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New subjectivities: Aspiration, prosperity and the new middle class

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ABSTRACT

Kenya and South Africa are two settings in which the upwardly-aspiring ‘new middle class’ has been particularly noted: its members desire to transcend the hierarchies and inequalities that once kept some from achieving prosperity. Based on research in South Africa, this article goes beyond a focus on narrowly economic aspects of this class to explore the role of the Pentecostal or neo-charismatic churches in articulating and (re)shaping its subjective values and orientations. Alongside expectations of abundant wealth, these churches affirm the positive qualities that work can endow, a capitalist-style interest in property investment, an inculcation of rational subdivision and allocation of one’s income to diverse ends, and a redistributive approach to economic arrangements. At the same time, church membership allows for self-reflection and critical citizenship: congregants have a nuanced self-awareness of the way in which their new status separates them from those with fewer privileges and less access to the benefits of modernity, and are able to deliberate reflexively about the character of these privileges.

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Across much of Africa, and indeed across the Global South, the new middle class is said to be on the rise (Cohen 2004; Fuller & Narasimhan 2014; Neri 2012; Zhang 2008), even as in EuroAmerica – paradoxically – its older counterpart is said to be declining (Newman 1999; Sassen 2014). Some are sceptical about its reported growth in these settings, questioning the World Bank’s inclusion of those earning US\$1 to US\$2 a day and suggesting that these new delineations are motivated solely by the profits that arise from new forms of financial inclusion (Cheeseman 2015; Spronk 2014); or claiming that the putative growth of this class can be explained by the extension of consumer credit to those formerly denied it (De Oliveira 2012; James 2015; Yaccoub 2011).

Kenya and South Africa are two settings in which the emergence of this ‘new class’ has been particularly noted – but also debated and even disputed (Cheeseman 2015; Scharrer, O’Kane & Kroeker 2018; Southall 2016). Critics have posited, for the Kenyan case, that its precarious character may leave members vulnerable to downward mobility (Kroeker 2018) and will likely preclude their engaging in more serious and public-minded activities

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which might make them the bedrock of political stability in newly-stabilising democracies (Cheeseman 2015). But others point out, for the South African one, that to focus only on the precarious character of this class can obscure its important social and political roles: roles embodying inventively novel self-identifications – and ‘transformative social potentials’ (Nuttall 2004; Mbembe 2004) – which may be predicated on the confidence that comes with new patterns of aspiration, consumption, work and education (Chevalier 2015; Mercer 2014; O’Dougherty 2002; Spronk 2014). (The recent ‘Feesmustfall’ movement calling for an end to student debt in South Africa shows that being indebted may, in turn, empower a new generation of activists.)

However shaky the basis of this putative class, upward mobility and inclusivity is experienced in vivid ways: a study in Soweto showed that ‘everyone is now’ – or considers herself now to be – ‘middle class’ (Phadi & Ceruti 2011). Or, at least, many are now engaged in that upward identification that Ivor Chipkin (2013), for South Africa, calls ‘middle classing’, or that Rachel Spronk, for Kenya (2014), typifies as involving the new subjectivities of ‘middle classness’. Underpinning this is a desire to transcend the hierarchies and inequalities that once kept some from achieving prosperity (James 2015; Servet & Saiag 2013). It is also strongly linked to the process of democratisation. While the mission-educated elite in South Africa was of long standing, the ranks of its more recent incarnation, the new black middle class, were massively swelled after the dawning of democracy in 1994, when many of the previously disenfranchised were included in an expanding civil service, became employees in state-owned enterprises, or – in fewer cases – enjoyed the benefits of public procurement tenders offered in the name of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) or affirmative action (Southall 2012 & 2016). The growth of this class, whose members hail from a variety of regions and ethnic backgrounds, has thus been closely tied to the fact of state employment and support, particularly during the years of the Mbeki government when there was an explicit attempt to foster that growth (Hart 2005; Iheduru 2004; James 2015: 3; Krige 2009; Southall 2016: 47, 88 & 128). Its members’ reliance on state patronage has been underplayed by the strong and much-repeated neoliberal mantra that it is people’s responsibility to earn a living through their own individual initiative and enterprise (Krige 2012; Marais 2011: 223) and become productive members of society without relying on connections or clientelist patronage. In Kenya, this story was somewhat echoed, with a mission-educated elite in colonial times giving way, in the post-colonial period, to a new middle class which has grown with similar rapidity.¹ But the Kenyan version of state patronage differs from the South African one: while government employees have been similarly implicated in schemes of enrichment related to government tenders (Wrong 2010: 78, 85–6 & 171), chains of clientelism have been closely tied to ethnic background, with each successive regime doling out state sector jobs to those from the same area/linguistic group (Wrong 2010: 52, 56, 116 & 126), and with these ties often linked to pro- or anti-authoritarian political affiliations respectively (Cheeseman 2015: 655).²

Whatever the material underpinnings of this rapidly growing social stratum – whether it is self-sustaining, unduly reliant on the state for its survival, or inclined to borrow excessively from its own future to invest in the present (Peebles 2010: 226), or all three – analysis in both countries has often focused on narrowly economic aspects of its existence. In South Africa, some are anxious about the indebtedness and precarity of its members (Daniels 2004: 842, see James 2015: 3 & 11–2).³ In Kenya, analysts question whether its members are able to espouse middle-class political cosmopolitanism with sufficient

vigour as to behave 'civically' and hence prove themselves 'more resistant to divide and rule politics than the average citizen' (Cheeseman 2015: 655 & 648). This article is concerned with the way in which these questions of sustainability and engaged citizenship are linked to the 'modern self-perceptions' (Spronk 2014: 99) and 'hopes, desires and satisfactions' (Moore 2011: 27) of this emerging social stratum. One arena in which this new value orientation takes place, and in which the subjective orientations of the new middle class are expressed and reshaped, is via the Pentecostal or neo-charismatic churches.

