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SPACE, DOMESTICITY AND 'PEOPLE'S POWER':
CIVIC ORGANISATION IN ALEXANDRA IN THE 1990S

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines local level civic organisation in Alexandra township, north-east of Johannesburg. A geographically small but densely populated area, Alexandra has a rich and well documented political history.[1] Much of the writing on Alexandra has focused on political and civic organisations, and the role they played in the struggle against the apartheid state. This paper takes a more anthropological approach, and looks at the relationship between political and social dynamics at a grassroots level

Carter has argued that youth and civic activists' strategies in Alexandra during the 1980s represented "an appeal to organisational and ideological allegiance, as well as the promotion of a certain kind of morality as the morality to be adhered to" [Carter, 1991:15]. In other words, community mobilisation was directed at transforming people's understandings of their social and political environment, rather than just eliciting support for a political cause. Civic activists in the 1990s continue to follow this strategy, whereby the organisation of local civic structures represents an attempt to effect social as well as political transformation.

Just how successful this strategy was in the hostile conditions of the mid-1980s is open to debate, although activists at the time confidently proclaimed an era of 'people's power'. Although direct state repression had decreased by the time I conducted my research in 1991 and 1992, wide scale violence and security force actions continued to serve as an impediment to organisation. A second factor affecting political activity, both in the 1980s and 1990s, is competition between different organisations within Alexandra. The two largest organisations in the township - the Alexandra Civic Organisation (ACO) and the ANC - have an uneasy alliance, and at times make contesting claims of support and legitimacy. In addition, ACO faces competition from several rival groupings such as the Alexandra Civic Association (ACA) and the East Bank Residents' Association.

Thus it is in a context of constraints and contestation that ACO functions in Alexandra today. In other words, the attempt to transform people's social and political understandings is a "process and an arena of cultural struggle" [Bozzoli, cited in Carter, 1991:20]. One of the terrains in which this struggle takes place is the organisation of living space. A number of

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[1]Eg Tourikis, 1981; Sarakinsky, 1984; Jochelson, 1990; Carter, 1991.

authors have discussed how people order the space in which they live to represent their social universe.[2] Not surprisingly, efforts to change people's value systems have often involved the reorganisation of space. For example, in South Africa, missionaries attempted to instil Western Christian values by reorganising the household, and the apartheid state set out to restructure settlement patterns and create racially and ethnically segregated townships [Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; Bank, 1993].

However, the representation of space can be interpreted in different ways, revealing the possibility for contestation. In Alexandra, the challenge to state power was closely linked to the organisation and control of space through yard, block and street committees. These structures were seen to represent 'people's power', thus challenging the idea of Alexandra as a state-controlled apartheid township.

The same structures are today organised by ACO. In ACO discourse, the civic is represented as a series of interlocking spatial units forming a unitary township community. Thus, the civic is simultaneously the township and 'the community'. While other organisations contest the inclusivity of this representation, ACO does have a hierarchy of elected committees linking grassroots and leadership. The basic units of this structure are yard committees[3], which form the building blocks of ACO's representation of the township. ACO's political strategy is based on the premise that yards are both social and political units. Its efficacy is thus linked to the way people conceptualise these spaces.

There are several different types of social organisation in yards in Alexandra. Some of these appear to be more amenable to civic organisation than others. Material gained from case studies suggests that historical continuities arising from Alexandra's freehold past play a significant role in the predisposition of some yards to civic organisation. I argue that one of the central factors in this process is the way in which people have conceptualised the yard community over time. This raises a further set of questions. Are yards public or domestic spaces, or rather something in between? How does this affect political organisation? What are the implications of this for the conventional association of politics with a public, male-dominated sphere of action, in contrast to a female domain of household and domesticity? And finally, how is this related to empowerment, particularly of women? Are yard committees truly a manifestation of 'people's power'? This paper addresses these

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[2]Eg Thornton, 1980; Moore, 1986; Ardener, 1981; Ramphele, 1991.

[3]Yards are the previously freehold stands which used to house landlords and their tenants. Many of these yards are today occupied by large numbers of households in formal and informal housing.

questions in a number of different yards in an area known as 'Lusaka'[4]

1. YARD COMMITTEES IN LUSAKA

Lusaka area encompasses several streets, running from the north to the south boundaries of Alexandra. It comprises hundreds of yards and thousands of shacks, both in yards and in free-standing shack settlements. The area was named in the 1980s, by youth activists who divided the township into a series of 'camps'[5]. Today it forms the boundaries of one of ACO's fourteen area committees, which are represented on the organisation's central committee.

Yard committees were first organised in the area in 1986. The main objective of these structures was to overcome social divisions and tensions arising from overcrowding. An elected committee would resolve disputes in the yard and organise people to ensure that communal facilities were looked after. Regular yard meetings would provide a forum where people could voice their opinions and participate in the management of the yard. People would thus be empowered to control the space in which they lived. Yard committees could chose representatives to represent the yard in broader civic structures, thus enabling people to participate in political processes.

