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'VOLKSMOEDER': MOTHER OF A RUGBY PLAYING NATION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role allocated to women in Afrikaner society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how it came to form an integral part of emergent Afrikaner nationalism. Created by men and sustained through the male dominated realms of politics and rugby, the notion of Volksmoeder or 'Mother of the Nation' promoted the virtues of 'ideal womanhood' and became a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom in the years following the Anglo-Boer War. Although the concept of the Volksmoeder defies precise definition, it nevertheless incorporated a clear role model for Afrikaner women and became part and parcel of the Afrikaner nationalist mythology. Synonymous with Afrikaner paternalism, it was a deliberately constructed ideal, the work of male cultural entrepreneurs who deliberately promoted a set of images surrounding women. Based on the exploits of Voortrekker women and perhaps more significantly, those who'd suffered at the hands of the British during the 1899-1902 conflict, the notion of an 'idealised womanhood' was woven into a male-dominated nationalism.

Key words: Volksmoeder; Patriarchy; Afrikaner nationalism; History; Rugby; Anglo-Boer War.

INTRODUCTION

> One of the means by which men in male-dominated societies control women is by giving them a well-defined but circumscribed position within society, to which some status, honour and respectability are attached (Brink, 1990: 273).

Afrikaner nationalists and liberal historians alike have portrayed men as the active agents of Afrikaner history, and women as the *Volksmoeder* figureheads of the movement. In his seminal study on 'Afrikaner civil religion', Moodie (1975: 17) wrote that "civil faith reserved a special place of pride for the figure of the Afrikaner woman". For Moodie, man remained "the instrumental agent who worked out God's will in Afrikaner history" yet in the struggle against Imperialist oppression, it was the woman who "provided a deep well of moral fortitude which complimented and even surpassed her husband's more practical exploits".

As an heroic ideology inadvertently created around the Boer women in the late nineteenth century, the notion of the *Volksmoeder* became the cornerstone of the nationalist movement as Afrikaners of all backgrounds drew on its sub-themes of courage and resistance. Books like A.P. van Rensburg's *'Moeder van ons volk'* (1966) built on long established tradition that enshrined women as pious mothers of the nation. As early as the 1890s, sympathetic writers such as Olive Schreiner were extolling the intrepid virtues of the Afrikaner woman and her place in society:

> If the Boer woman of today does not, like her Teutonic ancestresses of centuries ago, lead her nation to war, going bare-footed and white-robed before it, it is still largely her voice which urges it forward or holds it back. Keen, resolute, reflective and determined … in the Boer women, South Africa might boast in the future as in the past of possessing one of the most virile womanhoods that the world has seen (Schreiner, 1923: 201).[1]

Significantly in 1919, nationalist Willem Postma[2] perpetuated the ideal by publishing *Die boervrouw, moeder van haar volk* (The Boer Woman, the Mother of her Nation), a highly romantic history of Afrikaner women and their determination to preserve the identity of their people. Within it, Postma propagated the ideal of *Volksmoeder* as a role model for a new generation of women by showing how the courage of the womenfolk had continually sustained Afrikaner men. "No nation has a better, worthier, nobler example than that of the Boer woman; her history, her life and character" claimed Postma (1919: 205; translated). He praised their piety, bravery, love of freedom, sacrificial spirit, self-reliance, and many other talents but above all, he admired their gift of inspiring their menfolk to even greater sacrifices (Postma, 1919: 63-65).

Such nationalist mythology was built upon a predominantly male interpretation of Afrikaner history which saw Afrikaners as a separate people, with the woman being a symbol of this racial purity. The particular significance of Postma's work is that he extended the prevailing notion of ideal womanhood to include their nurturing of the *Volk* as well. For the first time the Boer woman's role as mother and central focus of her family was expanded to include the concept of Boer women as 'Mothers of the Nation'.