'The key to the new middle classes is the Bible churches', I was told by an informant. Because hope and its cognate, aspiration, are both forward-looking modalities, and because they are linked both to collective notions of the good life and to individual agency, those embracing new modes of social being – and simultaneously seeking to distinguish themselves from those who are not doing so – will be particularly inclined to plant themselves within social milieus and communities that offer guidance on how to live a future-oriented life (Freeman 2012; Moore 2011: 138–8 & 145). My research revealed that there was more to this 'key' than vague-sounding and feel-good ideas about orienting oneself as an individual to a new world of expectation. Ideas about collective action, critical citizenship and financial acumen also came into play. These churches – in a setting of neo-liberal late modernity in which sovereign authorities have waned in significance and the market is predominant – offer new visions of citizenship and belonging beyond those normally facilitated by secular government-style bodies (Comaroff 2012). Thus, 'shifts in forms of subjectification' may be 'linked to emergent publics and new forms of sociality' (Moore 2011: 145), and may simultaneously enable self-aware recognition of how their new status has been facilitated.

The first-hand research for this article was conducted in South Africa, but in line with the topic of this thematic section I offer some comparative insights drawn from literature on Kenya. Although my fieldwork did not focus on neo-charismatic churches per se, my focus on aspiration and upward mobility led me inevitably to explore them. Given that the ranks of those who aspire to join the new middle class far outnumber those who have succeeded in doing so, my interview-based research and participant observation extended across a range of settings. Accompanying my research interlocutors – from medium- to well-paid employees of the government and of universities based in Johannesburg and Pretoria to university students and their low- to middle-income wage earners in the Sunview neighbourhood of Soweto – to the range of churches they attended, I spoke to congregants and pastors in all of these.⁴ They included the bigger and wealthier Grace Bible Church with its huge Soweto headquarters and parking lots filled with up-market cars, more modest churches with predominantly student and young professional members such as His People, which operated from the premises of a cinema, and the even smaller Living Word International Church whose members met in a marquee on a vacant Soweto lot.⁵ While these might appear so diverse as to have little in common, what their members shared was marking themselves off from the longer-established and sometimes more mainstream churches in which they had grown up and which their parents had attended. They all fell within the broad category of 'neo-charismatic' (Anderson 2004) – as distinct both from 'mainstream' mission churches and earlier evangelical-style churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission (James 1987; Thompson 1993, cited in Van Wyk 2014). What linked these diverse congregations was their consumption of CD sermons – readily and widely available for sale across the board – by each other's pastors (see Hirschkind 2006).

My interlocutor's claim that the Bible or neo-charismatic churches are 'the key to the middle classes' is echoed in the literature (Frahm-Arp 2010), and similar links between class aspiration and Pentecostal affiliation has been noted elsewhere in Africa besides the two settings under consideration here (for example Meyer 2004; Van de Kamp 2012). Anticipating the arrival of democracy and the upward mobility and prosperity that was intended to accompany it, policy-makers in South Africa started to explore the role of these churches in the 1990s and early 2000s. Researchers at the Centre for Development Enterprise (CDE), formerly the Urban Foundation, made efforts to explore the ethical or ideological features that might nurture this new class and give it succour. They took inspiration from the broadly Weberian approach of Peter Berger, who had seen such churches as enabling the development of rationally calculative modernity and economic growth, and also explored their potential as models of democratic organisation, accountability and political responsiveness (Bernstein 2008; Bernstein & Rule 2011: 124–5; Schlemmer 2008).⁶

For those seeking new forms of citizenship and identification, and looking to create separate redistributive worlds of taxation and welfare (Bähre 2011) while simultaneously inducing expectations, in line with neoliberalism and market-oriented excess, of miraculous return, these churches may provide a significant vehicle of values, orientations and dispositions – both implanting and expressing these. Although they appear to orient themselves away from the world of public political engagement and engagement with the state, as Jean Comaroff (2012) suggests, they also – as she similarly notes and commensurate with what the policy authors maintain (Bernstein & Rule 2011) – provide a language of engaged citizenship, framed consciously and in a self-reflexive manner, that is otherwise difficult to articulate in the wider domain.

