

Apartheid Space and Identity in Post-Apartheid Cape Town: The Case of the Bo-Kaap

DIANE GHIRARDO
University of Southern California

The Bo-Kaap district spreads out along the northeastern flanks of Signal Hill in the shadow of Cape Town's most significant topographical feature, Table Mountain, and overlooks the city's business district. According to contemporary historical constructions, the district includes four areas — Schotschekloof, Schoonekloof, Stadzicht and the Old Malay Quarter, but none of these names appear on official maps (except Schotschekloof, which is the official name for the entire area).¹ The first three were named after the original farmsteads which were transformed into residential quarters, Schoonekloof having been developed in the late nineteenth century and Schotschekloof and Stadzicht during and immediately following World War II.² Schotschekloof tenements — monotonous modernist slabs — were erected for Cape Muslims during the 1940s as housing to replace slums leveled as a result of the 1934 Slum Act. The area known as the Old Malay Quarter, bounded by Buitengracht, Strand, Voelboog and Witford streets, is the oldest inhabited section, parts of which date back to the seventeenth century.

Just what constitutes now - and constituted in the past - the Bo-Kaap is hotly contested. Although the city was founded by the Dutch East Indies Company in 1652, land grants permitting permanent settlement in Cape Town were only doled out in 1658. After Jan de Waal purchased the land in the Schotschekloof in 1760, and between 1763 and 1768 he erected several small rental houses on the flanks of Signal Hill, the earliest such housing in the area that came to be known as Bo-Kaap.³ Several slave lodges were constructed there during the eighteenth century, all of which disappeared following the abolition of slavery by the British government in 1834, a period which also saw the construction of rental housing, especially low-cost housing, grow at a significantly greater rate after 1840.⁴ Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Bo-Kaap gradually became one of two major working class districts in Cape Town; housed in narrow housing terraces snaking up the flanks of Signal Hill, former black and mixed race slaves mingled with the rest of the city's working class of European and Asian origins.⁵

The typical block form in the Bo-Kaap consisted of rows of narrow, flat roofed single story flats with plastered facades. The lack of appropriately dimensioned timber dictated roof spans and room widths, and the poor quality of locally produced bricks meant that walls needed to be plastered, gave Cape architecture some of its

most characteristic features.⁶ These features were especially pronounced in the Bo-Kaap, where absentee landlords built rows of housing units significantly narrower than were the houses in the oldest part of the city. Aiming for cheaper housing, they also standardized windows and doors and eliminated the decorative gables and parapets typical of higher income areas.⁷ While the some of the eighteenth century terraces exhibited typical Cape Dutch details such as undulating parapets, two panel portals, and fixed upper sash and movable lower sash windows, the arrival of the British at the end of the eighteenth century altered the style once again. Typical elements of Georgian architecture such as slim windows, paneled double doors and fanlights, found their way into housing of all social classes, including the rental housing in the Bo-Kaap.⁸ At the end of the nineteenth century, new housing in the Bo-Kaap began to include pitched roofs, bay windows, and cast iron work on balconies and verandahs, at a time when a larger number of houses also became the property of the occupants.⁹ A dense network of alleys and narrow, sometimes hidden passageways ties the houses of the Bo-Kaap together. In most houses, a central passageway leads directly from the front to the back door and then opening onto a walled courtyard where the family could socialize in private. On the front, the stoep faces the street and serves as a place where more public socializing can occur.

This housing type extended through not only the smaller area today described as the Bo-Kaap west of Buitengracht Street, but the traditional area, from Long Street and parts of Adderly Street up the flanks of Signal Hill and out to Amsterdam Street and the old coastline and docks below Loader Street. The architectural texture of the Bo-Kaap to the west and east of Buitengracht Street differed little through most of the nineteenth century, so much so that some documents at the Cape Town Planning Department describe the Bo-Kaap as extending to Adderly and Long Streets even today. Even residents of the area are unsure of the precise boundaries of the various sections of this part of Cape Town.

