Chapter 8
The Position and Role of the African Corporate Middle Class in their Communities

8.1 Introduction

The spatial development of residential environments in South Africa represents the historical racial segregation of the country. Underpinned by the ideology of separate development, these areas were divided into whites-only middle class areas and working class areas dominated by black people. Although this development can be traced from the time of British colonialism, it came about mainly because of the apartheid government’s objective to confine the political, social, economic and recreational activities of different racial groups to different areas (Wardon, 1994). More specifically, while the apartheid government wanted to provide space for “white civilised” society, its policy thrusts were constrained by a need to provide cheap labour for South African capital.

It was because of these seemingly conflicting objectives that there was a need for control over black urban residential areas through planning and zoning (Wardon, 1994). Marked by mass forced removals in the 1950s, this gave an impetus to the growth of black townships on the outskirts of most South African cities and towns. Furthermore, through influx control and group areas policies, the government tried to achieve its objectives by putting constraints on black people’s mobility from the homelands and bantustans (Wardon, 1994). This meant that while most white people lived comfortably in well-off middle-class areas, black people lived in appalling conditions in townships and the homelands. Thus, the majority of African people alternated between the townships (where they resided
because of their jobs) and the homelands (where they were based as migrant labourers).

However, the seeds of change were planted towards the end of the apartheid era as the black middle class developed in the country (Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell, 2002). According to Beall et al. (2002), the imperatives of the post-Fordist mode of accumulation in the 1970s ushered the erosion of the residential division’s correspondence of class and race. Following the abolition of the influx control and group areas legislation in 1986 and 1990, respectively, “the urbanisation levels suggests that the level of urbanisation among Africans at the beginning of the 21st century approximately matched that of South African whites at the beginning of the 20th century” (Kok, O’Donovan, Bouare and Van Zyl, 2003: 35). Although the majority of Africans still constitute the poor in society, class stratification becomes more significant than race classification in South African society (Beall et al., 2002).

Although the above analysis give us an understanding of the implication of deracialisation on the social stratification of South African society, it tells us little about the impact of this process on the social relations of the colonial and apartheid era. The aim of this chapter is to explore the impact of the residential mobility of the black middle class in South African communities on black stratification structures. This is done by looking at how black managers interviewed for this study perceive their position and roles in their communities. The analysis spans both previously white-only areas and black communities.

8.2 Residential areas of the African corporate middle class

As shown above, one can identify three types of residential areas in South Africa – historically white-only areas (“suburbs” in South African parlance), townships (including squatter camps around big cities), and the homelands.
Table 8.1 List of respondents by area of residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Township</th>
<th>Suburbs</th>
<th>Province of origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thabang</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>KwaZulu-Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>North West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thembi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kobane</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thapelo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabelo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Godfrey</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Free State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makhaya</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Limpopo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Western Cape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josias</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banori</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>KwaZulu-Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>Limpopo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mankwe</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mpumalanga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barney</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>KwaZulu-Natal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khomani</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Free State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johannes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.1 shows that majority of the respondents are staying in the suburbs, with only four staying in the townships. Also, it shows that the majority (11) were raised in Gauteng. The remaining are scattered evenly in other provinces. The column on the province of origin shows that there are people from the other six provinces, excluding Northern Cape and Eastern Cape. It is important to note that two moved in their youth. Thembi’s father was a priest and was geographically mobile. Sharon left her home in North West to study in Cape Town.

In terms of a place of origin, there are differences, with some respondents coming from townships (10), while others (6) are from the homelands. One of the respondents was raised in the suburbs, and three do not indicate whether they are from the suburbs, township or homelands.
8.3 The position of black managers in communities

As is shown above, the residential mobility to middle-class areas is associated with the spatial environment of the area. Indeed, the major difference between the previously white-owned areas and the working-class areas is that the former provide a huge space, while the latter is characterised by close proximity of the neighbourhood (Wardon, 1994). In other words, the environmental contexts of the two are different in terms of space.