Abundance, calculation and redistribution

Neo-charismatic churches have often appeared to be overly concerned with money. Accounts of their 'prosperity gospel' have drawn attention to the quasi-gift economy these churches instantiate by insisting that their congregants pay generously – that is, tithe – into church coffers (Zaloom 2016; Bähre 2011; Van Wyk 2014), in what has been called a 'miracle seeding' approach. Qualifying the quasi-magical focus of such accounts, others indicate that the money is used for this-worldly purposes. Tithing can be seen as underpinning the creation of an autonomous community with its own welfare system, and as inculcating notions of self-control, planning one's money, and saving (Bernstein & Rule 2011; Freeman 2012; Comaroff 2012; Zaloom 2016). Erik Bähre (2011) shows that these churches share something with social grants and insurances: much like the state, but also in its place, they collect and then facilitate the redistribution of income.

These churches also lay a strong emphasis on self-help while encompassing the needs of the less well-off. Echoing a theme common in my own interviews, a pastor in one Soweto church outlined the contributions made by his church to congregants' school and university fees, their outreach activities with those suffering from HIV/AIDS, and their help to the poor (Bernstein & Rule 2011). Less concrete, and more focused on the attempted shaping of subjectivities, several accounts draw attention to the fact that tithing – which might on the face of it seem irrationally exorbitant – goes along with a measured and planned approach to using money. It entails calculation. There

is, as Laurence Schlemmer of CDE noted, a kind of quasi-Calvinist pattern of deferred gratification: ‘... don’t spend all your money now. Rather, invest it wisely. Marshal your energies so that you can do things better and have more effect’. Tithing, he observed, acts as a ‘spiritual investment’ but also provides ‘... a model of saving in other respects’; a format for thinking about ‘putting money aside for larger purposes, for constructive purposes’ (2008: n.p.).

The insistence placed by such policy-makers on the churches’ financial rationality of course reflects their interest in finding evidence of a ‘Protestant ethic’ rather than of more magical/affective ones. It is borne out by statements from some informants, who were aware of the negative perceptions of these churches’ ‘miracle seeding’ aspect but chose instead to highlight values of thrift and budgeting. A young member of His People Church in Pretoria stressed this:

Good stewardship is key. One must tithe, one cannot just spend as one wants to. With mentoring programmes, older men mentor younger ones, giving them advice on how to use money, etc. There are lots of programmes relating to finance and the like.

Although I was unable to ascertain whether members routinely contributed a tenth of their income, a statement by another member suggests that their donations were substantial: he said one would need to be a professional and a high earner to afford the tithes, and he himself paid his contributions by debit order.⁷

A concern with world-centred saving and fiscal discipline was echoed by church pastors. Rethabile Matome is part of a husband-and-wife pastor team in the Living Word International Church as well as working in the banking industry. The church, she told me, seeks to tackle problems of indebtedness. A sage and rational approach to personal savings and investment – as in her own case – can dovetail with rather than contradict a concern with the communal good of the congregation:

... as a minister, I have a couple of ways I combine – I have more than one property, and secondly I have some savings which I invest in. I try not to spend more than 70% of my income on myself. I share, and spread the rest to the church, and on my savings and investments ...

Decrying the broader lack of financial education (see Ndumo 2011; Zaloom 2016), she speaks of the need to ‘structure your income in a way that you will come always out earning more’. Having people do so, she says, will benefit both themselves and ‘us’ – the church:

... There’s a lot of development we would like to do. If you are not financially strong you will not be able to assist as you would like to do. So teaching people about finance and how to take care of their finances becomes an advantage to us as well – so that we can continue to do the things we are able to do.

One destination for such investments is fixed property. In preference to holding meetings in marquees, cinemas, and the like, many churches aim at saving money in order to secure their own premises. At a meeting of the His People Church in Pretoria, held in a theatre, the treasurer used graphs and PowerPoints in his yearly financial statement to show how close the congregation was to reaching its goal of buying a city apartment building which would serve as a headquarters, and in which members might reside as a close community or generate income by renting it out. In the far humbler Living Word Church, which met in a marquee on an empty plot in Sunview, Soweto, its pastor enjoined

congregants to help meet the savings target of R60,000 so they too could move into more permanent premises.

If church members aim to practise such forms of fiscal discipline, do the pastors who advocate this use similar rhetoric in their sermons? At first glance these seem to speak of the expectation of receiving in abundant return based on faith alone, and scornfully to repudiate the more worldly approach in which educational qualifications, a good job, and a salary are relied upon. In a sermon distributed on CD, Rethabile's husband Pastor Matome outlines the 'two financial systems'. There is the 'world's system' of poverty and 'not enough', and 'God's system' of 'more than enough'. The latter, to which he encourages his congregants to 'switch', is based, he says, in a prelapsarian world, before Adam was condemned to live 'by the sweat of his brow', and will instead distribute the benefits of harvest without toil.

The expectation of future plenty is vividly evoked. Seemingly paradoxically, however, this discourse is interspersed with language drawn from banking. In a 'Financial Seminar' that is likewise available on CD, Pastor Mohau Rammile of the Global Reconciliation Church in Bloemfontein, Free State Province, speaks of 'the Lord's standing order for your life'. It is like 'a debit order ... it must go at the end of the month – the bank must obey your instructions ... the moment you sign, from this account to that account'. He goes on to use further imagery from the world of finance:

The standing order is a debt that God owes you ... He was forced to make a statement of debt – *sekôlotô* ... From tonight, when you pray, you are going to invoke a standing order. Look at that house. That furniture. That car. Say 'tomorrow I am going to drive you'.

