

## Moulding *volksmoeders* or *volks enemies*? Female students at the University of Pretoria, 1920-1970

Ria van der Merwe\*

### Introduction

One of the key elements that nationalist ideologues have used over the last two centuries as a mobilising force is “a highly stylised symbolic identity of ideal womanhood to which the ordinary women of the nation are meant to conform or at least to aspire”.<sup>1</sup> Women are called upon to be mothers, not only of their private families, but of the “super-family” that is the nation.<sup>2</sup> In Afrikaner nationalism this translated into the image of the *volksmoeder*.<sup>3</sup> During a time of immense turmoil and change, Afrikaner women had to be, in the words of D.F. Malan, then leader of the National Party in the Cape Province, the constructive force of the nation as “no nation can be built by the sword alone; the trowel must feature too. The woman works with the trowel in a constructive manner, particularly in the social terrain, the terrain of education and health”.<sup>4</sup> After considering the genesis of the concept *volksmoeder* and various reflections on it, this article will look at the tertiary education of women, specifically at the University of Pretoria (UP). Firstly, the position of women as defined by Afrikaner nationalism and how it manifested at UP will be discussed. Secondly, it will consider the causes and implications of Afrikaner women’s move away from their designated role and place and whether this shedding of their traditional image lead to the undermining of Afrikaner nationalist ideals.

### The *volksmoeder* image

An idealised image of the Afrikaner or Boer woman, the *volksmoeder*, appeared for the first time in South African historiography in the late nineteenth century. The negative portrayal of the Boer settlers outside the Cape Colony in South African historiography written in English in the 1860s and 1870s (J. Noble, A. Wilmot, J.C. Chase), was countered with more apologetic approaches by Dutch, Afrikaner and English historians (C.J. Klok, C.J. Van der Loo, C.N.J. du Plessis, G.M. Theal) in the aftermath of the discoveries of minerals and the Transvaal War (1880–1881). In these studies the women featured more prominently than before and they became the symbols of courage, “virtue,

---

\* Ria van der Merwe is on the staff of the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies at the University of Pretoria. She works in the University Archives

1 L. Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes: The Afrikaner Nationalist Women’s Parties 1915 to 1931”, *South African Historical Journal*, 40, May 1999, p 64

2 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 64

3 L. Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity: Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the *Volksmoeder* Discourse of *Die Boerevrou*, 1919–1931” MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1991, p 194; E. Brink, “Man-made Women: Gender, Class and the Ideology of the *Volksmoeder*”, in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1990), p 274; E. Pretorius, “Communicating Feminism to the Community: The Continuing Relevance of Feminism Fifty Years after 9 August 1956”, *Communitas*, 11, 2006, pp 1–20

4 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 66

moral sensibility and political independence”.<sup>5</sup> Several of these scholars also stressed their “racial superiority and purity”, despite their isolation and contact with “wild barbarians” (black, indigenous population).<sup>6</sup> The popular appeal of this image was soon realised. In the late nineteenth century the Dutch Reformed Church used these idealised notions of motherhood in their magazines to encourage members to support missionary and philanthropic efforts.<sup>7</sup> F.W. Reitz, former president of the Orange Free State, used Theal’s portrayal of the Boer women in his defence of the Boer republics on the eve of the South African War (1899–1902) and during the war, Gen. J.C. Smuts referred to the heroism of the Voortrekker women to inspire the men in the field. After the war the suffering of Afrikaner women in concentration camps, their “heroism, patriotism and defiance of the British enemy”,<sup>8</sup> were used to augment this idealised image of women.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, the *volksmoeder* was in part based on the image of idealised womanhood in nineteenth-century England, namely that her most important attributes were her “ability and willingness to suffer and sacrifice for nation, husband and children”.<sup>10</sup> The portrayal of Afrikaner women differed from this ideal in that unlike the “passivity, modesty and decorativeness” encouraged in the drawing-rooms of metropolitan England,<sup>11</sup> they were productive members of society and “far more the fellow labourer and comrade of man, than are the masses of women in nineteenth-century societies”.<sup>12</sup> Although this was a romanticised view, the active participation of Afrikaner women in all spheres of society is well documented. Especially during the South African War, women were seen as “better patriots, the better men,”<sup>13</sup> by their unwillingness to surrender<sup>14</sup> and also by sustaining the war effort by keeping the farms running.<sup>15</sup>

This activism and patriotism of women were channelled into various welfare organisations in the aftermath of the war. In each province a women’s organisation was established which set out to work towards poverty relief and the general upliftment of society.<sup>16</sup> It was also these very qualities – activism, patriotism and its popular appeal – that attracted Afrikaner nationalism to the *volksmoeder* image as an ideal vehicle to advance their cause. The aftermath of the South African War was also a time of tremendous change and upheaval for the white Afrikaans-speaking population. This was

---

5 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 276

6 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 276

7 M du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: *Volksmoeders* and the ACVV, 1904–1929”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1, 2003, p 155

8 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 27

9 L Vincent, “Bread and Honour: White Working Class Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the 1930s”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26, 1, 2000, p 64

10 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 274; Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, p 219

11 Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, p 115

12 Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, p 107

13 H Bradford, “Regendering Afrikanerdom: The 1899–1902 Anglo-Boer War”, in I Blom and K Hagemann (eds), *Gendered Nations: Nationalism and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Berg, Oxford, 2000), p 212

14 S B Spies, “Women and the War”, in P Warwick (ed.), *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902* (Longman, London, 1980), p 168; Bradford, “Regendering Afrikanerdom”, p 212

15 Bradford, “Regendering Afrikanerdom”, p 211

16 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 285; Vincent, “Bread and Honour”, pp 64–65

most keenly felt in the two former Boer republics, which bore the brunt of the devastation of the South African War and the negative social and economic effects of the rapid industrialisation that followed.<sup>17</sup> This undermined the traditional political support base of the Afrikaner middle class, because these educated professionals who had previously held positions of authority now had no place in the post-war anglicised administration under the British high commissioner, Lord Alfred Milner.<sup>18</sup>

In the decades that followed, the middle class found in Afrikaner nationalism the ideal vehicle to garner the political support of the urbanised Afrikaner. By active involvement in all aspects of Afrikaner life, such as culture, language and religion,<sup>19</sup> they managed to sell Afrikaner nationalism as a device that placed the “good of the nation above the narrow concerns of politics”. The true nationalist goal was therefore not a “sordid quest for political power, but rather for the realisation of a divinely inspired project, the necessary birth of a nation”.<sup>20</sup> Within this context of Afrikaner nationalism, the image of the *volksmoeder* was also formalised. As they “had been designated as a more trustworthy form of humanity”,<sup>21</sup> they “had particular responsibility for the success of this project”.<sup>22</sup> Drawing on the pioneering *Voortrekker moeder* and the suffering Boer women in the concentration camps, women’s contribution to the Afrikaner nationalist cause was justified as a response to their historical destiny.<sup>23</sup>

The articulation of the *volksmoeder* discourse moved in the first decades of the twentieth century from history to popular literature. The well-loved and influential Afrikaans author, best known for penning the words of the national anthem of the Union of South Africa, C.J. Langenhoven wrote a book in 1918 entitled *Die Vrou van Suid-Afrika: Dramatiese Fantasia*. This work dealt with “the role played by the woman in the adventures of the Afrikaner People and her history of suffering and struggle and wandering, from the time when the Voortrekkers left Natal to the time of the last English War” and was reviewed in *Die Huisgenoot*, the most popular Afrikaans family magazine of the time.<sup>24</sup> The first systematically articulated *volksmoeder* discourse, *Die Boervrouw, Moeder van haar Volk* (The Boer woman, mother of her nation) appeared in the same year. Written on the request of two Afrikaner nationalist organisations, namely Helpmekaar (a welfare organisation founded to address the poor white problem) and the Kultuurvereniging of Reddersburg, author Willem Postma described the Afrikaner woman as “the conscience of her nation as well as the measure of its values. The moral

---

17 I du Plessis, “Narrating the ‘Nation’: Cultural Production, Political Community and Young Afrikaans Readers”, PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, 2004, p 63; H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003), pp 323, 332, 370

18 Du Plessis, “Narrating the ‘Nation’”, pp 59–62; I Hofmeyr, “Building a Nation from Words: Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902–1924”, in S Marks and S Trapido (eds), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Longman, London, 1987), pp 113–114

19 Hofmeyr, “Building a Nation from Words”, pp 113–114; Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 64

20 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 67

21 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 67

22 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 67

23 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 66

24 Vincent, “Bread and Honour”, p 64

life of a nation is controlled by the women, and by the women can we measure the moral condition of the people".<sup>25</sup> This work, as well as Eric Stockenström's *Die Vrou in die Geskiedenis van die Hollands-Afrikaanse Volk: 'n Beknopte Oorsig van die Rol wat die Vrou in die Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika Gespeel het in die 350 Jaar tussen 1568 en 1916*, in which the Afrikaner women were portrayed as "a purifying and ennobling influence on their menfolk", willing to "sacrifice much for their families" as loyal housewives and tender nurses,<sup>26</sup> would come to influence and direct *volksmoeder* discourse in the years that followed.