Those who stay in the suburbs expressed the change in their living environment as follows:

It’s very strange because we don’t live like in the township (Thabang, interview, November 2005).

Nobody knows his/her neighbour in my area (Sharon, October 2005).

While these respondents seemed to identify differences in terms of the environment, others took it further to explain the impact of this on their identity. Thembi argued that their neighbours were probably surprised about their presence in the neighbourhood:

My sister and I are the only black people in our neighbourhood. I think they wonder, ‘What are they all about?’ (Thembi, interview, November 2005).

Some felt alienated by the environment:

The place I am staying right now, it’s too Western. It’s different from the township where you find people coming to your place every now and then [and] people … knowing each other (Solly, interview, November 2005).

From the above quotes, one can see that while some respondents are worried about their environment, others seem less concerned. However, some among these respondents argued that they were trying to initiate ‘iculture yase kazi’ in their areas:

There seems to be iculture yase kazi emerging in this area. We are four black people in the same block and we always visit each other … watch soccer match together and tell each other where we are going for weekends. If I don’t see you on Saturday and you did not tell anyone

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25 Township culture.
where you’re going, I always call and ask: ‘Hey, man, where are you?’
(Thabang, interview, November 2005).

When we had a house-warming party we went around inviting all of [our
neighbours] to the party… I think they were surprised because other
neighbours will have a party and never thought of extending their
invitations to [all] neighbours (Thembi, interview, November 2005).

While the “suburbs” environment makes it difficult to know how other people
perceive you, some respondents went further to explain how they thought they
were perceived by people in their neighbourhoods. The majority of these people
did not think there was a problem of racism in their areas. However, some felt that
they were faced with difficulties. For instance, one of the respondents told the
story about church, where white church goers would not give them room to sit
with them on the same bench. He responded by speaking loudly about the fact that
“these people don’t want to accommodate black people, in church… Some white
people don’t want to change because we allow them to carry on with these old
habits” (Banori, interview, November 2004). Other respondents explained it thus:

White people are moving out… I don’t know where they are going …
Maybe a person like you must come and conduct research about this
(Solly, interview, November 2005).

Others still saw residues of the apartheid legacy in their interaction with white
people:

You see in South Africa black and white people sit together joking and
seem to be doing everything together. But, deep down, we all know that
we do not have the respect we all deserve from each other (Julius;
interview, September, 2005).

This question was also posed regarding the townships and the homelands, where
the majority of respondents were based before they moved to cities. Those still
staying in the townships had diverse answers on this issue.

Some respondents thought that there was no change in terms of how people saw
them. Others argued that everyone seemed to look upon them as community
leaders:

It is difficult, man, they elect you to be a leader in every community
structure because you have resources; you have a car to run around …
they elect you as a treasurer because they think you cannot squander
funds… (Barney, interview, November 2004).
A great number of those who are staying in the suburbs stated that they felt expectations in their former communities:

Because you are young and successful, people look up to you to do good things in the community (Sharon, October 2005).

Although there is no indication of what good things are expected from this respondent, Sharon felt that the expectations in her township community were linked to her youth. However, Makhaya thought these expectations were related to the fact that people in their community seemed to look at him in a different light:

I think people look at me differently. It’s interesting that they think you’ve got money all the time. This is the beggar mentality (Makhaya, November 2005).

Thapelo seemed to agree with this observation, in that people expect him to contribute material things to his family:

People expect me to extend a four-room house at home. And I am not gonna do that, because I want my siblings and children to know where we are coming from. It’s not expensive, I can afford it, but I want people to understand the symbolism of the house (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).

To further investigate the position of the African corporate middle class in communities, respondents were asked how the high level of unemployment among black people affected them. There seemed to be a consensus among the respondents that unemployment affects them both directly and indirectly. Indirectly, respondents said that it was “emotionally disturbing” and that some social ills such as HIV/AIDS could be attributed to unemployment:

It is not a good sight to see people begging all over the show. I have my close relatives who are unemployed and I try to create as many jobs as possible (Makhaya, November 2005).

