatory sexual behaviour was not confined to Lighty. After his death, Katie describes how one of Lighty's brothers - she only refers to him as "A" - embarked on an unrelenting mission to seduce her.[33] Even before this, he had made advances to her while her husband was alive. "Things came to a head" when she resisted an attempted rape, and called the police to stop brother 'A', who had "promised to tell Old Man Salot that I drank and went out with other men and that he would have me thrown out of the

[30] AN, Interview with author.
[31] George, 'My Life with the Salots', 61.
[32] George, 59.
[33] George, 61.

house".[34] Finding out the Salots were indeed planning to evict her, Katie understandably moved back to her mother's house - after which the Salots evidently launched a vindictive campaign to assault and threaten their sister-in-law's family. Was prostitution, as Hancroft intimates[35], something that the Salots capitalised on as well? There does not seem to be much evidence for this. AN, friend of Mascot Salot, explains, "I think the prostitution, [there] was… hardly any Indians involved".[36] JP agrees, conceding "the Rats" (the Salots), although despicable, were not involved in the sex industry.

According to AN, a journalist who grew up in Salot territory and was friendly with Mascot Salot, although the brothers were natty dressers[37], they were not quite the gentlemen gangsters of the Crimson League. "They had a different breed and a different culture. They were surrounded by […] riffraffs, they didn't conduct themselves [well]".[38] AN never observed a violent aspect in the Salot brothers themselves – "I never got the impression that they could be mean" – but "the rest of the gang were just thugs, who wouldn't hesitate to go and stab somebody, assault and break into places, etc."[39] While AN didn't fear the brothers,

> You feared their henchmen, the underlings, because you couldn't trust them; I mean these chaps were either steeped in dagga or liquor, and you didn't know which way they would turn […] You could counter-threaten them, and say, 'look here, if you don't stop your nonsense I'll have to tell Dees about you', or 'I'll have to tell Mascot about you. And then you'll be suitably disciplined.'[40]

Katie Salot had a similar view of these hired ruffians, claiming that "The house was usually overrun with the stooges of the Salots, who were treated more like dogs than human beings."[41] According to Katie, some slept in the cars while others slept in the garage.

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[34] George, 63.

[35] 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands'.

[36] AN, Interview with author.

[37] "Mascot was one of the best dressers, he loved his dressing, go for expensive clothing, suits and shoes, his footwear, and he drove the poshest cars, the most expensive in those days…" AN.

[38] AN.

[39] AN.

[40] AN.

[41] George, 'My Life with the Salots', 61.

The killing of Lighty Salot

The ignominious ending of Lighty Salot was captured in lurid detail in *Drum* magazine's enticingly entitled article, 'The End of Lighty Salot'. The gloating tone is overt in the final paragraphs as the moral of the story is opined: "He lived by violence and died by violence. All his bestial methods came back to him in his own brutal murder".[42] On July 14, 1954, Lighty drove his second wife, Eunice, and her sister, to a dressmaker in Umgeni Road. According to GG's memory, "His wife went in to the dressmaker, and they opened - he was sitting in the car, he disappeared from the car…".[43] In this version, he was caught by his attackers alone.

In the *Drum* account, however, Lighty and wife were exiting the dressmakers when:

> Two American cars drove up to the house […] Lighty raced back into the house followed by three Indians […] the gangsters followed him in. They hit him with an iron bar and he fell to the floor. Habiba Khan, the dressmaker, looked helpless and terrified, while the gangsters battered Lighty.[44]

Days later the dressmaker claimed to have received a death threat over the telephone, the article continues. The number plates turned out to be false, and the witnesses were unable to identify any suspects.

What stands out in this description is the prolonged dramatic unfolding of the death scene, almost as if it was scripted for some gangster movie. And while, as Fenwick points out[45], *Drum* took its crime writing cue from the cinema, it is almost as if the League itself plotted a 'scene' of cinematic surprise: audacity, brutality and female-familial vulnerability in the wife-at-the-dressmaker scenario, an 'ending' that was bound to shock and resonate with their Durban 'audience'. The reporter's final words hint at this strategy of a spectacular killing (to be repeated soon afterwards in the hit on Michael John) – the "murderers remain at large, protected by their own terrorism".[46]

Why exactly the League felt it necessary to 'take him out' at that particular moment, or whether it was a long time coming, seems lost in time. GG, well positioned in the

[42] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 55.
[43] GG, Interview with author.
[44] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 55.
[45] Fenwick, '"Tough Guy, Eh?"'
[46] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 55.

League inner circle, could not recall – "Well, I don't know what was the motive that time".[47] As to who was involved in the attack, he playfully withheld the details: "They don't know who did it. Don't ask me!"[48] Dee Salot went as far as suggesting Lighty's wife was involved in setting up the murder, wondering why she could not identify or describe any of her husband's assailants.[49]

However, a few years later, in an ironic series of twists, *Drum* 'reveals' Salot's killer in an investigative report on the killing of ex-Crimson League gangster, Michael John.[50] In the months prior to his own death at the hands of the League, John had supposedly admitted to *Drum's* reporter to having personally led the attack on Lighty during his time with the League. All of this in a perversely 'posthumous' report, penned by the also-just-deceased Henry Nxumalo, the star journalist himself having just been stabbed to death by a Johannesburg gangster.

The Michael John Gang

The name Michael John is still remembered today, probably less for whom he was than for being the most publicised Indian gang killing of the 1950s. The court case, for which seven young League-associated suspects waited a year to be released, garnered unprecedented media and public attention; it was indeed "one of the most talked of murder trials in Natal".[51] KN remembers rushing home from school to Prince Edward Street, hugely excited as a teenager, to follow the case on the radio with a brother of one of the accused[52], while at the court itself, "People jostled for positions in the crowded gallery".[53]

Michael John was an atypical gangster. He had been one of the elite few to have been clever enough to matriculate from Durban's only Indian High School for boys, Sastri College. He was clearly destined for great things. But having tried his hand at law and newspaper journalism, John ended up working with the League, where he quickly

[47] GG, Interview with author.
[48] GG.
[49] Salot, 'The Salots - 2'.
[50] Henry Nxumalo, 'Gang War', *Drum*, April 1957; Nxumalo, 'The League Busts up a Club'.
[51] 'Seven Men's Jubilee', *Drum*, March 1957, 69.
[52] KN, Interview with author.
[53] Naidoo, 'Dramatic Trial of Seven Men', 49.

become a prominent player, settling disputes and writing up contracts.[54] It seems he then progressed to collecting protection money for the gang, and got involved in the conflict with the Salots. According to Henry Nxumalo, who befriended John, the gangster told him that he and four other Leaguers had killed Lighty "because the Salot gang was trying to monopolise the taxi business on which the League was trying to get a hold".[55]

The anonymous *Drum* article, 'Death of a Bad Man'[56], as well Nxumalo's posthumous report[57], tells us John had fallen out with the League over remuneration - what cut he was entitled to, as one of the lieutenants sitting just under the bosses. When the relationship soured, he split from the League to start his own gang with an uncle, Emmanuelle, also an ex-Leaguer and a suspect in the Lighty Salot killing. The Michael John gang grew in strength rapidly, with John poaching protection clients from the League, starting his own fah-fee racket, and finding a whole new extortion market in the Indian waiters who worked in the hotels on the Durban waterfront.[58] One of his innovations was a compulsory fah-fee betting system for these vulnerable hotel workers – if you didn't play the game you got beaten up.[59] John was so confident he would march down Grey Street (League territory) with thirty or so gangsters, collecting from runners and clients on the street. Seemingly untouchable by the League's henchmen, he had, in relatively no time, became a major threat to their dominance.

The killing of Michael John

> "Boom! He must go." – Ronnie Govender[60]

The League's 'vigilante' narrative for their intervention was that John had become a hindrance to society with his ruthless extorting, a public menace who refused to take heed of the warning that was given to him. "But he wouldn't listen", Crimson Leaguer GG insists, shielding the gang - "they call on him, they ask him, they tell him to stop his

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[54] 'Death of a Bad Man', *Drum*, April 1956.

[55] Nxumalo, 'Gang War'.

[56] 'Death of a Bad Man'.

[57] Nxumalo, 'The League Busts up a Club'.

[58] "The waiters, knowing him from the days when he was a League boss. It was £1 or £2 a week they were forced to pay. Those who refused were beaten up" - Nxumalo, 57.

[59] Nxumalo, 57.

[60] Govender, Interview with author.

nonsense, taking [from] the waiters at the beachfront - he's extorting them!"[61] According to Nxumalo, it wasn't so much the extortion of the waiters that irked the Big Five – it was that John had begun seeking protection monies from the pirate taxis, the very revenue source they had fought for against the Salots, in the League's backyard.[62] Govender says the gang was threatened by John's rising star because "he could think".[63] In *Legends of the Casbah*, Hassim argues that John's meteoric rise threatened the very existence of the League – his slaying was a matter of survival.[64]

Whatever the exact reasons, John was apparently approached directly by one of the League leaders and given a final ultimatum to cease gang activities.

> So, the big boys of the Crimson League called him up. Said to him: 'You must stop your nonsense! There'll be trouble'. He never listened… Boom! That Saturday evening he went. He *went!*[65]

The attack on Saturday, 17 December 1955 at 22 Lorne Street, was precipitated by John and members of his gang being arrested for the illegal possession of a firearm - they only returned home late in the evening. Soon after, Sandy, Mike's lookout at the corner of Grey Street and Lorne Street, testifies that he was cornered and assaulted by a League squad, who then forced him to take them to John's back door via a back alley. Two carloads of young streetfighters had been dispatched.[66] Sandy was then required to knock on the door and call for John.[67] When the gang leader came to open the door, the League hitmen rushed in, repeatedly striking him with a tomahawk, knives and iron bars. A gunman with a revolver held John's fellow gang members and wife at bay while John was hacked, stabbed and beaten.[68] After the attackers fled, John was taken to hospital but died the next day.

According to GG, a relative of Sonny Morgan and Big Daddy, the Crimson League were "professionals" when someone needed to be dealt with. GG confides proudly but in a subdued voice: "Let me call it this way to you: exactly how the mafia operated,

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[61] GG, Interview with author.
[62] Nxumalo, 'Gang War', 57.
[63] Govender, Interview with author.
[64] Naidoo and Heatlie, *Legends of the Casbah*.
[65] GG, Interview with author.
[66] Nxumalo, 'Gang War', 57.
[67] Naidoo, 'Dramatic Trial of Seven Men', 51.
[68] Naidoo, 52.

nobody knows who did what. Well-timed, well-taken place, there were no witnesses… things like that".[69] Was this just the gangster movies talking? A rumour has it that the League had a contact at a Hindu crematorium, where they were able to make corpses disappear without a trace in the early hours of the morning.[70] But if there were - successfully - no witnesses who could identify the unknown assailants in the Lighty Salot killing, there was no such 'professionalism' in the slaying of John. Present at the time of the attack were Ashraf 'Smiley' Ali, S. 'Bongo' Chetty, Ivan 'Sandy' Soupan, Moonsamy 'Bones' Ragan, all members of John's gang, who knew their rivals in the League by name.[71] Along with Ruth John, Mike's wife, and Lily Richards, a neighbour, these witnesses who were able to relate the gruesome story from different angles and identify the seven accused[72] - at the trial they were called by the prosecution to give what, in retrospect, looks like quite consistent and persuasive evidence.

GG's observation that the League operated secretly just like the mafia can be corroborated in various events revealed through the process of the murder trial. Looking back, it remains a bit of a mystery how the case floundered. Blok tells us the mafia organisation partly derives social power or "respect" from a sense of its impunity – normal legal processes somehow falter against them when they have money and favours: "When indicted for violent crimes, mafiosi were usually acquitted for lack of evidence because of high-level protection and because local witnesses would rarely openly turn against them. This greatly helped to enhance their power and their reputation as 'men of respect'."[73] We will come to the question of police 'protection' in a moment.

The state witnesses were rigorously cross-examined by a well-oiled defence team; but their testimonies were not entirely neutralised. The defendants presented alibis, some of them seemingly rather flimsy. Nineteen-year old Sonny Morgan, accused number one in the trial, claimed he was at his older brother's house painting the whole night of the murder[74] – this brother just happened to be Crash Morgan, someone closely associated

[69] GG, Interview with author.
[70] KN, Interview with author.
[71] Naidoo, 'Dramatic Trial of Seven Men', 50..
[72] Naidoo, 'Dramatic Trial of Seven Men'; 'Seven Men's Jubilee'.
[73] Blok, 'Reflections on the Sicilian Mafia', 8.
[74] Naidoo, 'Dramatic Trial of Seven Men', 53.

with the League. Nevertheless, the alibis seemed to convince the jury, and the trial was prematurely brought to a close. Court reporting suggested it might be the first time that a jury had decided it did not want to hear any more witnesses in a murder trial - however the presiding judge agreed with the jury, and the young men were, to the surprise of many, found 'not guilty'.[75]

A logical assumption would be that with John dead and the Crown's case against them collapsing, the League would have re-established hegemony over central Durban and be flying high. Yet according to the Nxumalo report, factions and fissures emerged in the League soon after John's death - "one of the bosses is sore at the killing of Michael John, and he wants revenge"[76], while the other bosses are worried about recriminations. He also suggests that "the gangs are breaking up on religious lines. The Muslims, headed by Pop, the big chief of the League, are settling into one camp. The Hindus are gathering around another man".[77]

Big Daddy, the 'Hindu' leader, was certainly at the murder trial, seemingly lending moral support to the League 'family'. A photograph by Ranjith Kally of Crimson League members and supporters gathered outside the court building reveals Daddy at the centre of the group, smoking a cigarette. But beneath the façade, was Daddy the resentful "Hindu" leader Nxumalo alludes to? It was Hassim's opinion that Pine Mohammed had organised the attack on John, possibly without Daddy's knowledge.

It was also Mohamed who according to GG, was the gang's legal mastermind calling the shots in the courtroom. He "never went to college, never took up law; but he knew what he was doing. Just sit back, write his notes."[78] GG reckons Pine's strategic thinking was a key factor in winning the trial for them. Leaguer JP has a similar insight about the mastermind that shaped the legal strategy: "but behind the Crimson League, the brains, who do you think was the brains? … Pine! You know in that Michael John murder, they had their defence team, but Pine was giving them notes how to defend their case".[79]

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[75] 'Seven Men's Jubilee', 69.
[76] Nxumalo, 'Gang War', 57.
[77] Nxumalo, 57.
[78] GG, Interview with author.
[79] JP, Interview with author.



Figure 3 - Crimson League outside courthouse (photograph by Ranjith Kally, 1956)

Gangs and the law

The Michael John trial, with the plethora of court reporting, is quite instructive in the way in which the gangs found ways to work with and around the apartheid legal system. The court victory of the Crimson League, and the release of the seven accused of killing

John, was proof for many that the League had managed to corrupt the justice system. According to Hassim, "Nearly all the judges in the country are owned by them [the Crimson League], together with every big name in the police force".[80] Was this the case, and how might it have happened that the League had wangled out of a clear-cut murder rap?

Blok argues that rather than being 'a state within a state', the mafia colluded with the state: "mafiosi successfully infiltrated public institutions, including political parties, local governments, the judiciary, banks, and legal firms. They did so through their own personal network of 'friends' ".[81] The Crimson League were known to have a number of friends and supporters in the police force. One of these acquaintances was Detective-Sergeant Vasa Pillay, widely celebrated as the first policeman 'of colour' to carry a gun during apartheid. His alleged friendship with Daddy Naidoo is confirmed by his relative, TP, who concedes the Pillays and Naidoos would socialise together.[82] Because of this friendship, argues TP, some thought that Detective Pillay was in cahoots with the League (or even on their payroll as JP alleges[83]), while in actuality, TP maintains, this was not the case. TP recalls that, as a pragmatic and resourceful policeman, his relative spent a lot of time "putting out fires", trying to work with the gangs and reconciling them before their animosities got out of hand.[84] Even if this was the case, was it not still at some level what Blok calls "the peaceful coexistence between mafia and state"?[85]

Whatever the situation, Sergeant Pillay had begun with the Michael John murder investigation. But he was taken off the case, after Emmanuel, John's uncle, had written to his superiors accusing him of bias towards the League – this was revealed in the court questioning.[86] Enter the decoy theory, a popular explanation of the outcome – in order to stymie the prosecution, the League contrived with Pillay to have innocent men charged along with the guilty. "Let me explain to you, there was only three from this gang, from the seven, that were really involved – okay? But what Vasa did, he charged

[80] *The Lotus People*, 332.
[81] Blok, 'Reflections on the Sicilian Mafia', 8.
[82] TP, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2015.
[83] "Vasa was Daddy's man" - JP, Interview with author.
[84] TP, Interview with author.
[85] Blok, 'Reflections on the Sicilian Mafia', 8.
[86] 'Seven Men's Jubilee', 67.

all seven, to complicate things", explains an insider.[87] Hassim[88] and Khan[89] similarly believe that some of the real culprits were deliberately not arrested.

Dee Salot bemoans the fact that "the League always had the necessary money and influence to fight us. Through their extortion and blackmail rackets they had money to bribe whoever they pleased, and money to hire the best lawyers in town".[90] Their other big strength, he goes on to claim, was their ability to 'dissuade' witnesses of the feasibility of giving evidence. GG, however, suggests that community donations rather than 'rackets' funded at least the Michael John trial defence costs: "When Michael John got taken care of, the Durban people, they financed the lawyers and all that", and he goes on to proudly list the legal muscle these funds bought - "we had Jaco Meer, the late Jaco Meer, assisted by P R Pather, P R Pather assisted by Justice Harcourt today…[…] but behind all of that, Pine Mohammed, sending notes for them. He was the brains for all that".[91]

The Salots also developed tactics around the law – a *Drum* account of the early skirmishes between League and Salots points out how "[i]n each case, using their favourite trick, the Salots laid a charge of assault against the person they had just assaulted".[92] The gangs learned that they could intimidate or buy witnesses, and neutralise criminal cases through false alibis or counter-allegations. Violence against other gangs could be perpetrated with a fair degree of legal impunity, particularly if one had resources to pay off the law.[93] In the Lighty Salot murder inquest (there was no trial), a detective reported to the court that "for the past three years there have been numerous cases of assaults and fights between the Salots and the Crimson League, resulting in frequent and numerous cases of murder, assault with intent, etc., registered at police stations and heard in the courts. These rarely terminated in conviction, due to unreliable evidence".[94] Within an apartheid criminal justice system not particularly interested in successfully prosecuting crimes against 'non-whites', the gangs had

[87] JP, Interview with author.
[88] Hassim, *The Lotus People*.
[89] Khan, Interview with author, 28 January 2015.
[90] Salot, 'The Salots - 2', 67.
[91] GG, Interview with author.
[92] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 53.
[93] Rosenberg et al., *The Making of Place: The Warwick Junction Precinct, 1870s-1980s*, 184.
[94] 'The End of Lighty Salot', 55.

mastered techniques of rendering evidence 'unreliable' - but also overloading the system and creating a sense of an intractable norm of gang violence.

The end of Durban's 'gentleman gangsters'?

As mentioned, what is remarkable about the Crimson League gangsters is their ability to be lauded as "thorough gentlemen" by members of the community - a perception which in Kooistra's terms indicates that they were conceivably received by many as 'criminal heroes'.[95] This gentlemanly behaviour was not just about grooming, but involved public displays of decorum, personal restraint, sociability, politeness towards women - and generally acting the role of neighbourhood guardians and helpers of those in need. A 1960's article reinforces this image of the League 'gentleman gangster' as vigilante rather than extortionist – a new crop of predatory gangsters is 'using' the name of the League to extort businessmen, giving the original (noble) "vigilante society" a bad name.[96] But even 'street gangsters', who did not have the money, style or "class" of the League gangsters, could behave in a decent 'gentlemanly' manner. ANC activist Phyllis Naidoo recalled Dutcheen gangsters protecting her as a local teacher in the streets of 'the District'[97] - even though they were also known to have mercilessly preyed on women of lesser social status.[98] She also expressed gratitude to the Crimson League and Daddy Naidoo for helping activists locate and reach fellow detainees.[99]

It would seem that violence was something that had a place in gangsters' lives – something they could turn off or on, depending on the social context.[100] Was this just a façade of respectability and family values, from which an easily accessible aggression could emerge at any moment? Or were these different parallel life-worlds that gangsters could inhabit in different modalities? In my documentary, *Legends of the Casbah* (2012), Hassim points to the latter. Many of the gangsters were married with children, and had committed family lives. Indian gangsters obeyed an unwritten rule that you did not involve the families of your rivals in gang-fights - women and children were exempt from gang violence. According to Hassim, the Michael John trial turned the tide of

[95] Kooistra, 'Criminals as Heroes'.
[96] G.R. Naidoo, 'The Human Vultures', *Drum*, October 1961, 31.
[97] Interview in *Legends of the Casbah* Naidoo and Heatlie, *Legends of the Casbah*.
[98] RM, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2015.
[99] Interview in Naidoo and Heatlie, *Legends of the Casbah* (2016)
[100] Naidoo, 'The Indian in *Drum* in the 1950s', 125.

public opinion against the League.[101] The League were not in the dock for the first time, but this time they were viewed as thugs rather than vigilantes or 'gentlemen gangsters', when it transpired that John had been killed at home in front of his wife and baby.[102] After this tipping point, where they lost public support, the League slowly declined, he argues. JP however, disagrees that this was such a significant point – it rather 'dwindled' away later as the gangsters grew older, and younger, fresher gangs took over.[103]

So what eventually did happen to the mighty Crimson League? GG explains that Sonny Morgan was the heir apparent to the League throne - "it moved from generation to generation […] after Daddy and them faded away, he taken over".[104] But Sonny's reign fell apart in the 1970s, when things soured with his gambling den partner, Mohan Govender. Akie Vahed's son, Dollars Vahed, set up a new gang called the Queen's Brigade (including, ironically, the old Salot henchmen, Fishy and Sharkey) to deal with the chaos on the streets.[105]

> You know at the time now, Mohan had split from Sonny, right; Sonny got shot in Victoria Street by some of Mohan's men. But Sonny survived it. That's how it happened and that's where all the splits came. And Mohan brought a gang from Cape Town [in the 70s] and these were *real* extorters. Mohan told them go to this man, go to that man and they were really extorting. Now Dollars and them got rid of them, made them leave Durban. Dollars![106]

But that's another story for another study.

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[101] Naidoo and Heatlie, *Legends of the Casbah*.

[102] In a December 1955 Christmas issue of the *Golden City Post*, a dramatic story revealed how Ruth John had tried to pass her baby through a window to her neighbour as her husband lay dying.

[103] JP, Interview with author.

[104] GG, Interview with author.

[105] JP, Interview with author.

[106] JP.

Chapter 5 - The 'sensational story'[1] of Sherief Khan's rise to power, 1940 to 1952

Introduction

In 1995, a well-to-do Fordsburg resident in his late seventies died in his sleep. The ensuing obituary in *City Press*, 'Quiet end for gang boss'[2], glossed over some of the highlights of Sherief[3] Khan's underworld career spanning over half a century. It rightly points to the gentleman gangster's "two faces" - the family man with social and religious commitments, and the "gang boss who ran his underworld kingdom with an iron fist".[4] However over time, some of the finer details seem to have got mixed up. For one, his ability for evading conviction was stretched to assert that Khan "never saw the inside of a jail".[5] While it is true that in cases in the latter part of his career Khan spectacularly dodged the law, he had earned his reputation the hard way. Sentenced to two long spells in jail, Khan was first given a seven-year stretch in the 1940s for theft, and then another nine-year sentence in the 1950s for a shop-breaking heist. During these prison terms, Khan's accomplices outside continued with his core businesses of extortion and gambling – and in the 1960s we see him consolidating his grip on power.

In this chapter we chart his rise to power in Johannesburg in the 1940s, marked by the fractious relationship with mentor-turned-rival, Old Man Kajee, and culminating in his second big conviction for robbery in 1952. A through-line of this chapter is how Khan managed to build a unique personal 'brand', one that would evoke fear and admiration across the Indian community of the Transvaal. The chapter ends with a review of the various activities he had managed to establish or monopolise by the time he was sent to jail.

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[1] Derived from the title of an early *Drum* article: 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', *Drum*, October 1952.

[2] Obed Musi, 'Quiet End for Gang Boss', *City Press*, 4 June 1995.

[3] While articles from the 1950s refer to him as 'Sheriff', from the 1960s *Drum* calls him 'Sherief'. The question around which was the 'correct' spelling is complicated by the fact that Khan was illiterate. Given the appetite for Westerns at the time (see page 97), and his 'protection' role, one can understand what the anglicisation of 'Sherief' would have brought in terms of connotation. For consistency, I refer to him throughout as 'Sherief', while retaining 'Sheriff' where he has been called that by others.