As "mothers of the nation", Afrikaner women served a dual function for the Afrikaner nationalist. On the one hand, they had to be a "solid and willing workforce"<sup>27</sup> for the National Party (NP) in their quest for political power,<sup>28</sup> and the NP's success in the 1924 elections was largely due to their fundraising and organisational efforts.<sup>29</sup> The NP realised that a solution to the poor white question was crucial to their political success. In a time when women working outside the home were considered morally detrimental to society,<sup>30</sup> their active participation in the welfare sphere was sanctioned as being an extension of their mothering role for their families and communities to the greater benefit of the nation. With their unpaid philanthropic work, Afrikaner women addressed many of the social problems of the time, thereby making an essential contribution towards the NP's support base amongst the working class.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand the *volksmoeder* also had to fulfil an important symbolic function. She represented a historically based role model of what it meant to be a true Afrikaner, namely a sense of religion, bravery and a "love of freedom and steadfastly anti-British".<sup>32</sup> As there was no unifying male figure Afrikaners could look up to, especially after the rebellion of 1914–1915, proponents of the Afrikaner nationalist cause hoped that this image of the patient, courageous and yet determined and idealistic woman could transcend division in the Afrikaner community.<sup>33</sup>

This use of the *volksmoeder* ideology within Afrikaner nationalism, as was often the case in other nationalist ideologies, gave women a distinct set of roles which were "usually associated with esteem, status and respectability",<sup>34</sup> but were at the same time very limiting. The figure of the *volksmoeder* is therefore paradoxical in that even though "the power of motherhood"<sup>35</sup> is recognised, it also "justified the call on women to go

---

25 Brink, "Man-made Women", p 281

26 Brink, "Man-made Women", p 281

27 Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 72

28 D Gaitskell and E Unterhalter, "Mothers of the Nation: A Comparative Analysis of Nation, Race and Motherhood in Afrikaner Nationalism and the African National Congress", in F Anthias and N Yuval-Davis (eds), *Women, Nation, State* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989), p 64

29 Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", pp 65–66

30 Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", pp 224, 227, 233

31 Du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism", p 156

32 Brink, "Man-made Women", p 274

33 Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", p 209; Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender*, p 308

34 Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 64

35 A McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (Routledge, New York, 1995), pp 378–379; Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", pp 208–210

back to the home”.<sup>36</sup> It is this very “Janus-faced” nature of the *volksmoeder*, and how it was adapted by various groups, both male and female, to advance their specific social, economic and political causes,<sup>37</sup> that has formed the basis of scholarly research and discussion in the last two decades.<sup>38</sup> Whereas some scholars feel that “women’s identities, roles and actions were ultimately moulded by men”,<sup>39</sup> others stress that “female Afrikaner nationalists were articulate and audible in their construction and elaboration of [the] *volksmoeder* discourse”.<sup>40</sup>

### The *volksmoeder* assessed

In one of the earliest explorations of women’s role in Afrikaner nationalism, Isabel Hofmeyr,<sup>41</sup> shows how popular magazines and literature were aimed at female audiences as women were seen as the key figures in reinforcing the “idea of an identity on a common culture and tradition” and “a common language which was spoken by all Afrikaners”. The idea of a shared language became one of the “cornerstones of Afrikaner identity”.<sup>42</sup> She also refers to the importance of women’s philanthropic work for Afrikaner nationalism, but feels that Afrikaner women acted “outside the explicitly political realm”.<sup>43</sup>

Elisabé Brink argues that the *volksmoeder* ideology is a “male discourse shaped by males to serve the interest of males” aimed at women who could be “manipulated in a way that suited the patriarchs of their time”.<sup>44</sup> Despite a body of work by female authors such as Marie du Toit<sup>45</sup> M.E. Rothman<sup>46</sup> and Erika Theron,<sup>47</sup> which created a “picture of Afrikaner women far removed from the heroic, rather one-dimensional rendering of their male counterparts”,<sup>48</sup> it was the works of Willem Postma and Eric Stockenström which

---

36 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 72

37 S S Swart, “‘Motherhood and Otherhood’: Gendered Citizenship and Afrikaner Women in the South African 1914 Rebellion”, *African Historical Review*, 39, 2, 2007, p 45; McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p 369

38 Marks and Trapido, *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism*, p 23

39 For example, E Brink; H Bradford; and Gaitskell and Unterhalter Quotation: Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, p 25

40 These authors include L Kruger, M du Toit, A McClintock and L Vincent Quotation: Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, p 158

41 Hofmeyr, “Building a Nation from Words”

42 E Cloete, “Afrikaner Identity: Culture, Tradition and Gender”, *Agenda*, 13, 1992, p 45

43 Hofmeyr, “Building a Nation from Words”, pp 113-114

44 Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, pp 24-25

45 Marie du Toit was seen as the Afrikaans counterpart of Olive Schreiner Her work, *Vrou en Feminist: Of Iets oor die Vrou-Vraagstuk*, published in 1921 questioned the ideological parameters of the idealised notion of women and was seen as an attack on generally accepted stereotypical portrayals of women See Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 281

46 M E Rothman, as the only female member of the Carnegie Commission, conducted a sociological study of the problems of mothers and daughters of poor white families between 1930 and 1932 See Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 282

47 Erika Theron investigated the lives of female ‘coloured’ and white factory workers in Cape Town in the 1930s, giving a portrayal far removed from the idealised versions of her contemporary male authors See Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 283

48 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 285

“were to exert a considerable and pervasive, though indirect, influence on the way the notions of an idealised Afrikaner womanhood was assimilated within Afrikaans popular culture”.<sup>49</sup> Brink acknowledges that women produced some of the imagery, but that it was used in an “utterly different context”.<sup>50</sup> The term *volksmoeder* was used by middle-class women to “underpin their work on the welfare front with an ideologically acceptable base”,<sup>51</sup> and to give them a “sense of stability and purpose in a rapidly changing world”.<sup>52</sup> Because the prevailing view was that a “woman’s place was at home raising her family”,<sup>53</sup> working-class women, confronted with financial hardship in their families, in turn adopted and adapted the *volksmoeder* ideal to claim their “own legitimacy, as valid members of society”.<sup>54</sup> Brink also argues that women conformed to this idealised image because they would lose the privileges of this position if they questioned society and their role within it.<sup>55</sup>

Lou-Marié Kruger, in her study of the women’s magazine *Die Boerevrou*, launched in 1919 as a magazine “by women and for women”, agrees with Brink that the formalised and coherent image of the *volksmoeder* was a male construction.<sup>56</sup> She points out, however, that Afrikaner women’s ideas and activities were not merely a “reflection of the priorities and concerns of the male-dominated Afrikaner nationalist movement”,<sup>57</sup> but that “female Afrikaner nationalists were articulate and audible in their construction and elaboration of *volksmoeder* discourse”.<sup>58</sup> This view is shared by Anne McClintock who feels that while “the gender component” in Afrikaner nationalism is “synonymous with white male interest, white male aspirations and white male politics”,<sup>59</sup> the *volksmoeder* ideology was not “imposed ... on hapless female victims”, but that women “played a crucial role in the invention of Afrikanerdom”.<sup>60</sup> Therefore she sees the *volksmoeder* figure as “a changing, dynamic ideology rife with paradox, under constant contest by men and women”.<sup>61</sup>