Historical Continuities

James Scott has argued that the idealised nature of a hegemonic ideology results in internal contradictions which enable people to criticise it in its own terms. Thus, "The ideological source of mass radicalism is, in this sense, to be sought as much within a prevailing ideological order as outside it." [Scott, 1985:317]. While civic organisation in Alexandra was seen as part of a revolutionary strategy to establish 'people's power', material from yards in Lusaka suggests that ACO's success in organising yard committees partly depended on continuities in the way people have perceived their yards since the time when Alexandra was a freehold township. In the area in which I conducted my research, none of the yards that were not inhabited by former tenants had fully-fledged yard committees. For example, one yard was occupied exclusively by members of one extended family, who saw no need for an elected committee to maintain social order in the yard. A second yard was occupied by people who had all moved into the area after the expropriation of property rights, and who had never experienced life under a landlord. Dispute resolution and the maintenance of social order was managed in a rather ad hoc manner by the man who had resided in the yard the longest.

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[4]This name and the names of people living in the area are fictitious.

[5]See Carter [1991:v (fig 2c)] for a map of these 'camps'.

In contrast, the best organised yard I encountered was still occupied by many former tenants, who played an active role in the yard committee. In this yard, continuities from the freehold past played a positive and constructive role in the formation of the yard committee. However, the persistence of ideas related to the landlord-tenant relationship can also serve as an impediment to ACO organisation. In the following discussion I look at how people understand the nature of the yard community in two yards which are still inhabited by many former tenants - one where the yard committee is very weak, and one where it is strong and active.

Case study 1: Landlord-tenant continuities

This yard illustrates the effect of the continued presence of former landlords or their families. In yards such as this, the social relations arising from the landlord-tenant nexus has continued to exert an influence on how people perceive the yard.

The yard is home to a number of different families, living in two brick houses, several smaller terraced and detached brick rooms, one shack and a caravan. The big house in the yard is occupied by the descendants of a Mr Tshabalala, who used to own the stand, and who was known as the "mastant" by the 15 or 20 families who were his tenants, most of whom still live in the yard. Tshabalala bought the property in the 1940s and owned it until the late 1970s, when it was expropriated by the state. After their father's death, the Tshabalala children partitioned the house, which is today occupied by five of the Tshabalala children, eight grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. Tshabalala's eldest son lives in a separate brick room near the house. The family is effectively headed by two of the Tshabalala children: Joyce - one of the few family members with an income - and her brother Patrick, who is a recently returned ANC exile.

The old landlord had a paternalistic relationship with his tenants. In the words of his son Patrick,

> *"He saw to law and order and keeping the place clean. He solved problems. If someone was beating his wife, she would run to my father, who would speak to them. In most cases they respected him. If someone didn't want to listen, he could be chucked out. It didn't happen, to my knowledge."*

I interviewed several former tenants who substantiated this view. Elizabeth Langa, who has lived in a room in the yard since 1968, described her relationship with the landlord,

> *"The mastant was a very kind man, like a father. You could understand him. If you couldn't pay rent, he would wait."*

Today the Tshabalalas have a similarly close relationship with some of their father's previous tenants. As Joyce said, "The old people who were here with my parents are very sweet. They treat us like their children." Elizabeth concurred with Joyce that the yard was like a family, saying, "I'm just living with everybody

like sister and brother."

Joyce and Patrick, as heads of the household, continue to have a paternalistic relationship with many former tenants. Joyce is a nursing sister, and regularly provides free treatment to people with minor ailments or injuries. Patrick, who has been building an extension to the house and has started several small business enterprises, receives assistance from local unemployed men in return for food and drink or a little money. Another former tenant, Rose Mokoena, clearly felt quite affectionate towards Patrick, saying,

> *"He's very kind and gentle and helpful and he's got a fourteen-year-old daughter who goes to school in town."*

Even though the Tshabalalas have no formal rights to the stand, former tenants still behave as if the family controlled the property. Joyce described how they were able to prevent shacks being erected on the stand.

> *"We were fortunate because when someone wanted to build, the person who stays by that space came and told us and we told them not to build."*

Joyce is planning to buy back the stand from the local council. However, there are tensions between the Tshabalalas and some residents in the yard who do not relish the prospect of having to pay rent to a new landlord. Patrick was indignant about this, saying,

> *"Some of the people talk about the Freedom Charter and don't know basic economics. You can't stay on someone's stand and not pay rent or electricity. You have to agree a flat rate. Someone has to pay for services, although the rent may have been too high [in the past]."*

This situation also highlighted the resentment the Tshabalalas had felt at losing their property rights, and exposed underlying tensions that had long existed between them and some of their tenants. Joyce explained with some frustration,

> *"When the council took over the properties, the tenants told us we are equal. There are no standholders. They started neglecting the yard. You can't tell them anything. It's not your property...We thought we were like a family...As children we played with them. Now we can buy the properties back they pretend to be nice."*

About half the residents of the yard are opposed to the Tshabalalas buying back the stand. There is presently a dispute between Joyce, some of the residents, and the council, which has told the residents that they can stay for five years before they have to find somewhere else to live. Some of the former tenants stress that the rent charged by Tshabalala was much lower than the rent charged by the local authority after the property was expropriated. However, the reluctance of others to having a

landlord could stem from the fact that they have been boycotting rent to the council since 1989, and were still boycotting when I interviewed them in July 1991, despite ACO's signing of the Alexandra Accord which had ended the official boycott[6].

There has been a fledgling yard committee in the yard since 1990, headed by four "reps", one of whom is Joyce's younger sister. The committee coexists smoothly with the paternalism of the Tshabalalas, and the chairperson of the committee is in favour of Joyce buying back the stand. This easy coexistence is probably due to the fact that the committee plays a very minor role in the yard. Few of the people I spoke to were involved, and several did not even know about the committee's existence. Patrick, like many returned exiles, is hostile towards ACO, since he blames the civic for the influx of shack-dwellers in Alexandra. In fact, the committee does not appear to have a strong link to ACO, and its main function is dispute resolution. Other functions usually associated with yard committees, such as the allocation of space, are fulfilled by the Tshabalalas.