[4] Musi, 'Quiet End for Gang Boss', 3.

[5] Musi, 3.

My recounting of his story is again a chronological reconstruction from primary sources, consisting mainly of fresh interviews and stale *Drum* articles. From the *Drum* sources, three personal 'gangster testimonies' stand out – that of Old Man Kajee, Garrett Adams and some anonymous sidekick of Khan's - providing an invaluable if often contradictory set of 'representations'. As I discuss in more detail elsewhere (see page 134), *Drum*, the gangsters and the reading public were all seemingly caught up in their own local gangster 'movie' (the obituary mentioned above giving just a small indication of the many urban myths that had gathered around the signifier 'Sheriff Khan'). But Khan seemed to have been writing his own very strong 'script - and if this chapter (and the next) feels more biographical, character-centred and, dare I say it, plot-heavy, than the League section, it is because we are now dealing with a high-profile 'gangster' rather than a shadowy 'gang'. Of course, every gangster needs a gang, but Khan made it very much his own story.

Ferreirastown - 'gangster land'

In 1953 *Drum* puts out the clarion call to 'Clean up the Reef!' The Indian parts of Ferreirastown, on the western edge of Johannesburg, are deemed to have become criminally 'infested'. It has been "for long, one of the main breeding grounds of gangsters" while "much of the gangster terror on the Reef is the work of the mysterious 'Y Gang' which now rules the Johannesburg underworld".[6] The gang, based in Becker Street, Ferreirastown, has "carved out whole areas as their special province", including the lucrative shebeen, dagga and gambling businesses located at 'Bullet Corner' in lower Doornfontein.[7] The article claims indignantly that this Y Gang has been operating from their illicit gambling den in Ferreirastown for over a decade. The gang function brazenly as they seem to have some kind of immunity from the law - "members boast they have never been raided".[8][9]

Who was this Y Gang? A clue to this lies in author 'Mac' Carim's portrayal of Ferreirastown in the 1950s, a thriving "Asiatic bazaar" bounded by Fordsburg in the

[6] 'Clean up the Reef!', 11.

[7] 'Clean up the Reef!', 11.

[8] 'Clean up the Reef!', 11.

[9] Carim's father gambled there, and he recalls how the gambling den would limit access - a wooden ladder was let down for customers to climb up to the upper-story den - Mohammed 'Mac' Carim, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2017.

west and Sauer Street demarcating its eastern border. Its many Indian businesses meant it was also home to predatory gangsters:

> This was gangster land. Here directly opposite the Magistrates Court, I would see such prominent underworld personalities as Sharief [sic] Khan, Essop Mayet, Sarang, Cassim Delaire, and other lesser known but just as dangerous figures.[10]

But we will come back to these professional gangsters in a moment – for now we briefly intercut to another 'scene': a more youthful and less criminally-inclined street gang, the Becker Street Boys. Indian 'gangsterism' was not a homogeneous phenomenon, and it is essential to understand the differences between these two types of gangs, and the dynamics of their co-existence.

In his autobiography, *Insurgent Diplomat*, prominent ANC leader Aziz Pahad recalls a strange mix of 'underworld' gangsters and 'underground' activists converging at the corner of Fox and Becker Streets in the 1950s.

> Orient House was flanked by the offices of the ANC and the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC). […] Then there was Kosi Café, which was directly below the Tambo-Mandela offices in Chancellor House. In the absence of any public recreational facilities, Kosi Café became our regular gathering space. We also took advantage of the billiard room across the way from the café, where many of the top gangsters of the area used to hang out. I knew those gangsters well and under their 'protection' felt safe and secure from other competing gangs in the area. These connections led me to join the 'Becker Street Gang' and we earned a healthy respect from the community.[11]

If we look carefully, we get a glimpse of another odd conjunction – a street gang fraternising with professional gangsters. The Becker Street Boys were a group of feisty youths whose main resolve was to fight other street gangs and maintain symbolic control of their territory. Khan's gang, on the other hand, was comprised of older, professional 'protectors', the "top gangsters" mentioned above - their rationale was simply to make money. Inhabiting the same turf as Khan's dominant gang meant that the younger Becker Street Boys could only exist in a non-commercial way. As one Becker Street Boy explains, "in our days it was clear. There was only one serious group of gangsters and that was Sheriff Khan's – and you didn't cross them. That was the

[10] Carim, *Coolie, Come out and Fight!*, 50.

[11] Aziz Pahad, *Insurgent Diplomat: Civil Talks or Civil War?* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2014), 2.

understanding and the rule."[12] Their 'protection', as Pahad puts it, was conditional on their subordination to the older gang.

Khan's rise to power

One cannot tell the story of Sherief Khan without first recounting the story of the older, original extortionist of Ferreirastown - 'Old Man Y', a.k.a. 'Old Man Kajee'. Sherief's rise to power corresponds with the downgrading of Mohamed Kajee, whose large extortion gang established control of Ferreirastown in the 1940s. Kajee's chief weapon in the intimidation trade was a henchman, a "tough, brutal Somali" known as German West[13], who had previously dominated the Durban underworld in the 1930s.

Old Man Kajee - the trailblazer

In 1953 *Drum* published a ground-breaking series of biographical-confessional articles, in which 'Old Man Y' (Kajee) 'remorsefully' reflects on his life of crime. These four articles provide invaluable insights into the early South African Indian underworld, and the rise of Sherief Khan, Kajee's onetime rival and eventual partner. Old Man Kajee was not actually that old yet – if he was born in Dardal, India in 1905 as he says he was, that would have only made him 48. What is remarkable about these premature memoirs - his gangster life is by no means over yet - is how openly he talks of his criminal activities; with a sense of impunity, as if he knows he is immune from arrest. As we shall see, there are many indications that he enjoyed good relations with the police – and he would continue with extortion activities for another two decades until his death in 1970.

Old Man Kajee describes a fairly conventional childhood as an immigrant, leaving India in the 1920s to join his father on the Reef. Arriving as a 12 year old, he was schooled till standard six, and then worked as a shop assistant.[14] Kajee was becoming known as a young man who " 'knew how to handle himself' [and] my reputation having spread to Durban, I was hired as a strong man, or more correctly, a tool for dirty work".[15] Kajee

[12] EP, Interview with author.
[13] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 6.
[14] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', 6.
[15] Kajee, 7.

remembers the port city as a violent world in the 1930s – Durban's Grey Street, home to the Indian community, was "a little Chicago and gangsters dominated it".[16]

An early description of his work as a 'vigilante' gun-for-hire places him single-handedly defending the Star Bio cinema in Prince Edwards Street during the pass laws strike of 1931.[17] In 1934 Kajee found work in Durban as the bodyguard of conservative Indian politician, I.A. Kajee. This was the man, he sensationally alleges, "who launched me into crime".[18] Kajee claims to have bullied and beaten up numerous political opponents and obstacles for his namesake. In contrast to the violence he inflicted professionally, Kajee paints a picture of himself as a saint in his personal life. As a "true Moslem" he claims never to have indulged in drinking or smoking; and he had two wives (the first one, he claims, died from "a leaking heart", not from domestic violence, a dreadful rumour he had been forced to endure).[19]

It was also in the 1930s in Durban that Kajee encountered and fought against his future accomplice, German West, a Somalian gangster and streetfighter of repute. A late account[20] claims that West's East African mob was the under-capacitated underdog in street-fights with Kajee's Indian gang. That is, until a Somalian ship docked and the Somali Gang temporarily swelled - then Kajee's outfit would be on the receiving end. Eventually, West was driven off to Johannesburg to find fresher pastures, only to be followed there by Kajee, where the two then apparently joined forces.

The young Khan

This was the Durban gangland milieu in which the older Kajee encountered Sherief as a streetfighter in his late teens, young and poor.[21] He first noticed Khan in a Grey Street fight – the lad had shown "tremendous guts when he stood in a battle royal" with the notorious Goolam Boxer Mullah, a professional boxer – "anybody who could stand against [Goolam] was a somebody".[22] Both were as "strong as oxen" and the fight only ended when they were stopped. In the late 1930s, Khan joined Goolam Bhayat (another

[16] Kajee, 7.
[17] 'The Power of Old Man Y', *Drum*, June 1971, 22.
[18] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', 8.
[19] Kajee, 7.
[20] 'The Power of Old Man Y'.
[21] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', 8.
[22] Kajee, 8.

older, established Reef gangster and an associate of Kajee's) in running street battles with the Somali gang in Grey Street (German West's outfit). It was Bhayat, impressed with Khan's fighting ability, who, Kajee claims, brought the young man now in his early twenties to Johannesburg around 1940.[23]

It is around this time that one of Khan's "closest cronies" got to know the young thug while he was still in Durban. In a series of revelations spilt across *Drum's* pages in 1956, while Khan was in jail, this anonymous and reformed 'friend' of Khan offers some insider information on his ex-compatriot. The youthful Sherief Khan seems to have been a bully-for-hire in the early 1940s, exploring a number of illicit revenue streams and petty criminal activities. Khan's "confidante" gives us a sense of some of the young gangster's wheeling and dealing in Durban at this point - illicit activities which illustrate his entrepreneurial zeal and continuous ingenuity in ferreting out new criminal opportunities. In one story the friend was roped into what was to become a staple intervention for Khan – sorting out unwanted romantic partners or rivals – when a cuckolded husband pays Khan and friend to beat up his wife's lover.[24] It also seems that shop-breaking was an activity Khan had learned in the early days prior to coming to Johannesburg.[25]

It was either Kajee or Bhayat who enticed the young criminal to join their Reef network around 1940[26], but it was not long before Khan had fallen out with his handlers: "Big Boss Y [Kajee] and German West had turned against Sherief over a deal and tipped off police that he was carrying an unlicensed firearm."[27] Khan put together a rival, multi-racial outfit very quickly:

> The three of us were too small to take care of Big Boss Y's gang and Sherief sought recruits from Kliptown, Newlands, Sophiatown and Alexandra Township. Then Sherief grew up into something formidable in a matter of weeks.[28]

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[23] Kajee, 8.

[24] 'Go Straight Sherief Khan!', 59.

[25] 'Go Straight Sheriff Khan!', 59.

[26] 'The "Cop-Proof" Gangster', *Drum*, July 1956, 61.

[27] 'The "Cop-Proof" Gangster', 63.

[28] 'The "Cop-Proof" Gangster', 63.

This apparently led to increased conflict with Kajee's gang, with Khan wresting control of some of the gambling dens from Kajee. At the same time, Khan was 'pulling' increasingly big shop-breaking jobs with this gang – "three or four big breaks" a month, netting goods worth thousands of pounds, and selling to white fences on the Reef.[29] Evidently, Old Man Kajee's guys found an informer in Khan's gang - and he was caught red-handed by the police.[30]

Khan's first big prison term

Khan was sentenced for seven years in jail in the early 1940s (possibly around 1943), but served just under six years[31], and returned to the streets of Johannesburg again in the late 1940s.[32] It was during his time away in the mid-1940s that a pivotal event transpired that would reshape his career. Prior to being arrested, Khan had allegedly approached his old enemies, the 'Durban Gang', to assist in the ongoing battle with Kajee. Khan's "right-hand man" claims that when he was jailed, a pact had already been made between Khan and the Durban Gang to deal with West and Kajee.[33] Khan managed to keep the gang going from the inside, putting his number two in charge – "the business of the gang had to go on as we had to live"[34] - but according to his trusted lieutenant it proved very hard to operate under these conditions. A goading, triumphant Kajee made things difficult for them: "we were in constant fear of our lives" and "we did not have the organising genius that Sheriff had".[35] It was at this point, claims the insider, that Khan's second-in-command called 'the Durban Gang' to urgently intervene.

The 'mob' comes for Kajee and West

It is worth pausing this Khan-aligned narrative and turning to some other points of view to contextualise what came next. Old Man Kajee claims that by the mid-1940s, he and his old rival, German West, had reconciled and were working together as extortionists

[29] 'The "Cop-Proof" Gangster', 63.

[30] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', *Drum*, August 1956, 71.

[31] Soon after being released, however, he was caught with an illegal firearm, and completed the original term.

[32] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 6.

[33] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', 71.

[34] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', 71.

[35] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', 71.

on the Reef. Then he reveals that in 1945[36], while Khan was still in jail, the turning point occurred: "A gang under the leadership of W was brought out. My present friends, Goolam Bayat and Cassoojee, my faithful lieutenant, were against me. They sided with the mob."[37] Kajee escaped the hit-squad, but West was killed.

This is an astonishing revelation - public incrimination of his "present friends" in a murder, with the potential for legal consequences, is mindboggling – unless Kajee was sure that there would be no legal consequences. One has to wonder again – did this confidence come from a sense of personal impunity (thanks to police protection), or did this simply come from an understanding of the structural deficiency of 'non-white' policing at the time? It is also worth noting he does not say who brought out the "mob" – it is left in the intransitive, and unnamed. Who was out to get him? Was it Khan's doing?

The Durban 'mob' came for him in Ferreirastown: "Twenty-five of them, armed to the teeth with guns, choppers and knives, got my strongman, German West, and brutally chopped him to death".[38] Kajee says he was chased into the Kosi Restaurant on Fox Street, shot four times, but managed to hide away before being arrested. According to Kajee, although the attackers were also arrested, most of them were released, escaping prosecution. But this is not the only version of the attack.

A later version of this seismic underworld event describes the actors *and* ascribes reasons for the assassination. This account[39] claims it was a group of businessmen, 'clients' who had tired of Kajee's incessant extortion, which hired the "Crimson League" gang from Durban to take him out. According to this story, he took three bullets in the stomach, jumped onto a moving truck, and sought refuge at the Fordsburg police station.[40] The truck getaway scene is very similar to the popular account of Khan's narrow escape on Fox Street (which Kajee and Carim both relate – see page 87). Seemingly, Kajee and Khan's exploits sometimes got conflated. This makes one wonder whether the identification of the Crimson League was not also a literary

[36] An earlier account puts the attack happening only in 1950 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 6. – but this seems to have been an error, given Kajee's own fairly detailed time-line.

[37] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', 8.

[38] Kajee, 8.

[39] 'Old Man Y: Part 4', *Drum*, October 1971.

[40] 'Old Man Y: Part 4', 27.

embellishment – Kajee's account does not name them as such. And in yet another version, the least plausible account (in its deviation from the others), Kajee himself conspired to have West murdered.[41]

From these differing accounts of the killing of West in 1945, an intriguing question emerges. Who was this 'Durban Gang'? Was it really the Crimson League, as some later commentators claim? The Khan-aligned account doesn't identify them as the League at all, although it claims 'the Durban Gang' were in cahoots with Khan's gang. It claims when the hitmen were arrested for murder – and, amazingly, only convicted of the lesser charge of public violence - this "put the nail in the coffin of the Durban Gang and it led to its natural death".[42] Other reports say that when Khan came out of jail in the late 1940s, he absorbed some of the remaining gangsters from the now defunct 'Durban Gang'. Given that the Crimson League gang was only formed around 1945 as a vigilante organisation, it seems unlikely that it could have been them. Perhaps the very demise of the 'Durban Gang' created the space for the League's emergence.

When German West was killed, Old Man Kajee seems to have lost his mojo – slowly surrendering to Khan's supremacy before heading off to India. Kajee's main defect as a gang leader seems to have been a reputational lack of fighting prowess, bordering on cowardice. Khan's lieutenant describes Kajee's lack of resolve when they confronted him in his Kliptown gambling school in the early 1940s: "We entered the place without guns drawn. Big Boss Y [Kajee] – he was always yellow when it came to a fight – shivered in his boots. He pleaded with Sheriff to leave him alone and not kill him".[43] This description was one of many anecdotes that would circulate about Kajee's weakness in battle. Correspondingly, Khan's competitive advantage was precisely his uber-masculinity and fighting reputation. EP, associated with the Becker Street Boys, eulogises the local hero - "Sheriff Khan was himself very well known to be very tough and prepared to engage in a one-to-one fight with anybody".[44] A *Drum* writer lauds his charismatic appeal and "the abilities of leadership as a result of his ability physically".[45]

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[41] 'The Battle of Bullet Corner - Old Man Y: Part III', *Drum*, August 1971, 58.

[42] 'Khan's Last 'Job'!', *Drum*, September 1956, 77.

[43] 'The "Cop-Proof" Gangster', 63.

[44] EP, Interview with author.

[45] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 7.

After West's killing and Khan's release, Cassoojee and Bhayat had (re)crossed the floor to join Kajee and tension built up with Khan's outfit. "Sheriff began giving us a lot of trouble", the Old Man recalls, to the point where Kajee and friends decided to "bump him off".[46] This led to the famous encounter with Khan that took place outside the Magistrate's Court on Fox Street. Kajee recounts the incident: "As he came out, we let him have it with a .45 but it just missed his head. He picked up his hat and jumped on passing lorry and got away in time".[47] Carim gives a slightly more cinematic account of this legendary encounter, as told to him by his father:

> It was here [in Ferreirastown] that the famous shootout came, when four gunmen came after the legendary Mr Khan, revolvers blazing. As they told it, 'He dropped to the ground, rolled out the café door, onto his knees, shot two of them, and then raced after a truck, grabbed its side rails, and allowed it to drag him to safety'.[48]

It was at this time, with incidents like these, that Khan was establishing his reputation as the most fearless gangster – toughness, boldness, resilience, persistence, and a devil-may-care attitude were key attributes he projected.

Kajee's sabbatical and return

After West's death, Kajee explained that accumulated fear and loathing of the gangster's life pushed him to take a sabbatical in India in the late 1940s – he visited the madressa and clinic he had set up in India in 1947.[49] Returning to Durban in December of 1949, he found many of his old gangster friends in a sorry state of poverty and personal decline[50], before finally returning to Johannesburg in 1950. But by now Sherief Khan was the undisputed boss of the Indian underworld.

At this point in his story, one finds Kajee making a bid to salvage his reputation. Kajee was keen to re-establish his 'toughness' credentials, and dispel a debilitating rumour. "Most people are under the impression that I ran away to India because one of the biggest gangsters in town, whom I shall call M [Khan], threatened to kill me and had

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[46] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', 8.

[47] Kajee, 8.

[48] Carim, *Coolie, Come out and Fight!*, 50.

[49] A Khan-aligned account, on the other hand, claims he simply ran away when his nemesis, Khan, was about to be released from jail. 'Khan's Last 'Job'!', 77.

[50] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: II', 27.

assaulted me on several occasions […] What nonsense!"[51] Claiming he was scared of no-one, Kajee lists the various ways in which he had been attacked, including taking sixteen bullets over the years.

According to Kajee himself, established Johannesburg Indian business interests did not want to see him back on the scene in 1950 and lobbied Khan to get rid of the old extortionist.[52] He describes his wariness on his return and his avoidance of Khan, who, with Goolam Bhayat and Cassoojee now in his orbit again, was threatening to kill him. He avoided places where he could be attacked.[53] Eventually Khan caught up with him at his favourite haunt, the old Kosi Cafe tea-room where West had been butchered. But rather than attacking the older man, Khan warned him to go back to India: "There was a menacing gleam in his eyes, and there was nothing cowardly about M [Khan], either. If he went for you he did so in a big way".[54] And it wasn't just him; the fearless Khan had assembled a large coterie of gangsters at this point - around fifteen men, according to one source, mostly "Moslem Indians and Malays", and a Tamil bodyguard.[55] Soon after Khan's threat, says Kajee, his old colleagues (Cassoojee and Bayat) managed to broker a peace with Khan, and all of them became 'friends' again.[56] But the peace was not to last.

One of Kajee's henchmen corroborates the narrative that the feud was reignited around the profit split of gambling school protection fees around 1950. But in his 1953 memoirs, Kajee points to a more personal catalyst in their renewed power struggle – he says it started with a quarrel between the Salot and Khan brothers. When Sherief's younger brother, Solly, was injured by the Salot Gang in Durban, the incident irked Khan no end. Sherief decided to go to Durban to deal with the injury and asked Kajee and others to join him. Kajee claims that when he refused – he was friends with the Salots – Khan angrily split from him.[57] But then things only got worse between them. When Sherief was arrested after firing at Lighty's car down in Durban[58], Old Man

[51] Kajee, 27.
[52] Kajee, 27.
[53] Kajee, 28.
[54] Kajee, 28.
[55] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 7.
[56] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: II', 28.
[57] Old Man Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: III', *Drum*, August 1953.
[58] 'The Story of Lighty Salot', 49.

Kajee, in a horrid act of miscalculated betrayal, goes down to give evidence in the trial against his former partner.[59] The Crown's case against Khan flopped, the case was discharged, and the strongman returned to the Reef, very angry with his ex-associate.

The big Pretoria shoot-out

Kajee recollects that their paths miraculously didn't cross for a while - but then they 'accidentally' bumped into each other at a traffic intersection in Pretoria sometime in 1951. According to Kajee, Khan seized the opportunity and leapt out of his car with gun drawn and started firing at them, triggering a shootout. Strangely and perversely, in Kajee's account, although some African children were injured as bystanders, none of the gangsters were wounded - and he (Kajee) was unfairly arrested when the aggressor, Khan, had the audacity to lay a charge against him.[60]

However Kajee's own henchman, Garret Adams, remembered the incident quite differently, claiming he was in one of three cars that Kajee took to Pretoria to hunt down Khan's gang. The leading Kajee car eventually "noticed the Sheik's[61] [two] cars coming towards the corner, so they stopped in the middle of the intersection, blocking the cars".[62] Khan, in the first car, was surrounded by the other Kajee cars, and separated from his second car as the Kajee gang started firing - "I reckon he must have been scared crazy, because he jumped out of the car into the hail of lead, emptying his gun towards our car while running to the second".[63] Khan got away in this second car, while the remainder of his outfit and Kajee's gang were set–upon by angry African bystanders, incensed at the wounded children. For once, gangsters were at the mercy of the public: "I think they would have mobbed us if the police hadn't arrived to arrest us".[64]

A state of impunity

> "How can you be a bloody gangster and not trade information with the police, man?!" - EP[65]

[59] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: III', 14.
[60] Kajee, 14.
[61] In Adams' narrative, a code-name 'the Sheik' is consistently used for Khan.
[62] Garrett Adams, 'Confessions of an Ex-Gangster', *Drum*, November 1953, 41.
[63] 41.
[64] 41.
[65] EP, Interview with author.

Oddly enough, even though eighteen assorted gangsters were arrested for public violence and Khan laid charges against Kajee, bail was paid and it all came to naught: the court case was (once again) discharged and everyone walked off scot free. Garrett Adams' account of the Pretoria shoot-out, points to the boldness with which the Reef gangsters planned and executed their attacks, not fearing to perform these battles in public spaces in full view of witnesses. The almost rhetorical question that arises here is, how seriously did the apartheid justice system take 'non-white' gangster violence? It seems that gangsters knew the answer: not very seriously.

Kynoch offers a devastating thumbnail critique of the deficiency of South African policing in the twentieth century, which helps explain the perverse logic of the situation. While government cracked down on white gangsters in the early 1900s,

> Policing of black areas was, for the most part, limited to the enforcement of pass regulations and liquor raids and, as long as violent crime was contained within the townships and posed no threat to whites, it was largely ignored. This early pattern persisted throughout the century.[66]

The Reef then, in the 1950s, was a 'gangster's paradise', one in which hard-nosed opportunists such as Kajee and Khan could flourish without fear of serious prosecution.

Adams reveals that there was always a designated 'backstop', a member of the gang left behind with sufficient cash to pay the bail money should they be arrested.[67] This audacious arrangement indicates their confidence and complicity in the charade of 'non-white' policing - you might well be arrested, but you could count on it not going much further. While the police probably had to be seen to be reacting to a public disturbance or crime with an initial arrest, it seems this was essentially 'gestural' policing, a performance of social control; gangsters knew the chances were that there would be no proper investigative follow-through, and the case would be quietly discharged.

On top of the systemic lack of policing interest, degrees of complicity between cop and crook allowed for an even greater sense of impunity in 'connected' gangsters. EP, an activist, suggests they had some intelligence that Kajee had been working with the Special Branch.[68] At one point Kajee himself admits that other "gangsters did not like

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[66] Kynoch, 'Crime, Conflict and Politics in Transition-Era South Africa', 494.

[67] Adams, 'Confessions of an Ex-Gangster', November 1953, 41.

