

Mixed Lifestyles in South African Townships: Interviews and Participant Observation in the Greater Cape Town Area

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Abstract

In South Africa, “township” means habitats for black people, from mainly low-income backgrounds. Until 1994, there was once severe racial segregation called Apartheid in this culturally diverse nation. During that period, the government forced black people into segregated areas such as “homelands” and “townships”, which they had created.

Townships are still exclusively for black people, even since the abolition of Apartheid. Most black residents in townships are Christians practicing Westernized lifestyles, while simultaneously upholding African traditions.

Townships are racially homogeneous, but they are economically diverse. Residential types include informal settlements, the buildings of which are similar to “Favela” or “Hope Occupation” in Brazil. The residents build shacks by themselves with recycled materials. The neighborhoods are usually clean, and the interior is better furnished than one might expect from the exterior. The municipal government provides the public water supply and toilets, as well as the maintenance of them. The residents buy prepaid electricity and air-time for their mobile phones. There are also government-offered simple houses and various types of collective housing, the rent of which is low or free. People who have a steady income and have eligibility for a mortgage may purchase custom-designed homes. They create middle to upper-class neighborhoods within townships, but they are not gated like the affluent communities in the USA. A complicated sense of community within a township seems to exist within the economic gap.

Social Background

Demographic distribution

South Africa is a “rainbow nation” with eleven official languages and countless ethnic groups. According to the 2019 census¹, about 80% of citizens are Native Africans; or black people, consisting of different tribes such as Zulu and Xhosa. The coloured, or mixed-race people are about 9% of the national population, but they amount to almost half of the population in the greater Cape Town area. White people consist of 8% with two-thirds of them Afrikaans, or descendants of continental Europeans, mainly Dutch and French, as well as one-third of them descending from British ancestry. Afrikaans immigrated in the 17th century, and later in the 18th century, the British came and colonized the land. These two different white populations had different languages and a long history of conflict against each other. Subsequently, the white people in Cape Town are mainly Afrikaans, with more British people residing in Durban. Likewise, there are more Zulus in Durban and a higher percentage of Xhosa in Cape Town. Additionally, in the greater Durban area there is the second-largest Indian community in the world outside of India, which consists of as much as 25% of the regional population. Mahatma Gandhi lived in South Africa for 21 years, and he taught agriculture in an Indian settlement on the outskirts of Inanda township near Durban. Nowadays, Indians are said to have a strong economic and political influence.

Historical Background

Colonization and Apartheid

In South Africa, there was enforced racial segregation of the habitat by the Apartheid government. This started with the Native Land Act in 1913, which prohibited land trade between races. “Homelands” were designated in rural areas to make “independent territories” for native Africans. They were supposed to be self-sufficient by production of agriculture, but the lands were so barren that the residents could not get enough produce to feed themselves. Additionally, the homelands were so remote that the residents had

difficulty commuting to the city to work. The act, therefore, only worked to segregate people and deprived non-whites of equal citizenship in South Africa. This finalized the economic gap between the whites and non-whites.

In urban areas, the Group Areas Act in 1950 specified some “white only” areas in cities, which were exclusively for European descendants. Non-white people, including native Africans, Asians, and Coloured people were forced out of these areas. Some suburban areas around the big cities were specifically for the accommodation of those non-white people who became expelled from their homes. Among them were “townships” that referred to those areas exclusively for native-African black residents. They had to commute from there to the city for work, even after Apartheid ended in 1994.

Research Methods

Interviews and Participant Observations

This research is based on interviews with township residents and participant observations, while also referring to facts and data drawn from local and global media articles. In May 2016, the author visited schools, churches, shops, community facilities, and residences in Langa, Guguletu, Nyanga Crossroads, and Khayelitsha

townships in the greater Cape Town area. Those visits were made in a chartered car with a private guide because townships are known for their high crime rate and lack of safe public transportation. Prior to this, in 2014, the author's fieldwork plan was shelved because the guide cancelled the booking at the last moment. Non-black drivers refusing to enter townships also is a common situation. Nonetheless, the visits in 2016 were successful thanks to the reliable guide, Mr Thabang Titotti of Ezizwe Travel and Tours. He was only found six months prior to the fieldwork and after considerable correspondence with several tour companies. In 2018, the author visited South Africa again and stayed overnight in Langa and Khayelitsha with township residents, who she became acquainted with through connections obtained during her 2016 visits. This time she conducted in-depth interviews, especially in the informal settlements.