Despite divisions over the sale of the property, there is a strong sense among its residents that the yard is a community. When it was sub-divided by the council, people ignored the fence dividing the yard into two and refused to use the new numbering system introduced by the council. Ethnic differences are only incidental to the social relationships in the yard, which are defined by what was a landlord-tenant nexus, aspects of which still continue. It is not a community of equals. Despite the attempts by some residents to use the expropriation of property rights to assert a principle of equality in the yard, the Tshabalalas have a clearly paternalistic relationship with many of their former tenants. If they succeed in buying back the property this relationship will be formalised once again.

The organisation of yard committees in yards where landlord-tenant relationships continue informally, despite the absence of formal property rights, therefore creates a situation that is full of contradictions. ACO yard committees are premised on the basis of unity and equality, and provide mechanisms to solve or avoid potential disputes. On the other hand, the unequal power relationship which previously existed between landlords and tenants also provided mechanisms for solving disputes. The introduction of a yard committee combines both these models of social relationships in the yard. In the above case study, members of the former landlord's family have largely incorporated the idea of a yard committee into their understanding of social relations in the yard, and the participants in the yard committee have likewise adjusted ACO's model to accommodate landlord-tenant continuities, leaving those who oppose the reintroduction of a

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[6]The Alexandra Accord was an agreement on rent, services and the development of housing in Alexandra. It was signed in February 1991 by ACO, the Transvaal Provincial Administration, the Alexandra town council and the councils of neighbouring Randburg and Sandton.

landlord marginalised. The activities of the yard committee remain limited, precisely because it co-exists with an alternative model of the yard community. The result is that the yard is not a political unit, and while it could be described as a social unit, it is different from that envisaged by ACO.

This example describes a situation where continuities in the way people perceive the social relationships in their yards have served to undermine ACO's strategy of organising yard committees. However, there are many yards where such continuities have instead strengthened ACO organisation. These include yards where the landlord moved away, but where former tenants still perceive themselves as a close-knit community.

While Tshabalala appears to have been a fairly popular landlord, this was often not the case. The idealised image of paternalism, in which the yard is seen as a family with the landlord as father, was often contradicted by the harsh reality of material inequality and high rents, which meant that this model of social reality could be criticised in its own terms. The idea that a yard was like a family, where authority is accompanied by respect and is conferred by consent, often appeared to fit more closely with the egalitarian yard committee model than with an exploitative landlord-tenant relationship.

Many landlords moved away after their properties were sold or expropriated, and the subsequent transformation from one person's control to communal control over space was therefore relatively simple, since the categorisation of the yard as a social unit remained unchanged, and the authority to maintain social order was merely transferred from a landlord to an elected committee. I spent much of my time in one of these yards, which has had a successful yard committee since 1986. I looked at how it continued to function as both a social and political unit during a period which has brought significant demographic and political changes to the area.

Case study 2: ACO's ideal yard.

This large yard consists of a house, two rows of terraced rooms and over 50 shacks, with a central open space. Although it was subdivided and renumbered by the council, residents took down the fence and use the old numbering system. It used to be owned by a landlord who lived two streets away, until it was expropriated by the local authority in the mid 1980s. Today, virtually all the residents of formal housing in the yard are former tenants or the descendants of tenants of the old landlord, while the shack-dwellers are much more recent arrivals.

Several of the original tenants are male migrant workers, mostly from Transkei, who have lived in rooms in the yard for up to thirty years while maintaining families in the countryside. Since the late 1980s, many of their younger relatives have moved into the yard with their own families and have built shacks. Some of these came directly from the rural areas, while others were already living in Alexandra and were forced to flee their homes

after violence erupted in 1991. The other former tenants in the yard are families, often extended, that have been in Alexandra for generations. One of these is the multi-generational Kekana family.

> Abel Kekana was born on a farm in the western Transvaal in 1919, and came to Alexandra in 1939, shortly before joining the allied forces in World War Two. He was married in Alexandra, and moved to the yard in 1971 because his Alexandra-born wife was related to the landlord. Today he lives with his wife, two of their children and a grandchild. In 1970, one of the Kekana daughters married Matthew Mkhize, who came to Johannesburg from Natal in 1957. In 1972 the couple moved to the yard, and live with their six children in a room opposite the Kekanas.

Most of the shacks in the yard are occupied by young couples (the average age of those interviewed was 31) and young children, since school-age children are sent to relatives in the rural areas. Almost 90% of those interviewed had moved into the yard since 1990, although many of the men had been living elsewhere in Alexandra during the 1980s or earlier, before their wives joined them.

The yard has had an active and well organised committee since 1986. It was originally formed by three 'reps', who are still on the committee, which is chaired by Matthew Mkhize. The committee performs many functions, in which political and social dynamics are closely interwoven. One of these is the allocation of space in the yard, which is formally governed by the yard committee. In this process, political orientation, kinship, social ties, and to a lesser degree ethnicity all play a role in determining the suitability of new residents.

On one level, the allocation of space is a purely political process. Some residents consulted external ACO structures before being allowed to move in. This process is illustrated by the case of Alfred, a shack-dweller who has lived in the yard since 1990.