[68] EP, Interview with author.

me because I assisted the police".[69] This double-agent game had been going on for some time, with Khan's lieutenant claiming that Kajee was, already in the early 1940s, "playing police informer thinking he would be given police protection".[70] And in the late 1950s, although Khan was in jail, Kajee and other members of the 'Malay Camp' syndicate were apparently exploiting their reputation as police informers to extort other criminals, as well as to silence ordinary people who might otherwise have reported them to the police – "the victims of these outrages refuse to talk because they are scared" it is reported.[71] The 1959 article ends with a nightmarish image of corrupt collaboration, where the gangsters have somehow 'captured' the police: "How can they talk when there are cases after men have been arrested - these gangsters are reported to have gone down to the cells of Marshall Square to beat them up".[72]

Power, paranoia and pawns

The detailed narrative of henchman, Garrett Adams, sheds some light on the Kajee-Khan paranoia at the beginning of the decade. By the time of his 'Confessions of an ex-Gangster' series in 1953-54, Adams has "turned over a new leaf".[73] Having left Kajee's 'syndicate' in 1951 for an adventure in Cape Town, he fell afoul of the Old Man when he returned the next year. Discovering that Kajee had been sowing dissent with a mutual acquaintance, Adams confronted his old boss angrily. After this blow-up, Adams relates, he was set-up and set-upon by Kajee's gang a few days later: "as I turned a bend on the first floor, five of the mob I had threatened were there waiting for me. One was carrying a small Indian axe, another a baton, and the rest, tyre levers".[74]

Interestingly, Adams does not identify his assailants in his detailed account of the attack in the 1953 'confession'. But two years earlier, in a much shorter account, he had let slip who the chief attacker was: "I saw Old Man Y [Kajee] lift a chopper and the next moment I felt a burning pain on my head"[75], before losing consciousness. It is worth pondering the use of weapons in this incident – apart from the axe, used sparingly for

[69] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: II', 27.
[70] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', 71.
[71] 'Terror Reign Let Loose on Joburg's Asians', *Drum*, June 1959.
[72] 'Terror Reign Let Loose on Joburg's Asians', 37.
[73] Adams, 'Confessions of an Ex-Gangster', November 1953, 40.
[74] Garrett Adams, 'Confessions of an Ex-Gangster', *Drum*, January 1954, 46.
[75] 'Gang War Crisis!', *Drum*, November 1952, 16.

the initial blow and wielded carefully by the boss, the weapons are all blunt. It would appear that, like many of their planned assaults on uncooperative clients, the gang's objective was not to kill Adams but to teach him a lesson.

After the brutal attack, Adams was hospitalised with a "bashed-in skull" and broken limbs – the 'result' shows how these professional gangsters were able to modulate their violence to specific degrees. Rarely was it necessary to kill someone and risk the legal consequences. An account of Khan's attack on a gang in Durban expresses a similar reserve of force - although the gangsters got "the hiding of their lives", "nobody was killed. Sheriff saw to that. Though he was ruthless he never wanted to be pulled in on a murder rap."[76] Kajee's gang then managed to discourage the witnesses from making any statements on the assault. Apart from a case study in Fordsburg-style intimidation (Adams rediscovers Christianity soon afterwards), the whole sorry incident illustrates the ruthless, distrustful mob culture, in which gang bosses could turn on their henchmen as expendable pawns in their game of power.

1952 - Sherief Khan is bust!

Then in the Highveld autumn of 1951, a major upheaval in the underworld took place, which for many seemed to signal the end of Khan's career - little did they know he was just starting. Khan roped in Flying Squad members of the police to assist his burglary outfit pull off one his most ambitious capers yet – the daylight robbery of a white-owned department store in downtown Johannesburg. The gang met the cops at Zoo Lake on a Friday to plot the raid – and on Sunday, April 15 the plan was implemented: "two lorries, followed closely by a flying squad car, pulled up in front of the shop. In broad daylight the biggest and most audacious robbery was committed".[77]

Indeed, this was to become one of the most popular stories about Khan, one that cemented his reputation as a mercurial, Robin Hood-type figure, an urban outlaw with almost superhuman agency. Here was someone who had bent the law so completely to his will that he had white cops working for him – evidently there was something enormously satisfying about this feat for a subordinated Indian community. The police officers had parked their flashing Flying Squad vehicle outside the store while it was

[76] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', 69.
[77] 'Khan's Last 'Job'!', 81.

being looted, and then escorted the laden lorries away from the crime scene. Another police car was on standby.[78] Seemingly, the theft had been perfectly executed, with £4000 worth of goods netted – but a few weeks later Khan, cops and accomplices were all arrested.

At this point Kajee claims there was a reconciliation of sorts, where he tried to help Khan by "arranging defence expenses"[79] – a shorthand for exacting these from the compliant trader class. Additionally, it seems that in 1952, while Khan was awaiting the outcome of the trial, Kajee was back in the protection game as part of the younger gangster's outfit, reportedly attacking an uncooperative businessman in a cellar with a knobkerrie.[80] Khan was now established as 'the strongman' and leader of an enlarged syndicate, with Kajee positioned as 'the brain'. Despite all attempts at getting him off the hook, Khan was found guilty and sentenced to nine years in jail.

With Khan seemingly in jail for the rest of the decade, one would have expected him to have lost sway of the criminal empire he had just consolidated. While some accounts (including Kajee's) indicate that the two gang bosses had 'made up' during Khan's 1952 trial period, once Khan was in jail it seems quite possible - as a Khan lieutenant reported - that Old Man Kajee took one last opportunity to side-line Khan's associates.[81] However, by the time Khan emerged from jail at the end of the decade, it seems that the two old rivals were no longer at loggerheads. During the 'Malay Mob' war of 1963-64, Khan's court testimony reveals he and Kajee shared interests in gambling schools, and were plotting on the same side.

During Khan's second long absence from the streets, his associates had continued with their established gambling and extorting activities through the 1950s. A rather critical (and unsurprisingly anonymous) *Drum* writer claims in 1959 that the remnants of the 'Malay Camp Gang' (Khan's network, not the 'Malay Mob' of the 1960s), who "had learnt their trade from a Durban gangster" (Khan), have been terrorising the local Indian community for the last few years.[82] Apart from the extraordinary and inexplicable

[78] 'Khan's Last 'Job'!', 81.

[79] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', 8.

[80] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 34.

[81] Khan's 'confidante' claims that the conniving Kajee tried to frame him by lending him a car and then reporting it stolen - 'Khan's Last 'Job'!', 81.

[82] 'Terror Reign Let Loose on Joburg's Asians', 33.

killing of a Ferreirastown gambler, Essop Patel, in 1956, Khan's colleagues were also making the news for innovating new forms of extortion. These, according to the 1959 article, included kidnapping of wealthy family members and blackmailing of other criminals.[83]

Reviewing Sherief Khan's activities

Sentenced in 1952 for his second big stint in jail, Sherief Khan, only 35, had already become, remarkably, in the words of his right-hand man, the "South African King of the Underworld".[84] *Drum* photographer, Jurgen Schadeberg's recycled epithet from the 1980s explains the achievement: "the man who did not go to school and could not write his own name, was destined to become King of the South African underworld."[85] Rather than being squashed by apartheid's deprivations, Sherief had leveraged these conditions to his advantage in breaking his way out of poverty. In concluding this chapter, it is worth considering the main business activities he had managed to establish or take over by 1952.

Extortion and Protection

Khan and associates had founded a feared reputation as extortionists and providers of protection. It would be unwise to dismiss the term 'protection' as simply a euphemism for professional extortion in the apartheid context. Kynoch says of 'non-white' communities generally, "the nature of [deficient] township policing encouraged both criminal gang activity and the emergence of vigilante organizations".[86] This followed a general pattern - "in many cases these protective associations developed authoritarian tendencies and deteriorated into criminal organizations".[87] As described in Chapter 1, Indians felt themselves a specifically vulnerable minority in early apartheid, open to attack on various fronts. There was a perceived need for personal and commercial safety by 'non-white' communities in Fordsburg and surrounds deprived of proper policing and access to the courts. Khan's gang emerged in similar circumstances to the Crimson League in Durban. The League was initially set-up to protect business from criminals

[83] 'Terror Reign Let Loose on Joburg's Asians', 36.

[84] 'Khan's Last 'Job'!', 81.

[85] Jurgen Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People of South Africa*, 1st ed (Johannesburg: Bailey's African Photo Archives, 1987), 208.

[86] Kynoch, 'Crime, Conflict and Politics in Transition-Era South Africa', 497.

[87] Kynoch, 497.

and extortionists, but then extended their 'protection' to women from thugs, to Tamil girls from Moslem boys, and symbolically to Indians (as a 'race') from Africans post the 1949 Durban riots - while seemingly becoming extortionist themselves.

One narrative of Khan's beginnings in Johannesburg claims that he was brought up from Durban to protect the interests of a rich Indian business family - private security, bodyguard and debt-collector rolled into one. An anonymous 1959 *Drum* writer mentions that the 'Durban gangster' (Khan) "soon realised how much power he had, because merchants started approaching him for protection. Whenever he got into trouble, they arranged for his bail and briefed counsel to defend them."[88] Here the expected extortion causality of 'protector' approaching 'client' is reversed - Khan's business of protection is handed to him on a silver platter. However Khan got started, debt-collecting was definitely a form of revenue collection he offered to Indian clients, on top of his own private 'collections'. EP confirms this[89], while Laloo Chiba explains the service his friend of 1950 provided to those businessmen to whom people owed money – "if they didn't pay, they would hire the services of Sherief Khan, who would go there, threaten them, beat them up, or whatever the case may be."[90] Conversely, being under Khan's protection probably also meant you had a degree of immunity from other debt collectors and extortionists.

It is worth considering social theorist Diego Gambetta's understanding of the Sicilian mafia's primarily economic role in providing genuine commercial protection to private clients in an 'low-trust' economic setting. Weak state institutions create a trust deficit, where promises, guarantees and debts can easily be reneged on. A mafioso is a "special entrepreneur who safeguards the smoothness of transactions in exchange for a reward which he can extract from both parties".[91] In this setting, the client often actively seeks out a 'protector', unlike simple predatory extortion. Gambetta's view of a third-party guarantor of transactions and regulator of illicit industries, feared and respected for their access to violence, seems to fit some of Khan's roles in the Indian business world quite

[88] 'Terror Reign Let Loose on Joburg's Asians', 33.
[89] EP, Interview with author.
[90] Laloo 'Isu' Chiba, Interview with author, Audio recording, 17 February 2017.
[91] Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia*, 21.

aptly. The South African Indian business world was similar to its Sicilian counterpart in its marginal proximity to government regulation and the courts.

Similar to the Crimson League's reputed defence of the Durban Indian community, Khan and his gangsters also developed a reputation for protecting the neighbourhood in *ad hoc* situations of unexpected violence – one female interviewee warned that I should be "careful" about calling Khan an 'extortionist' as he "protected the community".[92] Two types of community protection were explained. Apparently white youths would at times launch 'raids' on the Fietas community, possibly as some kind of racialised masculinity ritual, and the gangsters could be called to come and deal with these intrusions. Khan and company could also be approached to intervene in a domestic abuse situation where, for example, "a husband had beaten his wife"[93] – they would have a talk with the husband, and warn him it shouldn't happen again. In this context, extortion would constitute a specific sub-set of 'protection' arrangements all involving the back-end threat of violence, with a view to extracting monies from a client.

Nevertheless, Kajee and Khan were known as professional extortionists, and created complex systems of patronage and cash flows that would extend throughout the Transvaal.[94] According to EP, extortion would have been these gangsters' main activity and "their full-time occupation".[95] There was nothing novel in the extortion arrangement, explained by *Drum* as "the age-old gangster technique of putting the big squeeze on businessmen, demanding protection money, in return for which the businessmen were guaranteed unmolested trading and protection from the gang".[96] It should however be noted that this description still alludes to some 'peace of mind' the businessman procured in the extortion relationship – while they had to take it, they got a shot of immunity from other gangsters and petty criminals.

The cordial and business-like relations between businessmen and most of these professional gangsters should not be discounted. EP describes their 'civility': "Those people are ruthless against those people they want to get something from – but for the

[92] AK, Interview with author, Audio recording, 2017.
[93] AK.
[94] 'Drum Investigation into Extortion', *Drum*, July 1964.
[95] EP, Interview with author.
[96] 'Goolam Gangat - The Life of a Gangster', *Drum*, March 1964, 24.

rest of the people they would be very friendly".[97] An insider however, claimed his boss Khan was in the 1940s, still contemptuous of extortion as a business activity.[98] At this stage, Khan was making lots of money from the big shop-breaking heists he masterminded, which could explain this kind of talk. But *Drum* magazine's first exposé of Sherief Khan's dubious dealings maintains that by 1951 "most of Khan's money was made in extortion from small shopkeepers and big businessmen."[99] It would remain his bread and butter for decades, with reports of Khan still extorting into the 1980s. While Kajee established the practice, Khan took it over and scaled it up, leveraging his oversized reputation to grow the business.

It seems that initially Khan's extortion methods would often take the form of a one-off high figure extraction, rather than smaller monthly payments, as with gambling school 'protection fees'. In the 1950s, Khan refrained from direct initial involvement in the approach – he was the 'good cop' kept in reserve. It was rather members of his gang that would go and "threaten to 'bust up the shop' and […] injure the family".[100] This is where Khan's dramatic artistry came in - it was "when the actual threat was made that Khan would intervene, in a seemingly benevolent role"[101] to play a mediating part in 'negotiating' with the extortionists. Again, one can find shades of Gambetta's view of a transaction 'guarantor' here. Reducing the price, it would seem worthwhile to the victim. Another tactic involved sniffing out illicit or unlicensed businesses – Old Man Kajee's reputation as a police informer could be leveraged to coerce these vulnerable traders into coughing up without employing violence.[102]

Burglary

According to the 1952 exposé, Sherief Khan's operations in the early years included shop-breaking. Careful planning and preparation was done for shop break-ins by a dedicated burglary gang, a major source of revenue for Khan in the early 1950s – up to £1000 a month it was claimed.[103] Vans were bought to transport the stolen goods to

[97] EP, Interview with author.
[98] 'Khan's Last 'Job'!', 79.
[99] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 34.
[100] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 34.
[101] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 34.
[102] 'Drum Investigation into Extortion', 39.
[103] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 7.

warehouses in the white area of Bertrams, or preferably, directly to waiting "Indian and European fences across the Reef".[104] Deals with fences could be struck beforehand, with exact quantities, delivery times and prices arranged before the actual burglary took place.[105]

It was the aforementioned spectacularly orchestrated shop-breaking effort in April 1951 that put Khan behind bars for several years again. Together with three members of his gang, he was convicted - shockingly, for white South Africa - alongside two white associates, one of whom was a policeman. The trial exposed Khan's extraordinary organisational ability[106] - but shop-breaking took its toll. Old Man Kajee[107] reveals the stresses, strains and general precariousness of Khan's shop-breaking business model as it existed in the early 1950s. While waiting to dispose of his 'backdoor' goods, Khan "would jump up for no reason at all and pace restlessly. A lesser man would have snapped under the strain".[108] And if Khan took all the risk, it was the faceless (white) fences receiving his stolen goods that had the upper hand in setting the price.

Gambling

One regular source of revenue for Sherief Khan and friends was illicit gambling – he ran his own schools and benefitted from many others through 'shares' and extortion over the decades.[109] While it did not yield the majestic profits of shop-breaking, it was a relatively low-risk activity. Bhayat, Mayet and Kajee also ran gambling schools in Ferreirastown and Fordsburg - Carim relates how his father would frequent "Mr K's [Kajee's] gambling den on Mint Rd".[110] In addition to part shares in various gambling schools, Khan and associates took protection fees from a spread of gambling operations all over 'non-white' Johannesburg. It was probably the beginning of the wider extortion network they developed over the years. Gambling would have been an easy place to start with the extortion business; gambling and selling liquor was illegal, and so these

[104] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 7.

[105] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 7.

[106] A Flying Squad member was convicted for parking his car outside the burglary site "for the protection of the Indians and Africans involved in the case, and of escorting out of the 'danger zone' one of the vans which removed the loot"- 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 35.

[107] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: III'.

[108] Kajee, 15.

[109] Schadeberg, *The Fifties People of South Africa*, 208.

[110] Carim, *Coolie, Come out and Fight!*, 49.

particular business owners were doubly vulnerable. They could not report the extortionists to the police, but they themselves could be reported to the police.

One insider claimed that already in the 1940s, Khan's gang was apparently bagging up to £400 per week from these gambling taxes.[111] As we have seen, the gang wars of the early 1950s over gambling 'protection' rights indicate how lucrative this activity was. The killing of ex-serviceman Essop Patel in 1956 a few years later shows how it was not just the operators of casinos that were the targets of intimidation. When they were found to be frequenting casinos further afield, Ferreirastown gamblers were sometimes crudely forced to patronise local gambling dens owned by the gangsters. Patel and a friend were at a Kliptown shebeen when they heard that the Ferreirastown gangsters were displeased at them gambling elsewhere and had issued threats. Patel ventured out to the gambling school to make peace with the gangsters - but never returned.[112] His nephew found his body in Market Street; it appeared that he had been assaulted by the gangsters with a baseball bat and possibly an axe.[113]

Smuggling and dealing in illicit goods

Occasionally Khan seems to have ventured into smuggling. Back in the 1940s, Khan came up with a famously bizarre venture – "I'm going to put up the biggest magical show" he apparently announced to surprised associates.[114] He commissioned a number of 'magical props' along with oversized containers built with false bottoms. In these, cases of liquor were to be hidden and transported on a truck. This mad-cap scheme apparently turned out to be an ingenious ploy for smuggling liquor from Natal to the Transvaal for a while. Buying from wholesalers at the coast, Khan sold to legally-constrained Indians on the Reef - somehow this trade yielded profits of 100%.[115] Drug dealing however, was not something Khan embraced until the late 1970s, when the massive profits of the Mandrax trade became apparent – but this latter part of Khan's career is beyond the scope of this study.

[111] 'The "Cop-Proof" Gangster', 63.
[112] 'Terror Reign Let Loose on Joburg's Asians'.
[113] 'Terror Reign Let Loose on Joburg's Asians', 33.
[114] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', 69.
[115] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', 71.

Domestic problems & romantic affairs

Like the Crimson League in Durban, Old Man Kajee's outfit also seemed to have muscled in on the domestic 'melodrama' business, in the early 1950s intervening in an elopement and then pressing for a large payment from the parents.[116] This was to become a regular intervention for Khan, something he was renowned for dealing with. As EP recalls, "there were times when people were using them if they thought their son wanted to get married to the wrong woman. They would send Sheriff Khan".[117] Elopements, affairs, family disputes, undesirable romantic attention or 'interference' with women, all provided an opportunity for the gang to get involved and do some persuading. While one view of this line of activity was that it allowed Khan and associates to offer a *pro bono* 'service to the community', EP is adamant that this was business as usual: "No! You paid for it!"[118] This, however, was not their core business, and to what extent this was fundamentally driven by an economic imperative or a desire to be seen as local custodians of the id, is debatable.

The following chapter looks at how Khan manages to re-establish his operations and position in the Indian underworld in the 1960s on his release from jail.

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[116] 'Gang War Crisis!', 17.

[117] EP, Interview with author.

[118] EP.

Chapter 6 - The return of Sherief Khan: the 1960s

Introduction

It is worth pausing at this point, while Khan is behind bars, to reflect on his incredible journey so far. By the time Sherief Khan went to prison in 1952, he had established a bouquet of revenue streams that would remain the basis of operations until the emergence of the Mandrax gold-rush in the 1970s. The gang leader had built up a network of trusted colleagues who pursued these activities while he was in prison, and kept the Khan 'brand' alive during his absence from the streets. This chapter begins by exploring who Khan had become by 1952, how he dazzled others with his persona and masculine traits, as well as looking at the web of characters that he was involved with. We pick up Khan's story in the early 1960s when he was released from prison, focusing on how Khan re-established hegemony in the underworld in dealing with a major rival, the 'Malay Mob'. The chapter also looks at how Khan's ensuing murder trial exemplified a way of exploiting an ineffective criminal justice system - not only could he act with impunity, but it also further enhanced Khan's reputation as someone unassailable.

The subtext of this chapter has to do with revealing Khan's maturation as a performer. An "avid crime movie fan, borrowing a lot of jargon and ideas from the gangster films"[1], Sherief Khan knew how to play the sardonic *noir* gangster. He had a receptive audience and chroniclers who could both appreciate his mastery of the role and help build up his 'script'. A resident of Lenasia, Hamid Khan, recalls meeting his namesake as a teenager one day at a social function in the early 1970s:

> So there was a hundred people waiting to greet the *bra*. And you would say he was the president – and he was just a gangster, you know. But the respect he collected in the community – and his gang was sitting there, Dan and some other guys. We all stood in the queue – so when we went to school, we could tell all the *chommies*, *ek se*, hey *bru*! This weekend we went to a function - we greeted Sherief Khan![2]

[1] Schadeberg, *The Fifties People of South Africa*, 208.

[2] Hamid Khan, Interview with author, Audio recording, 25 May 2017.

Ordinary Indian people were taken with this extraordinary 'Pathan' hero (see below), who although clearly self-interested, nevertheless represented rebellion, self-fashioning and a certain kind of ironic detachment from apartheid's demoralising constraints.

Extraordinary qualities

How had Khan reached his point of pre-eminence, not only in relation to the broader public but within the underworld and his network of colleagues who managed to keep the momentum of his 'brand' going in the 1950s? While we have looked at many contextual factors, Khan's character showed remarkable resolve. What follows is a consideration of the 'leadership' qualities and personal attributes that had worked so successfully for Khan in his quest for wealth and power. As I have argued, Indian society in the early apartheid period was invested in cultivating and celebrating certain kinds of mythic hyper-masculinity, including the gangster and the soccer player, in the wake of debilitating and emasculating colonial forms of "indentured masculinity" (see page 22) – Khan fitted the bill perfectly.

The big thing with Khan, as we have seen, was his *physical dominance* – Khan had developed a reputation for toughness, boldness, as well as an unusual eagerness for physical combat. Even prior to Kajee's fall from grace with the killing of German West, Khan had established himself as the "undisputed leader" of a rival gang who had defied Kajee's bigger grouping and beat them at their own game. Prior to his first big jail sentence in the mid-1940s, he had shrewdly confided to his 'friend' that, rather than eliminating Kajee altogether, he would keep him going, partly to extract tribute, but also as symbol of his own dominance – "we'll have no opposition" he tells his men.[3]

EP, a teenager in the 1950s in Khan's home turf of Ferreriastown, explains part of the gangster's aggressive reputation was related to his Indian heritage as a 'Pathan'.

> And the things people used to say is, don't cross a Pathan. Because those things [sic] are mad. And they are very tough. And they are not afraid of anything. So you cross a Pathan and you get involved in a fight with a Pathan you are bound to lose! So Sheriff - that's what the Khans are, they are these Pathans […] There is no doubt he had a helluva reputation as being very tough, and that you don't cross him.[4]

[3] 'The "Cop-Proof" Gangster', 63.

[4] EP, Interview with author.

This key element of 'reputation', which maintained his dominant position in relation to other gangsters, businessmen, and the community at large, is developed further on in this study (see page 118 and 136).

Another strong drawcard was his *personal charisma* and *visual appeal*. Khan looked the part – a cinematic gangster both in looks and actions – and this must have played a role in his growing influence over others. He 'cut a dashing figure' as a "handsome man"[5], with chiselled features and an athletic physique that he kept trained and ready for action.[6] The hyper-masculine body was impeccably groomed and dressed in stylish suits, and transported in a shiny, "powerful, American car".[7] Styled as a slick, sardonic 'gentleman gangster'[8] who positioned himself above the street hustlers, he presented himself as a 'businessman', at ease and friends with other Indian businessmen.

Khan managed to channel this physical attractiveness into a charismatic sociability and personal 'brand'– his cultivated friendliness and approachability meant he was not just 'attractive' in the abstract, but that he successfully attracted both men and women into his orbit. People went to him. In some cases, this 'friendship' was part of his game, a trap - the wealthy widow's car blunder was just one example. Once you approached the gangsters, whether it was Khan or Kajee, for however small a favour or job, they would not let you go. In some cases of friendship, however, Khan seemed to be simply that strong, elder brother that many Indian young men wanted. The late struggle stalwart, Laloo 'Isu' Chiba, who briefly stayed with Khan in 1950 when he was thrown out of home, remembers him as "cool, calm and collected" gangster who generously took him to the movies, and "took a lot of pride in his fancy Buick". With his "dominating personality, he was quite a chap, no doubt about that".[9]

In a time when Westerns such as *Gunfight at the O.K Corral* (1957) and *Last Train from Gun Hill* (1959) were hugely popular with South African Indian audiences[10],

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[5] Chiba, Interview with author.

[6] Khan's daughter recalls he had a daily boxing routine in their garden, while veteran journalist, Farook Khan, celebrates his famous "iron grip" handshake - Naidoo and Heatlie, *Legends of the Casbah*.

[7] 'Sherief Khan's Latest Venture', *Drum*, September 1961, 56.

