Changing Space, Changing City

Published by Wits University Press

Changing Space, Changing City: Johannesburg after apartheid - Open Access selection.
Wits University Press, 2014.
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On ‘spaces of hope’: Exploring Hillbrow’s discursive credoscapes

As legend has it, Hillbrow is one of the deepest circles of Dante’s hell, a chaotic swirl of drug dealers and murderers that any visitor would be lucky to escape. A post-apocalyptic Wild West that leaves hardened police pale with fear. People might even compare it to a war zone. But it is NOT a war zone. Alongside this, there is a vibrancy and a sense of community that is certainly not found in any of Johannesburg’s walled-off northern suburbs and sterile malls.

– Nessman 2002: 194

Despite its reputation, severe physical degradation, relatively high rates of unemployment, and a history of being ‘redlined’ by financial institutions, Hillbrow remains a ‘popular’ urban realm. Here, the resident population has doubled in the past 20 years, as a significant number of newcomers to the city tend to first locate themselves in this inner-city neighbourhood. Hillbrow therefore functions as a ‘port of entry’ to Johannesburg for many who desire to engage in the perceived economic opportunities of the city. It is home to a diverse resident constituency, and at least 38 per cent of its current population is foreign-born. The tendency for migrants, immigrants or transnationals to ‘cluster’ in a neighbourhood due to established networks, shared language or cultural practices is not unique to Johannesburg. Yet, Hillbrow – often dubbed by locals as ‘little Lagos’ – has become a zone of great vulnerability, attracting hostility, xenophobia and violence. Accordingly, Hillbrow is a domain to which few want to belong, or in which few are able to establish their roots. Still, it keeps alive residents’ hopes for stability and security somewhere else. Hillbrow thus has much in common with other African urban contexts that are becoming accustomed to ever-increasing uncertainty,
cross-border mobility and informalisation, which, in turn, contribute to the disconnect felt by many urban dwellers (Appiah 2006; Edjabe and Pieterse 2011).

However, as Nessman (2002) suggests, there is something else besides decay and chaos happening in Hillbrow. Here, there also exists ‘a vibrancy’ and some ‘sense of community’ that is founded, to a large extent, on local credoscapes, since faith identities facilitate ‘spaces of hope’ for at least 70 per cent of Hillbrow’s residents (Winkler 2006). They enable one mechanism through which the everyday uncertainties and insecurities of the African urban may be navigated, and they create, however tenuously, some sense of belonging in this ever-changing port-of-entry context. Faith identities also constitute a repertoire of symbolic, social and material resources, because they serve as ‘main providers of meaning for many residents’ (Mbembe 2002: 268). This may be said despite Hillbrow’s diverse, and often competing, faith identities. Still, for members who mobilise their credoscapes, religion offers individuals and groups additional ways of positioning themselves. Faith identities are then ‘linked with processes of reinventing the self through rituals and celebrations’ (Mbembe 2002: 270). These aspects alone make religion of great [socio-economic, spatial and] political importance in any society where the overwhelming majority hold some sort of religious belief’ (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004: 14).

This is not to suggest that some religious organisations don’t engage in exclusionary, conservative and repressive enterprises. Rather, my aim in this chapter is to explore how residents ascribe meaning to space and their everyday experiences through religion. Thus, ‘faith identities’ are discussed in emic rather than etic terms, based on research participants’ ascribed definitions and self-identifications. ‘Faith’, in turn, refers to their belief in the existence of an invisible world that is distanced but not separated from the visible one.

The chapter is structured as two sections. In the first I explore some of the more prominent faith identities found in Hillbrow, while in the second section I briefly demonstrate how ‘spaces of hope’ are created through faith-sponsored actions. Findings are based on participant observations and in-depth interviews with residents, community leaders and members of Hillbrow’s abundant faith affiliations. Before engaging in these explorations, it is worth noting that the number of faith affiliations operating in Hillbrow has increased phenomenally over the past 20 years, from 11 formally established ‘mainline’ organisations to at least 75 known credoscapes (Winkler 2006) (see Plate 50).