Marijke du Toit traces the origins of the active use of *volksmoeder* imagery back to the late nineteenth century, especially in terms of the activities of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging (ACVV).<sup>62</sup> She finds that while ACVV women carefully distanced themselves from movements that rejected male authority, such as female

---

49 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 283

50 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 290

51 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 285

52 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 291

53 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 289

54 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 291

55 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 273

56 Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, p 308

57 Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, p 23

58 Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, p 158

59 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p 369; Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, p 157

60 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, pp 378–379

61 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p 378

62 M du Toit, “Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism: A Social History of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging, c 1870–1939”, DPhil dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1996

suffrage and special educational opportunities for women, they still played a pioneering role in “claiming a legitimate place for women in public”.<sup>63</sup> She also finds it difficult to reconcile the presence of “vociferously politicised Boer women”<sup>64</sup> at the turn of the century with the dominant idea of Afrikaner women as, at best, “consumers of nationalist discourse in the post-war, foundational years of modern Afrikaner nationalism”.<sup>65</sup>

Louise Vincent draws on the National Party’s women’s publication *Die Burgeres* to show how from 1915 to the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, “leading figures in the nationalist women’s parties came to redefine the notion of the *volksmoeder*, articulating a broader interpretation of this ideology which allowed them to legitimise their political role while remaining within the framework of Afrikaner nationalism”.<sup>66</sup> She also underlines the changing nature of the discourse as it became “the ideological battlefield upon which the desirability of the politically active Afrikaner national woman was both affirmed and denied”.<sup>67</sup>

However, Vincent and several other scholars<sup>68</sup> emphasise the impact of the South African War, the subsequent industrialisation and urbanisation and the economic hardship of the Great Depression, on women’s place in society. Although she does not elaborate on the matter, Helen Bradford also notes the change from Afrikaner women’s political activism during the South African War to the subsequent portrayal of women “not as amazons, but as mothers of the *volk*”.<sup>69</sup>

Elsie Cloete and Anne McClintock see the inauguration of the Women’s Monument at Bloemfontein in 1913, commemorating the women and children who died in concentration camps during the South African War, as an important symbolic turning point in the position of the women. The women’s “martial role as fighters and farmers”<sup>70</sup> during the war was “purged of its indecorously militant potential and replaced by the figure of the lamenting mother with babe in arms. The monument enshrined Afrikaner womanhood as neither militant nor political, but as suffering, stoical and self-sacrificing”.<sup>71</sup> The symbol of the weeping woman not only shifted the attention from “the mighty male embarrassment of military defeat”,<sup>72</sup> but diluted the women’s “vital efforts during the war” to that of muted, disempowered participants.<sup>73</sup>

The run-up to and subsequent victory of the National Party in 1924 is, according to Vincent, pivotal in the position of women. This victory was largely due to the

---

63 Du Toit, “Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism”, pp 122-123; Vincent, “Bread and Honour”, p 65

64 Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, p 159

65 Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, 159

66 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 54

67 Vincent, “The Power behind the Scenes”, p 64

68 Among them are E Cloete, H Bradford, A McClintock, H Giliomee

69 Bradford, “Regendering Afrikanerdom”, p 212

70 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p 378

71 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p 378

72 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p 378

73 Cloete, “Afrikaner Identity”, pp 47–48; McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, pp 378–379

organisational skills and financial contribution of the National Women's Party. Women started using the very attributes of the *volksmoeder* employed a few years earlier by the men, to argue for greater political rights. However, their newfound confidence on the political and social terrain was seen as a threat by their male counterparts who did not "anticipate the force which it would unleash when it called upon Afrikaner women to organise in a political party".<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, with the economic crisis brought on by the Great Depression, some of the male members of the National Party felt that they could not longer tolerate nor control<sup>75</sup> "an independent and critical (and vibrant) voice"<sup>76</sup> within their ranks, with whom they would also have to compete in the labour market. The "more traditionalist strain in the *volksmoeder* ideology came to the fore once more, urging women back into the home",<sup>77</sup> to devote their time to their families and households as well as welfare organisations.<sup>78</sup>

This change is so significant that Hermann Giliomee, in his general history on the Afrikaner, makes mention of it. In the years directly after the First World War (1914–1918) General J.B.M. Hertzog, leader of the NP, noticed the large number of women at political meetings and declared unequivocally: "if one ignores the voice of the Afrikaner woman, one will land this country in a political hell".<sup>79</sup> Even during the 1922 strike, Afrikaner women featured prominently.<sup>80</sup> Giliomee also sees the NP's victory in 1924 as the turning point in women's active participation in national politics and their subsequent relegation to a "helpmate role".<sup>81</sup>

### Educating the *volksmoeder*

Even though men felt that women had no place in politics or the formal labour force, they had very strong opinions on women's role in society as the carriers of civilisation and culture and as mothers and educators, not only of their children and communities, but of the nation.<sup>82</sup> This was her natural role, since "*sij weet dat sij in haar skoot dra die toekomst van haar volk en haar kerk*"<sup>83</sup> (she knows that in her lap she carries the future of her nation and her church). This "work for the nation" was compared to that of a soldier or politician.<sup>84</sup>

In order to equip young girls for this task, they had to receive suitable education. Already in the period of the Batavian Republic in the Cape (1803–1806), Governor De Mist realised the value of a good education for the "*toekomstige moeders van die volk*"

---

74 Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 73

75 Brink, "Man-made Women", p 271

76 Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 73

77 Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 69

78 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp 375–376

79 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp 375–376

80 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p 376

81 Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 72

82 Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 60

83 Dr Okulis, *Die Boervrouw, Moeder van Haar Volk* (Nasionale Pers, Bloemfontein 1918), pp 157–158

84 Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", pp 229, 236



(future mothers of the nation). Apart from being excellent mothers, they had to be educated to be the centre of the family's happiness, which De Mist hoped would lead to the advancement of the general wellbeing of the community.<sup>85</sup>

In general, the proponents of Afrikaner nationalism realised the value of formal education to disseminate nationalist ideals. From a young age children could be exposed to "carefully constructed images of the Afrikaner" – that of the Afrikaner as a chosen people with "a strong sense of identity, tradition and unique culture".<sup>86</sup> The education of women based on Christian nationalist principles could therefore be instrumental in the dissemination of these ideals to future generations.<sup>87</sup>

At the first annual congress of the Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie in 1905, the Rev. Klopper called women the teachers of the "volk" who had to have "*n helder hoof, 'n heldinne hart en helpende hand*" (a clear mind, a heroine's heart and a helping hand). She had to teach the "*dierbare volk*" who were going through a trying period of transition, the difficult lessons of adapting to new demands.<sup>88</sup>

In the editorial of *Die Boerevrou* of August 1920, Mabel Malherbe encouraged young girls to study as much as they could. As the homemaker, a woman had to be supportive of her husband, but she also had to be educated enough as a person to challenge him intellectually.<sup>89</sup> Malherbe also called for specialised training and the elimination of irrelevant subjects to equip the girls as mothers of the future.<sup>90</sup> This call to study was not only limited to secondary schools, but included tertiary education as well. Although several of the other Afrikaans universities were also notable for their pro-Afrikaner nationalist positions and conservative views on female students, the University of Pretoria had an especially close affiliation with the Afrikaner nationalist movement and its ideals. For a number of decades at the turn of the twentieth century, it played a significant role in the education of its female students – the future mothers of the *volk*.