[8] It is worth noting that while the gangster genre launched in the early 1930s, it was only in the 1940s that *film noir* brought a distinctly 'dark' and visual style to the crime film – in which the 'look' and the *mise-en-scène* becomes highly significant.

[9] Chiba, Interview with author.

[10] Kalim Rajab, Interview with author, Audio recording, 21 November 2017.

Sherief Khan styled himself and was seen by some as a latter-day 'sheriff' in a lawless land, a *protector of the Indian community,* particularly when it came to ethnic incursions. EP recalls hearing how Khan dealt with a Soweto-based African gang who came to Fordsburg:

> I didn't witness it myself but we were told that – one of – Orlando Pirates, for example, had a centre-forward called Black Sash, and Scara Sono's father and them, and they also thought they might want to come and make a break [and] get a share of this extortion money. And Sheriff Khan and Black Sash – big, tall, bald-headed – apparently, Sheriff beat the shit out of him - in a one-on-one fight, in Fordsburg. And that's how Sheriff's reputation grows even more.[11]

Even though EP was involved in non-racial political activism, the story is told with a twinge of ethnic pride - in this local arena, Khan was his champion. Drawing on Khan's battle with the Malay Mob in the early 1960's, veteran *Drum* journalist, Farook Khan (no relation), goes as far as claiming that Sheriff Khan's whole mission to Johannesburg was to "look after the Indians" and "fight the coloureds".[12]

Khan was also remarkably *self-disciplined.* While he evidently smuggled liquor (and eventually became a Mandrax kingpin in the late 1970s and 1980s) he seemed to avoid falling for the obvious vices that might have diluted his intensity, and which took their toll on many others of his ilk. Numerous articles testify to his teetotalling ways, and one might assume that this was just part of Khan's PR project to present himself as a 'good Moslem' and respectable community figure. However, a confessional account by one of his gang members points to more self-interested reasons. He recalls Khan warning him that he was "drinking too much and keeping company with undesirable women" – Khan declared that while he himself was a Moslem, this wasn't the reason for his abstention: "a drink-sodden tongue will tell a lot, and you will find yourself behind bars".[13] The drinking, womanising henchman was warned by Khan to shape up or ship out. Self-discipline seemed to be a way to focus and maintain his incredible energy and will-to-power, while building resilience in the face of adversity.

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[11] EP, Interview with author.

[12] Khan, Interview with author, 28 January 2015.

[13] 'Sheriff Khan Smuggled Liquor from Natal', 69.

The Sherief Khan Gang

Sherief Khan's world of gangsters, from the forties to the sixties, was a fluctuating field of alliances and rivalries. As Chiba puts it:

> Even amongst gangsters, there was enmity. I'm sure of that. […] a common lifestyle doesn't mean that you are friends […] because sometimes protection rackets, you've got your own turf. You've got your own clients as it were.[14]

This was clear in the volatile relationship between Kajee and Khan. While there are frequent references to Khan's 'multi-racial' gang, it would seem that African, coloured, Chinese (and even White) gangsters that worked with or for him were mostly subordinates and more transient than permanent members of the network. However, from court records and press reports one picks up a fairly consistent inner circle of Indian 'colleagues' working in tandem with Khan. Although Khan might have taken the limelight - and the heat - as the leader, these mostly Muslim Gujarati-speaking Indians worked as a cooperative or syndicate, and there was at time a close-to-egalitarian understanding around the distribution of profits amongst the top brass. Carim surmises that each of these 'players' might also have a few personal henchmen that would orbit them specifically for individual work, but they could come together as a team for collective operations.[15]

Composition of the 'Syndicate'

Who comprised this 'syndicate', as Garret Adams called it? Old Man Kajee, as we have seen, was one of Khan's oldest connections, going back to around 1940. According to EP, "Sheriff was the obvious leader of the gang – but he was also the tough one."[16] Old Man Kajee, who really was getting on by now, still had his uses - EP recalls, "people used to say […] the tough guy is Sheriff, but the brain is Old Man Kajee."[17] Goolam Bhayat and Khan's brother-in-law, Essop Sarang, were also part of this inner sanctum

[14] Chiba, Interview with author.
[15] Carim, Interview with author.
[16] EP, Interview with author.
[17] EP.

for decades. Bhayat and Sarang, who lived in Kholvad House[18] in Ferreirastown, were connected as "Kholvadians":

> Amongst these Moslems, at that time, that village that their ancestors came from, people tended to congregate together. So Sarang was known as what was called a Kholvadian - people whose ancestors came from a small village called Kholvad, outside Surat [in Gujarat, India]. And so was Goolam Bhayat.[19]

For Muslim Gujarati people, regional identity and village kinship ties facilitated networks in the new world of Johannesburg. Essop Mayet was another one of the big shots in the 1950s and 1960s – Chiba remembers his shebeen and gambling den on the corner of Avenue and Lillian Roads in Fordsburg[20], while Carim knew him as his father's protector in Ferreirastown. When Carim's father was beaten up by some of the Becker Street Boys, it was Mayet who rounded up and punished the culprits.[21]

Then came the second tier of collectors and henchmen. The younger, scrawny Essop 'Junior' Adam, who would become Khan's right-hand man in the 1960s and 1970s, was a junior partner in the circle from the mid-1950s. EP dismisses him as a "weak fellow" – "when you're young, [you say] '*ag* no, this *ou*, he's part of Sherriff Khan's gang', but really, he's nothing".[22] Mohammed Cassoojee, referred to by Kajee as his trusted lieutenant, pops up quite often in the early days, while Goolam Gangat, killed at age thirty-eight, was another 'collector' who "could plan things".[23]

On the other hand, Dan September, a coloured gangster from Sophiatown reputed to fire a shotgun from under his coat, became one of the most feared punishers of Khan's organisation and Khan's right-hand man. Interestingly, this role was also linked to the fantasy space of the cinema (see page 146 for a more extended discussion).

> Dan was the main tough guy […] Also used to work for the Majestic Cinema, as a kind of bodyguard there. But if anyone did anything, Dan was there to evict you from the cinema. But Dan was very tough! And he was

[18] Kholvad House is 5-story apartment building on Market Street built by the Gujarati Kholvadian sub-community in 1942. One of its most famous residents was ANC political leader, Ahmed Kathrada.

[19] EP, Interview with author.

[20] Chiba, Interview with author.

[21] Carim, Interview with author.

[22] EP, Interview with author.

[23] EP.

> feared. And everybody knew, if you did something wrong, Dan would come for you.[24]

Already present in the late 1950s, September comes to the fore alongside Junior in the 1960s and 1970s. Other gangsters associated with Khan in the 1950s included Leslie Harvey from Fordsburg, Cassim De Lair from Doornfontein, while another strongman, Marie Pillay, supposedly hailed from Khan's home town of Umzinto in Natal.

A new beginning or false start?

By 1961 Khan was out of jail and back in the news with a new legitimate venture - the opening of a Fordsburg nightclub, suggestively named 'Club Four Aces'.[25] As the front-of-house, hand-pumping proprietor, Khan was reported to be running the place with two associates: 'Poison' Patel, the manager, and Goolam Gangat, the assistant manager, who had been in the Khan-Kajee underworld configuration for several years. While the name 'Four Aces' suggests a continuation of Khan's gambling interests, the club is punted - and that's possibly why Khan is talking to *Drum* for the first time - as the perfect place for 'socialites', law-abiding citizens who enjoy the permissible nightlife pleasures of eating-out, music and dancing. The (anonymous) writer makes no reference to Khan's recent jail term or his gangster heritage, and the veiled suggestion is that Khan has gone straight. The article nevertheless alludes to his notoriety with subtleties as "Sherief Khan, who is known throughout South Africa, has gone into a completely new line of business", and asserting that the club is attracting customers because people are keen to check out "the club owned by Sherief Khan".[26]

A few years later, Khan was no longer a night-club owner but still very much in the gambling business when a protracted struggle started with a new gang operating in Fietas. This conflict appeared to be about a gambling operation, but, according to one view, masked an underlying power grab: "another group wanted to take over from them".[27] It involved an escalation of violence and cycle of killings that would rock the Indian, Malay and coloured communities of Vrededorp and Fordsburg. Through the

[24] EP.

[25] 'Sherief Khan's Latest Venture'.

[26] 'Sherief Khan's Latest Venture', 54.

[27] EP, Interview with author.

media and word-of-mouth, mediations of a gang war would ultimately re-establish Khan's notoriety as "someone you don't want to cross".[28]

The Malay Mob

The contenders for the gangland crown were a group of gangsters that presented themselves to the media in 1964 as the 'Malay Mob'. To what extent this was their own ethnic branding is unclear – one has to at least read the prominence and repetition of this title in *Drum*'s ensuing articles, with its hardening of racial/ethnic categories, as a bid towards generating some kind plot momentum, headed towards an inevitable Malay-Indian 'showdown' (even if it never really came).

In an interview that seems to want to display their ruthlessness, 'Nel' and 'Zel' Walters, accompanied by 'the Professor' surprisingly discuss their long track-record in crime in a most unabashed manner.[29] Carim argues that the Malay community in Johannesburg should be seen as 'Muslim coloureds'[30] and were more affiliated to a coloured identity than any Asian or Indian ethnicity. However, a *Drum* article of 1964 'contextualises' the underworld dynamics between the two intertwined groups in the greater Fordsburg area:

> Indian gangsters have ruled the non-white and non-African underworld for many years and have had nobody to challenge their reign. African gangsters have steered clear of the Indians and the Indians have done the same […] But the Malay gangsters are different, they are openly defying the Indians. Indian gangsters never gave a thought to the Malays and therefore never thought of them as competitors. The Malay has always been looked upon as a man who regularly fed the gambling schools controlled by the Indian mob.[31]

It seems the new gambling schools opened by the renegade Malay gangsters in the Vrededorp area started attracting gamblers, eating away at the Indian gangsters' market share. But the confrontation between these rivals properly kicked off with the killing of Goolam Gangat. Gangat was one of the second-tier gangsters aligned to the Kajee-Khan syndicate – as a legal clerk with a day-job in an attorney's office, the story goes that he managed to get in with the gangsters by dishing out loads of free legal advice. He

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[28] EP.

[29] 'The Malay Mob', *Drum*, October 1964.

[30] Carim, Interview with author.

[31] 'Drum Investigation into Extortion', 37.

became a 'collector 'for the extortionists – his "job was to drive around collecting the pay-offs from the shop-owners. He was a middleman but he enjoyed the power which he now had by virtue of the gang behind him".[32] He got a gun and told everyone about it - unfortunately the new job seems to have gone to his head and he developed a reputation for being a spineless "bully".[33]

Drum paints Gangat's abusive arrogance as a fatal flaw. An article published just after Kajee's death in 1971 suggests there were tensions within the gang before Gangat was killed - he "had openly claimed that he was more powerful than Kajee"[34], Gangat was starting to "carry out commissions of his own"[35], and the more established Fordsburg gangsters "felt too that Goolam Gangat was getting too big for his boots".[36] It is worth noting here how *Drum* was once again reconstructing and narrating a generic gangster story - with a labyrinthine plot. Although it would 'appear' to have been the Malay Mob, the story published soon after Gangat's death insinuates that his fellow gangsters (Khan, Kajee and Mayet, etc.) could have arranged for him to be taken out. "Too big for his boots" was a stock rise-and-fall gangster trope already deployed in the Michael John stories - here it is used to specifically 'thicken the plot' around Gangat's death.

While there is no clear-cut reason accessible to us for Gangat's killing when he was stabbed outside a Fordsburg cinema in early 1964[37], if we are to consider the events that followed, it would seem to be linked to the incipient feud with the Malay Mob. Three young coloured men were arrested for the murder - including two Edries brothers - but were bailed out by someone identified as 'Professor' Fonda. Soon after this, 'the Professor', along with Zel and Nel Walters, would openly declare themselves as the leaders of the Malay Mob in their candid interviews with *Drum* magazine.

This grouping of coloured/Malay gangsters were contesting the Khan-Kajee syndicate's grip on the Vrededorp gambling scene. Gangat's death in 1964 initiated a series of threats, ultimatums and violent confrontations that culminated in the infamous 17th Street shootings. In the ensuing murder trial, a number of these contributory clashes are

[32] 'Goolam Gangat - The Life of a Gangster', 24.
[33] 'The Battle of Bullet Corner - Old Man Y: Part III', 59; 'Goolam Gangat - The Life of a Gangster'.
[34] 'Old Man Y: Part 4', 26.
[35] 'Gangat's Bid for Power - The Life of a Gangster Part II', *Drum*, April 1964, 53.
[36] 'Gangat's Bid for Power - The Life of a Gangster Part II', 55.
[37] 'Gangat's Bid for Power - The Life of a Gangster Part II', 55.

revealed, mostly triggered by rights to Abubaker Omar's gambling club on 17th Street. Khan and associates had owned a stake in Mr Omar's club – but when Khan's gang opened a new gambling school in Fordsburg early in 1964, Omar testified that they "dissolved the partnership" with him, with the proviso that "he must close his club by 10pm and send the gamblers on to the new club".[38] But when Manuel 'Nel' Walters (one of the Malay Mob leaders), became Omar's new partner he dismissed this condition. A number of threats and counter-threats ensued.

The simple economic explanation for the quarrel is consistent with Captain van Tonder's assertion that, rather than trying to maintain control over all the gambling operations, the Fordsburg gangsters' new tactic was to induce a late-night monopoly by imposing a gambling curfew on other clubs.[39] But the conflict was not that simple – in the course of the trial, Khan asserts that not only was his late friend, Gangat, one of the partners at Omar's bustling Vrededorp club, but that Gangat's death stemmed from a gambling dispute at the club with a Mr Edries.[40] Consequently, in a skirmish outside the Avalon cinema, Mr Edries had been shot dead, while two of his sons had stabbed Gangat to death. The tussle over gambling had become a blood feud as well as a more general takeover bid - "if you then took over from Sheriff Khan, then you would be the big boys".[41]

At around 9 p.m. on April 21, 1964, the '17th Street shootings' took place. This is the cinematic scene from the Malay Mob's point of view (as patched together from the flurry of *Drum* articles that revelled in the gang war of that year): Manuel Walters, Amien Edries, Gregory van Rensburg, and Karrim Byneveld were all in a car together driving down 17th Street in Vrededorp. Suddenly, out of the rainy night, a car pulled up next to them, and forced them off the road. A second car simultaneously bumped into them from behind. Khan, Mayet, Bhayat, Sarang and Junior Adam "jumped out of the car, armed with revolvers, and fired on them".[42] Van Rensburg died in the car, while Byneveld staggered to his aunt's house nearby, where he died soon afterwards. But the

[38] 'Sherief Khan - By Himself', *Drum*, August 1964, 20.
[39] 'Drum Investigation into Extortion'.
[40] 'Sherief Khan - By Himself', 20.
[41] EP, Interview with author.
[42] 'Sherief Khan - By Himself', 18.

hit was not a complete success for the attackers: Walters, purportedly the main target, was only shot in the hand and survived, while Edries escaped unscathed.

The five alleged perpetrators (along with Khan's strongman, Dan September) were arrested the next day, refused bail and brought to trial, where the first-hand accusations of Edries and Walters would drive the prosecution's case. But the accused, defended by the astute Ismail Mohammed (later to become a judge) all had credible alibis. Khan claimed to have been visiting a businessman, Solly Akoob, in Pretoria, accompanied by Old Man Kajee.[43] Importantly, Akoob backed this up, saying Khan arrived in Pretoria at the time of the murder.[44] Bhayat and Sarang claim they had supper together at Sarang's Hi-Lite restaurant in Ferreirastown, and then were back at Sarang's flat by 9 p.m. (the time of the attack). Witnesses came forward to say they saw him entering the building at that time. Neighbour, Ismail Pahad, "swore that he found Sarang there at 10 p.m., in pyjamas, and told him about the shooting".[45] Ismail (elder brother to the famous political brothers, Aziz and Essop Pahad) happened to be one of the Becker Street Boys, who we know were a local street gang aligned to Khan's syndicate. Essop Mayet had a friend testify to the fact that he was drunk with him on the night, while Junior's alibi was that he was partying in Doornfontein.[46]

At the end of the trial, the 48-year old Khan and his mostly middle-aged associates were found not guilty. Most of them were immediately rearrested on lesser charges of extortion – but crucially, the shadow of the death penalty had disappeared, much to the vocal relief of their families presented at court. Apparently "the judge attached great importance to Sherief Khan's alibi, which was well supported"[47], while the key evidence of 'Boikie' Miller was dismissed as "unreliable". Nel Walters was also dismissed as a "bad character", whose evidence should also be treated with suspicion.[48]

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[43] An anonymous *Drum* commentator credits Kajee with masterminding the Vrededorp hit, and the "fool proof case for their defence – he had brains" - 'The Battle of Bullet Corner - Old Man Y: Part III', 59. However, Kajee had fled to India, where he remained during the trial, and only returned after Khan and the others had been discharged.

[44] 'People Are Afraid to Talk, Top Cop Claims', *Drum*, June 1964, n.p.

[45] 'The Sherief Khan Case', *Drum*, June 1964, 21.

[46] 'Sherief Khan - By Himself'.

[47] 'Sherief Khan - By Himself', 23.

[48] One has to wonder how the judge could cast aspersion on Walters' character while ignoring Khan's track record, one that included two lengthy jail sentences.

Reflections on the trial

On a performative level, the trial was an opportunity for the Indian public to see a local criminal hero once again unphased and triumphing over the law. Here was "Khan, suave, well-dressed. Head cocked to one side, looking rather bored with it all."[49] But the 17th Street murder trial also stands as an illustrative case-study of how these gangsters dealt strategically with the law, and how the law dealt (or failed to deal) with them. These points we have touched on before, but I would like to briefly recapitulate four of these interrelated themes or observations: the efficacy of employing the *best legal defence*, *the paucity of police investigation and prosecution*, *intimidation of potential witnesses* and fear-mongering, as well as the *brazenness of unrepentant gangster behaviour* in the aftermath of the trial.

According to an interested bystander at the time, the top-notch defence mounted by Khan's lawyer, Ismail Mohammed, was the key ingredient in ensuring the positive outcome for the Indians – EP asserts "you have very smart lawyers like Ismail Mohammed. Very smart businessmen coming to give evidence for you, that you not there. Who's the court going to believe?"[50] Mohammed had cleverly highlighted Walters' criminal record, representing him as a 'gangster'. But when Khan was asked whether he was known as a "famous gangster" by the prosecutor, Khan flatly denied this, claiming he was a belt manufacturer, with a negligible interest in clubs these days.[51] Khan was able to produce an 'employment alibi', with financial statistics around the belt business, a fabrication undoubtedly cleverly prepared by his defence.

EP claims that Mohammed's master stroke - "and [he] was quite devastating in his cross-examination" - was dismissing Amien Edries's testimony:

> Apparently, it was raining that night […]. So one of the guys, who was from what we called Malay Camp […] when Ismail Mohammed questioned him, as soon as he heard the shots or something, he ducked, he was just sitting in the back seat. So Ismail Mahommed asked him, 'do you have eyes in the back of your head?' So then that guy's evidence was totally discredited -

[49] Juby Mayet, 'At Last... The Judge Said "Not Guilty"', *Drum*, 1964, 21.
[50] EP, Interview with author.
[51] 'The Sherief Khan Case'.

> because he said he saw them, but he couldn't possibly have seen them if he ducked - and it was raining!"[52]

We know the judge was impressed by Khan's alibi, and EP recollects the big impact made by wealthy Mr Akoob's presence in court: "So that guy came, I remember this very smart-looking Indian businessman in a very expensive suit! […] and he said 'But Sheriff Khan was with me!'"[53] Was this respected community figure coerced? EP reckons Akoob's support was not about intimidation but mutual benefits - apart from the extra protection that his testimony would have brought the prominent businessman: "I think partly they wanted to be associated [with Khan…] Big businessmen also like to associate with gangsters, "giving you a kind of stature, that you are highly respected by these gangsters".[54]

On the other hand, the investigative and preparatory work done by the police and prosecution seemed shoddy. Shady characters were brought in to testify.[55] EP's recollection of his involvement with the trial is an example of how sloppy the investigation was. Banned at the time, the police wanted EP to give evidence merely because they thought he might have been around when the shooting took place. EP pointed out he wasn't there; "I'm banned" he explained, but the police insisted - "they were paying you as a witness, so I used to hang around the court… as a potential witness".[56] As a young Ferreirastown homeboy with links to the Becker Street Boys, EP was sure to explain his actions to the gangsters being prosecuted.

> But I let Essop Sarang know, that, 'listen, I wasn't there, so I don't know what you talking about, and if they ever call me to court, I'm going to say I don't know what you talking about, because I wasn't there'. Well, eventually they didn't call me.[57]

EP had nothing to give them and told them as much. Either the police were disinterested and just going through the motions of finding a 'witness', or at most perhaps, they hoped to able to persuade him to offer up a lie or two. Whatever

[52] EP, Interview with author.
[53] EP.
[54] EP.
[55] EP.
[56] EP.
[57] EP.

their intentions, the 'purchasing' of an uncooperative and useless witness illustrates their (possibly even wilful) lack of investigative rigour.

It should be noted that Major von Tonder, the chief investigating officer, did seem to publicly display some concern around the rampant extortion network he had stumbled on in Khan's murder trial. Shocked at "the extent of the gangsters' hold on the Johannesburg Indian public" he made a grand promise: to purge the Indian community of the extortionists. "Only an all-out war on gangsters will rid the society of this menace and with the continued cooperation of the community, gangsterism will be a thing of the past in Johannesburg", he declared.[58] This we know, he did not manage to accomplish and we can only speculate why there was not even a serious attempt to follow through - perhaps he didn't have the resources, or the personal will or stamina, perhaps he was constrained by the strategic intent of his superiors to maintain a state of chaos. Perhaps it was just the "cooperation of the community" proviso that was never forthcoming. As he himself acknowledges, "the Indian community is still too scared to come forward to make statements".[59]

Indeed, one of the problems he complained about in the trial was the accused's intimidation of state witnesses and the community's general fear of reprisals from gangsters. "According to sworn statements in my possession, attempts have already been made to intimidate a witness and threaten him with bodily harm and the burning of his property". Then comes the chilling part: "He was threatened that his children would be maimed if he gave any information to the police".[60] This concurs with what EP maintains was part of a general pattern of silence – people being extorted never talked, because "the hold that gangsters have over you is fear and intimidation".[61] When it came to the 17th Street shootings, the Indian community had no doubt Khan did it: "It was generally accepted that it was them – because we knew that these other ones wanted to take over."[62] But the same principle applied: "if they can put the fear of God

[58] 'Drum Investigation into Extortion', 47.
[59] 'Drum Investigation into Extortion', 47.
[60] 'People Are Afraid to Talk, Top Cop Claims', n.p.
[61] EP, Interview with author.
[62] EP.

in you, then it doesn't matter. So publicly you won't find anybody saying that. Privately they might say, 'Ja, we know it was Sheriff Khan'".[63]

A final inference from the trial can be made from the sequence of events and performances that followed in its wake, characterised by a lack of any feeling of repentance amongst the gangsters. In the aftermath of such a high-publicity case, with an awakened police force promising a war on gangsterism, one would have expected the warring gangsters to lie low. But quite the opposite happened. First there was the big, brazen party. Solly Akoob, Khan's game-changing alibi, invites Khan's gang and over a hundred guests to his Pretoria mansion to celebrate the outcome of trial. *Drum* journalists are there to capture it all and splash the story over the pages of its next edition. An audacious toast to the accused is offered - "the boys have got themselves out of big trouble, now they must stick to small troubles".[64] It is almost as if this party is a public display of victory and continued impunity.

However, just days later the Malay Mob struck - Moegsien Edries, of the already deeply implicated Edries clan, shot Khan twice in the stomach as he approached the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court. Khan ended up in hospital with guards at his door, while Edries was arrested.[65] This, we are told, is the seventh attempt on the gangster's life. Then we have the flagrant declaration of the Malay Mob's identity in *Drum* – "We are fearless men. We are known throughout South Africa even as far as Lourenco Marques and Rhodesia…"[66] Zel, Nel and the Professor audaciously published their criminal exploits of the last two decades; they avoided mentioning Khan, but dis Old Man Kajee, who they claim grew to fear them. Next month, they were at it again. In a veiled jibe at the married Khan, Zel dismissed the idea of attachment to women: "Me? I'm a hater of women. I am only after money. You know, the biggest gangster today is controlled by a woman. His weak spot is a woman. It is funny."[67]

In the closing act of this drama, in the final month of an eventful 1964, and for the second time that year, Manuel 'Nel Fonda' Walters was shot at – this time he was

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[63] EP.

[64] Juby Mayet, 'It Was the Party That Went with a Swing...', *Drum*, September 1964, 37.