As the pastor gets more excited, he speaks with greater passion:

In your business, in your studies. God has unfinished business with you. There is an outstanding amount of money coming your way. There is an outstanding amount of cars, and marriages, and relationships. God is going to settle some scores with the devil in your life. We are reversing every curse, we speak restoration of everything that has been taken from you. I decree finances, not just a six figure, but a seven figure. I force it upon your spirit, upon your life and family.

In this 'Financial Seminar', imminent good fortune arises without congregants needing to take any practical steps.

But underlying these millenarian expectations of abundant harvest is a trenchant critique of the new order, at both global and national scales. Pastor Matome, Rethabile's husband who, like his wife, is employed in a bank, had an acute awareness of the weaknesses of the global financial system. If we turn back to his CD sermon on the 'two financial systems', we can see that he deploys these skilfully to strengthen the message that only 'God's system' is enduring. Countering a statement by an imaginary protagonist, who says 'No, I'm not poor, I've got R30,000 in the bank,' the pastor emphasises:

You cannot bank on your bank. Just because your bank has never gone broke, you think it's not possible. ... Who has studied economics here? If you study economics you will realise this whole system is a gamble. Nobody knows when it will break down. They are riding on it as long as it lasts, until it breaks down. That's what happened in America. South Africa didn't tell you, if the bank goes bankrupt you might lose your money. If Standard Bank says 'I'm bankrupt' and you say 'you owe me', how can they pay you if they are bankrupt?

He expands his critique of the 'world's system' to encompass those who think they have benefited from it, but remain in bondage.

Right now, less than ten per cent of the world holds the riches of all the world. The business world keeps you stupid, earn a stupid degree, do a stupid job, for a rich guy.

Speaking in apparent repudiation of the accomplishments and practices of his congregants, many of whom although of humble means are studying at university or paying for their children to do so, he says:

I want to dash this degree thing. People think it's the hope of the world. 'Man, you must get a degree.' Get a degree if you want. But get a degree with a smarter mind. The business world says 'we need engineers', so they promote engineering at university. Who needs them? The rich guys. We are short of scientists. Who needs scientists? The rich guys.

He nevertheless assures his congregants that he is not recommending they skip work. Like him, they will be going back to their day jobs on Monday morning. Indeed, he speaks with approval of the empowering character of work, and in doing so disparages the high levels of unemployment:

People are sitting at home because they are waiting for jobs for money. Work gives you benefits, you have a positive mind, you wake up early. When you work, there are other benefits than money. When a person has no work, he frustrates his woman, frustrates the whole family.

He then slips seamlessly into a condemnation of the circumstances of those who have benefited unduly from the government's BEE strategies, in which privileges have been doled out to those with connections while leaving many in their wake without equivalent advantages. He speaks scornfully of the BMWs, DSTV subscriptions, and other outward and visible signs of wealth much-beloved of those in this world of the new middle class, while also criticising the fact that these are the fruits of nepotistic 'affirmative action':

Have you ever seen someone throwing food to hungry dogs? People are fighting for this cake, fighting to bring in their cousins and their uncles, fighting to bring in their friends?

Completing the impression that his sermon represents a strong critique of the post-1994 South African social order, with its disparaging references to 'the rich guys', he draws on a section of the Old Testament that has long been a favourite with church pastors ministering to South Africa's dispossessed. The episode concerning the slavery of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians, commonly invoked in defence of beleaguered and oppressed people (Genovese 1976), condemns the undue benefits that accrued to the slavemaster and holds out the promise of restitution (James with Nkadi-meng 2003; James 2003). Having stored 'the riches for the righteous in the hands of the wicked ... God promises he will restore them to us'. Evoking the same episode, Bloemfontein pastor Mohau Rammile, in his CD sermon, intones:

Your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land; they will be slaves there and will be treated cruelly for 400 years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and when they leave that foreign land, they will take great wealth with them.

Mixed in alongside multiple references to wealth, consumption, and profligacy, these evocative images engage in complex ways with the aspirations and desires of upwardly mobile people – and with the conflicts these entail. Pastors speak with admiration of those who get rich quick, yet they express profound mistrust in banks and politicians, aware that the roof might come down at any time. They also scorn those who succeed too easily. (Although it is certainly the case that some pastors in the bigger and more prosperous churches themselves engage in the forms of excess they criticise, Pastor Matome and his wife, presiding over a small and modest church housed in a marquee, repudiated such behaviour. Despite undoubtedly belonging to the ‘new black middle class’ and residing in the suburbs rather than the township, the way they combined their day jobs in the banking industry with an after-hours commitment to their congregants suggested a relatively modest rather than opulent lifestyle.)

The discourse and practice of these churches thus combines several features which might at first sight seem contradictory. Supporting the analysis of these churches as quasi-magical in their orientation, there is an expectation of abundant wealth that transcends and arises beyond this world’s preoccupation with monthly payment. But they also encourage a more classically ‘Protestant ethic’ and affirm the positive qualities that work can endow, a capitalist-style interest in property investment, and an inculcation of rational subdivision and allocation of one’s income to diverse ends. In addition, they epitomise South Africa’s new redistributive approach to economic arrangements, and ‘offer members what amounts to alternative citizenship’ (Comaroff 2012), by stressing the importance of securing an internally coherent system of taxation and redistribution (Bähre 2011).