### The *volksmoeder* at UP

The Afrikaans language was one of the key elements used by proponents of Afrikaner nationalism to gain support for their cause. The university was established in 1908 as a dual medium institution, but a lack of resources and text books in Afrikaans, meant that initially, classes were presented in English only. A nationalistic fervour soon developed on campus and from about 1918 voices emerged for lectures to be given in Afrikaans.

---

85 J Ploeger, "Inleiding tot die Studie van die Christelik-Nasionaal Onderwys in Suid-Afrika, met Besondere Verwysing na die Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek", MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1942, pp 22–23

86 Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity", p 43

87 Du Plessis, "Narrating the 'Nation'", p 47; B Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, New York, 1983), pp 184-185; G Leach, *The Afrikaners: Their Last Great Trek* (Macmillan, London, 1989), pp 43-45; Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", p 309

88 SAVF, Transvaal 1904–1929, p 23; Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", p 147

89 Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", p 221

90 Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", pp 272, 283

Prof A.E. du Toit, a keen supporter of the Afrikaner nationalist cause, was appointed as rector in 1929, and he openly worked towards transforming the university into an Afrikaans-medium institution. This was achieved in 1932, but not without controversy, because many felt that the language issue was being used “as a cloak for personal or party favouritism”.<sup>91</sup> UP was described as a “hotbed of Afrikaner nationalism” by the English press for the way the initially dual-medium institution changed to an Afrikaans-only language policy.<sup>92</sup>

Another element of the Afrikaner nationalist drive was the celebration of the centenary of the Great Trek in 1938, which they used to win mass support for their cause. Students from the University of Pretoria took an active part in these celebrations by joining the symbolic ox-wagon trek from Cape Town to Pretoria; placing a torch with the centenary flame in the main building on campus; and taking part in the laying of the foundation stone of the Voortrekker Monument. Subsequently, a number of cultural activities such as *volkspele* and a traditional Voortrekker-style orchestra were formed on campus and the university earned the nickname “Voortrekker Universiteit”.

After the election victory of the NP in 1948, the relationship between the university and the Afrikaner nationalist cause was reinforced. The leaders of the NP were intimately involved in the activities of the institutions such as addressing key events on campus, like the opening of the academic year and graduation ceremonies, while buildings were named after them. At the funeral of Dr H.F. Verwoerd in 1966, the UP students formed a guard of honour at the gravesite. The rectors at this time also had close ties with the NP and some were believed to be members of the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB), a secret society that worked towards healthy and progressive unanimity among all Afrikaners and for the wellbeing of the Afrikaner nation.<sup>93</sup>

As indicated above, the place and role of women were crucial to the Afrikaner nationalist movement. In terms of how women and their position in society was viewed, the university also followed the Afrikaner nationalist example of the *volksmoeder*. Although there was never an all-encompassing policy describing their status, the university authorities took the responsibility of ensuring the good education of their female students very seriously on all levels. The various rules and regulations pertaining to their dress code and general comportment were in line with what would be expected of a *volksmoeder*, namely to be virtuous, humble and submissive, but also idealistic, cheerful and industrious in their “noble task” of rearing a nation that would be physically and psychologically healthy.<sup>94</sup> The academic offerings for women students also subscribed to this ideal.

---

91 University of Pretoria Archives (hereafter UPA), E-6-4, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 July 1932 (letter to the editor)

92 C H Rautenbach e a (reds), *Ad Destinatum 1908-1960* (Voortrekkerpers, Johannesburg, 1960), pp 54–56

93 A N Pelzer, *Die Afrikaner-Broederbond: Eerste 50 Jaar* (Kaapstad, Tafelberg, 1979), p 10

94 Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, pp 207–212

## The *volksmoeder* and the Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie

Women's organisations, in particular the Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie (South African Women's Federation) (SAWF) played an important role in advancing the *volksmoeder* ideal at the University of Pretoria. In response to reports from her friend Emily Hobhouse on the devastation in the former Boer republics in the aftermath of the South African War, and the poverty that she personally observed during visits to those areas, Georgina Solomon decided to establish the SAWF in 1905. This organisation was aimed at predominantly Afrikaans middle class women who contributed to the task of "safeguarding and fostering the progress of the Southern African people in the spiritual, moral, intellectual and material fields"<sup>95</sup> by doing volunteer work for various charitable causes, primarily amongst the poor whites.<sup>96</sup> It also offered middle class women the opportunity to move outside the confines of the household into "greater society", giving them a "sphere of influence and some degree of autonomy and independence".<sup>97</sup> The official publication of the SAWF, *Vrou en Moeder* – the title of which in itself encapsulated the essence of their perception of the role of women – stated in 1944 that "if it could ever be said of a nation that its women, alongside their menfolk, had brought about the growth and security of a nation, it can certainly be said of the Afrikaans woman".<sup>98</sup>

The *volksmoeder* ideal was used as a "model" for the SAWF members and the history of the Afrikaner women as portrayed by Postma<sup>99</sup> and Stockenström<sup>100</sup> was often harnessed to inspire. This reference to the *volksmoeder* and the fact that their work conformed to women's perceived domestic role, as well as their close links with Afrikaner nationalist organisations such as the Broederbond, the Dutch Reformed Church and the Smuts and Hertzog governments, made their work acceptable in a society where women working outside the home was frowned upon.<sup>101</sup> Some scholars also point to the fact that active support from the state was ensured, since the women fulfilled necessary social welfare functions for which the state did not have to pay.<sup>102</sup> In the 1970s the presence of the SAWF was very apparent on the UP campus and the president, "Tannie" J.M. Raath, was one of only two women to be invited to write for a regular column in the student newspaper.<sup>103</sup>

The SAWF's concern with welfare work prompted it to become directly involved with tertiary education and in 1927, the organisation offered to finance a child welfare clinic at the university. It was envisaged that students could study social work here and that lectures could also be given to groups of SAWF members. The UP senate decided in

---

95 *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, vol 10 (Nassau, n p , 1974), pp 346-347

96 Brink, "Man-made Women", pp 285–286

97 Brink, "Man-made Women", p 288

98 *Vrou en Moeder*, June 1944

99 Okulis, *Die Boervrou, Moeder van Haar Volk*

100 E Stockenström, "Die Vrou in die Geskiedenis van die Hollands-Afrikaanse Volk: n Beknopte Oorsig van die Rol wat die Vrou in die Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika gespeel het in die 350 Jaar tussen 1568 en 1916" (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1921)

101 Brink, "Man-made Women", p 288

102 Brink, "Man-made Women", p 288; Walker (ed ), *Women and Gender*, p 308

103 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 28 August 1970

favour of establishing a Department of Social Work that would allow “the training of Social Workers and so as to afford further training to Teachers who have to become the leaders in the Transvaal Schools”, because this would “meet the needs of the Transvaal”.<sup>104</sup> They also voted in favour of extending the Higher Education course to include a child welfare clinic and a nursery school.<sup>105</sup> The Department of Social Work was officially started in 1929 and the SAWF gained a secure foothold on campus through which their ideals could be advanced. The course included

a discussion of the methods of care of dependent children in their own homes; the children’s protective work and the present status of that movement; the relationship of juvenile delinquency to dependency and neglect; the work of child guidance clinics and child welfare societies; problems of illegitimacy, sub-normality and the relationship of the school visitor to these problems<sup>106</sup>

These were all skills that would not only benefit their own children one day, but would enable women students to make a positive contribution to the general welfare of the Afrikaner nation. Furthermore, the SAWF offered bursaries and loans to students in the field of social work, and a number of these students were subsequently employed by various institutions such as nursery schools, after-school centres, sheltered labour projects, homes for the elderly and places of care for unmarried women.<sup>107</sup>

Dr Maria B. te Water was appointed as the first head of the newly founded Social Work Department and was regarded as the perfect role model for female students to emulate. She was described as one of the “keenest members of the Vroue Federasie” and the “mother” of the Transvaal University College (TUC) Parents’ Association.<sup>108</sup> Her credentials were impeccable. She had initially worked as a teacher in the Transvaal, but left for England to study medicine. As a qualified obstetrician she did welfare work in the slum areas in London including medical inspections of schoolchildren and was recommended for the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fellowship for the Study of Subnormal and Difficult Children in America. In 1928 she returned to Pretoria and “electrified thinking circles with her lectures and propaganda in connection with Child Guidance”.<sup>109</sup> She was praised for channelling her “superb intellect” in a direction suited to a woman of her stature and to the welfare of her native country.<sup>110</sup>