This company used to employ plus-minus 1400/1600, but today we are just making 400. And I know the majority of people out of that number. And it affects you to see a man who was in the company now unemployed (Solly, interview, November 2005).

High levels of crime - I was a victim of crime recently; the pandemic of HIV/AIDS can also be attributed to high level of unemployment (Julius, interview, September 2005).

In terms of how unemployment affects them directly, respondents argued that:
People are always looking for employment from me. But you find that there is nothing much I can do except that I can put them to a labour broker. The reason is that we need skills to put someone in employment. Some people are crying in front of me asking for money to catch a taxi to township. It’s tough and sometimes I try to avoid them (Thabang, interview, November 2005).

This shows us the contextual background of the growth of labour brokers from the perspective of a black manager. This is closely related to the following quote:

I’m being bombarded with lots of people looking for a job from me. Whenever there is a problem at home, members of my extended family always come around looking for assistance (Kabelo, interview, September 2005).

While the above quotes indicate the fact that these managers are seen as a source of hope by some of their acquaintances in the workplace, others think these expectations extend to their places of residence:

There are lots of hopes and expectations, both in the workplace and home. People look at me with higher expectations in the family. At my house, I get visitors who bring CVs. Because you drive Pajero, they think you can do a lot, not for work only, but also for advice. Mošimane,26 I play a role of an employer, advisor, counsellor … everything: You are seen as a [source of] hope (Mankwe, interview, October 2004).

However, others take a long-term view on the impact of unemployment on themselves:

It means I can’t actually get rich in a short period of time, because I share the money with members of my extended families because they are not working. My clothes that I would be sparing for older age I give away to other people at home (Kobane, interview, November 2005).

In this section, we looked at how black managers perceive their positions in both previously white-only residences and black communities. Furthermore, this section explored the effects of the high level of unemployment among black people on black managers. It emerged from the findings that the majority of respondents are perceived as a source of hope in the workplace and black communities.

The next section systematically investigates the latter theme by looking at the contribution the respondents make to their extended families and communities.

26 Pedi word meaning “boy”.
8.4 The role of black managers in black communities

The respondents were asked whether they were involved in any community activities. Almost none of the respondents were able to participate in community activities. The single most important reason cited by many of the respondents was that they lived far from their former communities. Some argued that they did not have time to be involved in their communities. Indeed, some respondents made it clear that they would not go back to their communities because they “have different values with those people” (Banori, interview, November 2004), “I struggle to live with those people because of my interpretation of reality, values and views” (Khomani, interview, September 2004), and because “honestly, townships and rural areas are not safe” (Barney, interview, November 2004).

However, there are those who argued that they ensured that they always made a contribution to their communities. For instance, one interviewee had an opportunity to run projects in communities, and always made sure that his community back home got preferential treatment (Jeffrey, interview, October 2004). Some became involved through their churches. Fewer were involved in government initiatives such as local economic development initiative (Thembi, interview, November 2005). Nonetheless, there are those who have aspirations of doing something in their communities one day. One interviewee said that he wanted to start a competition in his high school as a way of ploughing back to his community (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).

Also, there are those who want to leave a mark in their communities by establishing, for example, social clubs, giving motivational talks and educating youth about democracy. One of the respondents explained it thus:

After 1994, I saw people moving to suburbs and I thought, let me remain back because if we all leave the township, our youth in the township will end up having wrong role models: people who are unemployed but get money from unclean sources … makhinza27 (Julius; interview, September, 2005).

27 A township lingo word meaning gangsters.
One interviewee dismissed the idea of community activities altogether:

I’m not involved in any, but I’m helping people. I’m a little sceptical about these so-called community activities because mostly are meant for CVs. It is a human thing to do, rather than going around and talking about it… ‘I’m involved with AIDS, I’m involved with disabled people’… please, why are you saying it? … people should do it … it is a call … you are privileged … just do it without ringing a bell about it. I’m part of a family gathering, helping my extended families; everyone, and I don’t want any returns. It should not be structured. I do it an African way because I’m not in public relations social responsibility (Josias, interview, September 2005).