These are more than academic disputes: The Malay Quarter, situated between Wale and Strand streets, is asserted as the historic center of Muslim Cape Town and the heart of the Bo-Kaap, and as such, is the subject of a historic preservation campaign. Indeed, the controls exerted by Islam on its members in Cape Town, and their manifest differences from the Christian community, encour-

aged them to cluster together in the city's working class areas, where they could be called to prayer five times daily, and where it would be easier to maintain their religious and social practices. Nonetheless, such designations leave the Waterkand area (between the Strand and the old docks) and the rest of Schotschekloof out of the equation, but equally importantly, they seriously distort the history of the district as a whole.¹⁰ Of equal import for the Bo-Kaap in the nineteenth century with respect to race was class: the working class which inhabited the small housing terraces included mixes of race and ethnicity, and also included working class whites. City officials from the second half of the nineteenth century through most of the twentieth century found the Bo-Kaap disturbing not only because of race, but because it collected a mix of working class and unemployed poor, and along with them a range of locales associated with vice. Bars and hotels in the Bo-Kaap drew negative press in the late nineteenth century because they were characterized as places from which "a stream of moral pollution is constantly flowing."¹¹ Even though there was an exodus of "white" residents of the Bo-Kaap once the area began to fill up with newly emancipated coloured and black slaves in the 1830s, low-income whites families continued to live there throughout most of the twentieth century.

The relations between the Muslim community and the Christian authorities of Cape Town were far from smooth. Until well into the nineteenth century, Cape Town authorities forbade the Muslim community to practice its religion, so secret meetings were held in homes and in an abandoned quarry along the flanks of Signal Hill. In 1886, city authorities forbade the Muslims from using their historic burial grounds, supposedly for reasons of public health (Cape Town had been hit by a smallpox epidemic in 1882). The Tana Baru (new ground) had long been the community's cemetery, parts of which dated back to 1805. The forcible closure prompted immediate disobedience and a massive rebellion and riots that enflamed the city for days, rallying the Muslim community as no other government action had managed to do in the past.

For white Cape Town residents, class concerns intersected with racial fears prompted by the steady migration of black Africans to South Africa's urban areas; throughout the twentieth century a series of laws tightened the grip of the white minority over coloured and black South Africans, particularly spatial control. In 1923 the Native Urban Areas Act forbade black Africans from owning land anywhere except rural areas. By contrast with the laws regarding blacks, control over other racial groups varied throughout South Africa. The fear of Cape Coloured and Indians moving into white areas finally spurred enactment of the Group Areas Act in 1950, which instituted a formal policy of separating races in different areas. These assorted acts were not simply neutral statements about racial separation; they served as the legal pretext for forcibly classifying and separating the different racial groups, and as they were implemented, the effect on families and individuals was devastating. Under the color of this purportedly legal system, between 1950 and 1984 over 126,000 families were forced to abandon their homes and businesses and move to the Cape Flats area.¹² Cars arrived with GG license plates, and individual families were pressured to move out. Although many said that they would not go, as one of the

former residents, Pedro Meyer, describes it, one day their houses would suddenly be empty, the families having moved to the Cape Flats.¹³ A combination of threats and quiet harassment ultimately convinced people to leave. The black Africans were the first to go; they lived throughout the Bo-Kaap, but throughout the 1960s they were steadily removed. Mrs. Miriam Bakana ran a small hotel for 14 Bantu laborers at 18 Dixon Street; in 1963 the city's director of Bantu administration notified the town clerk that since new housing was being made available for the Bantu (in the Cape Flats) her license would not be renewed; furthermore, she and her husband would also be required to move to Guguletu Bantu township according to the provisions of the Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act.¹⁴ Once the black Africans had been removed, attention turned to the Coloured population. A slow bureaucratic and legalistic process of denying residence and business permits gave spurious legitimacy to the racist program.