Conceptualising Hillbrow’s discursive faith identities

Identities, according to Bourdieu (1990), are always fluid. As such, identities are difficult to define, for at times they are retrospectively anchored in the past, involving loyalty to one’s beliefs, origins and roots, and at other times identities are seen in a prospective manner. In Hillbrow, residents’ faith identities encompass both retrospective (or nostalgic) and prospective (or strategic) conceptualisations. Many residents therefore continue to turn to traditional healers, including sangomas and inyangas, for spiritual and other guidance. And at least 15 per cent of the total population explicitly embraces a melding of traditional, or
pre-colonial, religious practices with Christian ideologies. This ‘creolisation’ of pre-colonial practices with contemporary values engenders distinctive faith identities that oscillate between visible and invisible imaginations (Nuttall and Michael 2000), ‘where the real and the unreal become indistinguishable’ (Deleuze 1990: 93).

For analytical purposes alone, this category of faith identities is referred to as ‘informal’, since all of the faith affiliations within this category either rent spaces or make use of faith leaders’ residential apartments for weekly gatherings. While the degree of creolisation between traditional and prospective social practices varies among these affiliations, all belong either to African independent churches (AICs) or independent churches (ICs). According to research participants, AICs embrace a greater degree of traditional practices than ICs. Included in this category are also those religious affiliations that worship in public open spaces, namely Hillbrow’s Zionist, ZCC, amaNazaretha and Apostolic churches.

Strictly speaking, ‘informal’ is perhaps a misleading term because Zionist, ZCC, amaNazaretha and Apostolic churches, for example, resemble an established history in the South African landscape. Informality then refers neither to longevity nor to informal religious practices: there is nothing ‘informal’ about these creolised religious beliefs and identities. Rather, and for the purpose of this chapter, ‘informal’ refers to a lack of fixed capital investment in Hillbrow, which in turn hampers the capacities of most AICs and ICs to launch community development projects. Most struggle financially, some have relatively few members and are transient, while others define themselves by nationality or a common language. And most AICs and ICs do not have official planning permission to use pastors’ apartments or public open spaces for weekly gatherings. Some AIC and IC pastors also ‘moonlight’ as security guards, waiters or office clerks because their ministries do not have ‘sufficient members to financially support pastors going into full-time service’.1

To illustrate this lack of fixed capital assets, as well as the fluidity of Hillbrow’s faith identities, the Great Synagogue in Wolmarans Street – which served Johannesburg’s Orthodox Jewish community for over 80 years – represents one example of how a religious space in Hillbrow is transformed to accommodate residents, since it is being leased by the Jewish community to an AIC with over 600 members. Similarly, a colourful noticeboard located at the entrance to Hillbrow’s Recreation Centre suggests that at least ten AICs and four ICs operate from these premises. Membership numbers at individual churches range from 120 to 400 members. Larger churches – such as Brethren in Christ, Church of God and the United Pentecostal Church – also rent rooms from the Centre for weekly youth and women’s organisation meetings and for choir practices.2 In addition, a relatively smaller group of 80 Muslims make use of this Centre for Friday afternoon prayers.3 However, the outdoor noticeboard has failed to keep up with the ephemeral nature of some faith affiliations. Four of the listed AICs no longer exist, and five new congregations now make use of the Centre for weekly gatherings.

Still, for the 15 per cent of Hillbrow’s residents who find some solace through creolised social practices, communication with ancestors and ‘salvation’ through Christian doctrines provides them with a conceptual framework to explain and overcome afflictions. Moreover, because Zionist, ZCC, amaNazaretha, Apostolic and other AICs and ICs are established by
black theologians, members of these affiliations speak of the strong sense of emancipation their faith engenders. ‘It fulfils African aspirations and meets African needs.’ For this reason, principal religious leaders are perceived by their followers as ‘Moses figures [that might] deliver the faithful out of slavery [namely, poverty] into the Promised Land: The new City of Zion.’ Devotees thus ‘receive the Zionist healing message as a gospel for the poor.’ And by means of this ‘message’, the faithful believe themselves to be ‘healed’, whether spiritually, emotionally or physically. Prophetic ‘healing practices’ then represent truly African and Christian approaches to the problem of pain and suffering, even in cases where it is difficult to distinguish between the acts of benevolent ancestors and divination (Anderson 2000).