In 1944, the Social Work Department founded a student organisation called Cum Animo. As the name suggested, it was by doing, not talking, that the students would try to “bring about a new spirit and direction in the nation”<sup>111</sup> and to “serve that section of our country’s population that is less fortunate and with the energy to our disposal to help

---

104 UPA B-5-1-1, Senate Report of University Commission, 14 November, 1928, Annexure D

105 UPA B-5-1-1, Senate Report of University Commission, 7 November 1928

106 UPA E-8-6, *UP Calendar 1931*, p 153

107 *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, p 347

108 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 April 1932

109 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1930

110 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1930; Rautenbach e a (reds), *Ad Destinatum*, p 123

111 Rautenbach e a (reds), *Ad Destinatum*, pp 401–402

them to make life more enjoyable”.<sup>112</sup> Various girls’ clubs were formed in less fortunate areas of the city and the chairperson of the organisation was pleased to report that great progress had been made. They also established women’s clubs in these areas with the help of the SAWF and the Christelike Maatskaplike Raad (CMR). Variety concerts were organised not only for the enjoyment of the spectators, but to help in the growth of leaders within the organisation.<sup>113</sup> This would serve as the ideal preparation for women students to fulfil their roles as future *volksmoeders*.

The first course specifically aimed at female students was Domestic Science. In 1917 a women’s organisation under Lady Van Boeschoten began a “Million Shilling Fund” to finance training in Domestic Science at UP. This came to fruition in 1927 when the Domestic Science Department was established, falling under the Faculty of Agricultural Science.<sup>114</sup> The subjects included Laundry and Housewifery; Household and Institutional Management; and Hygiene and Nursing (including childcare and training).<sup>115</sup> In 1930, Organisation and Practical Demonstration Work was added to the syllabus. This entailed a study of the organisation of women’s clubs, especially rural domestic science clubs. As part of the practical component students had to participate in the organisation of clubs in rural communities and work out a club programme for one year.<sup>116</sup> In order to address the poor white problem, the establishment of domestic science schools and clubs was proposed in the Carnegie report.<sup>117</sup> It was believed that the training received by women students at UP would equip them to make a positive contribution in this regard.

The idea of Domestic Science as an ideal course for women continued to be fostered in the following decades. In April 1955, an exhibition on the development of education was held at the Pretoria College of Education. UP’s exhibition consisted of eight different panels showing the academic offerings of the university. Women students appeared in only one of the panels and they were depicted exclusively in the Domestic Science course.<sup>118</sup>

The official staff and alumni publication, *Skakelblad* also published a photo article on course offerings in that year. Female students were openly encouraged to enrol for Domestic Science, as it would “prepare them to be good wives and mothers”. However, it is clear in the text and the accompanying photographs, that “difficult subjects” such as chemistry were not usually taken by female students and they were only included because these were prescribed in the course. There was also the subtle hint that the university was the ideal place to find a good husband. According to *Skakelblad*, in the chemistry laboratory, while a female student tries to make the correct measurements – “*kyk hoe korrel Nicola*” (look at Nicola concentrating on her work), her male counterpart

---

112 UPA E-5-3, *Trek*, 1948

113 UPA E-5-3, *Trek*, 1948

114 Rautenbach e a (reds), *Ad Destinatum*, p 141

115 UPA E-1, *TUC Yearbook 1929*, p 270

116 UPA E-1, *UP Yearbook, 1931*

117 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 282

118 UPA E-5-10, *Skakelblad*, 3, 1, March 1956, p 26

tried to make a good impression on her – “en kyk hoe korrel die manstudent oorkant haar” (look at the male student opposite her aiming to impress Nicola).<sup>119</sup>

Another profession strongly recommended for women was nursing. In 1949 the university presented a Diploma in Nursing, in cooperation with the Department of Health, and in 1967 a fully-fledged department was established at UP.<sup>120</sup> According to Charlotte Searle, the director of Nursing Services of the Transvaal Provincial Administration and first chair of the Department of Nursing at UP, a growing country such as South Africa needed nurses and nursing was vitally important work for the community, which accorded very well with the concept of the *volksmoeder* and the views of the SAWF. Staff and student publications advertised nursing as a wonderful career for “*agtermekaar dogters*” (competent girls). It was repeatedly stressed that it was a “professional” career with a reasonable salary and pension plan. Furthermore, the students would be neither messengers nor be expected to scrub floors, jobs usually reserved for black workers. Parents were also reassured that their daughters would be accommodated in homely nursing residences and be well looked after during their training.<sup>121</sup>

### Female residences

Upholding the good reputation of the female students while they stayed in a university residence was not a matter taken lightly by the university authorities. When the TUC opened its doors in 1908, the female students were housed in private houses under the watchful eye of a certain Mrs Martin and a lady warden, Miss Alice Acutt, who was known for her old-fashioned views on behaviour and deportment. The already strict rules that governed the female students’ lives became even more stringent when a private residence for male students opened close by.<sup>122</sup> When the male residence was moved to the main campus in 1914, the female students still had to contend with private accommodation in the suburb of Brynterion, several blocks away from campus. The high rental payable for this type of accommodation forced the university authorities to consider a residence closer by, and in 1926 the first residence for female students was completed. Although it was nearby, it was still just off the campus.<sup>123</sup>

The behaviour of the female students at the university’s hostel was closely monitored by the SAWF. At a congress of the organisation in 1928, a resolution was tabled that expressed concern that

... the lack of control of the movements of women students in the Transvaal University College hostels is causing the greatest anxiety to parents in the country districts, and that in view of this the Congress requests the Executive Committee to communicate with the

---

119 UPA E-5-10, *Skakelblad*, 2, 2, August 1955, pp 22–24

120 F J du T Spies and D H Heydenrych, *Ad Destinatum, II, 1960–1982* (Universiteit van Pretoria, Pretoria, 1987), pp 191–192

121 UPA E-5-10, *Skakelblad*, 3, 3, November 1956, p 34

122 Rautenbach e a (reds), *Ad Destinatum*, pp 20-21

123 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1930; Rautenbach e a (reds), *Ad Destinatum*, pp 20–21

authorities concerned in order to have stricter rules drawn up Or, if these already exist, to see that they are carried out<sup>124</sup>

This statement was met with a “feeling of strong resentment mixed with surprise at having been grossly misjudged”,<sup>125</sup> and the regulations in place for women students were defended by various people, including the mayor of Pretoria, who had also consulted with the vice-principal of the Girls’ High School, Miss le Roux, and the former lady warden, Miss Constance Pocock. The principal of UP, Prof A. du Toit, welcomed the fact that the subject arose because it would give him an “opportunity of showing that the ideals of the TUC were the ideals of the Congress”.<sup>126</sup> He also invited the congress to appoint a member of the SAWF to act on the committee of the women’s hostel and extended an invitation to the members of the SAWF to visit the hostel while in Pretoria.