The important thing about this quote is the suggestion that a contribution to community members can be done in an “African way”. This was investigated further by asking whether respondents were making any contributions to members of their extended families. All respondents answered in the affirmative. Some respondents argued that their contribution was monetary, while others said that they give information, motivated members of extended families, and formed gatherings for their extended families:

My brother passed away. I had to bury him and take care of his children. I pay for their school fees now (Thabang, interview, November 2005).

I don’t want to see my kids and members of my extended family go through what I went through. I currently pay tertiary fees of my uncle’s children because he adopted me as my mentor (Julius; interview, September, 2005).

The latter quote shows a concern of the black manager about the structural constraints that nearly demolished his own aspirations, and he indicates he would not like to see anyone else going through the same process. Others, however, emphasised that their contribution was directly linked to blackness:

As a typical black person, I still do a lot. I’ve got children of my sister, who had passed away, that I’m taking care of (Kobane, interview, November 2005).

The above quote demonstrates the fact that members of extended families add to the number of dependants of the African corporate middle class. In fact, this theme of contributions by the African corporate middle class to members of extended families is captured very well by an African saying: “motho ke motho ka batho” (a person lives because of other people), captured by the following quote:

My own company will be ran by members of my family and extended family. You are going nowhere without other people. I give guidance to
my brothers and sisters. Actually my younger brother, who is 25 years old, is an engineer and living comfortably. For my relatives I help where I can. In terms of the community at large, I was elected by my ancestors to become a coach and a mentor in my community. I do that in church every last weekend of a month (Thapelo, interview, November 2005).

I provide information to people. The main worry for me is that lots of people do not have access to information (Makhaya, November 2005).

However, there are those who seem to be disillusioned about contributions to members of extended families:

But, ‘wa bona darkie is ander ding, janong’\(^{28}\). We’ve got a serious … serious entitlement problem. We always feel [that] because we are needy, we think we are entitled to help. I’ll teach people from ekazi\(^{29}\) the work and give them an advice about how to run a contract business … Aaa … after three months they will come late, at 9:30, and at 12:00 they will take lunch, take a long walk and lastly they will say … ‘Hey, man, help a black brother’. Some of them will come here to ask for money under the impression that they are going to use it functionally, but they’ll spend it on their girlfriends (Kabelo; interview, September 2005).

The impact of the deracialisation of previously racially segregated communities differs in degree. One may conclude that the new environment makes some black managers see blackness in a different light, as some define it in terms of how they are seen in their neighbourhood and others look at how people in their communities look at them. Although class becomes an important variable in social stratification, as there seem to be growing inequalities within black communities and many black people move to previously whites-only areas, there seem to be polarisations emerging with the residential mobility of the black middle class to “the suburbs”.

The interviews with the African corporate middle class show that their social mobility comes with certain expectations from their communities and former communities. Indeed, most of the respondents indicated that their contribution to these communities was very limited. This is especially the case for those who no longer reside in “black communities”. However, an interesting aspect of this is that an overwhelming majority of the respondents argued that they did actively

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\(^{28}\) You see a black person is another thing, now

\(^{29}\) Township.
contribute to the members of their extended communities. This indicates the burden of the extended families on the African corporate middle class’s position of being the middle class.

In addition, the entry of black managers to previously white-owned areas seems to impact on their identity. Although some of them seemed to be content with their environment, others indicated that the remnants of apartheid social structure prompted a need to initiate changes. Finally, while some of them showed enthusiasm to develop their communities, others made it clear that they had cut ties with the world of their former communities. This can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, they argued that their social position made them differ with people in their former communities. Secondly, there were those who argued that most black people were not of a mind to improve their living situation on their own account. This also contributes to a view expressed by those who, although willing to contribute to uplifting the poor, were disillusioned by so-called community activities. There are those who argued that community development could be done in an “African way”, without playing the “public relations social responsibility game”.

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