The owner of the small grocery store at the end of Loader Street recalled how up until 1969 there had been thirteen shops nearby, but in 2000, only his remained.¹⁵ Although a Muslim who lived behind his shop in defiance of the law, Mr. Ali managed to resist the pressure to move even after officials attempted to claim that he had no business permit. He showed them his permit, which also included a small hotel behind the shop and which gave him the semi-legal grounds for living there with his family. Mr. Ali purchased the property in defiance of laws forbidding such ownership to coloured people through subterfuge: an elderly gay man who lived nearby held 51% title in a fictitious company, while he held the other 49%.

Prior to apartheid, there had been no such thing as a coloured identity. As informants repeatedly asserted in interviews, those who were wealthy enough could move up in society, and so could those who were pale enough to pass for white. Most families had branches which intermarried with people of different races and ethnicities, which were only redefined as White, Coloured and Native in 1950. In the same year, the Population Registration Act required all South Africans to be classified according to race - a necessary component of the Group Areas Act, for races could not be isolated if race was not a fixed component of an individual's identity. In 1953, the Separate Amenities Act ensured that facilities would be clearly identified as being available to a particular racial group. These legal props for apartheid led to the forty year effort to clear the black and coloured South African population out of areas reserved for whites, and to the creation of a ring of townships spreading out in the Cape Flats south of the city. They also led to the destruction of some of the city's oldest and most richly textured urban districts, such as District Six, and to the fundamental transformation of others, such as the Bokaap.

Already by the 1930s, an awareness of the poor physical condition of Bo-Kaap's buildings converged with fears about crime, disorder, infectious diseases and racial mixing, setting in motion movements to eradicate the slums.¹⁶ While the public rationales for the Slum Clearance Act named the bad effects upon slum dwellers of unhealthy conditions in substandard housing, the judgments in fact concerned the effect of slums on the population that did not live

there. One of the areas designated for “urban renewal” was the Bokaap, along with District Six and the area between Bokaap and the docks. The latter was the first to go, but because no replacement housing was provided when demolition began, residents crowded into the other areas, replicating and even worsening the very conditions slum removal was designed to cure. The dubious success of this first program significantly slowed implementation of slum removal in the other two areas, but the City Council nonetheless proceeded to acquire so-called derelict housing in the Old Malay Quarter and to plan for the rows of tenement flats in the Schotschekloof. World War II intervened, and forced city officials to place the plans on hold until after the war.

Although the process of dismantling mixed race urban areas dates back to the slum removal campaigns of the 1930s, it heated up after the 1948 elections that brought the Nationalist Party to power, when apartheid became formal public policy. In turn, the assault on this working class, racially mixed district also triggered a response from members of the white community who wanted to preserve the urban texture of the Bokaap. The history of the Bo-Kaap becomes increasingly complex, as the efforts to preserve it as a ‘Malay’ quarter were led by a white man, the Afrikaans writer and poet I. D. du Plessis.¹⁷ Beginning in the late 1940s, du Plessis spearheaded a campaign to recognize a section of the Bo-Kaap as the historic Malay Quarter, not because of distinguished architecture but on cultural grounds, because of what he argued was a historic community which had continuously inhabited the area for nearly two hundred years.

Du Plessis was responsible for designating the Bo-Kaap as the area between Chiappini and Rose Streets, from Wale Street to Strand Street. From the 1930s forward, Du Plessis aggressively led the campaign for the preservation of the Bo-Kaap as an exclusively Malay quarter. His role as the Secretary of Coloured Affairs in the first Apartheid cabinet after the 1948 Nationalist Party victory gave him the political clout to see that his goals were achieved - the Bo-Kaap was not leveled as District Six had been. What up until the end of the 1930s had been repeatedly reviled in the press as a slum became, from the 1940s onward, a quaint and picturesque corner of Cape Town whose identity needed to be preserved. In order to preserve the Bo-Kaap, however, du Plessis had to construct a narrative that would support this objective. In an era when the goal was to achieve complete racial apartheid through the Group Areas Act, preserving the Bo-Kaap as a Muslim, or Malay, Quarter, neatly resolved the problem. Du Plessis could claim that the coloured population was being kept together in one district, just as the Group Areas Act required, while at the same time, the small scale neighborhood was being retained, with its picturesque houses and street life. Achmat Davids observes that the Muslim community, defined as “Cape Malay”, were encouraged to see themselves as the elite among an otherwise oppressed group, and that indeed, since 1925 they had sought the designation of a Malay identity that separated and raised them above people of Indian, African and mixed descent.¹⁸ An article in a resistance newspaper, *The Torch* (11 March 1952) praised the Cape Malays as being more civilized than and distinct from the “savage and benighted blacks,” even though the latter were often Christian.¹⁹

