Alexandra! : An Unsolicited Tribute from an Anthropologist
アレクサンドラに捧ぐ

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Abstract: Alexandra is a predominantly black and working-class township located in the northeast part of Johannesburg, South Africa. Established as a freehold black township in the period of racial segregation, Alexandra has accommodated generations of urban Africans with different cultural backgrounds and social interests. As its residents have fought determinedly against the white regime to protect their homes, Alexandra has survived a number of crises and recently celebrated its centenary under the black majority rule. However, the township has accumulated causes of internal conflict, with violent eruptions at times, as the population has become increasingly diversified, stratified and segmented. In order for Alexandra to grow into a better place for all, a host of politico-historical complications should be sorted out, which is a challenging field of moral and intellectual engagement for anthropologists, specifically myself.

Keywords: South Africa, Township, Apartheid, Anthropology

要約: アレクサンドラは、南アフリカ共和国ヨハネスブルグ市北東部に位置する黒人労働者階級タウンシップである。人種隔離政策時代に設立され、黒人の自由土地保有権が認められていたこの町では、様々な文化的背景と社会的利害関心を持つ都市生活者が何世代にも渡って生活してきた。彼らが自らの住処を守り、断固として白人政権と闘った結果、アレクサンドラは幾多の危機を乗り越え、その百年祭を黒人政権のもとで祝うことができた。その一方で、住民の多様化と階層化および分節化が進む中、タウンシップは内部抗争の火種を蓄積し、その暴力的発現も経験してきた。アレクサンドラが全ての住民にとってより良い町となるためには、政治的・歴史的に複雑化した多くの問題を解決しなければならない。それは、人類学者（とりわけ筆者）の知的および倫理的関与のあり方が厳しく問われる領域でもある。

キーワード: 南アフリカ、タウンシップ、アパルトヘイト、人類学

In the northeast part of Johannesburg, the economic capital of South Africa, lies a sprawling township called Alexandra. We do not know exactly who Alexandra was. The people who live there — mostly black and working-class — have often been told that she was the wife of Herbert B. Papenfus, a white farmer and attorney who established the township in 1912. This, however, is a popular myth. Records show that neither his wife nor his daughters nor any other female relatives bore the name Alexandra.¹ After whom, then, did Papenfus name the township? It is possible that Alexandra was a child
born to Papenfus out of wedlock; he apparently had one with his former typist and lover, to whom he gave over his shares in the township’s management company without his wife’s knowledge.\(^2\) If this child was indeed Alexandra, she must have been bewildered by not only the circumstances of her birth but also the growth of a black township named after her—often called by the shorter, epicene name of Alex. Having witnessed the heyday of apartheid, the liberation struggle and the birth of the New South Africa, the township recently celebrated its centenary with some 350,000 residents, saluted even by the current state president Jacob Zuma.\(^3\)

Apart from the possible soap opera behind its name, Alexandra is truly an intriguing place. As a rare instance of a freehold black township that survived apartheid, Alexandra has accommodated generations of African urbanites with different cultural backgrounds and social interests. Alexandra is also a highly politicized place; though lesser known than Soweto, a former black-designated area in the southwest part of Johannesburg, Alexandra was the locus of the urban struggle against the white regime, as well as of violent infighting among black South Africans. More recently, Alexandra became known for its striking contrast with Sandton, a bustling hub of business and consumption in the north of Johannesburg, located only a few kilometers away from the township. Compared to Sandton, with its lavish hotels, restaurants and shopping malls, Alexandra is often represented as the other end of the spectrum—a slum sunk in poverty and crime, left out of the economic fortunes of post-apartheid South Africa. While this view, unfortunately, is partly true, it does not do justice to the diversity, complexity and, above all, vibrancy of Alexandra, with which I, a Japanese anthropologist, fell in love.

My relationship with South Africa started in 2003 when I took up a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Alexandra caught my attention as a predominantly black, impoverished township in the predominantly white, wealthy northern suburbs in which I lived. It was very easy for an expat from the North in Johannesburg to be stuck in a white middle-class community, hardly mixing with black Africans, apart from domestic servants. I became increasingly frustrated by the de facto segregation of social groups in post-apartheid South Africa, which added to a lingering sense of guilt that had haunted me since my doctoral research in Zambia. In a nutshell, the guilt of anthropology is that it draws on the inequality between groups of people; the rich and powerful study the poor and powerless in the name of social science. Life in Johannesburg constantly reminded me of the privilege that I felt guilty about, which held me back from conducting virtually any fieldwork in the divided city,
let alone in a township like Alexandra. Instead, I spent a lot of time at suburban parties, often spoiling the mood, and wandering around the streets, where I often got robbed and then felt better, as if I had paid a price for my prerogatives.