[65] Juby Mayet, 'Sherief Khan Said: "I'm Afraid Something Will Happen to Me"', *Drum*, September 1964; Juby Mayet, 'The Vigil on Room 158, Ward Two', *Drum*, September 1964.

[66] 'The Malay Mob', 7.

[67] 'How Girls Betray Gangsters', *Drum*, November 1964, 41.

sleeping in bed at his home in Ferreirastown.[68] And this time they didn't miss. It is worth noting that one of the things Goolam Bhayat allegedly asked 'Boikie' Miller to ferret out eight months earlier was where Nel slept.[69] Even though Walters had taken six bullets, he jumped up to recognise one of the attackers fleeing in a car. From his hospital bed, he vowed revenge. But this is where the media coverage ends.

The 1970s and beyond

With the trial behind him, and the Malay Mob put in their place, Khan continued with business as usual, managing to stay out of the limelight until the end of the decade. Junior made the headlines again in 1970, along with new bully-boy, Bashir Bulbulia, after assaulting a Fordsburg chemist when he refused to hand over prescription drugs.[70] This, in retrospect, was a sign of things to come. The gangsters were moving towards the drug trade, and the late 1970s would see Khan (and Junior) becoming a major distributor of the new working-class drug, Mandrax. MS, involved in Mandrax dealing at the time, knew how his competitor, Khan, operated. "He was a supplier – but on his part he was very discreet […] Of course he wouldn't sell directly to end-buyers – he sold to guys he knew, he passed it on to them, who supplied all their suppliers."[71]

Old Man Kajee died in 1971, seemingly marginalised by the rest of the gang, and apparently leaving his wife nothing more than their Kort Street flat, which she would now need to rent out to boarders.[72] In the same year, Khan now in his mid-50s, was back in court with his old enforcer, Dan September, when a businessman resisted extortion and cooperated with police in a sting.[73] This cinematic set-piece involved a tape-recorder, marked bank notes to the tune of R1000, and a thrilling car chase in which Khan and September were apprehended (but not before throwing the notes out of their car window)[74] – once again, these dramatic plot scenes seem to be straight out of some pacey crime film. But then 'Mr. X', the accusing businessman, wilted during the

[68] 'The Five Lives of Nel Fonda', *Drum*, January 1965.

[69] Mayet, 'At Last... The Judge Said "Not Guilty"', 24.

[70] 'The Day Acid Flew in a Mint Rd Shop', *Drum*, April 1970.

[71] MS, Interview with author, Audio recording, 5 July 2016.

[72] 'He Extorted Thousands; Now His Wife Takes in Boarders', *Drum*, June 1971, 23.

[73] Apart from September, Khan now has a coterie of younger, tough guys around him – Kajee and Bhayat have died, while Mayet and Sarang have seemingly receded into the background.

[74] 'The Day Mr X Shook Hands with Sherief Khan', *Drum*, May 1971.

trial. Astonishingly, X is persuaded in cross-examination that he might have wrongly assumed Khan was extorting, when all he was trying to do was settle his uncle's outstanding gambling debt. Evidently some private 'settlement' had been reached, and Khan and September were duly acquitted. And then the *coup de grace* – outside the court, Mr X "clasps" the hands of the very man he had taken to court, while telling the aghast journalists, "I have peace of mind now. I can think straight. We are great friends now… me and Sherief."[75] Sherief Khan had escaped the law once again.

A cultivated reputation

It is evident that the failed court cases against Khan were fundamentally performative in various ways – they paradoxically sustained and developed his reputation as someone who was completely above the law, and could wheedle his way out of any situation. While he did not intend to be sitting in the dock, he used these situations to his best advantage, choreographing his personal performances and pulling strings behind the scenes. These ongoing demonstrations of his impunity no doubt further discouraged any attempts by the public to take him on in any way. As Blok says of the Sicilian strongmen, witnesses would be scared to testify against the Mafiosi out of fear of retribution, which in turn enhanced their status as 'untouchable': "This greatly helped to enhance their power and their reputation as 'men of respect'."[76]

But the reputation augmentation process was not just advanced by the outcome of the 'X' trial – the court case provided a stage for the Khan mystique to be played out, displayed to the public. The journalists played their part here, mediating his 'image' to an expectant readership interested in Khan's latest move. As per the *Drum* 'house-style' of cinematic crime reportage developed in the 1950s (see page 133), they translated what they saw in court into filmic images and plot lines, maintaining him as a sellable movie character.

Here he was, again, immaculately dressed, "cool, calm, collected"[77], unafraid of the law, unrepentantly the gentleman-gangster. In the 1971 trial, his own lawyer repeatedly referred to Khan's 'reputation' in a bid to show that he might not be who he appears to

[75] 'The Day Mr X Shook Hands with Sherief Khan', 46.
[76] Blok, 'Reflections on the Sicilian Mafia', 8.
[77] Chiba, Interview with author.

be - “it is an accepted fact with his reputation”, “because of Mr Khan’s reputation”, “he has not what you’d call a happy reputation”, “a man of shocking reputation”, “because of Khan’s reputation”, “because of Sherief Khan’s reputation”.[78] The underlying legal logic: ‘we all know he has this reputation of being a gangster, it is probably generally true, but in this particular instance it is false’. And this argument helped win the case. But the counter-effect of this repetition is that it also, once again, validated that very ‘reputation’. Khan got to daringly, brazenly, exhibit his gangster identity in a court of law – and so maintain or enhance his reputation as unassailable.

We have seen how from the early days Khan built his criminal career on a ‘reputation’ for toughness, resilience and exceptional confrontational skills. At first, it was limited to word-of-mouth communication in the underworld – but the first 1952 *Drum* exposé must have demonstrated to him how his reputation could be extended to a broader public. Here he was hailed as an “expert gunman”, having good knife skills, but was truly outstanding with his fists. Having trained in a boxing gym, he “revelled in street or gang fights”.[79] There was also the heroic story of how he “held his own” against four henchmen in a Durban gambling school.[80]

But, as a counterbalance to this, Khan was also careful to cultivate an air of ‘civility’ and self-control. As we have seen, he would also trade on his personal charm, visual appeal and charisma. Waiting in court in 1971, “Sherief Kahn paces the linoed floor. One hand is tucked firmly in a trouser pocket, the other extended as if waiting for a perpetual greeting. And there are plenty of handshakes.”[81] This image of the extended hand is disturbingly evocative. As much as he needed to hit people, he also needed to greet them, befriend them, reassure them – other men needed to meet him, be associated with him, cut deals with and be ‘friends’ with him.[82] Ultimately what he was selling was the protective hand of friendship. But if that hand of friendship was not taken, it could turn into a fist. And what was lurking in his pocket? As Chiba suggests, Khan had an enigmatic, oscillatory quality to him:

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[78] ‘The Day Mr X Shook Hands with Sherief Khan’.

[79] ‘Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook’, 6.

[80] ‘Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook’, 6.

[81] ‘The Day Sherief Khan Waited...and Waited...and Waited’, *Drum*, April 1971, 16.

[82] And here we should remember his legendary ‘iron grip’ handshake.

> Look, he was a calm chap – cool, calm, collected. I never saw him very angry, in the short while I knew him. But beneath that cool, calm exterior was a hard chap - only those who dealt with him, who were objects of his wrath paid by other people, knew what lay beneath that cool and calm exterior of his…[83]

To differentiate himself from the riff-raff, he had to practice a restrained, rational violence applied in a very focused way, only when necessary.

It must be said that Khan also performed in an occasional satiric or ironic mode. Even in the 1950s, he seems to have enjoyed and played around with his 'reputation preceding him', as EP puts it. When Khan and company visited a boarding house looking for someone, he sat and had a very "gentlemanly" conversation with the female proprietor, discussing the deplorable state of crime and gangsterism in the city. It's only on the way out that he dropped his calling card - "Tell Mr. U that Sheriff Khan called". The shocked lady reported, "he treated the whole matter as if it were a huge joke".[84] Here we get a glimpse of Khan the actor - masquerading as a concerned citizen for the landlady, but also honing the role of the sardonic *noir* gangster for a larger audience.

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[83] Chiba, Interview with author.

[84] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 6.

Chapter 7 - '…like the gangsters in the bios'[1]: Indian gangsters, American gangster films and *Drum* magazine

> "South Africa's Al Capone, 35-year old Moslem Indian gangster, Sheriff Khan […] was as cold and savagely ruthless as any villain in fiction" – Anon. Drum article[2]

Introduction

From the 1930s, South African Indian audiences were already watching films in their own cinemas, and a flourishing Indian cinema culture boomed from the 1940s in Johannesburg and Durban. From articles and recollections of interviewees, it is clear Indian audiences enjoyed watching, amongst other genres, American gangster films.[3] More specifically, as already shown but developed further in this chapter, in the early apartheid decades, Indian gangsters modelled themselves on Hollywood criminal 'anti-heroes'. This was reinforced by the ability to play this role in *Drum* magazine. In the early 1950s, *Drum*'s editors discovered that a large slice of their market's appetite was for stories about crime - and specifically 'non-white' gangsters in South African urban settings. This interest was fuelled by the public's identifications with cinematic anti-heroes, introduced by Hollywood in the first gangster film cycle of the 1930s, but evolved in the *film noirs* of the 1940s and 50s. This chapter begins with probing the narrative mechanics, meanings and resonances of the gangster genre, as it took shape from the 1930s onwards. It then looks at how *Drum* appropriated and recycled cinematic gangster tropes for local tastes, and how a convoluted conversation between local writers, foreign films and 'non-white' gangsters themselves emerged.

The gangster as 'rebel' – the resistance argument

What was it about the imported Hollywood gangster film that so resonated with mid-century 'non-white' South Africans, and specifically for our focus, Indian spectators and gangsters? Although able to recall aspects of a cinema culture, none of my interviewees were able to recall individual film or genre experiences sufficiently for me to be able to answer this question empirically. My attempt to explore this question below, therefore tends towards a more speculative or *a priori* reasoning.

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[1] A description of the Michael John gang - Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 292.

[2] 'Sheriff Khan: The Sensational Story of a Master Crook', 6.

[3] Mamoo Rajab, of the cinema-owning Rajab family, recalls, "Gangster films were extremely popular" - Mamoo Rajab, Interview with author, Audio recording, 31 January 2018.

As a first step, it is worth observing that literary scholar Mac Fenwick has analysed *Drum*'s adoption of a generic cinematic gangster figure in some detail, putting it down to the active search for a new 'black' urban identity:

> One of the more surprising sources of this new identity was Hollywood gangster films. The fascination with gangsters that was shared by all levels of cultural production in Sophiatown, including both the real gangsters themselves and the "intellectual tsotsis" who wrote stories and articles about them in *Drum* magazine, reveals more than just a thirst for escapism on the part of *Drum* readership and staff. What the *Drum* writers found in the Hollywood gangster was a figure who was always/already foreign to and in conflict with the wider state apparatus in which he lived and parasitically thrived.[4]

Fenwick goes on to conclude positively that "the appropriation of the Hollywood gangster-figure by all levels of cultural production in Sophiatown was a remarkable act of resistance to white oppression".[5] This idea resonates with my analysis so far of the Indian gentleman gangster, and corroborates a feature of the 'criminal hero' identified by sociologist, Paul Kooistra - criminality "is imputed with political meaning" by a dissatisfied public when the state fails "popular conceptions of justice".[6] But was there not more than this? Did Indian men not watch gangster films partly to connect with the 'rough justice' given both by and to gangster heroes? But also, to identify with 'non-criminal' elements, a transnational and trans-ethnic image of 'cool', stylish masculinity?

In Fenwick's down-playing of 'escapism', we risk losing a sense of those aspects of identification that are not reducible to the proto-political. The visual appeal of the stylised, self-fashioning gangster, the ambivalent reception of the 'tragic' narrative structure, would in this view all be reduced to an overarching "resistance to white oppression". We also need to question Fenwick's theory in relation to a common 'black' reception - whether Indian gangsters related to these figures in the same way, and for the same reasons, as their African and coloured counterparts. In order to delve deeper into the attractions of the genre for Indian audiences one needs to get to grips with the characterological innovations of the early cycles of Hollywood gangster films, and look at how these stories hooked audiences more generally or universally before

[4] Fenwick, '"Tough Guy, Eh?"', 617.

[5] Fenwick, 632.

[6] Kooistra, 'Criminals As Heroes'.

focusing on what it was that specifically connected with South African Indian gangsters.

The Hollywood gangster film

One can trace a nascent fascination with criminality and gangs back to the earliest silent Westerns in the early 1900s.[7] However the early 1930s saw the emergence of the first slew of gangster films, over fifty of them, inspired by real-life Prohibition mobsters such as Al Capone. More allegorically, they have been read as an encoded 'anti-social' reaction to the capitalist catastrophes of Wall Street and the Great Depression. The wide-spread popularity of the new 'morally' subversive' gangster figure with its criminal behaviours was alarming to the governing classes of America, and by 1935 the newly formulated Production Code was mobilised to throttle the production of pro-gangster films.[8] The gangster genre has, from the beginning, offered audiences an anti-hero and violently transgressive actions with which to identify.

As to what exactly was essential to the gangster form, this remains a somewhat elusive riddle. Scholar Jack Shadoian says the genre quite simply represented a "public fascination" with real gangsters and their lives of crime.[9] Several literary critics concur that the superficial 'crime doesn't pay' message of the original cycle of films masks deeper social meanings, while Cavallero argues that this veneer was highlighted by the producers to "shift attention from the challenges the narratives posed to American ideals" by celebrating ruthless ambition.[10] Martha Nochimson argues that the gangster genre is differentiated from other genres and crime films by three innovative characteristics: The genre: a) gets one to identify with a criminal; b) is "epic in nature" and maps the larger social structure of the story; and c) gives equal emphasis to the individual and the social (where other genres privilege the individual).[11] This I believe, provides a useful framework for understanding the 'recipe' of the genre. I use it below

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[7] See Grant in *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 6. The famous *Great Train Robbery* (1903) was marketed more as a crime film than as a 'Western'.

[8] Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from* Little Caesar *to* Touch of Evil (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

[9] Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead-Ends: The American Gangster Film*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 28.

[10] Jonathan J. Cavallero, 'Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos', *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 32, no. 2 (2004): 53.

[11] Martha Nochimson, '"Waddaya Lookin' at?' Re-Reading the Gangster Genre through *The Sopranos*"', *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2003): 3.

to analyse critical interpretations of the gangster film. Additionally, I maintain that these three differentiating features would have made the genre, at least in relation to other Hollywood genres, particularly appealing to Indian audiences.

1) Protagonist and character arc

Nochimson points out that in the gangster genre "the protagonists with whom we empathize reverse our usual patterns of identification by engaging us and our feelings with career criminals".[12] The genre's unique deployment of a 'criminal hero' is an obvious but critical attribute, predetermining the arc of the gangster protagonist.[13] In a seminal 1958 essay, film critic Robert Warshow claimed the gangster was a 'tragic hero'.[14] Dancyger and Rush concur that it is a particular narrative about "the rise and fall of a man who has no patience to progress through the ranks".[15] Likewise, Shadoian claims that the earliest 'classic' wave of gangster films, beginning with *Little Caesar* (1930) and culminating in *Scarface* (1932), deploy central characters who are configured ambiguously - as violent, transgressive yet strong-willed tragic heroes.[16] The tragic arc of the protagonist provided a basic narrative structure – "the hero's gradual rise to fabulous power and his inevitable meteoric fall […] allowed audiences to indulge both sides of their ambivalence towards an establishment that seemed less and less responsive to their needs".[17] This in-built ambivalence permitted the viewer to oscillate between supporting the transgressor *and* 'the system'.

If their world was experienced as an "inseparable mixture of oppression and opportunity"[18], for Indian audiences the tragic 'criminal hero' of the gangster genre might well have resonated with a similar ambivalence towards their apartheid situation. Indian South Africans could well have identified with the raw ambition and 'transgressiveness' of the gangster - but also respected the necessary restoration of 'law and order'. The prevailing social order presented specific opportunities for Indians - but

[12] Nochimson, 3.

[13] Thomas Leitch, *Crime Films* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24.

[14] Warshow cited in Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, 3.

[15] *Alternative Scriptwriting: Beyond the Hollywood Formula*, Fifth Edition (Burlington, MA ; Focal Press, 2013), 108.

[16] *Dreams and Dead-Ends*, 28–29.

[17] Leitch, *Crime Films*, 24.

[18] Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 10.

more generally, as Goodhew points out[19], the 'non-white' working classes of early apartheid were at least partially invested in 'respectability' (including 'law and order') as a means towards a better life.[20]

2) Society in focus

The gangster film is contextual in focus and consciously addresses social issues as themes: Nochimson says it "generally paints a panoramic picture of society and its values - all in all a departure from the usual emphasis in Hollywood on the purely personal and individualistic".[21] Shadoian presents several genre characteristics which centre around the social, including that the protagonist is fundamentally in conflict with 'society', and the genre renders visible an underworld of unsightly social ills.[22] Munby takes a broadly historical perspective, claiming that the films represent a "demographically divided society" and growing dissatisfaction with the 'American' national project.[23] Similarly, Shadoian maintains, "There is an inherent contradiction in American thought between America as a land of opportunity and the vision of a classless, democratic society".[24] The gangster is a deconstructive figure, who manifests the contradiction between ideals of social equality/democracy and individual success, while "the gangster film contains the clearest exposition of this disturbance, the extremities of success and failure - exhilarating, top-of-the-heap life and brutal death being its (initial) stock in trade."[25]

If an 'antagonism' towards an unjust state and an unfair capitalist system remained the driving force of the genre,[26] most South African Indians would have connected with this feeling of the odds being stacked against them. What would appear to reverberate here with Indian and other 'non-white' experiences under apartheid is the subversion of the idea of the social whole, a cohesive nation - the very notion of 'the nation' is

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[19] David Goodhew, 'Working-Class Respectability: The Example of the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1930–55', *The Journal of African History* 41, no. 2 (July 2000): 241–66.

[20] Goodhew understands working-class respectability as a "cluster of values and practices" centred around education, religion and law and order - Goodhew, 242.

[21] Nochimson, '"Waddaya Lookin' at?' Re-Reading the Gangster Genre through *The Sopranos*"', 3.

[22] Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead-Ends.*

[23] Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, 2.

[24] Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead-Ends*, 6.

[25] Shadoian, 6.

[26] Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, 3.

deconstructed as a bogus social contract in these films. Shadoian suggests that the 'ethnic' (Italian/Latino) position of the gangster facilitated an additional 'outsider' status.[27] In its portrayal of excluded immigrant ethnicities and their marginal place in American life, the gangster film could also speak more specifically to the displaced, 'minority' experience of Indians in their mid-twentieth century South African limbo.

3) Balancing individual and social interests

If society is dissolving, the family is a smaller social structure that shapes identity in the gangster genre, enabling a meditation on masculine roles, obligations and performances. Nochimson[28] remarks on the gangster's family values - "the gangster protagonist is in the most profound way a family man who gives the audience a means of exploring family life, free from the stigma attached to emotions and "women's entertainment".[29] The gangster film was a male genre, a form that allowed for the expression of (generally Italian) codes of assertive masculinity within a restraining framework of family relations. This tension between aggressive man-to-man masculinity and more respectful male roles within the family is something that would have resonated with the complexities of South African Indian gangster masculinity (see page 3).

The Street with no Name

It is worth pondering whether specific gangster films impacted on South African Indian gangsters more than others, and if so, why. Unfortunately there do not appear to be any official records of film exhibition in Indian cinemas for this period; additionally, most of my interviewees could not remember the details of films they saw over half a century ago. However, one film surfaces continuously in interviews, stories and texts: *The Street with No Name* (1948), a gangster film apparently widely influential on 'non-white' gangs in Sophiatown, Cape Town and Durban alike. Recalling the massive impact of *film noir* 'anti-heroes' on gangster identity in the 1950s, ex-gangster Don Mattera chooses specifically to reference this film: "We hated the straight ones and we chewed gum like Richard Widmark's 'Styles' character in *Street with No Name*."[30]

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[27] Munby, 5.

[28] '"Waddaya Lookin'' at?' Re-Reading the Gangster Genre through *The Sopranos*"'.

[29] Nochimson, 4.

[30] Mattera cited in Lesley Marx, 'At the End of the Rainbow: *Jerusalema* and the South African Gangster Film', *Safundi* 11, no. 3 (18 June 2010): 262.

Apart from being a cult film for township gangsters (as Fenwick also notes)[31], *The Street with No Name* seems equally important to the Indian gang culture of Durban in the 1950s. In *The Lotus People*, Hassim refers to the film, suggesting a strong identification, in one of the character's description of the Michael John Gang:

> "Hang on," Jake said, "These guys, can you describe them?"
> "Well they were dressed sharp, you know, like the gangsters in the bios [cinemas]. Like that guy in *The Street with No Name*, with felt hats and all".[32]

Legendary street fighter and market trader, Mack Naidoo, called his Overport street gang, 'the Stiles Gang', after the film's antagonist, Alec Stiles.[33] Mack's investment in cinematic fantasy space is recalled by several interviewees. A neighbouring stallholder says Mack did not do much work at his stall in the Victoria Street market on weekdays: a "man-about-town", he was frequently to be found in Durban's Indian cinemas.[34] In 1955, Dee Salot pointed out the 'Stiles Gang' literally "took its name from the gangster-boss in the Hollywood film, *Street with No Name*".[35] The fact that Salot, himself a gangster, was aware of the film and its influence on a rival gang is itself indicative of the pervasive influence of the film.

The Street with No Name is set during a crime wave in a mythical 'Central City'. FBI operative Gene Cordell is sent on an undercover mission to investigate the murder of a suspect, and infiltrate a criminal gang. Posing as 'George Manly', Cordell has to prove himself a tough guy to be recruited by super-slick gang boss, Alec Stiles. Unexpectedly, he beats a boxer at the local gym to get closer to the gangster. Once he gets into the gang, the dramatic tension builds around whether Cordell/Manly will be able to take down Stiles before his identity is revealed and he is killed. We know this is coming because Stiles has an informer in the police. When the hero is finally outed, he is taken

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[31] Fenwick, '"Tough Guy, Eh?"'

[32] Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 292.

[33] Another possible tribute to the film is discernible with the nickname of one of the Salot brothers – 'Gloves'. Humphrey Bogart played a dodgy anti-hero called Alfred 'Gloves' Donahue in the *noir*-ish film *All Through the Night* (1941), a sports promoter who is wrongly suspected of a murder and has to prove his innocence to avoid retribution. There is a certain ambiguity in the moral fibre of the character, who is shady, edgy, but not actually a 'criminal'.

[34] Naidoo, Interview with author.

[35] Salot, 'The Salots', n.p.

to a factory to meet Stiles and his death – but luckily his FBI colleagues arrive in time to save the day, and Stiles is the one to die.

Generically, the film offered up a powerfully charismatic, brutally decisive and good-looking 'bad guy' in Stiles, which, as we have seen, accounted for a large part of its successful reception by local gangsters.[36] *Drum* editor, Anthony Sampson, recalls how the antagonist powerfully connected with 'non-white' audiences in the early 1950s:

> Stiles wore a long overcoat, sniffed a Benzedrine inhaler, and occasionally bit an apple. Beside him slouched his henchman, wearing a belted raincoat with slits at the back. "When this film came out," Can [Themba] whispered, "sales of Benzedrine rocketed. Everyone munched apples. All the *tsotsis* wore those raincoats".[37]

But there are also two narrative idiosyncrasies to do with the deconstruction of 'authenticity/inauthenticity' that would have made it additionally compelling to Indian youths. Firstly, the mockumentary innovation of the framing narrative - the film starts with titles that assure us of its 'authenticity':

> The motion picture you are about to see was adapted from the files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Wherever possible, it was photographed in the original locale and played by the actual FBI personnel involved.

But audiences knew the actors were not 'FBI agents' - the audience would have recognised them as famous actors playing fictional roles. This ruse is followed by FBI Director, Edgar Hoover's flowery letter to the public: "The street on which crime flourishes is the street extending across America. It is the street with no name. Organized gangsterism is once again returning […]". Here is a historical character, a 'real' figure of authority, endorsing a fiction – saying that the story is fundamentally 'real'. The first few minutes take us through a montage of short crime vignettes, explained by a documentary-style voiceover, which present the clearly staged scenes as some kind of newsreel footage. These markers of 'realism' lend the film a gritty veneer of 'authenticity' - the dark edginess

[36] Anthony Sampson, Drum: *The Making of a Magazine* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005), 81.

[37] Sampson, 81.

differentiating it from the usual Hollywood escapist fantasy fare, even if the film can only ultimately be perceived by the viewer as 'inauthentic' fiction.