Low-income Neighborhoods

Subsidized Homes and self-built shacks

There are several types of housing for low-income residents in townships. Old public apartments from the Apartheid-era, which were often crowded with multiple families per flat, became much better after 1994, according to the residents (Fig.1).



Figure 1. Old apartment buildings from the internment era (photo by Arno Suzuki, 19 August, 2018).

Government-subsidized single-detached houses were provided under the Reconstruction and Development Program by Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress (ANC) administration started in 1994. These were called RDP houses, or nicknamed as “Mandela houses” by some residents. They are made of concrete blocks, which take time to build, and the waiting list is always long. The subsidized houses are cheap or free, which has led to some recipients subletting their houses to earn money, while they stay in a shack. However, this kind of business is now patrolled and strictly prohibited. Additionally, there are also new kinds of government-subsidized collective housing.

There is still a serious housing shortage for all low-income people, and many people have self-built shacks in the backyards of RDP houses (Fig. 2). The backyard is usually provided for free out of the goodwill of the RDP houses owners, to help those more in need. They have also built shacks in peripheral areas or on empty township lands, making informal settlements. Even though they are illegally squatting, the municipal government, to some extent, takes care of the infrastructure of these areas to maintain sanitation. They also provide shared water lines and toilets, and the municipal

employees clean them. In either housing areas, laundry can be seen everywhere, neatly hung outside, and the neighborhoods are thoroughly clean in and out.

Inside, the shacks are creatively equipped with furniture and portable electric appliances. The life there seems to be more comfortable than it may be imagined from the outside (Fig. 3).

The minimum wage in South Africa as of 2018, was 20 rand per hour, or about 1.5 USD, which makes a monthly income of 3500 rand. This is less than 250 USD. The unemployment rate in South Africa is about 30%, which is much higher in townships. Every other black person who wants a job is unemployed (Wesster 2019). The prices of food, commodities and services, however, are not that different from advanced countries. Therefore, low-income people are ‘making their ends meet’ with simple food such as grains and potatoes, while living creatively with second-hand goods.

An interviewed resident complained that it was exceedingly difficult to get a job without a personal connection, and non-skilled workers such as waitresses are often under pressure from power and sexual harassment. On the other



Figure 2. Shacks built in the backyard of RDP houses (photo by Arno Suzuki, 22 August, 2018)



Figure 3. Typical furnishing of shacks (photo by Arno Suzuki, 22 August, 2018)

hand, some white people have said they thought it was unfair that black people have a priority to enter some universities, and indeed there are some privileged black people from affluent families.

Middle to Upper-Class Homes

Custom-designed houses with ownership

Those who have a steady job and are eligible for a mortgage have built custom-designed houses and created high-class neighborhoods, which are sometimes called the “Beverly Hills” of a township. Some of these houses are large and look luxurious (Fig.4). The occupations of these homeowners include public servants, teachers, nurses, self-employed, business owners, as well as technicians such as hairdressers, and servants for rich white families.

The interior of the upper-class homes in townships are very nicely furnished, like those from advanced countries in Europe and North America. And their homes are always tidy and ready for surprise visits. These middle to upper-class neighborhoods are not gated but are surrounded by lower-income areas and informal settlements, which are known for their high crime rate. Children from these homes and those from shacks can be friends. In contrast,

affluent homes situated outside townships are usually gated with barbed wire and security cameras.

Residents are still cautious about crimes in townships, and pupils go to school in a car, or they walk in groups. Adults do not want to walk around alone, especially outside their familiar areas, even during the daytime. They are also cautious about going to different townships. According to an uber driver from Khayelitsha, most township residents are welcoming visitors in order to provide job opportunities. Only those who are addicted to drugs commit crimes, such as robbery and murder.