Having thus wasted a few years in unproductive melancholy, I ended up leaving for Japan with hardly any research achievements. Since then, I keep going back to South Africa, always feeling like the visit was a return match.

Alexandra has a strong magnetism for anthropologists and historians alike with its unusual presence in the northern suburbs. Back in the time of racial segregation, the township was like a black island in a white sea — unlike Soweto, which was located deliberately far from any white settlements. In fact, Herbert Papenfus did not originally intend to establish a black township. He purchased the land where Alexandra now stands in the hope of selling it by lots to white buyers. As he had little success in this attempt, he divided the land into smaller plots to sell exclusively to non-white buyers. This decision to convert Alexandra from white to black was wise in a sense, and benevolent in another, given that it barely preceded the enforcement of the Native Land Act in 1913.

The Native Land Act notoriously disabled black South Africans from owning land except in specific areas, mostly rural and barren, designated as theirs. By having Alexandra proclaimed black at the last minute, Papenfus secured not only possible buyers of his slow-selling land but also a precious urban area in which black Africans could acquire freehold properties. In fact, he was not simply a calculating businessman, nor a selfless philanthropist, in his guardianship of Alexandra. As an established attorney and, later on, parliamentarian, he made the most of his political influence in negotiating with white authorities for a ‘happy blend of liberal benevolence and commercial gain’. This enabled Alexandra in its early years to survive and even to enjoy some degree of self-governance. By the 1930s, however, the authorities started to consider complete removal of the township, which they thought was growing rapidly out of their control. Indeed, as is recalled by Nelson Mandela — the first black president of South Africa and a one-time resident of Alexandra — the township had developed into an ‘urban Promised Land’ where a multitude of black Africans could gather in search of freedom and opportunities.

The population of Alexandra became increasingly mixed and stratified as the
township attracted a large influx of rural migrants and urban poor. Most of them joined the freehold township as tenants, subtenants or even squatters, while resorting to informal, sometimes illegal, means of making a living. Consequently, Alexandra lost its original reputation among white authorities as an ‘upmarket version’ of Sophiatown, another black township in Johannesburg, accommodating a ‘more respectable, God-fearing and prosperous population’. Instead, Alexandra became known for its poor living conditions and high crime rate, which caused great concern for the white residents of the northern suburbs; they came to regard the township as a menace to their health and wealth, branding it as a ‘running sore of evil’ and the ‘Mecca of Native Scum’. Ironically, however, Alexandra was a convenient labour pool for the northern suburbs, whose affluent residents were in constant need of domestic servants. Besides, it was not financially feasible to demolish and relocate the township, whose population was approaching 100,000 in the late 1940s. Alexandra thus made it through the 1950s, when Sophiatown was bulldozed and rezoned for the white working class, with its black residents forcefully relocated to Soweto and elsewhere.

The full-blown apartheid from the 1960s to 1980s put Alexandra through more crises, including the infamous attempt to turn the township into a ‘hostel city’ of black migrants. The original plan was to build 25 single-sex hostels to house 2,500 people each, with all of the other homes in the township demolished and residents removed. In such a way, the white authorities expected Alexandra to provide Johannesburg with much-needed black workers without granting them permanent residency or family life, not to mention freehold titles. This shamefully segregationist plan met with heavy opposition from the residents of not only Alexandra but also the northern suburbs; apparently, many whites were genuinely concerned by the inhuman conditions of the hostels, if not by the inconvenience of having their live-in servants relocated to Alexandra. Such oppositions materialized the successful ‘Save Alex’ campaign led by Sam Buti, a black minister of the white-dominated Dutch Reformed Church, which gave Alexandra momentum for self-governance and civil movements. Buti, however, was to learn the hard way the difficulty of working within the system of apartheid; he was elected mayor of the township, increasingly criticized as a sell-out, and ousted from power after the ‘Six Day War’ revolt in 1986.

By the time the hostel city plan was abandoned, thanks as much to the opposition campaign as to the lack of financing, three high-rise hostels had been built — one for females and two for males. Contrary to the authorities’ claim, the hostels were devoid even of basic amenities, equipped instead with electric steel doors in the style of a
maximum-security prison. Unsurprisingly, alienation grew between the hostel dwellers and other township residents, culminating in bloody conflicts in the early 1990s; the male hostels became a stronghold of the Inkatha Freedom Party, a pro-Zulu organization that clashed with Mandela’s African National Congress over the framework of black majority rule. Two decades on, the three edifices still tower over Alexandra, partially refurbished and inhabited by thousands, exhibiting a gloomy posture as a monument to the botched social engineering experiment — called apartheid.