Under the same rubric of 'authenticity', the film mobilises themes of ambivalence and identity crisis, when Agent Cordell goes incognito, posing as a bogus underworld player, to infiltrate the underworld. Performing this alter-ego in a hall-of-mirrors, there is some suggestion that our undercover cop begins to lose his original identity and value-sphere as he gains the trust of his new criminal friends. Another Janus-faced character is the corrupt cop informer, who is actually working for the gangsters. One can surmise that these confusing and ultimately incommensurable character layers resonated with the way young South African Indian men were, in their new post-war, postmodern and cosmopolitan age, losing traditional Indian aspects of identity to more Western layers of being. But we might also question whether the protagonist's dual identity in this film also speak to the Jekyll and Hyde ambivalence of the Indian 'gentleman gangster' - he who must paradoxically straddle the world of respectability (the caring family man, community figure, etc.) and the harsh gangland world of violence.

The construction of the gangster in *Drum*[38] magazine

In the 1950s and 1960s, the criminal hero haunts the 'non-white' public imagination as a figure of ambivalence. Real gangsters were often feared and loved at the same time. This can be discerned in the circulation of the gangster figure in various narrative forms.

> The *tsotsis* and gang members took the image of the gangster and mobilised that figure against the white state's attempts to re-tribalise them by making urban, black South African culture necessarily outlaw. The writers at *Drum*, picking up on this, incorporated the gangster-figure - the black, Sophiatown gangster-figure - into their stories and articles […][39]

Apart from the explicit thematic strategy of the magazine (as discussed below), the fictional aspirations and imagination of crime fiction in the same magazine clearly

[38] *Drum* magazine, founded by Jim Bailey, son of mining magnate, Abe Bailey, and Bob Crisp in 1951, was the only lifestyle magazine at that time addressing a 'non-white' readership. Focusing on urban township experience, it quickly became an influential medium for ventilating social issues (as well as more mundane matters of topical interest.

[39] Fenwick, '"Tough Guy, Eh?"', 632.

shaped the 'reporting' of the criminal and his crimes. Nicol points out the blurring of the fact/fiction boundary that was part of the fantasy work being done in the *Drum* 'crime theme' – fiction coexisted alongside fact, as well as the actual fictionalising of fact.[40] In her overview of crime fiction in twentieth century South African writing, Le Roux gestures to the pivotal post-war moment in which black crime writing emerged, largely facilitated by *Drum* magazine, and its offshoot publication, *African Film*.[41]

The 'gangster' and the '*tsotsi*' should be understood as real identities emerging within social conditions as well as simultaneously discursive constructs developed and circulated in the new media of film and print journalism. They were symbolic figures signifying fear, violence and transgression, but also, heroically, defiance and assertive masculinity. These 'media constructs' were not exclusively shaped by the writers – the gangsters themselves performed for, shaped and were influenced by these writings.

Thematisation of 'gangsterism' as a marketing strategy in *Drum*

The fictional angle was part of the *Drum* marketing strategy, as revealed by Anthony Sampson, which quite early on, aimed to provide a mixture of "first class journalism and an element of sensationalism".[42] Clowes points to the acute awareness of Bailey, Sampson, Nxumalo and others of the early failings of *Drum* to find the black market.[43] Nxumalo helped reposition the magazine, introducing the white editorial team to what black people really wanted, which included crime: "black readers kept asking about crime.... it simply wasn't reported in the white press at all".[44] Sampson took the feedback to heart and readjusted the focus.[45]

Fenwick attributes this 'crime' market-orientation to *Drum* journalist, Arthur Maimane, and a visit to the bioscope.

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[40] Mike Nicol, *A Good-Looking Corpse – the World of* Drum *– Jazz and Gangsters, Hope and Defiance in the Townships of South Africa* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), xii.

[41] Elizabeth le Roux, 'South African Crime and Detective Fiction in English: A Bibliography and Publishing History', *Current Writing* 25, no. 2 (October 2013): 142.

[42] Sampson cited in Lindsay Clowes, 'A Modernised Man? Changing Constructions of Masculinity in *Drum*: The Making of a Magazine, 1951-1984' (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2002), 28.

[43] Clowes, 24–26.

[44] Sampson cited in Clowes, 26.

[45] He remarks in a letter "… I'm planning at the moment some articles on Crime on the Rand which I think should be fairly spectacular, seen from the Africans' viewpoint" - Sampson cited in Clowes, 28. The term 'spectacular' suggests that at some level, Sampson was aware of the cinematic nature of this identification.

> Claiming that, 'You can't understand our readers until you've seen Stiles [the gangster hero]', Arthur Maimane took Sampson to see the Richard Widmark film, *Street with No Name* (William Keighley, 1948), soon after Sampson's arrival. After seeing the enthusiastic reaction of the audience members to the gangster-hero and the enmity they displayed toward the FBI agents chasing him, Sampson was forced to agree.[46]

Sampson recalls the climax of the film, where the 'bad-guy' Stiles, is shot and "the audience groaned as the FBI took over".[47] If we accept this cursory market-research, it seems that many African audience members were less ambivalent in their reception of the gangster figure than their American (and possibly South African Indian) counterparts, identifying more whole-heartedly with them while directing animosity towards the cops as representatives of State injustice. This would not be surprising, given the subaltern experience of apartheid; the gangster film experience allowed for some emotional pushback against the oppressive system of daily life.

Nicol concurs with Clowes and Fenwick, saying that *Drum* cottoned on early to the popularity of the 'crime theme', pointing to the breakthrough October 1951 special report where "*Drum* takes on for the first time what is to become an obsession: "crime, gangsters, thugs, *tsotsis*".[48] Sampson claims that *Drum*'s working-class readership wanted the British *Daily Mirror's* tabloid formula of "cheesecake and crime".[49] Reading the changing preoccupation with gangs and gangsters in *Drum* as a market-oriented set of intentional responses to what audiences wanted is an important angle, but not the only one. One should also endeavour to offer a reading of what this new demand for crime from the public represented. From my perspective, the crime discourses that emerged in the 'non-white' public sphere produced a series of allegorical morality tales which have a common controlling idea: 'while Nationalist propaganda wants to project an image of an orderly and docile population under apartheid, here's the truth of the deprivations of township life', they seem to want to say. In this allegorical dimension, 'crime' emerges as the 'truth' of apartheid oppression, its direct yet hidden correlative.

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[46] Fenwick, '"Tough Guy, Eh?"', 621.

[47] Sampson, Drum: *The Making of a Magazine*, 82.

[48] Nicol, *A Good-Looking Corpse – the World of* Drum *– Jazz and Gangsters, Hope and Defiance in the Townships of South Africa*, 42.

[49] Sampson, Drum: *The Making of a Magazine*, 15.

Different modalities of representing the gangster in *Drum*

According to Fenwick there are "three relatively distinct phases of the representation of the gangster, and of gangsterism, in *Drum* between 1950 and the early 1960s": 1) early condemnation of gangsterism; 2) followed by more favourable and aspirational portrayals of gangster achievement (as "urban survivors"); 3) followed by nostalgia for a lost era.[50] In sifting through the stories on specifically Indian gangsters, I find some correlation with Fenwick's 'stages', viewed rather as competing authorial 'tones'.

If we look at an early (1952) stab at the new crime theme, 'Durban Exposed', we find an anonymous reporting of the underbelly of the sunny city, "now becoming famous for its gangsters, gamblers and prostitutes".[51] Somewhat hyperbolic at first – "the very name Victoria and Grey Streets strikes terror into respectable citizens"[52] - the Indian gangsterism it describes (public harassment, street gambling, hustling, etc.) turns out to be a rather mild set of misdemeanours. No personalities are mentioned in this depthless survey. The general view expressed: crime is the product of burgeoning slums, premised on social conditions rather personalities or choices. The article concludes moralistically that "Africans and Indians alike are being corrupted by poverty and want, and turning away from their strong traditions of laws and morals", while ending with the call to action, "this terrible degradation must be stopped, NOW."[53]

Where Fenwick proposes distinct stages of writing the gangster in *Drum*, in my analysis (of specifically Indian gangster reportage) there is a more complex, ambivalent mode of writing emerging out of the early 'condemnation' narrative. I would argue the moralising tone doesn't disappear altogether - the indignant voice of social condemnation has just been diluted by an excited, even celebratory counter-tone. From 1953, quite early on in *Drum*'s coverage of crime, the magazine's treatment of the gangster as a type of 'criminal hero' starts to contain a strange ambiguity. This is what Fenwick calls the second phase of *Drum* 'criminal narratives', marked by a "style of

[50] Fenwick, '"Tough Guy, Eh?"', 618.
[51] 'Durban Exposed', *Drum*, July 1952, 14.
[52] 'Durban Exposed', 14.
[53] 'Durban Exposed', 17.

writing that is reminiscent of crime-fiction, and by an emphasis on the affluent urban-lifestyle enjoyed by these men".[54]

While gangsters are more sympathetically treated as dramatic characters, their criminality is still ultimately condemned, implicitly or explicitly. The first-person narratives that emerge often decry their own experience of violence. In a single article, one can discern a socially concerned normative commentary on the 'disease' of gangsterism and criminality woven into a romanticising of gangsters and a dramatising of events. Indian gangsterism is now represented as the product of both individual 'character' and social ills - but personae, rivalries and killings are what fuel these more personalised narratives.

In *Drum's* 'Crimson League exposé of 1953, we find a new fascination with characters (*noirish* tough guys) and plot detail - the 'crime-fiction' mode Fenwick describes - interwoven with a recurring and framing perspective on the scourge of gangsterism, indicating a more normative 'journalistic' mode. The description of the leader of the gang (given the mysterious pseudonym 'G.B.') as "like a character out of a Hadley Chase novel: taciturn and very brutal in a fight"[55] makes the *film noir* rendering explicit. The journalist, writing in the first person (itself a *noir* convention), goes on to narrate an encounter in a bar with G.B., with dialogue that resembles the repartee of crime-fiction:

> Over our drinks I said: "Tough life you led?" He soured: "What damn business is it of yours?" "I'm your pal." His eyes gleamed dangerously: "To hell with you," he leered, and threw cane spirit into my face.[56]

This short 'scene', with its sudden but illustrative climax, shows how the writing draws on the crime-thriller style in its use of exciting characters and inciting incidents.

On the next page, the article features a well-composed and clearly staged photograph of nocturnal gang action: silhouetted Crimson League gangsters assault a helpless victim lying on the ground. The caption reads "BEATINGS-UP LIKE THIS are all too common in Durban, where the Crimson League takes the law into its own hands."[57] It seems the magazine had no qualms about constructing and deploying fictional

[54] Fenwick, '"Tough Guy, Eh?"', 619–20.
[55] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 12.
[56] Hancroft, 12.
[57] Hancroft, 13.

photographs that, at first glance (or possibly to the less critically minded), might appear to be authentic pictures of violence – but at some level must register as staged.[58] At some level the very distinction between authenticity and fakery is deconstructed in this postmodern ambiguity: the reader is encouraged to let go of 'the real', and to surrender to the more powerful cinematic logic of visualisation.

The article ends with a call to action that marks a return to the voice of condemnation: "it behoves those who regulate law and order to deal with organisations like the League with iron-handed firmness."[59] This is of course the final re-establishment of the reality principle over the fantasy principle, the hardwired ambivalence and oscillation around criminality that is constitutive of the gangster genre. The same ambivalence that plays itself out around the tragic arc of transgression in the classic gangster films – while we enjoyed him beating the system, now the gangster must pay for his sins.

Drum's 'gangster' tropes

The very early Indian gangster articles in *Drum* are written in the third person by anonymous writers – some pseudonyms do however appear in 1952. In 1953 *Drum* comes out with the fresh literary angle on the crime theme - a new sub-genre of confessional-biographical stories emerges in which Indian gangsters supposedly reveal all. First, we have Old Man Kajee taking the public into his confidence, followed later in the year by henchman, Garrett Adams. Then Dee Salot sets the record straight around the Crimson League in 1955, while 'Pataan' looks back on his decline in 1958.[60] Interspersed with these are similar reminiscences by other anonymous gangsters (see for example the revelations by Khan's 'friend' in 1956), most of whom claim to have left the world of crime. These first-person narratives are superficially stories of remorse, in which the gangsters 'out' themselves, confess their crimes, and reflect on the waywardness of their past ways. But the moral tone is just a veneer – the redemptive position of 'looking back' allows these narrators to legitimately entertain the readership with transgressive tales of violence, domination and betrayal, with lurid descriptions of stings, assaults and murders.

[58] The staged 'photo-fiction' trend is continued in the Salot series, as well as in later articles on Khan.
[59] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 15.
[60] Pataan, 'Pataan', *Drum*, June 1958.

In one article Kajee describes the terrible death of his Somali sidekick, German West, in visceral detail:

> Even now I shudder when I think of how West died. All that I see in front of me is a bloody mess. When the other gangsters caught him, like a helpless prey, they first beat him with sticks and broke several ribs; after that they chopped his skull with an axe. It was like a chicken being slaughtered. When the last blow struck, his body quivered, there were several violent convulsions and he lay still. His skull was battered in, and his face lay in a stream of blood. I could do nothing to help. I would have suffered the same fate, if I dared step out into the open.[61]

If we are to believe one account that Kajee was hiding upstairs in the attic at the time of West's killing (or that he was being hunted at all – see page 85), it seems unlikely that he was hanging around to witness his henchman's final quivering moments. Kajee's view of his friend's death seems impossible. What seems to be at work here is a *cinematic* evocation, on top of the crime-fiction mode. By this I mean, in addition to the narrative tropes, a scene *where the camera sees everything*: that impossible point of view of the camera as storyteller, invisibly placed right in the midst of the action. Here we see cinematically, as in the climax of a gangster film, the ambivalent, "tragic", ghastly ending of the gangster, who, in Kajee's own words, ultimately "got what was coming to him"[62] (even if it was a death unbefitting of a human, and more appropriate to a "chicken").

From the earliest stages of the crime writing in *Drum* one finds the drama of 'exposure' – articles on Indian gangsters playing a game of hide and seek with their identities. Small-time 'hired gun' gangsters, such as Garrett Adams and Pataan are paid to reveal themselves; but what they withhold are the identities of their bosses. Adams, for example, uses aliases for established crime figures, such as "the Sheik" (Sherief Khan) and "the Boss" (Old Man Kajee). People 'in the know' would know who they were talking about, but the larger public and the authorities would not.

Down in Durban, the chief honchos of the Crimson League never identified themselves or were exposed in *Drum*. The Salots however tried to use the 'transparency' of their revealed identities to boost their credibility in the public sphere. While the Crimson League chose to remain faceless, Dawood 'Dee' Salot makes his case persuasively in a

[61] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: II', 26.
[62] Kajee, 26.

series of *Drum* disclosures in 1955, recounting his family story of hard work, while taking the opportunity to accuse their Grey Street adversaries of gangsterism and skulduggery.[63] The Salots are not a 'gang' – Dee claims they are merely vigorous defenders of their targeted taxi business. It is as if through just going public Dee thinks that he will have somehow proved the Salots' innocence. His logic seems to be that the League, choosing to stay silent, anonymous, will conversely be seen to be hiding a dirty secret.

Gangster media strategies – the management of reputation

The first-person narratives indicate that from 1953 some Indian gangsters realised that they could use *Drum,* with its feature articles and crime theme, to present themselves in a certain light. In order to better manage their reputations, they could narrate and present events from their point of view. They could also use the public platform to undermine their adversaries, as we have just seen with Dee Salot's testimonies. Even if the *Drum* ghost-writers plumped up their lines, the gangsters' published narratives gave them a certain power of presence in their life-worlds. How they were represented and how they self-presented (if at all) to the Indian community was something they needed to consider carefully, as it would affect their reputation – and reputation was everything for the extortionist.

Old Man Kajee was the first career gangster to embrace *Drum* and 'tell his story'. In his adoption of the first-person mode of address one is reminded of the occasional voice-over technique of the *film noir* victim-heroes[64]. These kind of crime stories typically mobilised a duped protagonist who suffers for his transgressions in the climax, and then surveys his past weaknesses and mistakes, usually at the end of his life (or even once he's dead, as with *Sunset Boulevard*[65]). From a similar position of diminished capacity and decline, Old Man Kajee concedes that "I am an old man now, fast fading out of the glamorous picture which newspapermen conjure".[66] In defence of the wrong path chosen, he argues that gangsters are not born criminals – they are just distorted when

[63] Salot, 'The Salots - 2'.

[64] This narrative device is associated with the protagonist-narrators of nightmare *noirs,* such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)

[65] Billy Wilder, *Sunset Boulevard*, Crime-thriller (Paramount Pictures, 1950).

[66] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: I', 6.

they are "used as a tool of unscrupulous men".[67] This echoes the popular *film noir* plot of the protagonist being conned, either by a femme fatale or other evil, more powerful men.

Kajee proceeds to give us an insightful monologue on the life of gangsterism – how true a reflection of his real convictions it was is debatable. "Go straight", he implores the reader, "you will live happily, enjoy peace of mind and feel a real man, a greater feeling nobody can wish to have".[68] We know that, contrary to someone finished with a life of crime, Kajee was working with the Khan network right up to the beginning of the 1970s when he died. Old Man Kajee was not the retired 'old man' he pretended to be in 1953. What was he up to? My sense is that Kajee was doing two things: firstly, he was cementing his reputation as a gang boss and a man-to-be-feared through publicising his sordid history of violence - the only way he could do this was to claim he was no longer doing it. Secondly, he was, through the false remorse of the *noir* narrator, drawing on the ambivalent feelings ordinary spectators directed towards 'criminal heroes'. One could only embrace the transgressive nature of the gangster if they paradoxically paid for their sins.

Sherief Khan, on the other hand, steered away from talking to the press, presumably allowing his reputation to speak for him – that is until the *Drum* article, 'Sherief Kahn's Latest Venture', appears in 1961. Here he seems to want to try to actively shape his reputation in the press for the first time. The premise of the article seems to hinge on the underlying 'dramatic question' of how a mature Khan is going to fit into his new legitimate business, the Four Aces nightclub. Can this man, now in his mid-forties, build on his reputation to 'go straight' and make a new life for himself? Khan has decided to change his media strategy; he seems to want the article, speaking directly to the writer and posing for photographs. We are shown Khan and his wife next to "his familiar black, high-powered car used for his various business activities"[69], the caption framing the innocent image to hint that Khan could still be up to his old tricks.

Although the article ends with an anecdote illustrating Khan's old-style toughness - Khan had recently hospitalised some young thugs after he "sailed into them, using only

[67] Kajee, 6.
[68] Kajee, 6.
[69] 'Sherief Khan's Latest Venture', 57.

his hands" - one is comforted that it is all for the community's safety as "there have been no further assaults".[70] The dramatic question has been answered: Khan is back – strong as ever, but more mature, contained and accountable to his family, pursuing legitimacy. It does seem at this point, Khan's idea to was to clean up his public image, even if soon afterwards he would be facing a murder trial.

However, a complete reversal of the new press strategy was evident a few year later, around the 'Malay Mob' affair. After failing to persuade her that journalistic writing was not a woman's job, Khan threatened to shoot the fearless *Drum* reporter Juby Mayet if she didn't stop reporting on him.[71]

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[70] 'Sherief Khan's Latest Venture', 57.

[71] Juby Mayet, Interview with author, Audio recording, October 2017.

Chapter 8 - 'Spaces of excess': South African Indian cinemas during early apartheid

> "Ohhh Victoria Street" recalls Pillay bristling at the memory. "It was a festival back then. It was choko-block! When you looked down from the top of a building onto the box office, it was like a swarm of locusts from the Egyptian plague. Men in punjabis, suits and ties, colourful ladies in their saris with gold jewelleries dripping off their ears and necks and so on" – Coppen[1] recounting Shan Pillay, Shiraz Cinema projectionist.

Introduction

While our ultimate destination in this chapter is the engagement of Indian gangsters with the cinema space both literally and symbolically, it is important to first get to grips with the massive cultural impact of cinema on South African Indian society more generally. Numerous accounts, like Pillay's above, attest to the golden years of cinema in South Africa's Indian spaces during the early decades of apartheid. Some of my interviewees' accounts of this time allude to the causal role played by the National Party's spatialising regime, which further limited public space and leisure activities for Indians. A Lenasia resident tells us that "Indian people didn't have much to do - movies played a major role in their lives".[2] Chotoo Mistry, a young man in Durban in the 1950s, recalls that he and his five friends had only two main social outings in their spare time - "we used to go to cinema – [and] beach."[3] Unfortunately, he points out, with the latter "you can walk around; but you can't go into the water". On the other hand, Mistry remembers that for two shillings you got a front row seat in a 'bioscope' while another 'tickie' got you a Coke in a bottle.

In 1951, *Drum* magazine found and adapted to already cosmopolitan, cinema-going publics. One key strategy was to develop established cinematic modes of representing and experiencing the world – vicarious images of luxury, power and agency in the movies were continued in various kinds of *Drum* articles, including on the Indian film industry. For Durban's Indians, cinemas themselves became spaces of palatial luxury and Oriental heritage.[4] At least for Indian readers and audiences, it seems as if the

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[1] Neil Coppen, 'The Last Picture Show', Blog, *Neil Coppen Writings/ Plays/ Poetry/Musings/Travel Journals and Newspaper Columns* (blog), 09 2008, n.p., http://neil.iaminawe.com/2008/09/22/the-last-picture-show.

[2] MS, Interview with author.

[3] Chotoo Mistry, Interview with author, Audio recording, 15 February 2016.

[4] Vashna Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban: Urban Segregation, Business and Visions of Identity from the 1950s to the 1970s', *Occasional Paper* 22 (2014), pp.165-174.

cinema experience had moved beyond just entertainment and a social outing: it was a chance to dream of better things and other places, to rehearse participating in a world of unfettered ambition.

The post-war boom in Indian cinemas in Durban and Johannesburg

Freund reports that Indian entrepreneurs had already set up basic cinemas, such as the Rawat, in Durban Indian neighbourhoods in the 1920s.[5] Coppen however claims that in the 1930s "the white-owned African Consolidated Theatre Group (ACT) were one of the first to cash in on the local Indian population's fixation with the silver screen, erecting the region's first two cinemas, the Royal Picture Palace and the Victoria Picture Palace."[6] The Victoria was known as 'the bug-house' because of the flea-bites, while "the more salubrious Royal was the first to screen Hindi movies."[7] Victoria Street, in the heart of the Grey Street residential-business complex, would soon attract other cinema ventures and become known as the cinema strip (even if possibly the oldest Indian-owned cinema in South Africa was Rawat's Bio on intersecting Grey Street). The Avalon Theatre followed, opened by co-owners A. B. Moosa and A. I. Kajee on Victoria Street in 1940.[8] This famous duo was also known in the community as 'moderate' business-oriented politicians. In 1947 - after losing the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) to "communists"[9] - they founded their conservative (Smuts-friendly) Natal Indian Organisation (NIO) in their Avalon building at a meeting of 150 delegates[10], adding a political utility to an otherwise cultural space. The same owners opened the Albert Cinema nearby, and "these [two] cinemas put their comparatively grotty predecessors to shame by boasting air-conditioning, box and gallery seats".[11]

[5] Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 39.

[6] Coppen, 'The Last Picture Show', n.p.

[7] Coppen, n.p.

[8] Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 166. However, Jagarnath's interview with Moosa (presumably from the Avalon cinema group) leads her to tentatively assert that the Avalon was the oldest Indian-owned establishment in Durban.

[9] It is worth noting that NIC leader, Monty Naicker, while anti-apartheid, was not a communist.

[10] Fatima Meer and E.S. Reddy, 'Passive Resistance 1946 - A Selection of Documents Compiled by E.S. Reddy & Fatima Meer - Special Focus: Wrangling between Political Groups - 1947', Text, South African History Online, 23 May 2011, n.p., http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/passive-resistance-1946-selection-documents-compiled-es-reddy-fatima-meer.

[11] Coppen, 'The Last Picture Show', n.p.

More competition was to follow as the cinemas flourished. In 1953 Ramnikal Goshalia opened the Naaz Cinema, while the Raj Cinema opened in Prince Edward Street. The magnificent 2000-seater Shah Jehan cinema, launched in 1956 on Grey Street, was the first foray into cinema for the Rajab brothers, a wealthy, industrious family who were to become major players in the Indian cinema scene. The Rajabs later opened the Shiraz Cinema on Victoria Street in 1968 - and by 1976 the Rajabs were also operating their third cinema, the Isfahan.

