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# Bommastandi of Alexandra Township

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# Abstract

This thesis explores "private property ownership" in Alexandra Township, South Africa. Adopting the term mmastandi[1] as an analytical tool I highlight that there are other ways of understanding private property. I argue that though closely linked to the mode of appropriating property, the term denotes more than just a name signifying "possessing a property". Instead it invokes understanding of owning a stand, a piece of land which was developed through building a home. Additionally, at the core of the concept of mmastandi is the fact that the relationships to a stand were defined by a myriad of arrangements and agreements that were not necessarily codified. Hence categorising property ownership in Alexandra as simply individual and private is too simplistic and at best missing the point.

Mmastandi as an analytical prism complicates the geography-law nexus highlighted by Blomley (1994). It offers us an opportunity to interrogate further the overt agency role of bommastandi in their struggle to stay on in Alexandra a place that created (and still does) a problem for the South African government in that it refused to comply with the legal compartmentalization of the country. I argue that the culture of urban living that evolved from the ninety year long history of bommastandi's life in Alexandra needs to be interrogated more closely. Such understandings and their engagement should form the basis of research that informs the larger South African urbanisation project, that of dismantling the apartheid city.

I do not claim that the concept mmastandi is new, neither do I claim to have discovered it. However, drawing from a broad spectrum of research and covering a long historical period, it uses all of these to the extent that they impact and simultaneously highlight the significant role played by the experiences of bommastandi in imploring us to rethink Alexandra. This process obliges us to use the Alexandra prism to understand more than private property ownership instead the urban land question and the African demand for recognition as urbanised emerge.

The study adopts property life stories[2] of these of families of bommastandi[3] who continued to live in Alexandra despite the continuously changing political landscape and spatial legislation and used documentary sources as methodologies to glean empirical evidence. Drawing from these various sources is valuable for piecing together what is

[1] The term "*mmastandi*"or "*mmastene*" was used to denote African property owners in the earlier Johannesburg.
[2] Although Bozzoli (1991) adopts "life stories methodology" she does not draw a distinction between property owners and non-owners in Alexandra Township.
[3] Plural of *mmastandi.*

missing or silenced in recorded information. Although this study is based on experiences of land and property acquisition and dispossession by Alexandra property owners, it also serves as a window on the broader land question in South Africa. This is because Alexandra freehold was given to Africans at a critical moment in the history of the South African land question, the time when the "native" Land Bill which became the infamous "Native" Land Act, was discussed in parliament. It was also only two years into the merging of the former two Boer republics and the British colonies into the union of South Africa. This means that the country was still struggling with its rebirth but it was also dealing with, more often than not, diametrically opposed approaches to the "native" question. I argue that understanding the construction of "The paradoxical foreign native" is critical when interrogating property ownership among Africans in South Africa in general but in urban areas in particular.

Interrogating the meaning and the history of the concept of mmastandi called for an innovative way in which life story methodology played out in this thesis.The story told in this thesis explored the ways of life of families of bommastandi which highlights how they were identified in the community and also identified themselves in relation to their positions as private property owners. However, belonging to a group of bommastandi and the ways families of bommastandi experienced dispossession, resettlement and removals are in some instances as disparate as the ways in which they acquired their properties. The property life stories of families of bommastandi present an opportunity to rethink Alexandra Township as part of the broader South African land and urban question.

It is worth noting that the stories told by families of bommastandi connect their present to their past. The metaphor of palimpsest was adopted because it better captures their story of resilience and the specificity of their relationship to their properties, which is spatial, social and legal. Families of bommastandi experienced continuities and discontinuities in their relationships to their properties because the relationship of bommastandi who remained in their properties after expropriation show a complex continued occupation of space whose legal context changes from freehold to repossession and or expropriation. In other words we observe the continuities in their occupation of space and discontinuities in that the terms of that occupation change.

Finally, this thesis reveals bommastandi as ordinary human beings trying to make their lives work under difficult socio-political circumstances, but it also displays them as extraordinary people who fought the dislocation in their properties to the bitter end. Thus the story of the mmastandi of Alexandra is about a specific group but it is also about broader

questions of African urban identities since such identities attach to African land more particularly in urban South Africa.

The use of the terms that may ordinarily be viewed as NOT politically correct is deliberate. More particularly, the term “native”, which is used to highlight the paradox of being declared foreign with the advent of reserves and later homelands in the country where one has been categorised as native all along. Finally the use of English measurements and currency is intended to highlight the important role played by this colonial history in our experiences as a people and a country. For example a fine of £5 for alcohol brewing for a family that relies on alcohol sale or a monthly salary of less than £4 explains a lot in this history.

# Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

_____

**Abueng L Matlapeng**

**_____ Day of_____ 2011.**

# *Dedication*

*In memory of my mother, Mmampe Matlapeng (MmaButi) and my niece, Ivy Pitse*
*and more recently my nephew, Robert Pitse.*

# Preamble

As a South African geography student who has a long history of fascination with black urban housing and squatter settlements coupled with an interest in histories of exception, the broader question of black resistance against government resettlements was for me immediately linked to the urban question. A casual conversation with a friend and a colleague who I was fortunate enough to share a workspace with, redefined the focus of this question to the singular experience of Alexandra. We were reminiscing about childhood memories of home when she started talking about her *home* in a way that I thought was quite profound. She talked about *home* as a place that still existed in her life, but had ceased to be the *home* that she came to know and love. She explained that her home had comprised a "big house" with some cottages. This was contrary to the generic "match boxes"; four roomed houses that comprised Johannesburg's African urban landscape. From her description it was evident that this house was not only comfortable and spacious, but was also saturated with meaning: it made her proud to be black and urban, and to be so in a way that defied the boundaries of urban spatial legislation that governed the conditions of black urbanisation in South Africa at the time. But I have never been touched by the idea of owning and losing property, and the implications of this experience in material and symbolic terms, the way I was when having this conversation.

Such a conversation reminded me of the work of Ralph Mathews, a Canadian sociologist who published a study which he conducted among a fishing community in Newfoundland, Canada. In this study Mathews (1976) writes about three fishing communities whose life he describes as "often brutal and harsh". Claiming that "there was no better place than home" these communities had, in spite of these hardships, defied all efforts by both provincial and national government urbanization policies that encouraged them to relocate. Although this occurred in a different country, Canada and in the 1970s, the experience of "harsh and brutal" life resonated with that of African life in South Africa in general but more particularly resettlements and relocations which characterized lives of African communities who lived outside reserves more particularly in the 1980s. Although the intentions of relocating the Canadian and South African communities were differently motivated, their resistance against resettlement was about staking a claim in a place called home. The resolute determination of the fishing communities to resist resettlement ignited in me an interest in a similar phenomenon in South Africa, black resistance against government resettlement.

My friend grew up in Alexandra, an exceptional space since it was exempted from the Natives Land Act No 27 of 1913. This act prohibited "natives" from buying private property or having rights to land away from the reserves – at the time a portion of the Union of South Africa that was delineated for "natives". However, Section 1(1) of this law allowed the continued existence of townships whose proclamation predated the enactment of the 1913 Act and these included Alexandra. Thus Alexandra aptly encapsulates the South African urban land question, with all the trappings of black urban property ownership, accommodation/shelter (housing and squatting), coupled with resistance against forced removals and loss of private property. Such issues are raised in work such as Morris (1981), Sikakani (1977), Beavon (1982), Mabin and Parnell (1983) Horrell (1971, 1978 ) Haarhoff (1987), Black Sash (1988, 1989), Crankshaw, Hart and Mcnamara (1988), Harsch (1979), Hart and Hardie (1987), Maasdorp and Humphreys (1977), Mashabela (1980) and Stadler (1979) whose focus is housing shortage, squatting and forced removals.

Our conversation took me back to the allure I had for black urban life. Growing up in rural South Africa I was intrigued by the presentation of African urban life as temporary and yet permanent in some ways. I was captivated by the physical uniformity of the African urban houses which seemed to corroborate the transient status of their occupants. However, in Alexandra the red bricked, red roofed houses seemed to entreat one to rebut this notion of African urban evanescence. The life and socio-economic conditions of people who occupied these structures became clearer in our conversation. For the first time the heartfelt and lived experience of being modern, African and permanent in an urban area, were revealed in this apparently casual conversation that reawakened the interest I had in African urban life.[4]

The status of my "outsiderness" and the history of Alexandra made my reading of the place complex and layered but it simultaneously enabled me to question perhaps even some of the most taken-for-granted-experiences of bommastandi (property owners) of Alexandra. However, this time I particularly focused on Africans, who owned property in a place that not only increasingly became urban but was at the same time subject to attempts by the segregationist state to expunge this status through political and legal means.

Through the experience of bommastandi in Alexandra I recognised that while some of them may initially have been removed from their places they had appropriated in the urban space in Alexandra, they modernized but remained African. To many of these people, whether their properties were expropriated or not, Alexandra has never ceased to be *home*. As

[4] Urban here is taken in its most basic and simplistic form to mean a place proclaimed urban and falling under a local government structure such as a municipality

I was doing my research and delving deeper into my study area that attempts to trace the connections between property ownership, identity and way of life, I found that this idea, "there was no better place than home" albeit complex and operating on many layers, makes sense, even to me as an outsider looking in!