Mixed Lifestyle in Townships

Modernization, Religion and Tradition

Eighty percent of the black population in South Africa are Christians, and township residents appear to be more religious. On Sunday mornings, many people dress-up to go to their local church. There are different sects of Christianity, and individuals have the freedom to choose one, which can be different from their family. They also say prayers at home hand-in-hand with family, relatives and friends. In their everyday conversations, they refer to “God” all the time in the actual sense.



Figure 4. Custom-designed house in a township (photo by Arno Suzuki, 19 August, 2018)

At the same time, they also go to so-called “herbalists,” who practice traditional African medicine and healing methods. The healing methods and materials used differs by tribe. They are also licensed medical professionals like doctors in western medicine, and the ingredients used in traditional medicine and rituals are sold in big outdoor markets. This is somewhat similar to China, where people use both western and traditional Chinese medicine.

In township community spaces, they make a traditional light alcoholic beverage called “umqombothi” and drink one-by-one, together from the same big pot. Such a drink sharing feels somewhat like the traditional tea party and ceremonial sake drinking in Japan, where people confirm their relationships through sipping a drink from the same cup.

The Future of Townships

Education and Tourism

The only common working language in townships is English, even though there are eleven official languages in the nation. They speak their mother tongue at home, such as Xhosa and Zulu, and start learning English from kindergarten. Therefore, everyone is at least bilingual from a young age.

School education in townships seemed to be ordered and rather strict. In kindergartens, young children have a 15-minute inclement schedule from early in the morning to late afternoon. In junior and senior high schools, pupils were studying diligently with many homework assignments on math, biology, and other such academic subjects. They wear a uniform and look tidy with well-pressed white shirts. Township children are well disciplined and mannered, none of whom look like they will grow into criminals. However, colleges are so expensive that low-income people cannot afford higher or vocational education.

Townships have the necessary infrastructure such as schools, stores, clinics, and so on, but they do not have enough parks or sports facilities for children yet. Subsequently, the children play soccer in the open spaces between the houses. The townships need official programs to teach sports, according to Ms Balise Jicolo, the CEO of an NPO called Rescue Youth Community Organisation. This NPO has been supporting physical education at schools in townships, and they have a plan to build a remedial school in Langa Township to reach out to more potential learners and create jobs, but they are facing a challenge in funding.

Townships have been regarded as dangerous slums by non-black people, but some people have started offering tourism in the African experience. The number of educational tours and informal accommodation, such as bed and breakfast have been increasing rapidly in recent years. Many township B&Bs offer modern western-style rooms and continental breakfast. An interviewed owner said that he retired from public medical service, then added rooms upstairs using his savings, and started his own family bed and breakfast business (Fig. 5). His wife professionally offers a gorgeous African dinner on request, and they also offer optional walking tours with private guides. In general, the township B&B charges a little more than similar private lodging found in the city, probably because the staff need to pay personal attention to the guests for their safety.

Soweto, in the Johannesburg area, is the most successful township in tourism, and people visit Vilakazi Street every day on big tour buses. Langa, which is the oldest township in the greater Cape Town area and the closest to the city, attracts visitors with the colorful tourist center that showcases African arts. On the other hand, in Khayelitsha, the biggest and farthest township, the tourist center rarely has visitors.

One of the problems for township tourism is the lack of transportation from the city. There are local trains that go to townships, but they are usually overcrowded and are at risk of onboard crime. Furthermore, their schedules are so unreliable that even township residents would not recommend to use them. City buses may also feel dangerous to visitors. The most popular and convenient transportation to and from townships, is the so-called “kombi taxi” which is a 14-seat van ride-sharing scheme, but it appears to be exclusively for township residents. In consequence, it must be difficult to attract further tourists to the areas without the provision of a pick-up service from the city.

Further Discussion
Two Black Communities

During this research, the author realized that the “black community” in South Africa is not a single entity. There is a vast difference in opportunities for low-income black people living in townships and the more affluent ones residing outside. The former cannot afford to go to a community college even within their own township. Whereas, the latter may study at a top-class institution such as the University of Cape Town or schools abroad. Those who have grown up in a township and become successful,



Figure 5. Conversion to a Bed and Breakfast (photo by Arno Suzuki, 22 August, 2018)

may come back to find a home in an upper-class area. Whilst, those who grew up outside townships seldom think about even visiting townships. The division among black people is so complicated that it requires further research and discussion.

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