Zionist, amaNazaretha and Apostolic faith identities, in particular, are also expressed through a ‘politics of visibility’. Every weekend the streets of Hillbrow are filled with faith members wearing white, blue or green tunics, carrying wooden staffs, and making their way to Pullinger Kop or Mackie Nivin Park where public open spaces are, temporarily, transformed into sacred gathering spaces. Here, dance and music are employed to gain spiritual knowledge or to remedy ‘social evil’ by calling upon benevolent ancestral spirits for guidance in everyday endeavours. Social evil, in turn, is generally attributed to witches or sorcerers, who at times overpower spiritual protectors. These uncontrollable and invisible forces of evil sorcery are frequently cited by the faithful as explanations for failed ‘miracles’. Ancestral spirits might occasionally also inflict minor illnesses on some, but these illnesses serve as mere ‘warnings against religious neglect or misdeeds.’

Informality, in these cases, further refers to the lack of denominational control among AICs and ICs. This is not to suggest that there is no structural hierarchy or ‘social field’ within these religious affiliations, but rather that greater autonomy is awarded to individual ministries. This autonomy equally applies to the second, and largest, category of faith identities found in Hillbrow. For analytical purposes alone, I refer to this category as ‘formal’, since these are formally established religious organisations that operate from their own premises. They also possess financial and other capacities to facilitate community development programmes, because members are expected to make regular monetary contributions to their faith organisations via tithes. Of greatest significance, this category has experienced unparalleled growth in Hillbrow since the late 1980s, namely from zero to 27 established organisations. Consequently, at least 45 per cent of Hillbrow’s residents are members of these organisations, and they identify themselves as Pentecostals.

Contrary to ‘mainline’ religious organisations, which will be discussed shortly, the Pentecostal movement is mushrooming across the African continent. It deliberately distinguishes its role from other sectarian groups as ‘a call to arms for the faithful by providing a means of spiritual and material transformation in the face of powerlessness and disorder, if not chaos’ (Hackett 2003: 71). The Pentecostal belief in the power of a ‘holy spirit’ that can address both spiritual and material needs thus seems to appeal to a growing number of Hillbrow residents. And as is the case in other African contexts, Hillbrow’s Pentecostals embrace a prospective, albeit a conservative and often exclusionary, religious identity. Nevertheless, this identity – which is engendered through shared customs, values
and beliefs – secures a strong sense of belonging to the Pentecostal faith. Highly charged, jubilant and ecstatic styles of worship – that include exorcism, speaking in tongues and prophesying – ring out in the streets of Hillbrow surrounding ‘the Tent’ (which attracts over 5 000 members) and the Universal Church (with almost 900 members), for example, at any time and on any day of the week. Here, solutions to basic human problems are conveyed through ‘supernatural gifts’ that supposedly facilitate some kind of deliverance from invisible ‘evil powers’, in addition to the restoration of broken marriages and financial success in work or in business ventures.8

A final category of faith identities defines itself as ‘mainline’ organisations. This is the smallest category in terms of membership numbers, in that only 10 per cent of residents belong to these formally structured religious denominations. However, they are the longest established and most physically prominent faith organisations in Hillbrow. They are also networked, both nationally and internationally, through hierarchical structures, and these structures enable them to facilitate most of the faith-sponsored community development programmes found in Hillbrow. Some within this category identify themselves as ‘liberal Protestants’, including Anglican, Calvinist, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian identities, while others embrace more conservative Roman Catholic and Hellenic Orthodox identities. Hillbrow’s ‘liberal Protestants’ furthermore engage in ecumenical practices through increased collaborations with other faith identities. But this ‘mainline’ self-identification is not limited to Hillbrow’s dominant Christian identities, given that the owner of Temple Israel defines this Reform Synagogue as a ‘mainline religious sanctuary’.9 Temple Israel is the only remaining and functioning Jewish organisation in Hillbrow. I now briefly explore some of the faith-sponsored development programmes found in Hillbrow before concluding this chapter.