Du Plessis finally achieved his objective in 1957, when the swath of territory today known as Bo-Kaap was designated a “Malay Group Area,” and historians such as Jeppe argue that this was part of his strategy as Secretary of Coloured Affairs to ensure that a policy of divide and rule was achieved in a local setting.²⁰ The story, as we shall see, is more complicated than can be explained by the written history, but even the recorded history is intriguing. By framing themselves as the elite among the far more numerous coloured and black groups, the Muslims, or Malay people, did not see their fates intertwined with those of the other groups and hence they separated themselves politically from them - something that continues even today, as Cape Town is the only place in post-apartheid South Africa where the National Party continues to be elected to govern the city. Of course, groups within the coloured population also saw themselves as superior to the native, or black, population, and likewise have not always seen their struggles as allied. Therefore, the preservation of the Bo-Kaap required the removal of all non-Muslim coloured people. Pedro Meyer reported that some coloured people converted to Islam in order to apply for residence permits in the Bo-Kaap, but generally, the removal of the non-Muslim population was an unrelenting, ongoing process.

In terms of the urban and preservation programs being advanced for the Bo-Kaap, this meant that other groups had to be removed from the Bo-Kaap if the Malay identity of the area were to be maintained. Du Plessis warned repeatedly about the danger the community faced from the presence of other groups, and before the Group Areas Act, particularly the native population, which he argued was eroding the strong Muslim community.

In 1944, du Plessis wrote:

*“Shebeens have sprung up in clusters, wine is bought in from Monday to Saturday by ‘runners,’ dagga smokers make the Malay Quarter unsafe, and an influx of natives has added to the housing problems of the Malays. Any renovation....should lead to saving the most picturesque part of the city and preserving for some of the Malays a place which enables them to live according to their customs.”*²¹

In order to protect the Bo-Kaap, du Plessis fought both the City Council and the steady encroachment of commercial development that pressed upwards from Buitengracht, just as it already had already swept through most of the blocks north of Long Street throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite his best efforts, however, some of the properties which the council purchased from the 1930s on were leveled, and the blocks redrawn to accommodate commercial uses in 1961.²² And even though it had been designated a Group Area in 1957, the Mayor’s office was still declaring that other than a first group of 17 houses renovated in 1950, the rest of the housing stock remained dilapidated slums to be torn down before redevelopment could occur.²³ Du Plessis argued that because of the “charm which time [had] bestowed on [them],” the original buildings should remain and be renovated as a far more appealing draw for tourists.²⁴ On 5 July 1957, the Council finally issued a proclamation limiting all future development to residential use, effectively terminating the threat of commercial develop-

ment. A tug-of-war about restoration ensued through the 1980s, as the residents sought assistance to pay for renovations, assistance that was largely not forthcoming from the Council. Between 1970 and 1976, another 52 units were renovated in the core of the Bo-Kaap, and in 1985, a third group was slated for renovation. This last group of 69 buildings was destined not for existing residents in the Bo-Kaap, but for sale on the open market at well above the prices most residents of the Bo-Kaap could afford. The Council justified their actions on the grounds that they needed to recover some of their costs, but for the Bo-Kaap, the spectre of gentrification now became a reality. Under apartheid, the young professionals who purchased these houses were still coloured, but after the end of apartheid, the small houses became available to all races. Since 1985, much of the preservation attention at the Bo-Kaap has been focused on how to resist gentrification and maintain the integrity not only of the housing stock, but of the community itself.