> Alfred came to Alexandra from Venda in 1969, and stayed with his mother's sister in 14th Avenue. He was joined by his wife in 1982, and in 1989 decided that he needed more space. He first went to the local council, but they advised him to go to ACO. At the ACO office, he was sent to the Vincent Tshabalala area committee, which covers 14th Avenue. Alfred attended a meeting of the area committee, where he was told that there was no space in which to build. Alfred's next step was to attend a meeting of the Lusaka 'area committee'[7], which was also attended by yard representatives. At that meeting, Alfred was allocated

[7] This meeting was chaired by David Shabangu, who describes himself as the chair of Lusaka. In fact, Lusaka does not have an organised area committee, and Shabangu's influence covered a much smaller part of the area.

space in the yard.

Since the outbreak of violence in March 1991, political orientation has become an increasingly important determinant of suitability. An example of this is the case of Mandisa Vayeke, an ANC marshal who built a shack in the yard in July 1991.

> Mandisa is from Transkei, and has lived in Alexandra since 1989. Through her ANC activities she knew Matthew Mkhize and asked him if she could move into the yard. One of the yard residents described what happened:
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> *"Mkhize told the reps, who went house to house and told us there's a meeting on Saturday at 9.00...Everyone went... Mkhize told us there is a person who wants to build a shack here. The people admitted this girl to the yard. People asked where she's from; why she moved; what kind of person she is. He said Mandisa is a good girl and a member of ANC. She came here because there were enemies where she was staying. It's because she was the only Xhosa."*

From this it is clear that perceptions about the ethnic nature of the ANC/Inkatha conflict also played a role in the allocation of space. However, the yard is ethnically mixed, and the allocation of space is not ethnically exclusive. A large proportion of the shack-dwellers are Xhosa-speaking, but this is mainly due to the influence of kinship and social ties. As one of the former tenants explained,

> *"If someone asks for space to build here, first they [the yard committee] check out if he's good to live here and where he's from. Some people look for space because they have relatives around, so they can ask the relatives if he's good."*

While people went through a nominally political process to gain permission to build, and were necessarily ANC supporters, a significant number were related to people already living in the yard, and many more had 'homeboy' connections to yard residents. For example, Mandisa already knew many of the shack-dwellers in the yard, since she is from the same area of Transkei as them.

There are a number of other functions of the yard committee which similarly combine political and social dynamics. Social order is maintained through the mediation of disputes, usually by Matthew Mkhize. These include domestic quarrels, arguments over money, sexual infidelities and anti-social behaviour or fights arising from drunkenness. Since Mkhize is at work during the day, a time when many women are at home, there is a separate women's committee which deals specifically with disputes amongst women. If the yard committee is unable to resolve a dispute, it is referred to the ACO structure immediately above the yard, and in theory can continue to be referred to higher structures until it

reaches ACO leadership.[8] Another function of the yard committee is defence. After an Inkatha attack on the area, a yard meeting was held to discuss how to defend the area, and subsequently groups of men were organised into night watches.

There are also aspects of life in the yard which, distinct from overtly political structures, clearly mark out the yard as a community of co-resident and cooperating people. The yard has a burial society, whose members pay R15 a month into the society's bank account, contribute extra amounts when someone dies and attend funerals. While the society draws its membership exclusively from the yard, not all segments of yard society belong to it. It includes most of the people living in formal housing, but none of the shack-dwellers. The shack-dwellers' profile, as younger, poorer and more recently arrived than their house-dwelling counterparts may explain this.

There are practices, however, which cross-cut the divisions between residents of shacks and formal housing. For example, in February 1992 virtually everyone in the yard participated in a night vigil and ancestor ritual held by Mrs Kekana. People in shacks and houses alike also consult the yard's resident sangoma, who is valued for his powerful muti which protects the yard from violence. Patterns of social drinking also serve to transcend intra-yard divisions. Yard residents, many of whom are unemployed, spend much of their time in the three shebeens in the yard. Two of these border the open space in the middle of the yard, an area which is the focus of social activity. People are usually to be found sitting around on benches and chatting, or doing their washing while their children play. Occasionally someone will buy a bucket of umqombothi[9], which will be passed around for all to share, or they will persuade the owner of the shebeen to give them bottled beer on credit. People who try to drink alone are loudly berated for being "crooks", until they relent and share their drink.

Alexandra has a notoriously high crime rate, but none of the disputes mediated by the yard committee while I was there were about crime, unlike the 'people's court' had which existed previously in the street[10], and which had often dealt with cases of theft. Although several of the yard residents are involved in criminal activities, they are tolerated as long as they do not target people in the yard - an offence which would be regarded as seriously anti-social. The sanction against this is illustrated by the case of a man known as 'Tokolosh', a habitual

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[8]In reality, problematic disputes are referred to David Shabangu, chair of the Lusaka 'area committee', who is reluctant to engage the assistance of higher authorities.

[9]Home-brewed maize beer.

[10]In 1986, youth activists ran a people's court in the same street as this yard, and dealt with cases from all over Lusaka.

drinker of mbamba[11] who is mentally disturbed and has gangrenous sores on his legs and feet, which he has been told should be amputated. Although his physical condition is clearly related to his drinking, people say that he became sick after walking on muti that was put outside his door to counteract his habit of stealing from people in the yard. The yard thus comprises a moral community within which thieving and crime are not tolerated. This community transcends the formal/informal housing divide.