Finally, my friend's representation of the idea of a home was intriguing in that hers was a home that was somehow still there and yet had simultaneously disappeared. I became fascinated with the beginnings of Alexandra, a place that was conceived in the politics, the legislation and the economics of the time – 1912 - barely a year before the passing of the notorious Native Land Act No 27 of 1913. This was the beginning of a journey: a journey through property life stories that meant ploughing through history - spatial legislation, spatial and non spatial[5] – resettlement history and land reform policy and memory. All of this ploughing centred on a two square kilometre piece of land.

[5] Non spatial resettlement refers to a process where some property owners in Alexandra remained in their erstwhile freehold homes as government tenants after dispossession and forced removals

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I give thanks to the late Prof Zeke and the late Mme. Rebecca Mphahlele who gave me their time at the darkest hour, when I was beginning to think that studying bommastandi was not a worthwhile journey. Sharing their experiences about life in Marabastad and Sophiatown pointed me towards the right and incredible direction.

Moipone Lenyai, my (erstwhile) colleague, our conversations planted a seed which started the journey to Alexandra where I met incredible people, children of the former bommastandi who were willing to give up their time and share their life experiences with me. To the group of bommastandi whose willingness to disabuse me of the misconceptions that I came armed with to your part of the world and memories going with all of these encounters will always be cherished.

To my family (Mojamorago ke kgosi), brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces: I would like to thank you for the unwavering support which kept me going even beyond my physical strength, it was through the confidence you showed in me that I got the energy to go on … *Papa Kobe Thakadu, seepela tse dingwe matsatsa ngwana ga Mmatsela a Mosime letebejana loo Mmasenosi*! thank you for being my father and my lifelong teacher. Although you retired

from teaching fifteen years before I started this journey you continued to tirelessly be my teacher, I will forever be grateful for the wealth of African experience, history and cultural input that is surpassed by none that helped me to unravel some of the puzzles and palimpsests that constitute African life. Last but not least my daughter Botho, who once more compromised by showing unbelievable understanding and maturity when she had to do with less by sharing her mom with this work.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| AAC | Alexandra Action Committee |
| AAEC | Alexandra Anti Expropriation Committee. |
| ACA | Alexandra Civics Association |
| ACO | Alex Civics Organisation |
| AHC | Alexandra Health Committee |
| ALC | Alexandra Liaison Committee |
| ALPOA | Alexandra Land and Property Owners Association |
| AME | African Methodist Episcopal |
| ANC | African National Congress |
| ATA | Alexandra Tenants Association |
| ATC | Alexandra Township Company |
| AWNRP | Association of Waverly North Rate Payers |
| BAAB | Bantu Affairs Administrative Boards |
| CODESA | Convention for a Democratic South Africa |
| COSATU | South African Trade Unions |
| ETAC | Emergency Transport Action Committee |
| GAA | Group Areas Act |
| IFP | Inkatha Freedom Party |
| JCC | Johannesburg City Council |
| LAC | Local Area Committee |
| LDA | Lyndhurst and District Association |
| MOH | Medical Officer of Health |
| MP | Member of Parliament |
| NAD | Native Affairs Department |
| NEDPL | North Eastern District Protection League |
| NP | National Party |
| NSUTA | New Stand Holders United Tenants Association |
| NUAA | Native Urban Areas Act |
| PUAHB | Peri-Urban Areas Health Board |
| PUTCO | Public Utility Transport Corporation Limited |
| RDM | Rand Daily mail |
| SAIRR | South African Institute of Race Relations |
| SANNC | South African National Native Council |
| SAP | South African Police |
| SAYCO | South African Youth Civics Organisation |
| SOWETO | South Western Townships |
| TPA | Transvaal Provincial Administration |
| WNLA | Witwatersrand Native Labour Association |
| WPDHB | Witwatersrand and Pretoria District Health Board |
| WRAB | West Rand Administration Board |
| SPCA | Society for Prevention of cruelty to animals |

**MAP OF ALEXANDRA TOWNSHIP SHOWING STREET NAMES**




Source:http://www.flashconstruct.com/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=59&Itemid=54 accessed October 19, 2011

**Key For New Street Names**

Vasco da Gama - Florence Moposho Street
Hofmeyr - Richard Baloyi Street
Selbourne - Reverend Sam Buti Street
Roosevelt - Alfred Nzo Street
Rooth - Josias Madzunya Street
London - Vincent Tshabalala Street
http://www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3066&Itemid=192