To return to the issue of the community's identity, I remarked earlier that du Plessis had to construct a narrative about the originary "Malay" character of the Bo-Kaap, which necessarily entailed eliminating or downplaying the historic presence of other low-income and working class groups. The other groups - Filipino, African, Portuguese, Italian, and others defined as coloured - were eliminated from the histories du Plessis wrote, and they are still absent today. Street names sometimes testify to the origins of those who settled a section, such as Chiappini Street, but elsewhere their presence has been completely erased. Narratives presented by local Muslims and Muslim tour guides emphasize that today's Malay residents followed their Imams to Cape Town when the Dutch removed them from Indonesia, especially Java, and imprisoned them on Robben Island. In their stories, an unbroken tradition from the late seventeenth century up to today binds the Muslims to the Bo-Kaap. The inhabitants of the early slave lodges in the Bo-Kaap did include Muslims from Indonesia, but they also included slaves from elsewhere in Africa, Sri Lanka, and India.

Likewise, the Bo-Kaap museum documents the lives of the Muslim families in the Bo-Kaap, but completely ignores the presence of other groups. Just three blocks over from Wale Street, where the Bo-Kaap Museum is located, is the area largely settled not by Muslims, but by people from the island of St. Helena who are Anglicans. Their descendants apparently mingled freely with the Muslim population, and indeed, in the second half of the twentieth century the most prominent and sought after midwife in the Bo-Kaap is an Anglican woman from this community. The houses on Bloem Street and its environs, with the Anglican church of St. Paul's, are in general much smaller than those near Wale Street, and have not benefitted from renovation funds that have spruced up other parts of the Bo-Kaap.

One hotly debated issue in recent years is the question of who built the housing in the Bo-Kaap; many historians believe that the labor force consisted of European artisans who immigrated to Cape Town following the Anglo-French war of the 1780s, but those involved in the Bo-Kaap preservation community maintain that it was Cape Malay artisans who were responsible for the buildings.²⁵ Nonetheless, even the Bo-Kaap museum itself was originally a house erected

by Jan de Waal in the 1760s, in what was called the Dutch style. Although more research will be necessary to establish the ethnic make up of the labor force, it seems unlikely that some of the slaves and indentured servants brought in from throughout the world were not involved in the construction industry.

The section of the Bo-Kaap between Loader Street and the docks, today known as De Waterkant [waterside], is part of the historic working class Bo-Kaap district even though du Plessis excluded it from the borders he drew for the Bo-Kaap. De Waterkant has only been recognized as a distinct area in its own right during the last decade, when most of the renovations have been completed and it has become a public center of gay culture. Only the removal of the coloured population during the 1960s and 1970s made it possible for this new group to move in and gentrify De Waterkant. Much of the building stock remained in place, however, and has been gentrified over the past three decades into an area of small bed and breakfast hotels, bars, restaurants and coffee shops. It has also become the center of Cape Town's gay community, with a full complement of clubs, bath houses, theaters, galleries and associated retail and commercial activities. Historically, the section of de Waterkant below Loader Street, because of its proximity to the Docks, was known as a 'den of iniquity,' full of bars, brothels and flop houses. A typical case is the Manhattan Cafe, which was originally (in the eighteenth century) a house, then it became a hotel, later a brothel and bar, and now the Manhattan Cafe. Although the polemics about vice in this area date back to the mid-nineteenth century, perfectly respectable working class families of a variety of races and ethnicities continued to live and work in the area until the Group Areas Act and the forced removals of the 1960s and 1970s.