In Indian areas on the Reef, one likewise finds several cinemas springing up to cater to the community's new desires in the post-war period. In Fordsburg, one could frequent the Avalon, Planet, Lyric and Majestic cinema, which all catered to Indian tastes offering a mixed fare of Indian and Western films. In neighbouring Fietas or Vrededorp, Indian cinema-goers could choose between the Taj on 17th Street, the Royal on 23rd Street, and the Star Cinema on 20th Street. In the more culturally-mixed but predominantly 'non-white' world of Sophiatown, Indian audience members could also be found in the Odin Cinema, and at Balansky's. Dr Saloojee, who grew up with Don Mattera in the 'slum' neighbourhood, recalls the less salubrious movie houses of this area - "Sophiatown was gangster cinemas - you had to sit two-two in a seat! The guys, the ushers would come with a whip! To make more money for the cinema."[12] The adjective 'gangster' seems to refer quite loosely to the 'extortionist' revenue model imposed by the cinema owners (and possibly the force deployed by the ushers), rather than any actual gangster affiliation.

Engaging the other in the cinema space

Within the ghettoised South African Indian world, cinemas offered spaces of connection, transcendence and becoming – new kinds of self-imagination for South African 'Indianness' were made possible. One possibility was to embrace a fresh cosmopolitan identity through identifying with 'white' characters and Western dramatic situations in Hollywood genre films. But Jagarnath also argues that in the post-war decades from the 1950s to the 1970s, the Indian film was "an important influence on the development of Indian identity" and shaped "ideas and imaginings of India itself".[13] South African Indians were able to reflect on the limits of their own 'Indianness' by

[12] Saloojee, Interview with author.

[13] Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 165.

engaging a familiar-yet-different set of Indian roles and issues produced in their country of origin, India. For many young people, Indian (as opposed to American) films were a preference[14] - while Tamil films were to make an appearance, for some reason Hindi films seemed to dominate.[15] Kalim Rajab, from a supply-side perspective, reveals that the breakthrough film for his family's struggling Shah Jehan cinema was the Bombay-born mega-hit, *Mother India* (1957).[16] This Hindi epic drama, with its female protagonist and theme of maternal self-sacrifice, somehow resonated with Durban Indian audiences in a way that the Rajabs' staple Hollywood fare of MGM musical genres did not.

Going to the movies, South African Indians had a symbolic choice between Indian or Hollywood stories – this spoke to what we have discussed in another chapter as the South African Indian 'identity crisis' (see page 14). Alongside the Western content that was easily distributed to all South African market segments, specifically Indian cinemas were finding ways to import Hindi and Tamil films from the booming Indian film industry for local audiences. As Jagarnath points out, high import tariffs and a political ban on exports to South Africa after 1948 made the importing of Indian films a dodgy and expensive distribution challenge for a while; but demand was such that it happened.[17] By the mid-1950s, the Bombay film industry of about 60 studios was in magnitude second only to Hollywood, producing 250 films a year, and exporting to several countries including South Africa.[18] However, there were also Tamil films making their way to South African shores. The Naaz Cinema's innovation in Durban was to specialise in Indian films, specifically Tamil features. This resonated strongly with Durban Indian audiences (dominantly Tamil), including the inner-city working-class residents of the Durban Corporation's Magazine and Railway Barracks.[19]

Generally, Indian films provided a seemingly much needed cultural connection with the motherland. This was not just about connecting with Indian images; it also bolstered a

[14] Mistry remembers in the 1950s "we used to see a lot of Hindi movies – only Hindi movies. Now and then we used to go for a movie of Hollywood" - Mistry, Interview with author.

[15] Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 166.

[16] Rajab, Interview with author, 21 November 2017.

[17] Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 167.

[18] D. K. Sharda, 'India's Fabulous Film Industry', *Drum*, June 1955.

[19] 'Grey Street Complex - Cinemas', Online history site, *South African History Online* (blog), n.p., accessed 23 November 2017, www.sahistory.org.za/topic/key-sites.

sense of 'Indianness' and national identity. Chakravarty's study of postcolonial Bombay cinema centres around the notion that the popular Hindi film was thematically involved in a nation-building project through the allegory of 'imperso-nation' (the masquerader and the narrative dynamics of 'mistaken identity').[20] Indian cinema in the 1950s, says Chowdhry, was dealing with "the trauma of partition", resulting in a need for representations of Muslim-Hindu togetherness, with, for example, regal Mughal tolerance in historical films functioning as an allegory for contemporary multi-culturalism.[21]

Although the American films would have provided the biggest stretch of the imagination, a cultural gap was also evident in Indian films being seen by South African Indians. In some of the Bombay films, audiences were being surprised with representations of a new kind of hybrid, home-grown 'Indianness' that supposedly did not yet exist. A 1955 *Drum* article on India's burgeoning film industry, written from a seemingly South African Indian perspective, criticises the unrealistic story content of many of the films that have "Hollywood-style plots which do not apply to India".[22] For one, the boy-meets-girl scenarios of the romantic storylines taken from American films did not correspond to Indian reality. Sharda argues that, "In India the boy does NOT meet the girl as unfailingly or as single-mindedly as he obviously does in America. Consequently, when the two do meet under the auspices of some Hollywood-inspired director in India, the meeting lacks realism".[23] Actress Mumtaz Shanti smoking in a scene is seen as completely out of touch and implausible, as "no Indian women smoke". The article goes on to criticise the revealing Western dress of "cheesecake artist Nalini Jaywant", described as Bombay's answer to Marilyn Monroe – "no Indian woman would ever dress like this".[24] Quite controlling with reference to female sexuality, it seems that this reading was partly an attempt to define what should be essential to 'Indianness'. Sharda's indignance indicates that some South African Indians might have wanted a 'pure' Indian femininity to idealise and offset against local cosmopolitanism.

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[20] Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

[21] Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[22] Sharda, 'India's Fabulous Film Industry', 46.

[23] Sharda, 47.

[24] Sharda, 47.

In the exposing of unrealistic plots and female 'cheesecake' character types, Sharda is critical of cinema when it operates as a seduction machine. Cinema can stoop to offer up female characters as a form of visual pleasure, but not characters who have no part in Indian reality (and the allegorical grand narrative of Mother India herself). But what if all cinema, if we look at the underlying mechanism of manipulation, was some kind of desire-apparatus? At this point it is worth posing some rather complex questions: what accounted for this massive growth in cinemas and cinema-going in South African Indian areas from the 1940s?

Some interviewees make the point, retrospectively, in relation to the myriad of leisure distractions today, that cinema was one of the only 'outlets' or forms of leisure available to young people at the time. In Durban, Mistry says that "cinema was [the] only entertainment"[25] - while Mamoo Rajab explains there was "very little entertainment for the Indian, coloured, black community in those days".[26] Chommie Saloojee explains the comparable situation for Indians on the Reef: "we had very restricted areas to go to. The good cinemas were in Fordsburg […] Majestic and Lyric".[27] But was this the main reason for the flourishing of cinema culture? Perhaps there was just something intrinsically more pleasurable or addictive in the cinematic experience itself.

In a seminal article for feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey dissected the pleasures of the cinematic experience – viewing pleasure, she argued, is about taking up the powerful position of 'maleness'.[28] She was not interested in understanding the 'male gaze' as anything 'naturally' or biologically male – but rather how certain privileges of looking are constructed and reserved as a male 'position' in a patriarchal regime. In a later essay she suggested that even women can temporarily take up this 'virtual' male position in the cinematic gaze.[29]

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[25] Mistry, Interview with author.

[26] Rajab, Interview with author, 31 January 2018.

[27] Saloojee, Interview with author.

[28] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[29] Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 2013), 69.

Mulvey argues the cinema presents different "possible pleasures" in looking - including what Freud described as *scopophilia*, "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze".[30] Alongside this voyeuristic pleasure in looking is the *narcissistic* mode of engagement, operating on a contradictory principle of 'sameness'. Here self-recognition in - or 'identification' with - the other as *subject* takes place. Mulvey shows how psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan roots the child's ego formation in a primary identification (the Mirror Stage) with its own bodily image, projected and recognised outside of itself as an 'ideal ego'. This happens initially when the toddler, frustrated with its own fragmentary sense of coordination and powerlessness, sees a more in-control version of itself in the mirror[31] - and promptly imbibes or 'introjects' it. Apart from launching the self as a separate 'ego', the primary identification with the self-image facilitates future identifications with other people - and characters in films.

This allows for basic cinematic identification with strong characters – the most wilful being the protagonist: "The [main/male] character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the [viewing] subject".[32] Apart from resonating with an early victory over the limited body, the process of cinematic identification offers the spectator the possibility of temporarily letting go of their own gendered and racialised ego with its worldly frustrations – and allows 'it' to assume the powerful sense of agency and control of the (white) male protagonist in his gazing and acting upon the world.

What does this mean for the specifically South African Indian spectator in the post-war decades, one might ask? Scholar bell hooks raises questions around how black/colonised people relate to white films - she argues that black viewers of white-dominated (and populated) visual culture have long established an 'oppositional gaze', while critical black female spectators have specifically developed viewing pleasures of "interrogation", "contestation" and "confrontation".[33] She criticises Mulvey's theorisation for its neglect of black female spectatorship: "Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction

[30] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 59.

[31] Mulvey, 60.

[32] Mulvey, 63.

[33] bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 249–58.

of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator."[34] Here hooks seems to assume that women cannot temporarily identify with or assume the 'male gaze' in a viewing - identification is about conscious choice, rather than subliminal seduction. Hook's assertion of a general (black female) critical disengagement seems to want to create a baseline experience out of a privileged, contemporary intellectual position. It seems unlikely though that either male or female South African Indian spectators paid to go to the cinema to exercise an 'oppositional gaze' and practice 'non-identification'.

While the carrot of some kind of quasi-whiteness, citizenship, and future economic prosperity was dangled in front of the Indian 'population group', 'Indianness' was made or intended to feel subordinate to dominant, superior 'whiteness' under apartheid.[35] With narcissistic identification (identification with the 'ideal ego') it seems arguable that an identification with an out-of-reach white-male agency would have been a pleasurable cinematic experience for the subaltern South African Indian. The Indian spectator releases their disempowered status and takes in (and thereby takes pleasure in) the dramatic agency of the white-male protagonist.

In the realm of more conscious identification, there was also the cultural opportunity of cosmopolitanism - generally understood as "an expanded idea of humanity which transcends the boundaries of nation and ethnos".[36] Lamenting the loss of empathy through identification in the decline of cinema spaces, Jan Nåls reminds us that, "Cinema carries the potential to foster understanding and humanitarian values by inviting audiences into the minds of strangers and various representations of otherness."[37] An 'Indian-cosmopolitan' sensibility would have been the effect (but also a cause) of repeat experiences of cinematic identification with white Hollywood characters - involving the letting go of certain aspects of Indian traditionalism and in the embracing (at least the sense of) a new global-cinematic citizenship. This international

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[34] hooks, 254.

[35] Jarred Martin and Kaymarlin Govender, '"Indenturing the Body": Traditional Masculine Role Norms, Body Image Discrepancy, and Muscularity in a Sample of South African Indian Boys', *Culture, Society & Masculinities* 5, no. 1 (1 April 2013): 24, https://doi.org/10.3149/csm.0501.21.

[36] Arjun Appadurai, 'Cosmopolitanism from Below', *Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTC) - The Salon* 4 (2011): n.p., http://jwtc.org.za/volume_4/arjun_appadurai.htm.

[37] Jan Nåls, 'The Changing Cinema Spaces of Accra', *Journal of African Cinemas* 9, no. 2&3 (2017): 201.

or transnational identification, largely facilitated by cinema and the print media, one can assume would have been quite liberating and pleasurable in a different kind of way from what some might call, disparagingly, 'mimicry' of the local colonisers.[38]

While many notions of cosmopolitanism look to a 'cultivated' self-enrichment of the ego, Appadurai favours a local, lived variety, such as that required of the residents of Mumbai. In his view this entails:

> […] cultural co-existence, the positive valuation of mixture and intercultural contact, the refusal of monoculturalism as a governing value, and a strong sense of the inherent virtues of rubbing shoulders with those who speak other languages, eat other foods, worship other gods, and wear their clothes differently.[39]

One could argue that a similar kind of organic syncretism was already happening by default in the melting pots of Johannesburg and Durban in the 1950s and 1960s – cinema just extended the boundaries and allowed for more abstract identifications and connections for South African Indians at a transnational level. Beyond the scope of this chapter, this connection with and 'plugging-into' international popular culture would reshape South African Indian norms on many levels: gender roles, romantic relationships, personal style (fashion and grooming), sport and other 'lifestyle' activities, all would be reformed by the 'new media' cohering in the post-war period.

The fabulous world of cinema

Not only did the filmic content and experience of Indian cinemas provide exciting worlds of difference to observe and relate to, but the contextual apparatus of the film industry 'value-chain' was presented in *Drum* magazine (and presumably received) as a world charged with opportunity and success. A 1955, feature alerts readers to the "fabulous film industry of India" emerging in Bombay, second in size only to Hollywood.[40] In a 1959 *Drum* article, 'Inside India's Hollywood', the world of Indian film production is explored in more detail, represented as a fantastical and dynamic space of wealth creation (for a few) and employment (for many). Looking at the 'growing' Bombay film industry of over 300 films a year being made back in the

[38] Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* 28 (1984): 125–33, https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.

[39] Appadurai, 'Cosmopolitanism from Below', n.p.

[40] Sharda, 'India's Fabulous Film Industry', 46.

motherland, the writer starts with a familiar framing statement as well as an economic 'fact': "a fabulous film industry is growing up in India".[41] The adjective pops up later as well when it comes to discussing the select few actors who "are rushed off their feet with offers" and earn thousands of pounds per film, most of it tax-free: "their pay is as fabulous as the industry itself"[42], the article entices, before revealing the actual amounts earned. While on one hand the article offers facts and statistics of a burgeoning film industry, there is also a laudatory tone, which wants to communicate the excitement of an Indian success story – a world which is contributing to the development of the Indian economy but also making a particular class of supercharged Indians 'fabulously' wealthy.

A 1964 *Drum* article, 'Mr Lucky', seeks to reproduce some of this cinematic 'fabulosity' around local movie makers. The feature article zooms in on one Sammy Naidoo, a 28-year old Durbanite[43], and ostensibly wants to tell the rather banal story of a young 'man-about-town' who has hit a string of jackpots at the races. But the article subtitled 'the playboy with all the luck' also seems to be a bit of a character study, conveying something of the 'fabulous' world of a new kind of local Indian playboy - and we are afforded the interpretative opportunity to put together something of this lifestyle through a series of character details:

> Once Sammy used to walk to his work as an accountant. Today he drives a sleek convertible, and as one of Durban's best-dressed men (he has no less than 43 suits) he is a great entertainer and patron of the night spots – and he's just off on his second trip overseas.[44]

We are shown pictures of the dashing Sammy in his convertible, another with a young woman, one of him at work in a suit (he is an accountant amongst other things) and several other pictures of him with his passion, filmmaking.

One of the more complex pictures shows him at the races holding his "16mm movie camera" alongside his "soccerite pal", Sonny Morgan.[45] Now as a Crimson Leaguer

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[41] 'Inside India's Hollywood', *Drum*, May 1959, 26.

[42] 'Inside India's Hollywood', 26.

[43] I was lucky enough to meet the late 'Mr Lucky' (Sam Naidoo) through his friend and writer, Aziz Hassim, a few years ago – he was still involved in some way with the cinema industry, and we were to edit in some of his film footage in our film, *Legends of the Casbah*.

[44] 'Mr Lucky', *Drum*, February 1964, 18.

[45] 'Mr Lucky', 17.

known to Indian readers - "accused number one" in the infamous Michael John murder trial - Sonny brings a dash of danger to Sammy's picture. But at the same time, as a good-looking, well-dressed 'cinematic gangster' in his own right, Sonny extends our understanding of this new playboy culture being explored. The addition of the League to this story might also make us question, even if just for a moment, the 'luck' factor in Sammy's success at the races…

Later, we are told that "Sammy hopes to make movie-making his career", with the equipment he has already accumulated valued at R7000. Here, filmmaking, signified in Sammy's omni-present 16mm Bolex film camera (a level of apparatus we would now call 'prosumer'), works beneath the radar as a key aspect of the playboy's success. Even if he isn't a professional or successful filmmaker yet, Sammy belongs to the fabulous world of cinema. We are left with a web of interlocking elements – ambition, luck, movies, gangster, races, success. Sammy exemplifies that strange alchemical mix of luck, ambition and connectedness that we all sense is needed for cinematic success – but perhaps even for success more generally.

Sometimes cinema owners themselves became figures of fantasy, fabulousness and intrigue – occasional special feature articles on the Rajab family (whom we might recall built the Shah Jehan mega-cinema on Grey Street) - would marvel at the wealth and power that had been accrued by the six brothers. A 1962 *Drum* article, 'The Fabulous Rajabs', takes the reader on a voyeuristic journey into the lives of the "six musketeers of high finance", explaining the attributes and personalities of each brother in the "millionaire family", and how these have combined to create the "Rajab empire".[46] But the real meat of the article is the "trip around their fabulous home", which, as writer G.R. Naidoo puts it, is "one of the most palatial mansions you could find outside a Hollywood home".[47] Numerous pictures of their "pedigreed stable of cars" (a phrase which links the expensive cars to race horses, if not the whole dubious notion of aristocratic 'breeding'), and the brothers in their 22-roomed mansion fill the pages. Paragraph after paragraph describe the ornate furnishings and antiques in the house while providing monetary values for key items:

[46] G.R. Naidoo, 'The Fabulous Rajabs', *Drum*, January 1962.
[47] Naidoo, 14.

> On the living room wall hangs a magnificent ivory and gold-inscribed "Kashan" rug, exquisite in its beauty and intricate in its design. It is valued at over £1,500. In the living room, marble occasional tables hold ancient Chinese pieces of sculpture.[48]

A decade later, when Mamoo Rajab took over the 'empire' after the leading brother died, *Drum* revisited the Rajabs. While the article focuses on Mamoo's philosophy of work, the leading photograph chooses to position the dashing young man "near the fleet of Rajab luxury cars in the grounds of the Rajab mansion".[49] Decked out in whites and sunglasses, Mamoo is presented pictorially as a carefree playboy character, straight out of the movies.

The point of this vicarious journey into a home of 'fabulous' wealth seems on one level to be an attempt to establish (and thereby indicating a desire for) some form of local Indian cinematic celebrity. Neither Bombay or Hollywood film stars are accessible either geographically to local writers, nor culturally to local readers - the Durban-based Indian cinema owners are however local and relatable, and stand in for the absence of South African Indian film stars in the glamour and wealth department. If one of the pleasures of this 'text' are these decontextualised visual scenarios or fantasy spaces on offer, the article also functions narratively to provide a 'message'. It is partly a rags-to-riches story, an illustration of how Indian values of entrepreneurship, tenacity and family solidarity can lead to 'fabulous' wealth, even in the apartheid world of white privilege. This "secret" of their success is more explicitly revealed by the "head of the Rajab Empire", Habib Rajab, in an article enticingly entitled the 'The Millionaire Touch' – "we believe in all for one and one for all"[50], he is quoted as saying.[51]

Luxury and publicity in the palatial Indian cinema

On a very basic level cinema spaces (and here we should include the exterior facades, the interior foyer space, as well as the actual cinema-space) functioned as experiential 'private-public' spaces of luxury for less affluent Indians. Whether it be public toilets, beaches, park benches or seats on a municipal bus, public space for Indians was constrained and hyper-regulated in the apartheid city. Racial confrontation was a

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[48] Naidoo, 17.

[49] 'It's Mamoo's Empire Now', *Drum*, December 1973, 12.

[50] G.R. Naidoo, 'The Millionaire Touch', *Drum*, February 1962, 67.

[51] This is of course a reference to the 1948 Hollywood extravaganza, *The Three Musketeers*.

possibility. Going to an Indian cinema was an outing which allowed one to feel at home in one's 'Indianness', but also to experience the collective sociality of the Indian community as a 'public' – or as Jagarnath more simply puts it, "where people would come together".[52] Additionally, while ordinary Indians could not afford to live in the style of the Rajabs, for a small fee they could temporarily inhabit and enjoy a genteel, luxurious space – awe-inspiring décor, luxuriant upholstery and atmospheric air-conditioning were just a few shillings away. These places, with their exotic Persian-inspired names, are described as "palaces of excess and enjoyment",[53] with Coppen reporting that the Grey Street complex cinemas "attempted to outdo one another by decking out their interiors to resemble those of decadent Mughal palaces".[54] Jagnernath explains that this was partly because most cinema owners were Muslim – but, referencing Edward Said's ideas on Orientalism, also the result of a dominant story about India's past. "In orientalist representations, the Mughal era has been developed into the general idea of India's history"[55] - Indians both in India and the diaspora nostalgically clung to this vision. On top of the short-term rental of luxury space, Indian cinemagoers were also able to marvel at what they held to be their glorious heritage and affirm their 'Indianness' in its imagined historicity. In the absence of publicity and a sense of national belonging, South African Indian cinemas operated as pseudo-public spaces for alienated Indians, gathering places that allowed for a space of passive cohesion and ethnic identity.

The cinema space in the Indian 'underworld'

South African Indian gangster identity was unquestionably shaped to a large extent by identifications with the Hollywood anti-heroes of gangster films – I scrutinise this particular identification process in more detail elsewhere (see page 155). What is less obvious is the important role played by the actual cinemas, both economically and symbolically, in sustaining and shaping the stories of Indian gangsters. Hassim alludes to the importance of the many 'Casbah' cinemas in the life of the Durban Grey Street neighbourhood.[56] The Young Victorians Gang was literally enmeshed with the

[52] Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 168.
[53] Jagarnath, 169.
[54] Coppen, 'The Last Picture Show', n.p.
[55] Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 168–69.
[56] Hassim, *The Lotus People*.

functioning of cinemas in the district. Operating out of central Victoria Street (where many of the Indian cinemas were to be found), the Young Victorians were the "junior arm" of the Crimson League[57] - Hassim says that these young hustlers made their money controlling the 'black market' in cinema tickets.[58] Mamoo Rajab recalled his uncles' 'naivety' when they opened the Shah Jehan in 1956 – "we didn't realise that gangsters operated in and around cinemas […] they would go in and buy out all the tickets. And then they would stand outside with their runners and they would sell these tickets at a premium".[59] Invariably there was some "commotion" or dispute involving the black-market transactions and the Rajabs' response was to hire their own 'gang' of security guards to police the foyer and exterior surrounds of their cinema.

But it wasn't just this minor form of 'parasitism' that affected the cinemas; extortion, the preserve of the 'big boys', the professional gangsters, was also on the cards. Hassim describes metaphorically - and cinematically - the multi-layered connections between the gangsters and the cinemas in the Durban Indian underworld:

> The *Motas'* [gangsters'] cars, which were all black and huge, glittered as the neon signs from the Avalon Cinema flashed across them. In each car there were two or three sinister looking men, their felt hats pulled low over their faces. Although the parking bays on either side of the road were empty, the drivers ignored them and were double-parked, almost in the middle of the road, with the engines running.[60]

This overburdened literary image cleverly conjoins the spaces of cinema and gangster through the neon light of the cinema sign. In doing so it seems to want to communicate the impact of the cinematic fantasy space on the Durban gangsters, who emulate their cinematic anti-heroes in manner and style. But it goes beyond that, hinting at a story that is not being told, and providing more questions than answers – what are the cars doing there? Have the gang bosses (the "Motas") come to visit the cinema, and for what reason?

JP, a junior associate of the Crimson League in the late 1950s, revealed that indeed at least one of the Crimson League leaders would 'visit' the Avalon. "Whenever you went to them, the owners of Avalon Cinema… Right, Akie used to go there for the boys.

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[57] Hassim, 179.

[58] Hassim, 179–80.

[59] Rajab, Interview with author, 31 January 2018.

[60] Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 201.

30,000, 20,000 10,000… Whatever, ja! It had big money that time".[61] In this passage, it is not clear whether "it" refers to the gang or the cinema - but clearly "Akie" refers to Crimson League leader, Akie Vahed, evidently the League's connection to the Avalon. JP insisted however that this kind of transaction "was not extorting - that was a favour for the boys".[62] Why the Avalon's owners would want to give such a large gift (with no benefits) to the League is not explained. Mamoo Rajab tentatively corroborated this story - "there was this story that Akie was in on the Avalon because he ensured that nothing happened at the Avalon - so that story is possibly true".[63] When it came to the Shah Jehan and the Rajab's cinemas, Rajab claims that due to their security force and the gang's "respect" for their family, they were not at any point pressured by the Crimson League for protection - the respect was there "because we knew them. We knew Akie Vahed, we knew Goolam Boxer, and we knew, on the sidelines, Daddy Naidoo. And we knew very well […] Mohan Govender".[64] Govender, a well-known member of the League in the early days (but eventually hiving off and clashing with second generation Crimson Leaguer, Sonny Morgan) is described as a special friend of Shah Jehan – he is the one who takes the Rajabs to the Crimson League when one of their members abducts a Rajab female family member.[65] While it seems that they might not have paid protection fees directly to the League, the Rajabs still had some kind of gangster 'protector' in Govender.