The SAWF secured a greater say in residence affairs with the appointment of Mrs S.B. Boers, president of the SAWF, “for more years than she can remember” as the warden of the hostel.<sup>127</sup> She was described as “typical of the South African woman at her best”, namely an idealist and a patriot, who had a “quiet dignified bearing and strong personality”.<sup>128</sup> Her death epitomised her standing: when she passed away her coffin was covered with the word *volksmoeder* written in flowers and it was transported to the cemetery on a Voortrekker wagon, drawn by nurses employed at the SAWF Moedersbond.<sup>129</sup>

Even in the 1960s and 1970s the rules in the female residences were very strict. Curfews were rigorously enforced and when leaving the residence students had to sign out and provide an address of where they were going. A strict dress code had to be adhered to and receiving of male visitors was only allowed in designated “*kuierhokkies* (visiting booths), that were in full view of the front door of the residence. Although the claim was made tongue in cheek, male students said it was easier to “abduct” the Witwatersrand University rag queen from her parents’ home than their own rag queen, who was housed in an “impenetrable fortress” – one of the ladies’ residences.<sup>130</sup>

In the 1970s, the student newspaper commented wryly in an article “Tukkie Asters soos Soldate”, that life in the ladies’ residences was in grave danger of compromising their femininity. It went on to say that “*Onder dekmantel van ’n koshuis kan jong dogters nou onder dieselfde militêre dissipline staan*” (Under the guise of a residence, young women are subjected to “military” discipline). In the article, once again tongue in cheek, female students were referred to as “*dogters*” (girls), “*want hulle is mos nog nie oud genoeg om vir hulle self te dink nie – dit kan mos net nie toegelaat word nie. ’n Dogter kan mos nie haar eie waardes uitleef nie.*” (because they are really not old

---

124 UPA, E-7-2, Clippings, “Attack on TUC Girl Students”, *Pretoria News*, 3 September 1928

125 UPA, E-7-2, Clippings, “Attack on Girl Students”, *Pretoria News*, 3 September 1928

126 UPA, E-7-2, Clippings, “Women’s Dress Immodest? Defence of TUC Hostel”, *Pretoria News*, 3 September 1928

127 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 April 1932

128 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 April 1932

129 Brink, “Man-made Women”, p 288

130 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Pretoria News*, 1966

enough to think for themselves – this should never be allowed. After all, a young woman certainly cannot be permitted to live according to her own values). Furthermore, there was no need for moral standards because these were provided for the girls in the shape of draconian rules and regulations that governed every aspect of the female students' lives and could even replace their mothers' input.<sup>131</sup>

### **“Ideal” *volksmoeder* role models**

However, it was not only through rules and regulations that the university endeavoured to mould female students into industrious members of the Afrikaner nation. Apart from lecturers and staff members such as Dr te Water, Miss (later Dr) Jessie Davidtz and Mrs Boers, there were other women connected to UP who acted as “ideal” role models for the female students.

Mabel Malherbe was the editor of *Die Boerevrou*, a journal which addressed middle class Afrikaner women in their “new social position”, namely that of “mothers and bearers of Afrikaner cultural and nationalist aspirations”.<sup>132</sup> In 1930, she was the only female member of the University Council and was the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from the University in 1953. She was also elected mayor of Pretoria in 1930. She was described as a “champion of women’s interest” and a “fine example for feminist propaganda which maintains that it is possible for a woman to be a good wife and mother as well as a successful public character”.<sup>133</sup> This was in line with the notion that a true *volksmoeder* is self-sacrificing and will always put her husband and family’s needs above her own. She was also praised for her efforts “to educate women in the rural areas in the home-crafts” and to promote “the health and hygiene of the town as well as for practical housing schemes for working classes”,<sup>134</sup> emphasising the important role *volksmoeders* were expected to play in the upliftment of the poor.

Another female who set a “good example” in terms of the *volksmoeder* paradigm, was Mrs Reinink, wife of Prof H. Reinink, one of the first professors at the TUC and “father of the professional staff of the university”.<sup>135</sup> Mrs Reinink was described as “one of the most gracious ladies of old Pretoria, and in some respects the modern industrial city which is being evolved, is not part of that old, quiet, cultured and academic atmosphere which her presence seems to suggest”.<sup>136</sup> This was in line with the ideal of the *volksmoeder* as educator of the nation and standard bearer of culture and high morals.

The various rectors’ wives were also seen as important role models. With the appointment of Prof E.M. Hamman in 1970, an article about his wife was published in the student newspaper under the heading “Rektor se Beste”. She gave up her teaching job when she married and became a “homemaker”, as this was regarded as the *volksmoeder*’s

---

131 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 28 August 1970

132 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp 375–376

133 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1930

134 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1930

135 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1930

136 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1930



highest calling. In the article she is described not only as the model housewife, but the classic example of a woman supporting her husband in his job, also an important attribute of a true *volksmoeder*.<sup>137</sup>

### **The *volksmoeders* leave the “laager”**

As already mentioned, the policies in place on the general behaviour and dress code of female students differed from those applicable to male students, in that women were far more restricted. Whereas male students were allowed to wear short trousers (with long socks and closed shoes, however) in the warm summer months,<sup>138</sup> women were initially not allowed to wear trousers at all and their dresses had to cover their knees. When trousers were finally allowed, they could only be worn with a jacket that covered the buttocks. Unlike their male counterparts, women students were not permitted to smoke on campus or in a public place when wearing the university blazer, because smoking was considered “unfeminine” and “unbecoming” for a woman.<sup>139</sup>

Female students’ role in campus life and student organisations was also circumscribed and relegated to that of “helpmates” to the men, which was what was expected of a true *volksmoeder*. In the 1950s and 1960s it apparently became a tradition that only two female members were elected to the Student Council. These female members were relegated to “*maar net blommerangskik en teemaak*”<sup>140</sup> (arranging the flowers and making the tea). Those who did come forward to take a leading role in student life often had to endure sustained and harsh criticism. Before the election of new members in 1970, a call was made for more women to be elected to the council, yet it still remained pointedly chauvinistic: “*ons hoef nou nie die mans heeltemal uit te stem nie, maar kom ons stem nog ‘n paar mooie meisies in!*” (we don’t have to vote the men out completely, but let’s vote for a few more pretty girls). It was, however, pointed out that these female members would not take the place of the men and would thus leave their own “*plek as vrou*” (place as women) empty. They did feel that “*dames is ‘n groot aanwys by onthale en ander skakelings, want ons weet ‘n dame kry dikwels dinge reg wat ‘n man net nie kan nie*” (ladies are a great asset at receptions and other gatherings, because we know that a woman can often manage things that a man simply cannot do).<sup>141</sup>

The role of *volksmoeders* in national politics as the “solid and willing workforce” was also evident on the campus. For example, the male students expressed their surprise that canvassing for the parliamentary elections in 1970 was done at the female residences as well, because they did not expect the women students to be interested in politics. They were however reassured to know that the ladies would, as usual, be ready to act as receptionists, wash the dishes and provide snacks during the election process.<sup>142</sup>

---

137 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 30 July 1970; Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, pp 220–221

138 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Transvaler*, 19 February 1971

139 UPA D-1-3, Regulations

140 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 14 August 1970

141 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 14 August 1970

142 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 20 October 1970

The perception that most female students came to university to study “*man-vang*” (how to snare a husband), began to change by the late 1960s although only marginally. A column specifically aimed at women students made its appearance in the student newspaper, *Die Perdeby*, and their position on campus was openly discussed for the first time. In one article, the question was asked whether all girls went through life with their eyes closed or whether there were a few “op-en-wakker” (switched-on) girls amongst them. Women were reminded that it was assumed that they were fairly intelligent since they had made it to university and that, after all, they were there to study. Furthermore the “*ek-is-maar-net-‘n-onosele-hulpelose-vrou*” (I am only a stupid helpless woman) attitude was “*heeltemal uit die oude doos en beïndruk niemand nie*” (completely out of date and no longer impressed anyone). Although they all knew that no man wanted a “female Einstein” at his side, they were encouraged to broaden their general knowledge because it was impossible to have a proper conversation with girls who had absolutely nothing to talk about apart from life in the residence and the length of their skirts. The student newspaper therefore suggested that in order to “develop their brain”, women could take up chess and force themselves to read the sport pages at least once a week and while they were at it, they could also glimpse at the business section.<sup>143</sup>