A CONSEQUENCE OF WAR

Primarily based on the exploits of the Voortrekker women, a distinctive role in the development and articulation of the *Volksmoeder* ideal was played by the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The suffering of the Afrikaner women and children in the field and in the British concentration camps in particular was seized upon by nationalists to promote the virtuous image of Boer women. As over 26 000 Afrikaans women and children perished in the camps alone (Le May, 1965: 106; Spies, 1980: 170), their heroism, patriotism and defiance of the British enemy came to the forefront of popular consciousness. Ironically, the prominence given to their sufferings during the war was largely a result of the work of an English woman, Emily Hobhouse, whose concern on learning of the treatment of Boer women at the hands of the British military led to her active involvement in a campaign to improve conditions in the camps (Brink, 1990).[3] However, whereas Hobhouse meant to demonstrate the universal plight of women, others, after the war, were to appropriate her work for their own ends.

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[1] Although her book was published as late as 1923, Schreiner's thoughts were in fact recorded around the period prior to Anglo-Boer War.

[2] Willem Postma was a Free State journalist and brother-in-law of Afrikaans poet Totius (J.D. du Toit). Together these two men developed "their cultural nationalism and a sense of identity based upon Afrikaner traditions and the Calvinist religion" (Hexham, 1980, p.401).

[3] For an interesting account of the work of Emily Hobhouse, see: Van Reenen, R. (Ed.) (1984), *Emily Hobhouse - Boer War letters*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.

Following 1902, the wartime suffering of the Afrikaner woman began to serve an important political function in the development and deployment of Afrikaner nationalism. She was promoted as the representation of God's grace and intercession in the life of His people and throughout the bitter Afrikaner struggle for freedom her standing as a purveyor of national pride and values continued to grow in significance. The concept of the *Volksmoeder* added a further dimension to the nationalist movement as a new generation of culturalists strived to re-build Afrikaner society. Brink (1990: 279) points to the significance of the *Vrouemonument* (the Women's Monument), which was unveiled in 1913, as a symbolic victory over those seeking conciliation. There was, she suggests, a "clear convergence between the development of the ideal of the *Volksmoeder* and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism" during this time.

IN THE INTERESTS OF MEN

In Britain major middle class feminist campaigns were underway from the 1880s onwards to give women better education, to gain them the vote and to reduce male sexual power over them (Morrell, 1996). Within Afrikaner society however, the situation was different. "In essence the Afrikaner woman has never been a political person. She comes into her own in the field of charity, in welfare work and education" explained Van Rensburg in 1966 (p.99; translated).

While continuing to wield considerable authority in the community, most Afrikaner women were content to exercise their power indirectly, without questioning the principle of male hegemony until well into the twentieth century. According to Walker (1990) this was due partly to the hold of the Dutch Reformed Church, with its fundamentalist reading of the Bible and rigid adherence to patriarchal ideology. The Church was a strong, conservative force in Afrikaner thinking and remained opposed to the more liberal attitudes afforded to women in other societies. The Church, coupled with nationalist ideology, subordinated women into a separate, male-defined section of the community that was geared towards the overriding struggle of the Afrikaner people against British Imperialism.

The 1920s however did see the emergence of greater political confidence among some Afrikaner women. Central to this was the increase in female voices within Afrikaner print culture (Du Toit, 1996). Women journalists like Rothmann and Malherbe promoted the activities of the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging* (South African Christian Women's Organisation) as well as the women's wings of the National Party, and in doing so, contributed to the construction of a *Volksmoeder* ideal that cast women's domestic duties as essential services to the *Volk*. But whilst women were proving active participants in the construction and promotion of nationalist ideas, the discourse of male cultural entrepreneurs made them objects rather than subjects. As icons of wartime suffering, Afrikaner women remained the submissive players within a patriarchal society in which male dominated practices such as rugby and the political activities of the Broederbond still assumed the ultimate control.

A MAN'S GAME

Throughout the history of the game in South Africa, rugby has been indoctrinated with masculine values and ideals whilst the cultural centrality of the sport has maintained and reinforced male hegemony within Afrikaner society. Rugby itself has been explored by

Nauright and Chandler (1996) and their collaborators as a crucial vehicle for 'making men' where it has been popular. Nowhere has this been more applicable than in South Africa, where, according to Nauright (1996: 241)

> rugby is *the* crucial cultural form that entrenched the social order …
> with white males at the top, distinguished from women and other races
> who did not (apparently) share the same passion or derive the same
> cultural lessons from the game.