Identifying Hillbrow’s ‘spaces of hope’

Regardless of the many and discursive faith identities found in Hillbrow, a significant number of residents turn to faith-based organisations for assistance, hope, self-empowerment and survival. Said differently:

Hillbrow’s faith-based organisations provide many residents with a sense of hope and security. The role they play is immensely important, because most faith-based organisations have adapted mentally to change. And, as you know, there are so many different faith-based organisations in Hillbrow.10

Most ‘mainline’ and ‘formal’ faith-based organisations facilitate welfare programmes abandoned by the state, for example operating soup kitchens or shelters for the homeless, or providing newcomers to the city and refugees with legal, financial and accommodation assistance. Moreover, some implement community development programmes that are open to all residents irrespective of religious leanings. These include skills training, adult literacy and job placement programmes. Others facilitate entrepreneurial business ventures. One faith-based organisation is engaged in providing affordable, albeit transitional, housing
projects. Two facilitate full-time and professionally staffed HIV and AIDS hospices. Many tutor at-risk teenagers by working directly with local schools. Still others cater for street-based children and abandoned babies, while some engage in community theatre as a means of information dissemination to address xenophobia. And most run affordable day-care programmes so that parents and guardians can engage in the job market.

It may then be argued that while ‘there is a fine line between charity and development’, separating economic development activities from the welfare services performed by ‘mainline’ and ‘formal’ organisations may, in fact, prove to be unhelpful, as attempting to do so might negate activities that significantly contribute to the economic well-being of Hillbrow residents. For this reason, research participants propose that both activities contribute to community development, as do programmes that explicitly promote self-empowerment.

When you’ve lost all hope it is difficult to rediscover your own self-worth. But that is what we are doing here by starting with self-empowerment programmes, so that participants can rediscover their own self-worth the minute they walk through those doors.

Lines between charity, self-empowerment and socio-economic development activities are thus blurred in Hillbrow. Nonetheless, credoscapes are creating nodes of hope, order and stability amid perceived chaos and decay. By contrast, Hillbrow’s secular non-profit organisations are often structured as ‘businesses’ that compete for limited state resources, resulting in short-lived operations. In 2002, for example, I worked with 15 non-profit organisations located in Hillbrow. Today, only six of these continue to function. In Hillbrow’s port-of-entry context, ‘mainline’ and ‘formal’ faith organisations are relatively stable, and most have adapted to this ever-changing context.

Concluding remarks

More than 30 years ago, Martin West (1975: 202) argued – based on his empirically rich study of religious practices in Soweto – that ‘religion accommodates those who are affected by uncontrollable external determinants’. West’s findings are, arguably, still relevant in a context like Hillbrow where the overwhelming majority of residents hold some sort of religious belief, and where a sevenfold increase in the number of known faith organisations has emerged since the late 1980s. Here, credoscapes create spaces for self-empowerment, friendship, familiarity and hope to combat contemporary uncertainties, including those imposed by invisible worlds.

Despite the fact that most faith-based organisations work in isolation with varying levels of resource capacities, credoscapes also seem to have a comparative advantage over other sectors when it comes to community development in this context. This advantage stems from their presence, adaptability, growth and diversity, and from the fact that they are ‘the only organisations in Hillbrow presently involved in doing something’. Presence, adaptability and growth give faith organisations an understanding of the everyday barriers faced by Hillbrow’s residents. Additionally, the diversity of Hillbrow’s faith sector, while
limiting collaboration due to competing faith identities, does enable the implementation of a multiplicity of development programmes – programmes that, according to research participants, display some potential to address diverse resident needs.

Notes
1 Interview with AIC pastor, Hillbrow, 12 August 2005.
2 Interview with AIC leaders, Hillbrow, 3 August 2005.
3 Interview with manager, Hillbrow Recreation Centre, 6 March 2005.
4 Interview with Zionist elder, Hillbrow, 5 April 2005.
5 Interview with Zionist elder, 5 April 2005.
6 Interview with Zionist elder, 5 April 2005.
7 Interview with Zionist elder, 5 April 2005.
9 Interview with owner, Temple Israel, 12 March 2005.
10 Interview with secular community development facilitator, Braamfontein, 4 September 2005.
11 Interview with secular community development facilitator, 4 September 2005.
12 Interview with faith-sponsored development facilitator, MES, Hillbrow, 12 August 2005.
13 Interview with Hillbrow resident, Hillbrow, 10 February 2007.

References
Winkler, T (2006) Kwere Kwere Journeys into Strangeness: Reimagining Inner City Regeneration in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.