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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.