But alongside these there is also a biting commentary on the rising inequalities of 21st-century South African life and a critical allusion to the role of state patronage in putting this in place. It is this latter feature that will be pursued in the following section. Whatever role these churches play in fostering the entrepreneurial mind-set that goes with the emergence of a middle class, the additional circumstances which have conspired to bring that class into being and have bolstered it must also be acknowledged. And among some of their members – pursuing the classic middle-class goals of a higher education, and having acquired the detached self-reflection that such an education can bring – this acknowledgement has indeed taken place.

Self-reflection and critical citizenship

How far do congregants act on or embrace these pastors’ messages? Alternatively, in what other ways does church membership embody their ‘new subjectivities’? ‘The key to the new middle classes is the Bible churches’, was the assertion mentioned earlier. This observation, made by a young woman – Kopano Twala – who was lecturing in Sociology at the University of Johannesburg when I met her, combines personal involvement with detached analysis. She and her partner, Sello Morake, could be variously construed as members of those ‘classes’, and both belong to His People Church. But despite being committed members, they have the kind of self-reflective view that is not often conveyed in accounts of the ‘new middle classes’ and the churches to which they belong. The analyses mentioned above – whether ‘sociological/Weberian’ in tone (Bernstein & Rule 2011), pointing to the significance of

redistribution (Bähre 2011), or exploring 'neoliberal citizenship' and new hopes and aspirational subjectivities (Comaroff 2012) – can sound somewhat patronising. In outlining what roles the churches play for their adherents, such accounts seem to suggest that members of the rank-and-file membership hail from a walk of life very different from that occupied by the analysts. For Kopano and Sello, however, committed involvement combines with dispassionate observation to yield a subtle perspective that goes beyond these outsider perspectives. Their insights – as they themselves acknowledge – derive from an interplay between several factors. One is the confidence arising from the new subjectivities and value orientations that arise out of belonging to this church with its 'new middle class' membership. Another, contradictorily, is their having grown up in older, more established churches, which gave them the drive to become educated and get ahead in life (see James 2015: 40–1). A third is the happy coincidence of having come of age in South Africa's new democracy when good jobs were newly available, especially to those with the qualifications to fit the role.

Not surprisingly given the predominantly Christian culture of South Africa, both of them were brought up as members of more mainstream churches and hence neither has experienced outright 'conversion' or a straightforward 'break with the past' (Meyer 2004). In the case of Kopano, whose family had been stalwarts of the 'old' or 'traditional' black middle class (see Cobby 1990; Kuper 1965; Mabandla 2013 & 2015), they had belonged to a mainstream 'mission church' – the Methodist Church – for generations. She had nonetheless been drawn to His People, finding that it offered her something she previously lacked. In Sello's case, it was only in his parents' generation that his family had experienced upward class mobility. Paralleling this, but also reflecting other disagreements, his father and mother had made a series of conversion/moves: from the older Pentecostal Apostolic Faith Mission Church, very populous in rural areas of the former Transvaal, to the new Word of Life Church founded by his father, and then eventually to a larger church – the Assemblies of God.

Sello painted a vivid picture of the contrasts between his provincial upbringing and the slick urban setting where he was living and working when I met him. His account made clear the differences between what an upwardly mobile person might have aspired to one generation back and what was achievable in the 2000s. While acknowledging the full extent of the change undergone by his father, Sello also pointed to the subsequent gap – between the class to which his father had aspired and that in which he, Sello, had found himself.

His parents, as he told me, had themselves undergone considerable upward mobility – not without some psychic dislocation – with Christian conviction playing an important role in reshaping their value orientations and aspirations. They had lived near Bushbuckridge on the border of the Kruger National Park, before moving to the then small and sleepy provincial town of Nelspruit (which has since 1994 grown considerably to become the capital of the new province of Mpumalanga):

My father came from a working-class family, but his conversion is what propelled him to change. He is now a teacher of maths and science. He had a big desire to study, and went to school. But once he was at school, it was seeing this singing done by the church members that drew him – along with the message of hope and a better life. He was looking for something better, but could not quite define it. The church became a vehicle.

It was alongside his new-found motivation and professional status that Sello's father's religious leadership evolved, taking him from the Apostolic Faith Mission to found his own Word of Life Church. Political disagreements resulted in his shifting once again, this time joining his wife in the Assemblies of God:

When my father first joined them the members were mostly domestics, working-class people, even the groundsman was a pastor at the Afrikaans school in Nelspruit where we used to hold the services. Now, with the influence of my father and other teacher/professionals the regional leadership had to get a pastor who was more educated. Now, with black people moving into cities, you'll find that the culture of these urban churches is very different to that found in the rural areas.

Sello's account reveals a relatively gradual process, over at least a couple of generations, that eventually led to his current situation. A smart and sophisticated young IT salesman when I interviewed him, he was not yet satisfied with his achievements to date, and had yet further ambitions – including starting his own business. But this sense of style and orientation altering step-by-step across the generations belied Sello's feeling that his parents' existing church affiliations, fervent and committed though they were, failed to mirror or express his own new situation. It was this feeling of difference, and of future aspiration, that had fuelled his move to His People, which he joined while at university: 'I feel that this church speaks to me, to where I am, to where I want to be. I am the person I want to be.'