This yard is very clearly, then, both a social and political unit, and fits perfectly with ACO's conception of a yard. People frequently stressed that they were "united" and spoke about their "brothers" in the yard. Although the local council still has the authority to allocate formal housing, the space in the yard is in other respects controlled by the residents. It is a political territory[12], and at the same time a conceptual spatial category which underpins a pattern of social relationships, often described in the idiom of kinship. In addition, there are real ties of kinship and affinity in the yard, which is perceived as an extension of people's homes.

The yard committee provides a way for people to understand and organise their lives in the yard. The tenants had little social attachment to the landlord, who had never lived in the yard. When a committee was first introduced in 1986, it made perfect sense for people to organise themselves into a structure based on an ideology of equality, which provided mechanisms for social order, since their common experience of being tenants had already established these ideas in principle. Later, when shack-dwellers moved into the yard, they found a structure and model of social relations in which they were easily accommodated. The result is that the yard is today a bounded unit in which the political is inextricable from the social.

However, an important clarification needs to be made here. While the physical space of the yard provides a framework for people to talk about and understand social relations, it does not determine these social relations. After the outbreak of violence in 1991, there followed a process of redrawing and accentuating the boundaries of social inclusiveness in the face of a common

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[11]Mbamba is a highly alcoholic concoction, also known as Barberton. Can Themba wrote, "Barberton is a poison made in such a way as to give a quick kick. It is made of bread, yeast and sugar. Its main characteristic is that it is 'raw' (swiftly prepared) liquor. One of its commonest effects is upon the skin which it peels off and sallows. People get red lips and purulent black pimples on the face. But it has made those who have drunk it for a long time raging madmen, especially in fights." [Themba, 1985:73]. Mbamba is brewed in one of the shebeens in the yard, where it is a popular drink among the very poor and unemployed, despite its often dire consequences.

[12]The locus of an ACO yard committee, and therefore "the object of a political bond" [Thornton, 1990:10].

enemy. Political affiliation was central to this definition. A couple of Zulu-speaking shack-dwellers living in the yard were rejected by the community, and accused of being Inkatha supporters. One fled to the Madala hostel while the second was killed. While they may or may not have been Inkatha supporters, Inkatha functioned here as a label to attach to people who were seen as social outsiders, despite living in the yard.[13]

This process also drew in a few people living in a shack settlement opposite the yard who, since the violence began, have effectively become members of the yard community. The settlement, known as 'Mozambique', is inhabited mainly by young Mozambican men, but the people who were drawn into the yard community are South Africans, who have more in common socially and politically with the yard community than with the Mozambican shack-dwellers in the settlement where they live. The outbreak of violence provided the catalyst for these people to be formally drawn into the yard committee, since the shack settlement had no equivalent structure.

The conceptualisation of the yard as a social and political unit has, then, extended beyond the physical space of the yard itself. As one resident put it, "This yard committee takes them as if they stayed this side". One effect of this is that the yard is known not only as the best organised yard in the area, but its influence has spread such that Mkhize is seen by many people living nearby as the chair of a street committee, even though ACO officially has no such structure.

2. DOMESTIC AND PUBLIC SPACE

The above case studies suggest that a prerequisite for strong organisation in a particular yard is that its residents perceive it as both a social and political unit. However, many yards which could be characterised as social units have no political function. While historical continuities provide one level of explanation for this phenomenon, this raises further questions about the conceptualisation of yards as social, political and spatial categories. A yard is the locus of several households, which may act as a social unit of co-resident and cooperating people, and may take on a political function linking the yard to broader civic organisation which is seen to encompass the whole township. To understand how these three levels of categorisation are combined or separated, we need to investigate the categories of household, yard and township in relation to conventionally opposed domains of domesticity and politics.

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[13]It is important to note here that people did not reject these men simply because they were Zulu. Zulu-speakers such as Matthew Mkhize and several others have never been suspected of being disloyal.

Conventional dichotomies

The issue of domestic and public domains, both symbolic and sociological, has been extensively discussed by authors examining the status of women. The apparent universality of female subordination was explained by arguing that women are associated with the domestic sphere, a devalued and non-political domain, while men are associated with the more prestigious public, political sphere [Rosaldo, 1974].

In this dichotomy, domestic is largely conflated with household: either "the localized family unit" [Sanday, 1974:190] or "those minimal institutions and modes of activity that are organized immediately around one or more mothers and their children" [Rosaldo, 1974:23]. This is seen as a fundamentally non-political category, in the same way that Sahlins' 'domestic mode of production' describes household economies based on shared meanings and culturally ascribed statuses; effectively a 'moral economy' and, as Wilk describes it, a 'black box' - a unit rather than a focus of analysis [Cheal, 1989; Wilk, 1989].

In contrast, the public domain has been described as 'society': "activities that link, rank, organize, or subsume" domestic units. In other words, the public domain is a 'political economy' that involves the "control of persons or control of things" through negotiation and struggle [Rosaldo, 1974:23; Sanday, 1974:190; Cheal, 1989]. On a symbolic level, the public level is synonymous with "universalistic systems of order, meaning, and commitment" [Rosaldo, 1974:24].

The universality of this dichotomy has since been questioned, since the social and organisational form of the domestic unit varies in different societies. More importantly, the association of women with a devalued domestic sphere has been shown to be intrinsically related to a nature/culture dichotomy, and is culturally specific to 'Western' society. In other words, too many variables are subsumed in one all-encompassing dichotomy [Tiffany, 1978; Moore, 1988; Strathern, 1984; Poewe, 1981].