The relationship of 'protection' between gangsters and cinema operators had similar forms in other cities. Down in Cape Town, the Globe Gang of District Six seemed to have held the cinema as one place where they behaved themselves. While they would never have to pay, and could remove paying patrons from their seats, the Globe Gang also "helped the manager keep order. When we were seriously working, you could hear a pin drop any time during the show".[66] In Johannesburg there was also some kind of understanding between the two stakeholders. A *Drum* article from 1952 reports that "cinemas in Fordsburg and Ferreirastown are threatened if members of gangs are not

[61] JP, Interview with author.
[62] JP.
[63] Rajab, Interview with author, 31 January 2018.
[64] Rajab.
[65] Rajab.
[66] M, 'The Gruesome Inside Secrets of the Globe Gang', *Drum*, April 1954, 46.

allowed in free. Most cinema owners refused to comment."[67] By the late 1950s, Dan September, Sherief Khan's main henchman, had a job as "some kind of bodyguard" at the Majestic Cinema in Fordsburg - EP remembers that "if anyone did anything, Dan was there to evict you from the cinema. But Dan was very tough!"[68] Presumably employing one of his gangsters meant the Majestic had some form of arrangement with Khan. But he then also seemed to have a connection with the Avalon Cinema in Fordsburg - at Khan's party to celebrate the successful outcome of his 1964 murder trial, a "Mr Carrim" from the Avalon was spotted as one of the guests.[69]

Sites of incitement

We know Reef gangster Old Man Kajee had some kind of security guard status with a Durban cinema at one point in the 1930s - but a posthumous account of the man glosses over this, with just an oblique reference to the 'silent movies' - "[…]the Old Man's career really began in the early days of the silent movies when the streets of Durban were dusty and to become a feared character, you had to show your strength in Grey Street".[70] Why are the "movies" even mentioned in this description of a time when you had to prove your toughness? Kajee's 'bouncer' role is not even mentioned here. Just by being connected in the same sentence, the gangster is linked to 'the movies' in some unexplained, indirect way. While both are performed by a "character", it is as if Old Man Kajee is conjured up by the silent movies as some kind of larger-than-life persona, who just stepped off the screen.

In this way, the cinema space sometimes plays a more symbolic role in the world of the Indian gangster. Goolam Gangat, a collector for Khan's syndicate in the early 60s, and a man supposedly prone to nasty behaviour, was murdered 'dramatically' and publicly on the street outside a cinema – one account recalls, "there was one of their so-called strong-armed men of his who was a bully. He was chopped up outside a Fordsburg cinema".[71] Here in one sentence, the narrative logic of transgression leading to punishment is rendered in a single sentence. Another account mentions the "brutal

[67] 'Gang War Crisis!', 17.
[68] EP, Interview with author.
[69] Mayet, 'It Was the Party That Went with a Swing...', 39.
[70] 'The Power of Old Man Y', 21.
[71] 'The Battle of Bullet Corner - Old Man Y: Part III', 59.

slaying of Goolam Gangat with an axe outside a Fordsburg cinema"[72] – what in earlier accounts was simply a stabbing has been enhanced to a 'chopping' with an axe. Apart from this dramatic encoding of the story of Gangat's life, there are also more visually evocative or 'cinematic' renditions of his death closer to the time. A report that came out soon after his death ends with a literary flourish that visually encodes and projects the final scene of the gangster's short life:

> Gangat was at war with society. It was a war to the death. But when 'Big Mouth' died – knifed down into the very street he had terrorised – nobody had won anything. And as the gutters washed away his blood from the street outside that cinema in Fordsburg, so too they washed away some of their foulest memories.[73]

All of the representations here insert the backdrop of the Fordsburg cinema as a relevant detail. In its symbolic role, the cinema is figured as a spectral yet libidinal space of possibility and transformation, but also one of transgression – where you can go too far, forget your identity, your social constraints, and indulge your id. But other ids are liberated here too. Yes, Gangat the gangster was liberated by the cinema, but he was also killed by it, this image seems to warn.

Another act of gangster violence is similarly represented with the cinema once again in the 'background' of the 'scene'. EP recalls the Khan gang's attack on the 'Malay Mob' (in part a retaliation for Gangat's murder) as that incident "when they shot them in front of the cinema in Vrededorp".[74] Was EP confusing the cinema backdrop of the Gangat killing with the '17th Street shootings' a few months later? Or had the gangsters decided to execute Gangat's killers, publicly, in front of a cinema, in a kind of cinematic tit-for-tat? There was indeed a cinema on 17th Street – but we cannot know the killers' intentions. Whatever the case, the salient detail remembered by EP is that it was outside a cinema. In these and other representations it is almost as if the cinema acts as a 'site of incitement', a place outside which a fight can erupt, or even be staged. Perhaps the cinema in some way represented the unconscious itself, that Pandora's box of repressed aggressive drives - and physical proximity to the repository allowed one to access those drives.

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[72] 'Old Man Y: Part 4', 26.

[73] 'Gangat's Bid for Power - The Life of a Gangster Part II', 55.

[74] EP, Interview with author.

In what is itself a highly filmic image, Carim recalled the flamboyant Junior Adam, still a youngster in Khan's gang in the 1950s, with a cinema situated in the background - "I can see him right now with his white panama hat, beautiful floral shirt, dark pants – and his convertible car, *cruuuising* past the Majestic bio.... I can actually see him".[75] Carim then immediately moved on to remember an incident of rivalry in which he got the better of the gangster, when Junior gave his brother trouble - "And I just pushed him up against a wall, then he said something. *Klapped* [smacked] him a couple of times. And we never had trouble again after that".[76] The "Majestic bio", a cinema in Fordsburg, here again in the background of Carim's image-memory complex, seems to incite a memory of physical domination.[77]

Cinemas as gangster 'schools'

There are numerous accounts of 'non-white' and specifically Indian South African gangsters mimicking and assimilating 'gangster' codes and behaviours from American films. Having grown up amongst the gangs, Hassim tells us that Indian gangster behaviour was moulded by gangster movies.[78] Old Man Kajee warns that a problem with gangster films is the emulation of specific criminal techniques: "… there are many tricks which even seasoned gangsters learn", he says.[79] Reports maintained that even Sherief Khan, the great Reef crime supremo, spent a lot of time in and around the cinema,[80] with *Drum* photographer Jurgen Schadeberg recalling his appetite for the content - "He was an avid crime movie fan, borrowing a lot of jargon and ideas from the gangster films".[81]

This self-fashioning from violent movies was not limited to the professional gangsters. Growing up with Don Mattera and his Vultures street gang in Sophiatown, Saloojee

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[75] Carim, Interview with author.

[76] Carim, *Coolie, Come out and Fight!*

[77] It seems that in the 1950s cinemas were not just sites for 'non-white' confrontations – white 'bruisers' and ducktails were also somehow inspired to demonstrate their masculinity in the vicinity of the Hollywood dream-machines. A *Drum* article mentions the antics of the white Southern Suburbs gang in Johannesburg where "there was even a pitched battle on the doorstep of a cinema foyer"- 'Films Banned to Africans', *Drum*, October 1955, n.p.

[78] Niren Tolsi, 'When Movies Still Had Magic', *The M&G Online*, 2009, 2009-07–26 edition, n.p., https://mg.co.za/article/2009-07-26-when-movies-still-had-magic/.

[79] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: III', 15.

[80] MS, Interview with author.

[81] Schadeberg, *The Fifties People of South Africa*, 208.

tells us that "a lot of gangsterism we would learn from the movies".[82] While emulating some of the moves were from gangster *flieks* [movies], the Western was another fruitful genre for learning. Saloojee recalled: "They would act it out, they would see a film, say *Apache* - Apache was dynamic, he was good with a knife. So we would learn from those things, you understand, we would act some of those things out in the streets".[83] Rather than just the usual child-like simulation of action moves, the idea with this gangland choreography was to translate them into effective fighting techniques.

An important aspect of this identification was with the gangster premium on fashion. Singh and Singh mention how Durban's Indian gangs, the Crimson League and the Salots, identified with and modelled themselves on the cinematic gangsters in terms of visual style:

> There are reports from people who remember these gangs as deliberately wanting to dress themselves and emulate the activities of the Chicago gang leaders of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Al Capone and John Dillinger. Big American cars, Stetson hats, Bostonian shoes and pin stripe suits were characteristic features of especially their weekend outfits.[84]

A *Drum* account of the Salot Gang linked their violent behaviour to their predilection for Hollywood gangster performances - "They modelled themselves on American film gangsters: they would often be seen sitting in their "cabs" with slouched hats, and twiddling revolver triggers."[85] Similarly, Goolam Gangat, the legal-clerk turned extortion collector for Khan's Reef gang, imagined for himself a new persona straight out of the movies:

> [He] wanted to create for himself the image of a tough, Chicago-style gangster. The huge, left-hand-drive Chrysler typified for him the sort of life he wanted, the sort of brash elegance he loved. There were two bullet holes in the windscreen he refused to have repaired. It gave his ego a perverse boost to see them.[86]

Strangely enough, some Indian South African gangsters publicly rejected the new freedoms of the id espoused by the gangster film. One of its most righteous and

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[82] Saloojee, Interview with author.

[83] Saloojee.

[84] Anand Singh and Shanta Singh, 'The History of Crime Among People of Indian Origin in South Africa', *Anthropologist* 8, no. 3 (2006): 152.

[85] Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', 15.

[86] 'Goolam Gangat - The Life of a Gangster', 24.

surprising critics was Old Man Kajee, the "master extortionist" of Fordsburg with a "killer's brain".[87] In a prescient moment in his 1953 confessional narrative the seemingly reformed gangster, Kajee, points to the negative socialisation and undesirable 'normalisation' of violence effected by popular Hollywood genres of the time. Of particular concern is the romanticisation of guns and the killing of people:

> What do you see in a gangster film? Mostly shootings and murder. Gangsters use the guns as if it is a common feature of everyday life. They use it brazenly in broad daylight. And in a Western it's even worse. Men are killed like flies, and throughout the film you hear the incessant firing of a gun. You don't even feel shock or sorrow for the men killed.[88]

Employing a mind-boggling circularity, Kajee decries how a cinema-addicted youth might learn from gangster films to short-circuit the 'real' world of work in order to feed their appetite for fantasy: "What is more attractive to a youngster? He doesn't have to work. All he has to do is get a gun, stick someone up and he can have his cinema expense for the day".[89] In this psychic economy of drives, the cinematic gangster-simulacrum has a life of its own – 'it' warps extra-cinema social behaviour only to feed its own fantasy work back in the cinema.

According to Old Man Kajee, gangster films glamourise a grubby world of mob violence to make a profit. "[That is why] writers and producers who don't show gangsters in their real light ought to be shot. Kids are apt to be misled as a result, and that is why they hanker for stardom in their own little film-land of gangsters".[90] He suggests that the route to gangsterism is partly due to deprivations in the social context, but more specifically a visual indoctrination takes place in the youth's working class life-world.

> He sees the "big shots" stab a man, roll a "zoll" and take swigs from carefully concealed liquor bottles. He goes to the bioscope; and the management only shows him "exciting" pictures; crime pictures. His mind receives impressions that do incalculable harm to his character. Can you still wonder that he becomes a criminal?[91]

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[87] 'The Battle of Bullet Corner - Old Man Y: Part III', 59.

[88] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: III', 15.

[89] Kajee, 15.

[90] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: II', 26.

[91] Old Man Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld (Part 4)', *Drum*, September 1953, 16.

Kajee insists on a strictly normative or didactic function for the cinematic experience in which "the purpose of cinema should always be to discourage crime, rather than encourage it".[92]

Early signs of 'simulation'?

The process of mimicking 'characters' in the movies that today seems quite banal and ubiquitous was, from the 1940s, historically new and culturally disruptive for Indians in South Africa - but perhaps it was linked to a global mutation. For Frederic Jameson, it was the middle of the twentieth century that saw the pivotal shift into 'postmodernism', partly because of the new forms, technologies and intensity of visual content that emerged in this period. In this view, postmodernism is a new cultural-economic regime of 'spatiality' in which imagery becomes omnipotent in the extension of the logic of commodification to the cultural domain.[93] For Jameson, the accumulative weight of image production (in television, cinemas and advertising) creates an epistemological 'depthlessness' and a cultural dominant of superficial surfaces and empty performances. Similarly, Baudrillard suggests that postmodern 'simulation' (in which signs no longer gesture to a reality) involves a new performative mode of identity construction around pre-ordained roles: "all hold-ups, hijacks and the like are now as it were simulation hold-ups, in the sense that they are inscribed in advance in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in advance in their mode of presentation and possible consequences".[94]

Gardaphe relates an emblematic story of 'real' mobsters merging with their cinematic counterparts:

> As the New York police detective Remo Franceschini witnessed during his surveillance of John Gotti, the real gangsters started imitating the characters in the *Godfather* films. After a generation, one could hardly tell the difference between the real and artificial gangster.[95]

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[92] Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: III', 15.

[93] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[94] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. P Foss, P Patton, and P Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 41.

[95] Fred L. Gardaphe, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

In image-saturated postmodernity there is no 'original' referent, and the concept of 'authenticity' goes out the window. Even the policeman no longer knows how to perform his duties in any original way after watching countless cop shows and crime films.[96] Adorno and Horkheimer's already jaundiced view of the then emerging 'culture industry' echoes down the decades - "Real-life is becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the movies".[97]

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[96] Antony Stephenson, 'Police as Television Viewers and Policing Practitioners', n.d., 9.

[97] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 126.

Conclusion

I would like to at this point offer some final reflections on the question of voice raised in the Introduction (see page 5). The discovery of my own voice and relationship to the story I have been telling has been important both to my ability to enter into the world being described and analysed in a profound way, and in driving the creative component: the screenplay. It has allowed me to adopt the fast-paced voice of the gangster genre in some of the more analytical components of my thesis, reflecting not just the style of my sources' storytelling, but demonstrating, more rhetorically, the power with which the narrator is imbued in evoking people and events. This felt like the right 'voice-over', not just for stitching together the many voices, but for what could only be a narrated reconstruction of a hazy and elusive past.

With regards to my screenplay writing process (which as I have said, I have chosen not to analyse) I should at least comment on the decision to write about Durban Indian gangsters, and the position I take in relation to my characters. Rather than trying to write 'a gangster film' and imposing the gangster genre wholesale as some kind of all-determining, high-octane story template on local content, my process has been to write from the 'bottom up', finding a way to tell a story about a complex life-world of small-time hustlers, low stakes and fluctuating identities. Instead of providing the operatic tragic trajectory of say, a *Scarface*, the gangster plot in my screenplay is deployed as a ruse for exploring the cultural specificities of the complex field of Indian masculinity, respectability and gangster culture in the 1950s.

In concluding this study I will now revisit and polish some of the key ideas that have shaped my reading of these 'gentleman gangsters' and their world. Drawing connections across chapters, I like to think that these final elucidations represent the crux of what I am adding to the relatively small body of writing that exists on this topic. But first, a brief word on an omission in this study, one which I believe to be an avenue for further research.

A suggestion for further study: street gangs and street culture

As mentioned in the introduction, I originally intended a wider scope for the research, one that would include Indian and multiracial street gangs in the early apartheid period. In my fieldwork I conducted interviews around these formations, but realised at the

analysis stage that this created too much material to productively analyse, given the parameters of the thesis, and that I needed to focus on the upper echelons. My view is that this additional research on Indian and 'Indo-coloured' street gangs still needs to be done and would be beneficial to a deeper understanding of the social dynamics and subcultures of the period – including the youth-driven multiracial 'street culture' that surfaced in the post-war period.

Indian gangs both competed and collaborated with African, coloured or so-called 'Malay' gangsters. While professional Indian gangsters might take on African or coloured members as henchmen (for example the Salot Gang, and Khan's long collaboration with Dan September), genuinely hybrid street gangs were sometimes formed more spontaneously if they came from multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Many so-called 'Indian' street gangs would actually take shape across coloured and Indian lines[1] – and more generally the 'line' between Indian and coloured was often quite blurred.[2] Although apartheid attempted to essentialise and segregate races as much as possible, a number of multi-ethnic or cosmopolitan neighbourhoods persisted, providing opportunities for mingling and intermarrying.

ANC stalwart Laloo Chiba tells us of the "lively atmosphere" generated by the "mixed crowd of Coloureds, Indians and Malays" hanging out at the Soldiers Club, housed in a basement opposite the Majestic Cinema in Fordsburg. It was here that Chiba "started keeping company with undesirable elements – ruffians, dagga-smokers and gangsters."[3] This was also where he befriended a "gangster of note", Sherief Khan, in 1950.[4] Mac Carim glowingly recalls the Springbok Hall, "a big huge dance hall" on the corner of De La Rey and 23rd Street in Fietas – "that was the centre of our lives. No Africans – coloureds and Indians. Young people, gangsters, toughs..."[5] According to Carim, the Springbok Hall attracted youths from as far afield as Pretoria. A transformative encounter was taking place between Indian and coloured youth that shaped an emerging

[1] The Dutcheens of Durban's Warwick Avenue triangle are an example of this kind of formation, as are the Doornfontein and Fietas gangs described by Garret Adams.

[2] One interviewee points out that Indian guys could date 'coloured girls' more easily than Indian girls – "and a lot of them ended up marrying coloured girls." - TP, Interview with author.

[3] Ismail Vadi et al., *Laloo 'Isu' Chiba - Principled Activist, Humble Revolutionary and Selfless Leader* (Lenasia, Johannesburg: Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, 2018), 7.

[4] Vadi et al., 7.

[5] Carim, Interview with author.

cosmopolitan ‘street culture’ - this helped stimulate the emergence of hybrid street gangs and new forms of aggressive masculinity.

Indian gangsters and popular culture - a feedback loop

Gangsters both infused and were infused by popular culture. The gangster persona offered up by popular culture provided an escape from stagnant, traditional identities and opened up a vicarious world of cosmopolitanism and freedom for anyone. Local Indian gangsters however literally modelled themselves on movie gangsters. The gangster ‘archetype’ resisted socialisation, embracing alternative values of self-fashioning: stylishness, irony, resilience, fearlessness, expressiveness, transgressive opportunism, and violent assertiveness.

We saw how in the Indian areas of Durban and Johannesburg, there was a veritable flourishing of cinema culture from the 1940s onwards. Indian audiences identified with both Indian and Hollywood scenarios, and were excited with a sense of celebrity and ‘fabulosity’ produced around the industry players. For South African Indian gangsters, cinemas were important institutions economically as well as culturally and symbolically, with cinemas often in the background of violent ‘scenes’.

Within this thriving cinema street-life, the Hollywood gangster genre arrived as a subversive story, with a historically new ‘criminal hero’ protagonist. This anti-hero breaks the rules of ‘old-boy’ capitalism, but follows a path of reckless ambition to his own destruction. The tragic structure enabled viewers to enjoy the transgression as well as the retribution. At the same time the gangster protagonist was appropriated by *Drum* writers, and used as a template for creating excitement around local ‘non-white’ gangsters. Soon, however, gangsters themselves began to manage their reputations by representing themselves through the magazine, creating a feedback loop.

Gentleman gangsters as ‘leaders’

This study has looked at how Sherief Khan’s career was built on fear - the question arises, was he also received positively? Khan was not perceived by his Indian community in any single way - like any complex, charismatic figure he was seen positively, negatively and ambivalently. We have considered many examples of fear and loathing – what interests me at this point is the less obvious relation of attraction.

It seems clear that Khan represented something quite inspiring for a slightly wayward Indian masculinity in the making. Chiba offers a basic separation between a mainstream community and his own "juvenile delinquent" subculture:

> How the Indian community looked upon him? I think with a sense of fear. I suppose there would be people – like, in 1950, because he was a gangster, a well-known gangster, you feel a sense of excitement moving around in his company, gives you a sense of importance - my type, that type, would look up to him… but I think the rest of the community wouldn't be in favour of people like Sheriff Kahn, Essop Mayet, Leslie Harvey.[6]

Chiba's "type" is a street-wise male teenager or young adult, who would "look up" to an older, more potent Indian male figure as some kind of role model or masculine mentor. EP, a teenager in the 1950s, expresses a similar view of a generational split in perceptions:

> The gangsters were famous for being tough, and doing things and that - sometimes were in awe of them, until you grew up. So yes, my own view would be that a lot of the young people in Becker Street and in Ferreirastown, and in other places, were in kind of awe. Because Sheriff Khan and his gang had established a very powerful reputation.[7]

Khan facilitated that strange and opaque mechanism of celebrity and myth - identification. He provided a mirror for the introjection of missing qualities, exemplifying the transgressive Hollywood gangster, but also that Indian South African 'man' you could not (yet) be. Chiba tries to communicate the specific high of hanging out with Sheriff Khan: "like, in 1950, because he was a gangster, a well-known gangster, you feel a sense of excitement moving around in his company, [it] gives you a sense of importance".[8] An id unconstrained by super-ego, and uncontained by the oppressive state apparatus, Khan was virility and aggression personified for a young Indian masculinity.

It is also worth offering some concluding deductions on the leadership qualities of the Crimson League's chief honcho, Big Daddy, given his additional pre-eminence in the highly-organised Indian soccer world. One of the limitations of attempts to understand Indian 'political' identity in the early apartheid period is that it assumes it operates

[6] Chiba, Interview with author.

[7] EP, Interview with author.

[8] Chiba, Interview with author.

simply from a modern Western 'democratic' tradition - political leadership, ideas and personality, etc. Mines and Gourishankar[9] examine the institutional 'Big-man' form of leadership in India[10], in which a specific form of 'individuality' is key to leveraging power. In this centuries-old model "[a] leader's pre-eminence defines him as an individual. South Indians stress his inequality of status when they value his individuality, a contrast to the Western emphasis on equality among individuals"[11]:

> Institutional position is a necessary condition of the viability of the Indian big-man, but it is not sufficient. In keeping with their highly personalized nature (Kakar 1981:40-1), Indian institutions expand and contract in popularity and membership depending on the idiosyncratic charisma of their head.[12]

The 'big-man' leader, embodying high quotients of generosity, trustworthiness, fame and honour radiates power to his followers[13] - he performs it publicly in social rituals, but also relays it throughout the network. This model of performed hierarchical power explains to some extent the respect for Durban's own 'big-man', 'Big Daddy' Naidoo. We know that 'Big Daddy' was at the centre of several networks - he was a leading manager-coach in the soccer world, parading at Curries Fountain, a successful trader in the market world, and 'Number One' in the Crimson League gang. These 'pre-eminences' reinforced each other, multiplying his respect, whether it be from fellow businessmen, gang members or soccer followers. Mines and Gourishankar explain that lieutenants benefit in prestige and power by association to a 'big-man' in a hierarchical institutional network – they in turn bestow this prestige by association to *their* followers, who build the network. This analysis aptly fits the Crimson League hierarchical network.

Gangsters were opportunists

There should also be some final reflections on law and order in the time of the great extortionists. One understanding of the era would be that with apartheid's lack of 'low

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[9] 'Leadership and Individuality in South Asia: The Case of the South Indian Big-Man', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (1 November 1990): 761–86, https://doi.org/10.2307/2058235.

[10] Although the authors focus specifically on the institutional 'big-man' leadership style prevalent in South India they "believe that variants of the big-man form of leadership are widespread in India" Mines and Gourishankar, 762.

[11] Mines and Gourishankar, 762.

[12] Mines and Gourishankar, 762.

[13] Mines and Gourishankar, 763.

policing' in 'non-white' areas, crime and gangsterism flourished. To a certain extent, this macro-perspective explains the broader context of the phenomenon – undoubtedly many Fordsburg traders experienced their Indian 'protectors' simply as parasitic criminals. MS's view is an emblematic one here: "it was said it's a security service, but it was extortion, nothing else. He [Sherief Khan] used to say 'I will protect you' – but protect you from who? From nobody. I'll protect you from myself!".[14] In this view there was just fear and loathing.

But I do not think this is the full picture – I have attempted to look at it in a 'stereoscopic' way, and hopefully another more nuanced 'movie' has begun to present itself. The absence of on-the-ground policing was not just passively experienced by a victimised Indian population. From a kind of micro-economic perspective, opportunities were taken at the individual and team level by entrepreneurial 'gentlemen gangsters' – these were feared and respected, but also embedded, socially-integrated members of Indian society. The vacuum of state-sanctioned law and order was also filled at a collective level: by Indian society, with community-endorsed vigilantism, and by Indian business, with contracted private 'protection'.[15] The age of the extortionists can be understood as both a symptom and a response to the state's withholding of policing to Indian communities. Khan, Big Daddy and their elite troupe of 'gentlemen gangsters' were ambiguously seen (and probably actively projected themselves in this way) as both predators and saviours, depending on the situation.

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[14] MS, Interview with author.

[15] See Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia*.

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