Originally it was under the pervading influence of Imperialist Britain that the spirit of rugby and masculinity had been transported to the Colony. Evidence suggests that the ethos was entrenched within the South African game as early as the 1906 tour of the British Isles. In the official souvenir brochure of the tour, twenty two year old Border player W.A. Burger was described as a "splendid specimen of South African manhood" as well as being "probably the best forward in the country" (South African Rugby Football Board, 1906: 7).

In South Africa, like elsewhere, it was because of the rough, physical nature of the game that rugby was interpreted as being pre-eminently a 'man's game', inculcating values such as courage, self-control and stamina. Today, this still represents a popular conception of the sport among Afrikaners of both genders. Isabelle Nel (2000) talks of the prestige of the game and the fact that "rugby, of course, is for the boys – it is their game". Herman van Niekerk (2000), a professor at Stellenbosch University for many years, goes on to describe the educational virtues of playing rugby for adolescent boys whose motivation to develop into men is greatly enhanced through the playing of a "man's game". Contemporary gender theorist Robert Morrell also views the sport as an arena where male hegemony has been reinforced over the years. "Rugby stressed physical confrontation, perseverance and skill", which were, he suggests, "all equated with white masculinity" (Morrell, 2001: 23).

Historically during times of conflict, rugby, and those associated with it, have also been linked with masculine honour and a sense of duty to 'one's country'. Patriarchal values and nationalist pride have been called upon as the boundaries between sport and confrontation are readily dissolved to suit war-mongering propaganda. Within Difford's (1933) authoritative history of rugby in South Africa, the first of its kind to be written, Nicholson (1933: 735) typified the sentiment offered to South African 'rugby men' who had fought and died in the Great War:

> Those great-hearted and gallant men who played a bigger game
> in a greater cause, and in doing so laid down their young lives.
> On the bloody battle fields of Empire … virile and valiant, they
> gladly answered the Mother Country's call in her hour of need,
> and rugby men in legions went forth to humanity's aid.

As well as preparation for war, South African rugby has more commonly been viewed as an arena where gender relations were influenced and reinforced. In fact, the 'maleness' of the sport, as Grundlingh (1996: 200) notes "was one of the aspects of imperial rugby culture which Afrikaners adopted and even reinforced without further thought". From a very young age, boys in rugby-playing countries were socialised into a world where rugby was an important element in the construction of masculine identity and as Grundlingh (1996)

acknowledges, the very culture of the sport, imbued with its strong sense of tradition, encouraged conformity to male-defined values.

Excluded from the intimacies of male rugby culture, Afrikaner women however, did have a peripheral role to play. In the 1930s and 1940s, in support of the men women enthusiastically attended rugby matches at Stellenbosch (Grundlingh, 1996: 199), a trend which has indeed continued to this day.[4] However, as Grundlingh (1996: 199) later discloses, women were welcomed into the fold not through the promotion of equal opportunity, but rather "because it served the interest of men and the sport in general". In support of this Thompson (1988: 206) in particular decries the "endless list of chores traditionally done by women for the benefit of men and boys who play rugby". South Africa in this respect was no different from any other rugby playing society.

Patriarchal attitudes toward women adopted during the 1930s in particular and the mobilisation of Afrikanerdom often meant that women during this time could only gain social recognition as participants in the lives of their husbands and children. Rugby as *the* male sport, reinforced this. South African rugby supremo, Danie Craven, revealingly once said that a woman "should be soft, soft by nature, soft by word of mouth. If they are not soft, they simply do not have influence over a man" (cited in Grundlingh, 1996: 200). Such sentiments of course have been promoted throughout Afrikaner history and further manipulated by the very nationalists who espoused the *Volksmoeder* as the symbolic purveyor of all things pure and worthy within Afrikanerdom. In every respect rugby, alongside the nationalist cause, had played its part during this time in condemning Afrikaans women to their circumscribed, male-defined position within society.

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[4] During time spent studying at Stellenbosch University, it became obvious to the author the enthusiasm of spectators of both genders at inter-varsity rugby matches.

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