Despite this, the distinction between a non-political domestic 'moral economy' and a public 'political economy' is both persuasive and pervasive in social theory. One response to this has been to emphasise that power can be informal as well as authoritative; that politics need not be associated only with formal office and institutions, but can also refer to informal power relations within the domestic sphere [Collier, 1974; Tiffany, 1978; Rogers, 1978]. In some contexts, the significance of domestic power relations may arguably be greater than the public political economy. Peasant societies in particular are often described as centred around the domestic group, which is a social, economic and political unit [Rogers, 1978:148]. From a different perspective, Cheal has argued that in the context of socio-economic change, households may well combine 'moral' and 'political' models, which provide "contrasting sets of rules and resources, that are selectively drawn upon by social actors to achieve their purposes at hand, under conditions where no single

strategy provides a permanent best solution" [Cheal, 1989:19]. In order to understand how these arguments can illuminate the different statuses of Alexandra yards, I begin by examining the categories of household and domesticity.

Household and domesticity

There are many different kinds of residential arrangements in Alexandra. A high level of fluidity, and continued influx into the township, makes it difficult to define household membership without presenting a misleadingly static picture. Murray, writing about Lesotho, defines a de jure household as "the unit of economic viability", tangibly manifested as a "partially co-residential group" whose de facto membership changes developmentally over time [Murray, 1981:48]. Spiegel has challenged the analytical value of this distinction, pointing to changes in de jure household membership in rural labour-sending areas [Spiegel, 1986; 1987]. However, both Murray and Spiegel concur that labour migrants tend to remain members of their rural households, to which they send remittances.

Today's complex patterns of urbanisation, however, resist conventional typologies and periodisation [Mabin, 1991]. People living in South African cities pursue a variety of strategies regarding rural-urban links and urban household arrangements, and may not know themselves what decisions they are going to take in an unknown future. Whether one looks at co-residence and commensality, at household as a sphere of economic distribution and consumption, or at emic notions of household membership, de jure household membership in Alexandra is fluid. Patterns of co-residence and economic support are constantly changing. Nevertheless, domestic arrangements do form patterns which demonstrate significant differences in the way people organise their households.[14]

A simple typology of households in Lusaka would not only present a distorted and static picture, but would also gloss over the different characters and histories of specific settlements. Household typologies also obscure the linkages between households, a factor which Spiegel has suggested may be more analytically useful than household in a context of fluidity [Spiegel, 1986].

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[14]Since I am focusing on ideas around domestic space in Alexandra, the definition of household used here is that of at least partial co-residence and commensality. Economic support is a much more problematic factor, since there is a high level of unemployment in the area, and patterns of dependence and support are subject to the vagaries of the labour market. Although some people sometimes remit wages to rural relatives, this does not preclude them from being members of separate urban households. While I recognise that some people are members of rural households, these are not included in the analysis here, which refers to residential arrangements in Alexandra alone.

An examination of household in conjunction with networks of kinship, affinity and other close social relationships, in specific yards, begins to suggest that domestic space extends beyond households, and that we should focus on 'domesticity' rather than on a static notion of household. An analysis of this phenomenon provides some pointers to understanding the successes and failures of ACO strategy in the area.

Many yard-based households in fact form extended family units with other households. Although these households may reside in separate dwellings, there is often cooperation, commensality, joint decision-making and residential fluidity between them. In these cases, the use of household as a unit of analysis obscures more than it reveals. The family or domestic group may be made up of several households, and the domestic domain is not confined to a built dwelling. This dispersion of domesticity has been found in several other contexts. For example, Ross's study of an informal settlement in the Western Cape describes domestic relations diffused throughout the settlement [Ross, 1993]. This phenomenon has also been noted in America, where poor urban Black communities construct domestic networks. Thus,

> "the basis of familial structure and cooperation is not the nuclear family...but an extended cluster of kinsmen related chiefly through children but also through marriage and friendship, who align to provide domestic functions. This cluster, or domestic network, is diffused over several kin-based households, and fluctuations in individual household composition do not significantly affect cooperative arrangements" [Stack, 1974:114].

While Stack notes that the members of this group may live near each other or co-reside [Ibid:113], the domestic network is not primarily a spatial category. In Alexandra, however, the locus of domesticity is often the yard - a clearly demarcated spatial category. This is similar to the peasant '<u>domus</u>' in medieval France, which comprised a domestic cluster that went beyond the extended family, and was defined by and "embodied in the permanence of a house and in the daily life of a group co-resident under the same roof" [Ladourie, 1980:24]. The boundaries of Alexandra yards often similarly define domestic domains over time, despite changes in the number of households and their membership, so that, like the '<u>domus</u>', the yard is both a spatial and moral entity, the significance of which is greater than the sum of its inhabitants [Ibid:30].

One example of this is the yard inhabited solely by one extended family, referred to earlier. This yard has been inhabited by six generations of the Botha family since the 1920s. During the last seventy years there have been changes in family composition, in the number of households and in the number of buildings in the yard. However, it still remains the Botha family yard, headed by its widowed matriarch. Although there are a number of different households in different houses, the boundaries between them are porous and the yard as a whole is the family home. Fenced, with one access gate, and clearly differentiated from the public path

that runs alongside, the yard could be described as a domestic domain.

Most yards are inhabited by several different families, but even in these yards, ties of kinship, affinity and neighbourliness may extend many of the features of domesticity beyond individual households or families.