Apparently there was a long-standing but generally quiet presence of homosexual presence in the Bo-Kaap (remember that it was an elderly gay man who helped Ali purchase his grocery store), even before World War II. Because these histories are not recorded officially, it is difficult to reconstruct them. But interviews with members of the gay community confirm that the gay presence in de Waterkant and the Bo-Kaap generally predates the recent gentrification of de Waterkant. Although not known outside of the gay community, even I. D. du Plessis, who launched his campaign to preserve the Malay Quarter during the 1940, was homosexual, with a particular preference for Malay men.²⁶ The role of du Plessis' homosexuality and preference for young Malay men has been completely ignored in histories of the Bo-Kaap, but nonetheless it is intriguing. Like many homosexuals of western European descent of the last two centuries, du Plessis had to conceal his sexual preference, and like many others, he also gravitated toward men of a lower class and especially coloured men. Just how this led him to fetishize Malay culture and Malay identity cannot be reconstructed, but in doing so he managed to transform his personal fetish into an arm of state policy with the creation of a Malay identity, and to marry this identity with a specific urban area, the Bo-Kaap. Perhaps this was only possible because his personal goals intersected with National Party apartheid policy, but nonetheless it is clear that du Plessis was largely responsible for designating the borders of the Bo-Kaap, identifying it as a coloured area, and one that should be preserved for the Malays. It is then something of an irony that

the center of the homosexual community in Cape Town is part of the historic Bo-Kaap, with an identical urban fabric and comparable history of diverse architectural influences.

NOTES

¹Timothy F. Truluck, "Bo-Kaap: Changing Attitudes and Actions," Honours Paper, University of Cape Town, Department of Environmental and Geographical Science, 1989, pp. 9-10.

²Truluck, p. 10.

³Joanna Behrens, "Bo-Kaap Architecture: A Critique of Structuralist Theory," Honours Paper, University of Capetown, 1991, p. 50.

⁴Derek Japha and Vivienne Japha, "The Two Faces of Urban Conservation in South Africa," in *Traditional Dwellings and Settlement Reviews*. Vol. 33 (1991), p. 14; L. Townsend and S. Townsend, *Bo-Kaap. Faces and Facades* (Cape Town: Citadel Press 1977), 14.

⁵The history of racial and ethnic classifications in Cape Town is complicated: indigenous black residents of the area were known as Khoi-San; Cape Malays were those Muslims who supposedly came to Cape Town from Malaysia from the seventeenth century forward. Under apartheid, the distinctions were white, native and coloured, the latter being any racial mix.

⁶Japha & Japha, pp. 16-17; Behrens, p. 51.

⁷Behrens, p. 52.

⁸Behrens, p. 54-5.

⁹Behrens, p. 61.

¹⁰Current maps designate the area as Schotschekloof, while informally and in local literature it is variously termed Malay Quarter and Bo-Kaap

¹¹Editorial, 8 January 1876, *Cape Times*.

¹²Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act, No. 25/1945.

¹³Robert Silke and Jason Josselsohn, Interview with Pedro Meyer, 21 July 2000.

¹⁴State Archives, Cape Town, S: 3/CT; V:4/1/9/1/180;R: GN72, 1963, "Proposed removal of Mrs Miriam Bakana from 18 Dixon Street to Guguletu."

¹⁵Mr. Ali and son, interview by Robert Silke and Jason Josselsohn, 3 August 2000.

¹⁶Truluck, p. 19.

¹⁷I. D. du Plessis, *The Cape Malays* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Ltd 1972); *ibid.*, *The Cape Malays - History. religion. traditions. folk tales - The Malay Quarter* (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema 1972).

¹⁸Achmat Davids, "Complacency to Activism: The Changing Political Mood of the Cape Muslims from 1940-1985," unpublished paper. Workshop on the history of Cape Town, December 1985, University of Cape Town.

¹⁹*The Torch*, 11 March 1952.

²⁰S. Jeppie, "Historical Process and the Constitution of Subjects: I. D. du Plessis and the reinvention of the 'Malay,'" unpublished honours thesis, University of Cape Town, 1986.

²¹du Plessis, *The Cape Malays* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1944), pp. 81-82. Shebeens were clandestine saloons operating in the townships under black or coloured ownership; they originated in the early twentieth century as a form of resistance to state run beer halls.

²²Cape Town, Mayor's Minutes, 1961

²³Cape Town, Mayor's Minutes, 1957.

²⁴du Plessis, *The Cape Malays*.

²⁵I. Abrahams, "Who Built Bo-Kaap?" *Cape Argus*, 31 December 1988, p. 6.

²⁶Dr Jack Lewis, interview with Robert Silke, July 2000.