This, however, was not the official view on female students at UP. In reality things were changing far more rapidly. Although the university was largely unaffected by the student political protests of the 1960s and 1970s, there was a change in character on campus towards the late 1960s. The unquestioning acceptance of authority was also challenged and women students began to voice their opinions on various issues ranging from politics to a ban on women smoking on campus, which, according to one female student was “medieval”.<sup>144</sup> While the university officials were still debating over the suitability of the mini-skirt, women students ignored the dress code and began wearing the shortest of skirts. This open defiance of what was considered women’s “proper and moral” behaviour was however questioned by Gert Yssel, chairperson of the “Vereniging vir die Handhawing van Openbare Sedes” (Association for the Maintenance of Public Morals). In a column in the student newspaper he stated that mini-skirts, and thus those who chose to wear them, “*bedreig die Westerse en Christelike beskawing*” (were endangering Western and Christian civilisation).<sup>145</sup>

The question can be asked whether women’s defiance of what was deemed acceptable in terms of the *volksmoeder* image, eroded the social structure on which Afrikaner nationalism was built. Although many conservative Afrikaners were of this opinion at the time, in retrospect, scholars feel that Afrikaner nationalism was self-destructive due to its insular, authoritarian and rigid nature.<sup>146</sup> The first cracks had already begun to appear in all spheres of Afrikaner society by the early 1960s, only to accelerate in the following years. These events soon spread to the campus of the University of Pretoria. Although the students were critical of the violent nature of the

---

143 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 21 August 1970

144 UPA E-7-2, Clippings, *Die Hoofstad*, October 1970

145 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 27 February 1970

146 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp 546–547; Leach, *The Afrikaners*, pp 41–43

student revolts in France and the USA,<sup>147</sup> the changes taking place both nationally and internationally had a definite impact.

In 1969, the students staged their own “rebellion” when they marched on campus with placards reading “Away with the rector”. Although this only concerned the matter of the first year students having a vote in campus politics, the event was significant in that previously they would never have questioned an authority figure. Unlike their parents, most of whom came from the *platteland* and would follow a political leader or *dominee* without question,<sup>148</sup> a considerable percentage of the new generation of students had an urban background and through modern technology, such as radio and cinema, had far more contact with the outside world.<sup>149</sup>

At the end of 1970, the editor of *Die Perdeby* noted that the most important feature of that year was the “*dinamiese uitwaartse beweging*”, the way the students had become far more involved, worldly and outgoing.<sup>150</sup> The call to move out of the “laager mentality” was very much in line with the national government and more specifically the prime minister’s call for a more open attitude towards other cultures, but it is interesting to note how it came to the fore on the campus. Even from women students there was a call to break down the barriers between Afrikaners and the rest of society; to carry Afrikaner morals and values into the world at large. There was a deliberate effort to emerge from exclusivity and make contact with people of different cultural and religious backgrounds and those of other races, even if only in the form of aid to needy people in Transkei and Peru.<sup>151</sup>

In the issue of 24 April 1970, *Die Perdeby* published the results of a political survey that was held on the campus early in 1970, and compared these results to those of a survey held in 1959. Although surveys do not necessarily give a true reflection of the issue under question, the fact that *Die Perdeby* decided to publish these results is interesting in itself. Whereas 93% of students supported the apartheid system in 1959, this had come down to 81% by 1970. Only 66% believed that the next generation would be able to implement apartheid in South Africa as opposed to 84% previously. In 1959, no less than 96% believed that segregation could be justified by Christian principles and 78% were opposed to studying with students of colour; by 1970 these percentages came down to 71% and 59% respectively. Apathy towards politics was also apparent in 1970, because only 43% attended political meetings as opposed to 70% in 1959. In response to these results, the Afrikaans author Chris Barnard wrote that it was encouraging to see that the university was moving “*uit die laertjie uit, buite toe*”.<sup>152</sup>

In another article published in the student newspaper entitled “Kritiek – Ja of Nee: Mag ek Kritiseer?” students were encouraged to speak their mind about matters they felt

---

147 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 22 May 1970

148 Leach, *The Afrikaners*, p 207

149 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 24 April 1970

150 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 2 October 1970

151 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 2 October 1970

152 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 24 April 1970

went against their moral convictions. Frequent reference was made to the influence of Afrikaner students' upbringing on their reluctance to criticise the established order.<sup>153</sup> A lecturer at the university, Prof Nic Rhoodie, felt that the Afrikaner youth was disadvantaged because they felt too intimidated to ask questions and engage in active debate on current issues for fear of being labelled disloyal, communist, liberal or challenging the "ou ringkoppie", the older, authoritative leaders.<sup>154</sup>

This more critical attitude among students saw the introduction of a new feature in *Die Perdeby*, a column called "Opinie", in which people from various organisations could voice their point of view. The contributors varied in political background and vocation and even women, such as Senator Koster and "Tannie" Raath, president of the SAWF, had the opportunity to express their opinions. Contributors to the column such as Dirk Richard, editor of *Dagbreek* and *Landstem*,<sup>155</sup> and Adv. D.P. de Villiers<sup>156</sup> openly stated that contact with people of other races was not only unavoidable, but in some case desirable. Students were encouraged to move outside the "laager mentality", engage in new avenues of thought and gain greater understanding to enable them to take the initiative in the challenges of race relations.<sup>157</sup>

Whereas students were previously warned against undermining Christian nationalism by coming under the sway of "alien influences" such as liberalism, communism and Roman Catholicism,<sup>158</sup> this very pillar of Afrikaner nationalism, was challenged in a column by the Rev. C. Jooste, the chairperson of the Federasie van Afrikaans Kultuurverenigings (FAK), a cultural front organisation of the Afrikaanse Broederbond. He wrote that it seemed as if the meaning of Christian nationalism had become watered down, and was purely emotional without any true meaning or power.<sup>159</sup> This sentiment was echoed at the annual conference of the traditional Afrikaans national student movement, the Afrikaanse Studente Bond (ASB), where it was said that the Christian national viewpoint had outlived its usefulness and purpose, and had become a meaningless tool of stagnation. The Afrikaner had become so fixated on his glorious past that he would be unable to answer to the challenges of the modern era.<sup>160</sup> In a regular satirical column in *Die Perdeby* titled "Bromgrommer", even the biblical foundation of Christian nationalism was seriously questioned.<sup>161</sup>

There was also a definite change in male students' view of their female counterparts. Greater exposure to the outside world impacted on the way men viewed women. The "passion, outspokenness and provocative nature of contemporary films and

---

153 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 6 March 1970

154 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 7 August 1970

155 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 24 April 1970

156 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 7 August 1970

157 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 24 April 1970; UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 7 August 1970

158 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p 547

159 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 6 March 1970

160 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 7 August 1970

161 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 7 August 1970

imported magazines”<sup>162</sup> showed women in a very different light, far removed from the “dignity and good taste”<sup>163</sup> that they had come to accept as the norm. This change in perception was also evident on the UP campus. In an opinion poll held among male students on the merits of the mini-skirt, their approval was unanimous. According to some men, women who wore minis were the true *volksmoeders* and the “Voortrekkertantes” in their long dresses made men wonder where the ox wagon had been parked.<sup>164</sup> This portrayal of women was far removed from the image of the *volksmoeder* as chaste, pure and resigned.

The change in perception of their female counterparts did not, however, extend to other spheres of society. A group of UP students abducted several young men attending a folk music festival in Johannesburg held on 10 October 1970, and shaved off their long hair. According to the students, folk music and men wearing their hair long were synonymous with “hippies”, drugs and general permissiveness. Through decadent people like this, they argued, communists could infiltrate and undermine South African society. Furthermore, the fact that this concert was held on a public holiday celebrating the birthday of the last president of the former Boer republic, Paul Kruger, was seen as a personal affront to the Afrikaner community.<sup>165</sup>

Whereas the women, especially as symbols of “mothers of the nation”, were previously seen as an integral part of Afrikaner nationalism, it now seemed that Afrikaner men no longer felt the need for the *volksmoeder* to uphold the Afrikaner culture and religion. Indeed, an NP advertisement to vote in the coming election showed a blond, buxom girl in a mini-dress seated on a pile of newspapers, legs stretched out in front of her, beckoning a male student wearing a UP blazer to come and vote. At the bottom of the cartoon three worms made the comment: “*Pragtige ou volksmoedertjie, en tog so pligsgetrou!*” (beautiful little *volksmoeder*, and so dutiful!).<sup>166</sup> From being actively involved in the NP’s victory in 1924 and 1948 through fundraising efforts and organisation and being held up as “the fellow labourer and comrade of man”,<sup>167</sup> women were now being portrayed as pin-up girls.