In the Tshabalala yard, the three families referred to earlier - the Tshabalalas, the Mokoenas and the Langas - between them include at least eight households in seven different dwellings. Other families are similarly dispersed in different buildings in the yard. This pattern is constantly changing as the families change their membership over time, and many family members have moved out of the yard. However, in this example, the yard as a whole is described using the idiom of kinship; as one big family headed by the Tshabalalas. The power of the Tshabalalas to control the space in the yard is not presented in political terms, but as a process of authoritative allocation based on shared understandings. Some former tenants contest this model, and see the landlord-tenant relationship in political terms, as a process of struggle to prevent the Tshabalalas from buying back the stand. However, their concerns have not been taken up by the yard committee, which has been incorporated into the paternalistic and familistic model of social relations in the yard.

In other words, while there is clearly an imbalance of power in the yard, resulting in negotiation and struggle, this is not manifested in institutions or office and is largely informal. Thus it is not explicitly recognised as political. While households and families are differentiated, the yard as a whole is perceived in broadly domestic terms.

The diffusion of domesticity within a yard is even more marked in the second case study, but in this case the yard is also a political category. The following discussion examines this apparently contradictory situation.

ACO's ideal yard: domestic and political?

Previously, I showed that many of the households in this yard are connected through ties of kinship and affinity which cross-cut the distinction between formal and informal housing. In addition to this, people have 'homeboy' links as well as bonds of friendship and neighbourliness which have developed over the years, particularly among former tenants.

Many features of domesticity are diffused within the yard. While the yard is clearly demarcated from the world beyond it, there is no hard and fast sub-division of household space from the space beyond the household. Rather, certain activities are categorised as more private, and thus more firmly grounded within people's separate dwellings than other activities. One the one hand, sleeping and sex are defined as most appropriately situated within the dwelling, a space into which the yard community is

hesitant to intervene, as demonstrated by the yard committee's reluctance to mediate marital disputes unless they threaten the stability of the yard. On the other hand, activities such as child-care, commensality and washing clothes may take place within or beyond the dwelling. Even private, and quintessentially domestic activities such as washing oneself and using the toilet are not completely private, since the yard has only a few communal toilets and taps.

The narrow spaces between shacks are more private than the open space in the middle of the yard, and are often the venue for private conversations or people who simply want to be alone. The space between the two rows of terraced rooms is where yard meetings are held. This space is freely accessed by residents of the yard, but is strategically hidden from the view of the street and passing police patrols. The open space in the middle of the yard leads directly onto the street, and is the most public part of the yard. However, even this is not completely public, and is symbolically bounded by a small fence which separates the street from the yard.

In other words, space in the yard is categorised in terms of degrees of privacy or domesticity, which is not clearly distinct from the semi-public or political domain of the yard committee. Rather, these categories merge and are mutually constitutive.

Is there any contradiction in space which is both domestic and political? I argued previously that the yard population is a moral community, embodying shared values and understandings. This is the model which was enunciated most clearly by residents of the yard, who frequently stressed their unity. The role of Matthew Mkhize, as chair of the yard committee, on one level supports this perspective. He is accorded authority and respect, and speaks on behalf of the yard. Cheal has shown how this type of arrangement is conventionally described as a moral economy, which "presumes the existence of consensus and cooperation" [Cheal, 1989:18]. However, the main function of the yard committee is dispute resolution, which explicitly negotiates people's opposing interests. This is arguably characteristic of a political economy model of social relations, which "assumes that dissensus and division are to be expected" [Ibid].

This suggests a combination of a moral and a political economy. The reason there is no contradiction is due to the nature of political power in the yard. Since the yard committee is democratically elected, it is understood as being representative of all the people in the yard and directly accountable to them. Political power therefore rests on a moral base. There are presumed to be no 'political' divisions in the yard; an understanding emphasised by people's common affiliation to the ANC. Thus, while the yard committee is a formal political institution which enables the yard community to participate in broader political processes, disputes and opposing interests within the yard are not seen as political activity.

This case study would appear to contradict the conventional dichotomy between the domestic/private and political/public domains. While there is an emic distinction between the yard as a moral community and political activity that takes place in broader (public, township) political structures, the yard committee is nevertheless recognised as a political structure formed by the yard community and functioning primarily within the yard. However, political power is embedded within the moral community; perhaps a true manifestation of 'people's power'.

But what of the other central component of the public/private dichotomy? Where does gender fit in? Does the embeddedness of the political domain within a sphere which overlaps with domesticity enable women to participate in politics in a manner which women have in most contexts been unable to do? Civic activists often claim this is the case, and point to the predominance of women in civic structures. However, there are still very few women at a leadership level. The following discussion examines the political role of women in this same yard.

Women, Politics and Power

There seems to be a high level of political participation among women in the yard. Although the founding members of the yard committee are all men, the treasurer of the committee is today a woman, and other women also participate in the committee. Both men and women attend general yard meetings at weekends. Women in the yard also have their own committee, which mediates disputes between women, particularly during the week when male committee members are absent from the yard.

If women are unable to resolve a dispute among themselves, they refer it to the yard committee, which has more authority than the women's committee. In practice, this usually means referring the matter to Matthew Mkhize, whose position as chair of the committee is in many ways analogous to that of a household head.