When I asked him for further detail on how His People contrasted to the older, more 'rural' Pentecostal churches in which he grew up, his answer gave a self-reflective insight into the complex modalities of rapid class mobility, and into conundrums concerning those who one then 'leaves behind'.

The difference is that, in a more traditional church, working-class people tend to set the aspirations. It is hard for one to translate these into one's own aspirations – you do not share things with those around you. You are either trying to bring people up with you, or otherwise you are talking down to them. It is about class aspiration.

He felt equally uncomfortable, however, about:

middle-class people who take up a sort of missionary role in relation to those of the working class. They feel that they need to serve those in this lower class – not necessarily to 'bring them up'.

The 'visions and goals' of his new co-congregants, he felt, were:

All about importing their vision of society into all spheres – government, the corporate sector, etc. Here, they can have a bigger impact as a church. Now, if you are in a rural area, such ideals are rather too high-flying. There it is issues of subsistence that concern them – they are at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Spronk's research on young middle-class Nairobiens shows some similarities. Her informants 'were working their way up the social ladder through hard work, continuous educational pursuits, and manoeuvring within the job market'. Although most of them, unlike Sello, were second-generation city-dwellers, the gap between them and less wealthy people/relatives, especially those from rural areas, 'has increased steadily over the last decades' (2014: 102). As she puts it:

the distance between these young professionals and Kenyans outside the middle classes has widened. Some of those interviewed marvelled at the fact that they had more in common with me (a fellow young professional) than with some of their relatives 'in shacks' (in the rural areas). (Spronk 2014: 108)

Sello's account reflects – as do those of Spronk's informants – on whether a person who has moved up through the ranks will regard himself as connected, and accountable, to those who share his background, or whether he will feel more comfortable being 'the person [he wants] to be'. While it might seem to reflect an impetus similar to that discussed by Birgit Meyer (2004) and Linda van de Kamp (2012), in which young people seek a disconnection from kinsmen while simultaneously seeking to belong within a new group that shares these achievements and orientations, it is also a statement of individuality and choice that is characteristically middle-class.

When I talked to Kopano about similar matters, she gave further insight into the situation. In her case, what church membership and its associated counselling enabled was to break away from family expectations that were themselves implanted in middle-class ideals – but those of a previous generation. She told me she was coming under pressure from her mother and other family members to go along an expected route. They wanted her to complete the bursary-funded studies that she had begun in science, and were disturbed by the idea that she might not complete the degree. The pastor counselled her in a way that enabled her to counter these pressures, by emphasising the importance of finding her own route, realising her own talents and building upon these rather than following an established path laid out by others. This individualist-sounding advice was what had encouraged her in her decision to switch disciplines and pursue her studies in social sciences and humanities.⁸

The discrepancy between such a focus on the aspirations of the individual and the fate of those who are less fortunate is something to which – like some of the critical commentators on these churches – she had given much thought. She had pondered long and hard on the question of how neo-charismatic members of the new middle class square their success with the failure of so many (see Spronk 2014: 108); and whether this inevitably involves a retreat from their earlier tendency to engage more publically – and politically – with issues of social inequalities. This kind of withdrawal, she said, is similarly mediated by the notion of an individualised purpose, calling, or discovering of one's own route.

In the early 1990s the church became involved in the struggle against apartheid. Even Rhema opened up its doors to all at a time when the nature of politics and the economy was changing. It provided a perfect opportunity for people. Being in a context where the message corresponds to the broader situation, this offers an explanation to people. But it also gives people an explanation for gross inequality. If you're able to earn R100,000 per month and others have nothing, you feel there is a destiny and purpose. And so you don't have to struggle to reconcile this with the existence of inequality. You'd feel guilty if you used it all yourself, but here you are giving some of your money away. It is the church that uses it. The middle class are removed from their own societies – or the societies to which they formerly belonged – and are not aware of the extent of poverty and marginalisation out there, or of the scale of injustice.

Having developed sophisticated sociological insights into her own situation and that of the 'new black middle class' in general, she went on to reflect on some of the complex relationships between the ideology these churches propagate and the actuality of their

members' situations. One of the things she found it difficult to come to terms with was the disconnect between the church's attitudes towards gender relationships, on the one hand, and the actuality of their members' lives, on the other. Her account reveals the extensive interventions made by churches in members' lives – part of their welfare and outreach activities – through a series of home study groups and counselling arrangements, as well as by distributing advice and sermons on CDs. In line with the conservative-style family values propagated by the US churches on which the South African ones model themselves, these groups and sermons celebrate and try to propagate the idea of the submissive religious wife, obedient to her husband. In parallel, they attribute many of society's ills to the absence of father figures in modern families, and provide intensive mentoring to men as a means to counter this. The church endorses patriarchy in all its senses, she told me, legitimating the idea that the man is the image of the Christian God. Women in the church participate in and endorse this position, by taking their sons off to 'men camps', for example. But, she said, much of the market, many of the people who consume these CDs and partake of the advice, are – like her – professionals. 'I try to be open with my friends,' she says, 'challenging the women who are consuming all this stuff on CDs about how to be a prayerful wife.'