In *Die Perdeby* a column appeared called “Aster van die Week” and later “Oe-la-la” with a photo of a female student, the course she was enrolled for, and whether she had a steady boyfriend. This created the distinct impression of a catalogue where the male students could choose a girl who best met their set of criteria. A few years later a group of woman students travelled to the border to entertain the troops. Scantily clothed in male army jackets, these students performed chorus-girl type dances on a makeshift stage. They could not participate in the border war, but merely acted as a light-hearted distraction for the men, who as part of the government’s “total onslaught”, had been called upon to defend “*volk en vaderland*” and uphold everything the Afrikaner held dear.

---

162 S Viljoen, “Imagined Community: 1950s Kiekies of the Volk”, *Image and Text. A Journal for Design*, 12, 2006, p 27

163 Viljoen, “Imagined Community”, p 27

164 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 29 May 1970

165 UPA E-7-2, Clippings “*Why are they Out to Get Hippies*”, *Daily Mail*, 17 October 1970

166 UPA E-6-4, *Die Perdeby*, 2 October 1970

167 Kruger, “Gender, Community and Identity”, p 107

In light of this contradictory view of what was deemed morally acceptable in Afrikaner society, some scholars question whether emancipation from the *volksmoeder* ideal did indeed free women. Instead, they see their “emancipation” as a case of exchanging the paternalistic yoke of suppression with another, namely the mass media’s portrayal of beautiful women, and instructions on how to become more beautiful, and therefore more acceptable (to men). Elsie Cloete classifies this as the “second confinement in the twentieth century”,<sup>168</sup> the era of the *volksmoeder* being the first. Christine Sylvester calls it “home-bound workers for Benetton International”, equating women in general to international models advertising a well-known fashion house’s wares, but without the high salaries and international recognition associated with a modelling career.<sup>169</sup> Scholars feel that this emphasis on outward appearance places women under “even greater patriarchal control than in the past”.<sup>170</sup> Cloete asks whether women have given up their limited, but active participation in the construction of a nation as *volksmoeders* for a passive “discipline of looking good and keeping in shape”.<sup>171</sup>

## Conclusion

The *volksmoeder* concept played an important role at a time of tremendous change in Afrikaner society. In the aftermath of the South African War, the social, political and economic structures were in a state of flux and the *volksmoeder* ideal served as a stabilising and an inspirational force.

Although the proponents of Afrikaner nationalism achieved their goal of political dominance in a relatively short time, and to a large extent thanks to the behind-the-scenes efforts of Afrikaner women, the *volksmoeder* image could not sustain the internal strife in Afrikaner society and the external challenges of rapid technological advances in the twentieth century. Based on fragmented historical facts, the *volksmoeder* was a deliberately constructed, idealised image that did not bear in mind the realities that the majority of Afrikaner women faced every day.

Initially the *volksmoeder* image was emulated and promoted in Afrikaans tertiary education institutions, including the University of Pretoria. However, not even behind the walls of academia could the changes happening in the world be ignored, and these also impacted on the role and status of women in these institutions. Although some scholars point to the initial negative impact of the erosion of the *volksmoeder* ideal, downgrading women from circumscribed but active participants in the construction of the Afrikaner nation to mere decorative figures of entertainment, there were positive, long-term changes.

---

168 Cloete, “Afrikaner Identity”, p 54

169 C Sylvester, “Homeless in International Relations? Women’s Place in Canonical Texts and Feminist Reimaginings”, in M Ringrose and A J Lerner (eds), *Reimagining the Nation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993), p 77

170 Cloete, “Afrikaner Identity”, p 54

171 Cloete, “Afrikaner Identity”, p 54

The previously male dominated courses, such as engineering began to attract increasing numbers of women, many of whom excelled and in some cases outshone their male counterparts. Female staff members also benefited from these changes in the form of equal pay and staff benefits. Initially they had not received the same remuneration as their male counterparts, despite equal qualifications. In line with the *volksmoeder* ideal that women's role in society should be centred round their families and households,<sup>172</sup> women staff members were not encouraged to continue working after their marriage. Up to the mid-1970s, women would lose their pensions and medical benefits once married and received no maternity leave.<sup>173</sup> This all subsequently changed and men and women alike came to enjoy the same benefits. Although it was only in the 1990s that women were appointed in the top management structure of the university, the "enemies within" who first dared to openly defy unequally imposed regulations in the 1970s, made it easier for those who followed to move away from the self-sacrificing role model to women in their own right.

### Abstract

#### **Moulding *volksmoeders* or *volks enemies*? Female students at the University of Pretoria, 1920–1970**

One of the key elements that Afrikaner nationalist ideologues have used over the last two centuries as a mobilising force is a stylised version of ideal Afrikaner womanhood. The *volksmoeder* became the prototype for ordinary women to follow. In a time of immense turmoil and change that saw an increasing number of poor whites and the so-called degeneration of the Afrikaner, women had to be both the centre point of the household and the primary unifying force to elevate the Afrikaner community. This article considers the genesis of the concept *volksmoeder* and various reflections on the concept. It looks at the tertiary education of women, specifically at the University of Pretoria. The academic disciplines developed to enable Afrikaner daughters to conform to the nationalist ideal of the *volksmoeder* are discussed, as well as other mechanisms that were put in place by the university authorities to safeguard the female students' good reputation. The article also considers the causes and implications of Afrikaner women's move away from this designated role and place and questions whether the shedding of their traditional image undermined Afrikaner nationalist ideals.

**Keywords:** *volksmoeder*; Afrikaner nationalism; Transvaal University College; University of Pretoria; "Voortrekker Universiteit"; Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie (SAVF); Department of Social Work; Domestic Science, Nursing; university residences; gender.

---

172 Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity", pp 227–229

173 UPA D-4-5, Human Resources: Organisational Development

## Opsomming

### **Vorming van *volksmoeders* of volksverraaiers? Vroulike studente aan die Universiteit van Pretoria, 1920–1970**

Een van die steutelemente wat nasionalistiese ideologieë die afgelope twee eeue as 'n mobiliserende krag gebruik, is die volksmoeder ideaal. Van vroue is verwag om moeders, nie net van hulle eie families te wees nie, maar ook van die groter familie, naamlik die nasie. In Afrikaner nasionalisme het dit neerslag gevind in die volksmoeder ideaal. In 'n tydperk van geweldige veranderings, waartydens die aantal arm-blankes drasties vermeerder het, moes die Afrikaner vrou beide die middelpunt van die huishouding en die primêre verenigende en opbouende krag van die Afrikaner gemeenskap wees. Hierdie artikel gee 'n oorsig van die ontstaan van die volksmoeder konsep en navorsing wat reeds daarvoor gedoen is. Die tersiêre opleiding van vroue, spesifiek aan die Universiteit van Pretoria (UP), is ook bespreek. Die verskillende akademiese dissiplines wat ontwikkel is om Afrikaner dogters in staat te stel om aan die nasionalistiese ideaal van die volksmoeder te voldoen, is bespreek, asook ander meganismes wat deur universiteitsowerhede daar gestel is om die goeie reputasie van Afrikaner dogters te beveilig. Verder word die feit oorweeg dat Afrikaner vroue weg beweeg het van hulle toegekende rol en plek in die samelewing, en 'n invloed gehad het op die ondermyning van Afrikaner nasionalistiese ideale.

**Slutelwoorde:** volksmoeder; Afrikaner nasionalisme; Transvaal Universiteitskollege; Universiteit van Pretoria; “Voortrekker Universiteit”; Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie (SAVF); Departement Maatskaplike Werk; Huishoudkunde; Verpleegkunde; universiteitskoshuise; gender.