

Introduction

An Untidy Hero

“We women are the backbone of the nation,” declared Josie Mpama/Palmer, whose life as a political activist in South Africa was a testament to her assertion.¹ From leading a major protest against lodger’s permits in Potchefstroom in the late 1920s to promoting community struggles on the Witwatersrand in the 1930s and 1940s and from playing a leading role in antipass campaigns in the 1940s and 1950s to being one of the founders of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) in 1954, she was a pillar of the freedom struggle. Thus, it was fitting that in June 2004, the South African government recognized her service to the nation by posthumously awarding her the Order of Luthuli.²

Many women played critical roles in South Africa’s freedom struggle throughout the twentieth century, but despite the abundant academic studies,³ biographies,⁴ and autobiographies of women activists,⁵ they are often presented as marginal or insignificant figures in struggle narratives because they usually did not participate in the public domain of politics and political parties.⁶ And because they are generally perceived as directing their energies to family and domestic issues, they have been

presented as “mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters” rather than activists in their own right.

An exception to this rule is Josie Mpama/Palmer, who played many public roles as a political activist. Nomboniso Gasa has accurately called her “an untidy hero for those who want to present a one-sided view of history. She demonstrated a fierce sense of power and of organizing women independently.”⁷ This biography is an attempt to narrate her life experiences and her contributions to the freedom struggle and how they add insight into our understanding of women’s political lives.⁸

Josie’s life sheds light on a number of issues. One is how her early life laid a foundation for issues she took on as a political activist. Josie was born in Potchefstroom less than a year after the end of the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) to a mixed-race woman and a Zulu man, a court interpreter whose views reflected those of the mission-educated black elite. After her parents divorced when she was seven, she was shuttled back and forth between different family members and had to find jobs as a domestic servant and seamstress. Her turbulent childhood taught her self-reliance and sensitized her as an adult to the need to protect both family and community.

In the late 1920s, she brought these concerns to her first experience in political activism: leading community protests that featured black women in Potchefstroom against an unpopular lodger’s fee that undermined the stability and cohesion of black families. Standing up for

black families and communities became her passion for the rest of her life.

The Potchefstroom protests exposed her to the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). She joined the party in 1928 and was the first black woman to play a prominent role in it. After moving in 1931 to Sophiatown, a black community in Johannesburg, she threw herself into CPSA organizing and resisting government repression. She took the remarkable step of traveling to the Soviet Union in 1935 to receive training at a Communist International (Comintern) school. The CPSA had been crippled by internal ideological disputes, and a Comintern commission called on her to testify at a dramatic hearing in Moscow that turned out to be a life-and-death showdown between CPSA factions.

Although a disciplined Communist Party member, Josie held independent views and was not reluctant about candidly expressing her dissatisfaction in the 1930s with the party on issues such as the content of its newspaper, its declining membership, its relations with Christians, and the difficulty of organizing black and white workers in joint actions. Nevertheless, with the party on the brink of collapsing in the late 1930s, she took strong stances on preserving it and opposing a controversial proposal to split it into black and white wings.

African National Congress (ANC) narratives dominate much of the scholarship on South Africa's freedom struggle. Josie's political life offers a different

perspective. The CPSA was her primary political home, and that determined how she participated in leading black political organizations of the time: the ANC, the All-African Convention (AAC), and the Non-European Unity Front (NEUF).

She engaged publicly in local and national struggles. In keeping with her defense of family and community, she defended black townships such as Alexandra from being torn apart and expelled by the Johannesburg municipal council and was a leading figure in a national antipass campaign from 1943 to 1945 organized by the CPSA and the ANC.

Josie engaged in gendered politics. Most black women involved in political issues operated on the margins of male-dominated black organizations. Highly critical of the patriarchal attitudes that hindered black women from actively participating in politics, she was an outspoken advocate for women's social equality and encouraged black women to become more involved in issues of direct relevance to them: high rents, beer brewing, pass laws, police raids, education, health care, high bus fares, and the protection of black communities from forced removals and evictions. She did not see defending family structures and livelihoods as defining women as mothers and homemakers or a retreat from public life but as a way of mobilizing them politically.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Josie's views evolved on how black women should relate to black men in political initiatives. Initially she supported women working

cooperatively with men in political organizations but then shifted to women forming autonomous organizations such as the Daughters of Africa. By the end of the 1940s, she was one of the founders of the Transvaal All-Women's Union, which advocated women of all racial groups joining together in one organization.

After the white National Party came to power in 1948 and began implementing the apartheid system, it intensified its attacks on the Communist Party, declaring it illegal and forcing it to disband in 1950. Josie remained involved in critical issues, especially protests against the Bantu Education Act and African women being forced to carry passes. In 1954, she was a leading figure in establishing the Federation of South African Women, which was open to women of all races.

Served a banning order by the government in 1955 and facing health challenges, she had to withdraw from formal politics and devoted her energy for the rest of her life to women's groups in the Anglican Church in her township, Mzimhlophe. She did not conform to the image of a communist as one opposed to religion. She remained loyal to the banned CPSA and did not see a contradiction between her beliefs as a Christian and as a communist. She was also an active presence in her neighborhood and drew on her knowledge of Afrikaner folk medicine to treat illnesses.