One might argue that ascribing a higher degree of authority to the more inclusive yard committee does not imply that women have less authority than men. However, the men also have an exclusively male grouping, which is effectively beyond the authority of the yard committee, and which deals with defence. The issue of violence was raised only once at a general yard meeting, and the men later decided to organise defence. Women are excluded from any involvement in this activity, and there are no report-backs to general yard meetings. This is probably not surprising, since warfare is quintessentially political and public, and usually associated with men [Sanday, 1974]. In the context of the yard, this suggests that men as a group have more formal political authority than women.

Another arena of differential access to authority is the relationship between spouses or lovers, a domain defined in the yard as private. An examination of specific marital disputes suggests that women are not only challenging their husbands' authority, but also explicitly challenging the categorisation of

these disputes as private. This results in a process of struggle, of informal but nevertheless political competition within the yard.

During the 1980s, many women who were beaten or otherwise badly treated by their husbands reported this to people's courts. If the youths who ran the courts found the husband 'guilty', he would be punished, often severely. Not surprisingly, the phenomenon of youths flogging adult men for mistreating their wives was not popular among men, who felt it violated moral values.

Since people's courts have been disbanded, dispute resolution is primarily a function of yard committees; structures in which youth activists play no institutional role. Yard committees today are generally reluctant to intervene in marital disputes. Several examples from the previous case study illustrate the underlying processes.

Dispute 1

A woman living in a shack in the yard was being repeatedly beaten by her common-law husband. Eventually she reported the matter to the yard committee, who told the man to stop beating her. Months later, she was still being beaten. When she showed me her bruises in the presence of a man who played an active role in the yard committee, he responded by saying that she was lying, since the committee had told her husband to stop months before.

By bringing the matter to the attention of the yard committee, this woman was making a statement about the nature of marital disputes. She made it clear that husbands and wives can have opposing interests, requiring intervention in the political domain of the yard committee. The committee, whose purpose is largely to ensure that the yard remains a unified moral community, responded in a way that was calculated to restore stability - to reassure the woman that her problems were being taken seriously, without practically intervening in a way which would antagonise her husband. Women may, however, force their disputes into the political domain, as the following example shows.

Dispute 2

Late one night, Nomvula came back from the shebeen to find her husband Thami in bed with another woman. Nomvula stood in the yard and shouted so that everyone woke up and saw the guilty lovers coming out of their shack together. Nomvula then demanded that the yard committee convene that night to deal with her husband. In the end, the committee was saved the difficulty of having to mediate a dispute between a husband and wife. Instead, they mediated between Thami and his lover's common-law husband. Thami was initially ordered to pay compensation to the other man, but the latter rejected this, arguing that the payment would

effectively be lobolo, and he could lose his common-law wife altogether. The dispute could not be resolved by the committee, who referred it to David Shabangu, the chairperson of Lusaka.

In this example, a woman succeeded in bringing a marital dispute into the political domain, but this was then transformed into a dispute between two men, during which the interests of the women were not addressed. Although it might appear that men can treat their wives however they wish without public censure, there is a third example in which the yard community did intervene.

Dispute 3

Dudu used to stay with her sister's family in a shack in the yard, but began spending much of her time with her boyfriend on 14th Avenue. When he started beating her, Dudu turned to local comrades for help, but as she explained, "they think because love is involved they mustn't interfere". Dudu then had a baby, and her boyfriend denied paternity. He accused her of sleeping with other men, the beatings got worse, and he refused to support the child. Dudu sought refuge in the yard, and when her boyfriend started threatening her, he was himself beaten up by Dudu's "brothers": ie men in the yard.

In this example, direct intervention in a marital dispute did not threaten yard unity, since Dudu's boyfriend was not resident in the yard. In the previous examples, however, intervention would be perceived as endangering the moral community, by creating conflict between men, while marital disputes between men and women are private and therefore can be tolerated. The yard here could be compared to a patrilocal extended family, where women's attempts to achieve power are seen to threaten the moral ties between kin and affines [Collier, 1974:91]. Thus,

> "In a world where men gain political power by having a large and cohesive body of co-resident kin, young women gain power by breaking up domestic units. Men work to bind lineage mates together; women work to tear them apart." [Ibid:92]

I previously showed how the power and authority of the yard committee in this yard, and in particular Matthew Mkhize, has extended beyond the yard, so that Mkhize is popularly perceived as the leader of a street committee. This is due to the fact that the yard has a large number of people that are well-organised into a united body. Women's attempts to achieve power are seen as disruptive and threaten the power of the yard community as a whole.

I would argue that this exclusion of marital disputes from formal political processes lies at the core of women's limited participation in political structures outside the yard. Many authors have argued that women are empowered when categories of public and private are weakly differentiated [Rosaldo, 1974;

Collier, 1974; Rogers, 1978]. This appears to be the case in organised yards in Alexandra. Thus, women are able to participate politically in the yard because of the way in which the political domain has been brought into a sphere of activity which overlaps with the domestic domain. But the same process effectively excludes women from fully participating as political actors in the wholly public domain of the township or the civic. Since the yard committee is elected by and accountable to the yard population, political power in the yard is constituted by a 'moral community'. Within this moral community, the status of women is ascribed and defined by social norms and values. The attempts by some women to achieve power are not recognised as political, and these women are instead viewed as disruptive.

In other words, while the political domain has been partially brought into the domestic domain, the domestic has also been brought into the political, and women are constrained from fully becoming formally recognised political actors. In conclusion, it would seem that the conventional dichotomy associating women with domesticity and men with politics, although simplifying a complex situation, still has some validity.

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