Her account put me in mind of the many women – business professionals, graduate students, lecturers, and people in important government positions, as well as the more modest rural schoolteachers – that I met in the course of my fieldwork. These are people who not only earn their own living and support their children, but are also, in many cases, single or divorced; and ongoing and stable conjugal arrangements were in the minority. The role of the churches in enabling professional women to pursue their careers has been likewise noted by Maria Frahm-Arp (2010; see also Bochow & Van Dijk 2012). In light of this, it may well be that the efforts of the church represent a rear-guard action to stave off further such domestic struggle and schism, and restore the sanctity of marriage. Doing so – in frank contradiction of the socioeconomic circumstances in which these struggles arise – perhaps suggests a measure of desperation; but it is also possible for value orientations to affect material and social contexts, as Max Weber ([1905] 2002) suggested.

The real source of the new-found wealth enjoyed by some members of the new black middle class was something on which Kopano's critical self-reflection also dwelt. 'There is a coincidence,' she said 'in the Protestant ethic being preached among people where the structural nature of the South African economy is advantaging entrepreneurs'.

The higher education system is more advantageous to black men and women than before. Now, not many are turned away. There is funding available if you are black – government loans and the like. People find more and more opportunities, because of the transition – and this dovetails with the church's message of destiny, of calling. This somehow gives testimony that what they have heard at church is true – that this is the real church. They are not aware that the context is what is making this possible – especially during the Mbeki years. During these years, policies were geared towards producing a black middle class, a big white-collar sector. This was a key invention of Mbeki. All this coincided with the great influx of new churches in post-1994 South Africa.

Besides the members in the church who benefited from active strategies to foster the growth of this sector, many people in the church were working directly for the government, writing speeches for ministers, and the like. They formed part of a larger

phenomenon of class mobility in black society post-1994. In addition to being the beneficiaries of the particular strategy to enlarge the middle class that was one legacy of the post-1999 Mbeki presidency, their story was also that of the 'substantial upward mobility of significant segments of the ANC's constituency' (Southall 2012: 10), including not only a 'party-state bourgeoisie' but also a 'middle class strongly dependent on the state', which he analyses as part of the close relationship between the broader black middle class and that state (Southall 2012: 1).

Self-reflective congregants like Kopano and Sello were engaging in a paradoxical exercise. They drew attention to the way church members' class identities and new subjectivities were founded on state support but disinclined to acknowledge that support. Yet they themselves, as church members, had considered such matters carefully and were providing insightful and plausible reasons as to why this should be so, and as to why the church appeals to them. The broader literature on these churches in South Africa, as well as the speeches by pastors analysed above, reveals that members and pastors do share a similarly critical consciousness about the existence of the government's class project – and perhaps of its narrow remit. Making up for this, the churches are said to have 'empowered' more people on a more diversified and widespread basis than the black-empowerment policy had done (Schlemmer 2008). Politicians interviewed by researchers in the CDE project said it was felt that the government's 'entrepreneurial drive' had benefited only a few, and that the churches needed to bring this down to grassroots level and explain how those at the grassroots, too, might derive advantages from these government programmes (Bernstein & Rule 2011: 7). Pastor Matome's cynical statements about the dogs fighting over crumbs in a feeding frenzy induced by 'affirmative action', and his disparagement of those aspects of worldly wealth that such an advantage can bring, revealed a similarly critical stance.

Conclusion

Let us return to those forms of value orientation, and the potential to transform subjectivities, which are said to characterise the neo-charismatic churches more generally, and in South Africa and Kenya in particular. The cases outlined above substantiate the claim that these churches blur modernist-style boundaries between religion and the secular, as one can see from Sello's claim about 'importing their vision of society into all spheres – government, the corporate sector'. It is likewise true that they take charge of responsibility for members' welfare, education and the like (Comaroff 2012) through what Bähre (2011) terms a redistributive approach.

The churches' ethos also dovetails with what, in the case of Kenya, Henrietta Moore, terms 'shifts in forms of subjectification linked to emergent publics and new forms of sociality' (2011: 145) and what Spronk terms 'modern self-perceptions' (2014: 106). Young people expressing their 'middle classness' in both settings have a nuanced self-awareness of the way in which their new status separates them from those with fewer privileges and less access to the benefits of modernity. Being educated gives them the means to deliberate self-critically about the character of these privileges. While they tend to join churches where other middle-class people congregate – Sello and Kopano felt in their comfort zone as members of His People, and Spronk's Kenyan informants as members of the Nairobi chapel or the Baptist Church (2012: 101) – they are sometimes uncomfortably aware of

how this distances them from their countrymen and thus flies in the face of broader democratic initiatives. The churches' transformative discourse alternately conceals and reveals aspects of individual and group identity, respectively. It seems to spur and reaffirm processes of change while providing individuals with the psychic means for self-reflection about it and its shortcomings. It enables the emergence of a new language in which participants can both articulate the aim for and the experience of success, on the one hand, and cope with difficulties in achieving it, on the other. There is a coexistence of aspired-for self-betterment with consolation for ongoing marginality (Comaroff 2012; Martin, cited in Bernstein & Rule 2011: 97–8). Going further, church membership can conceal the true grounds on which self-improvement actually occurred, as Kopano complained was the case with her fellow-congregants. But – given the insight imparted by higher education, which many in this category have been acquiring – it can also enable the emergence of critical consciousness and the possibility to reflect upon the nature of socioeconomic causes and the extent of the social inequality that results.