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While Sophiatown has been sublimated into a legendary township of cool gangs and jazz musicians, Alexandra lives on as an anomalous enclave in the northern suburbs, earning an unsavory reputation for poverty and crime. To be fair, Alexandra today is so layered and segmented that it cannot be easily labeled as a community of any kind. Since the 1980s, the township has expanded beyond the Jukskei River and developed a middle-class area called East Bank, along with its vast extension, Far East Bank, where the state offers matchbox houses for lower-income earners. On the other side of the river lies the original, highly congested area known fondly or hatefully as Old Alex. Its landscape is dominated by rows of shacks and piles of rubbish, although dotted with some flashy signs of upgrade, including a modern shopping mall complete with a supermarket and fast food shops. The long-neglected township has gained such tangible benefits of regime change through the ‘Alexandra Renewal Project’, a billion-rand state initiative for better living conditions and more opportunities. Launched in 2001 by then president Thabo Mbeki, this ambitious project is now expected to be completed in 2014, its deadline having been extended twice before.

Unfortunate as it may be, the Alexandra Renewal Project has stirred up as much expectation as disappointment among township residents due to the slow and partial delivery of the promised benefits. Even more unfortunate is that competition for the limited benefits, particularly housing, has brought into sharp relief the division of social classes in Alexandra, fueling the conflicts between property owners, tenants, squatters, hostel dwellers and so on. It is truly remarkable how vocal the township residents are about their different interests, represented by a myriad of civil associations. On the one hand, property owners are seeking the full restoration of their freehold titles expropriated by the apartheid government. On the other, their backyards are occupied by shacks whose tenants are claiming right of residence and boycotting rent. At the
same time, the poorest of the poor make their homes in dilapidated factories, defying eviction orders unless alternative accommodations are provided. All in all, everyone looks for benefits from the Alexandra Renewal Project, disputes over who deserves them, and feels left out when others receive benefits before they do.

Against the backdrop of such a divisive social climate, Alexandra became the epicentre of xenophobic violence in 2008; a mob of frustrated youths attacked foreign African residents of the township, whom they made into scapegoats for crime and unemployment in South Africa, inducing a series of similar incidents that raged across the country for two weeks. The eruption of black-on-black xenophobia attracted national and international attention to Alexandra, adding to its popular image as a volatile shanty town loaded with post-apartheid hopes and despairs. It should be noted, however, that it was not that Alexandra as a whole burst into flames of hatred toward ‘others within’. In reality, violent incidents were limited to Old Alex, specifically the hostel neighborhood dubbed Beirut, which has remained the most strained section of the township since the political turbulence of the 1990s. The further spread of violence was largely contained by local community leaders, who did not necessarily share the unfair animosity toward the least privileged African foreigners. Clearly, for better or worse, Alexandra is not a cohesive whole.

It is very unlikely that the Alexandra Renewal Project will find a happy ending that satisfies all the residents’ needs — whatever those needs may be. The authorities might as well continue with the renewal for an indefinite period, adding complexity to the ever-segmenting township that would ‘defy all attempts at simplification’. Indeed, Alexandra is quite a challenging field of engagement for city planners and anthropologists alike. It is one thing to admire the township for its growing complexity and diversity, along with its vibrant culture of social action and critique. Quite another is to help the township sort out its historical and political complications so as to grow into a better place for, hopefully, all, including African foreigners. In this regard, it is far from clear to me what expertise anthropologists can offer, and what ethical stance they can assume, especially when they are comfortably nestled in the North — the northern suburbs of the world.

I still believe that anthropology does not boil down to conflict journalism or development work, or for that matter, anything with pragmatic accountability. And yet, the more time I spend in South Africa, the less certain I become about the potentiality of anthropology as an intellectual engagement with the world. I have no justification for involving South Africans, particularly the people of Alexandra, in my academic
soul-searching that I call research, while they have every reason to spare no time for it, knowing the hypocrisy and egotism of the North only too well. Nevertheless, I can’t help going back to South Africa. I can’t help seeking approval from South Africans, both black and white, for my existence. Admittedly, I am desperate for salvation from the shameful status that the apartheid government granted us, the Japanese, who embraced it with open arms — ‘honorary white’.

Please accept my belated congratulations on your centenary, Alexandra. I didn’t have the nerve to come and celebrate the occasion with your people. But I’ll be back. That’s for sure. – Kaori

Alexandra viewed from the Far East Bank; matchbox houses in the foreground and Sandton skyscrapers in the background on the right (photographed by the author in September 2009).

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