In neither country has the rise and enrichment of the middle class been an 'overnight sensation': rather, there has been a more gradual emergence of affluence with its accompanying mentality privileging individualised advancement, respectability, and ethical self-fashioning (Lentz 2016), over a number of generations (Wrong 2010: 127). In both cases, earlier elites acquired their elevated positions as members of older churches. From these, their successors departed: as a means not simply to detach themselves from kinship and other social obligations (Meyer 2004) but also to assert their novel status, identity and value-orientation. And in neither country was there a predominance of purely market-driven or neo-liberal arrangements, as Comaroff (2012) claims for Africa more generally. In South Africa, the eventual emergence of the new class, accompanying political liberation and democracy after 1994, owed itself not simply – indeed, not primarily – to the impetus of purely market forces. It was a 'middle class strongly dependent on the state': whether through employment in the civil service, the government's explicit focus on BEE, or the more notorious system of 'tenderpreneurs' (Southall 2012: 13 & 2016; McNeill 2012). It is a class whose formation saw 'neoliberal means interweave with and facilitate redistributive ends' (Hull & James 2012: 16; see Hart 2005; Seekings & Natrass 2005) in diverse and complex ways. In the Kenyan case, the newly-emerging middle class had its bedrock in state clientelism of a rather different kind, with each successive government offering privileges to its ethnically-defined followings (Wrong 2010: 52, 116 & 126). It was also reliant on social and kinship networks for support in times of insecurity (Kroeker 2018). The accompanying subjectivities similarly combine neoliberal with redistributive orientations.

Charismatic churches offer commentary, in particular, on the thorny and irresolvable question of increasing inequality that is so pervasive in both South Africa and Kenya, as well as criticising the apparently mindless consumption of commodities by the 'new middle classes'. In both countries, beneficiaries of the political developments that have made their newfound wealth possible find church membership affords them a more positive self-identity than the view, prevalent in the critical media and in some academic accounts, that this new wealth is the outcome of rent-seeking, cronyism and corruption (Southall 2012: 13; Wrong 2010). Church membership is a means for reflecting on, celebrating, and consolidating one's own new status. It allows a certain distance from what would otherwise be a daily confrontation with the realities faced by those who do not share that

status. For these latter – the non-beneficiaries – or for the pastors who minister to them without necessarily sharing their humbler position, a language is provided for disparaging the world of salaries, BMWs, and pay-TV subscriptions. Transcending and repudiating the world of the here and now will at some point bring abundant reward; but in the meantime, members are enjoined to work hard and also to pay their tithes into funds that will enable some redistribution. The sermons apparently aim to help congregants transcend ‘this world’s financial system’ but also to bring abundance that will be evident in the here and now. At the same time they provide a powerful ‘this-world’ commentary on the paradoxical ambiguities of class.

Notes

1. Dieter Neubert & Florian Stoll contest the usefulness of this category: claiming that ‘the Kenyan middle stratum does not form a class. Instead, the divisive lines run along socio-cultural dimensions’: they prefer to typify these as ‘middle stratum milieus’ (2018: 2).
2. Spronk indicates that there was much variation in the ways people entered the middle class over the course of the 20th century: ‘different ethnic groups had differential access to the resources generated by the cash-crop economy, schooling, and migration to cities (Parkin 1978)’ (2014: 100).
3. Where analysts give attention to their tastes and aspirations, this has been mostly because of an interest in using these for the sake of increased sales to this ‘market segment’ (Krige 2009; Unilever Institute 2007).
4. While some informants sought anonymity, others were keen to be cited, and I have respected their wishes.
5. Rhema Bible Church was started in Johannesburg in the 1980s by Pastor Ray McCauley after he had trained as pastor in the church of the same name in the United States <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_McCauley>; it is now known as Rhema North, and the Grace Bible Church in Soweto, under Pastor Mosa Sono, is an offshoot <<http://gracebiblechurch.org.za/>> (see Frahm-Arp 2010: 93–109). The members of both number in the hundreds of thousands.
6. Their analysis was more charitable than that of some anthropologists of the region, who despite recognising the sincerity of congregants’ belief that riches would be forthcoming following regular monetary contributions (Van Wyk 2014; see Zaloom 2016) have treated charismatic church members as being almost blinded by the ‘prosperity gospel’ to pastors’ habit of disappearing with the money (Bähre 2011).
7. In the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), there was strong moral pressure to tithe and a detailed pamphlet on how to calculate the amount: tithes and offerings ‘did not grant autonomy to local branches but went towards a central fund that maintained and expanded the church’s entire network’ (Van Wyk 2014: 87).
8. For more on the ambiguities arising out of conflicts between individual choice and social obligations see James (2015: 218–22) & Phumelele Ndumo (2011) for South Africa; and Lena Kroeker (2018) for Kenya.

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