

## Revisiting ‘Honorary Whites’: A Preliminary Research Note on the Japanese Racial Consciousness in Post-Apartheid South Africa

「名誉白人」再考：ポスト・アパルトヘイト南アフリカにおける  
日本人の人種意識に関する研究ノート

Kaori Sugishita

杉下 かおり

**Abstract:** Japanese have admired the West ever since they became a part of the modern, West-centered world. ‘Race’, however, has remained a factor that prevents Japan, a non-white nation, from identifying itself with the West. The Japanese found an awkward solution for this modern dilemma in apartheid South Africa, where they enjoyed an ‘honorary white’ status, which granted them some rights and freedoms normally denied to non-white peoples. Twenty years after the official end of apartheid, I have started a research among the Japanese community in post-apartheid South Africa, exploring their racial experiences, relationships and consciousness. In doing so, I do not withhold my moral stance against racism in the hope of establishing a dialectical relationship with the Japanese community. I believe that ‘our’ attunement with white supremacy may not be limited to the apartheid era but is a deep-rooted symptom of Japanese modernity.

**Keywords:** South Africa, Japan, race, honorary whites

**要旨:** 日本人は、西洋を中心とする近代世界に参入して以来、常に西洋に好感を抱いてきた。しかし、「人種」という差異により、非白人国家日本は、自らを西洋と同一視することはできなかった。この近代的ジレンマが奇妙な形で解消されたのが、アパルトヘイト体制下の南アフリカである。当時の在南ア日本人は、非白人には認められていなかった権利と自由を享受し、「名誉白人」と呼ばれていた。その体制が終了して 20 余年となる今、私はポスト・アパルトヘイト南アフリカに生きる日本人の人種経験、人種関係および人種意識について研究を始めた。その上で、私は自らの反人種主義的立場を隠すことなく、現地の日本人と対話的關係を確立することに努めている。「我々」の白人至上主義への迎合は、アパルトヘイト期の南アフリカに限られた現象ではなく、日本近代の根深い「病」なのかもしれないのである。

**キーワード:** 南アフリカ、日本、人種、名誉白人

### 1. Research Questions

South Africa and its ongoing struggle against racism recaptured the international spotlight when Nelson Mandela, the first black president of the formerly white-dominated country, died at the end of 2013. The news attracted due attention in Japan as

elsewhere, flooding the media with compliments and condolences for the great man, including those from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Like many others did, he praised Mandela as a ‘man of conviction’, a ‘promoter of reconciliation’ and ‘a beacon of hope for the future’, with a determination to ‘walk the “long way toward freedom and a better world” together with South Africa’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013, December 6). Heartfelt as it may have been, this statement sounded rather superficial, as it offered no reflection on Japan’s involvement with apartheid, the institutionalized white supremacy that Mandela fought for most of his life. In fact, as critics noted (Tsuyama and Katsumata, 2014: 33), such reflection was generally missing from the Japanese media coverage on his death, allowing the Japanese people to celebrate his life as if they had always been on his side.

Looking back on history, it even seems hypocritical of the Japanese to admire Mandela for his achievements. For one thing, the Japanese government and business community were notoriously tolerant of apartheid; they were reluctant to take a tougher stance against South Africa despite mounting international criticism for their effective support of the racist regime (Morikawa, 1997: 52-90; Payne, 1987). Moreover, Japanese expatriates in South Africa were well-attuned to white supremacy; as foreign visitors, they enjoyed what was called ‘honorary white’ status, granted some rights and freedoms normally denied to non-white peoples (Osada, 2002; Yamamoto, 2012). On the other hand, anti-apartheid movements, albeit small and scattered, did arise in Japan, expressing deep shame at Japan’s complicity in apartheid, particularly at the ‘honorary white’ status of Japanese (Kusuhara, 1988, 2014).

To be sure, ‘honorary white’ was neither a legal status nor a racial category provided under apartheid but a journalistic notion given substance by anti-apartheid activists (Osada, 2002: 144-146). It remains true, however, that the Japanese took part in apartheid as a privileged group of non-whites, largely failing to empathize with other, oppressed non-whites, such as the Chinese, let alone the black Africans, whose historic fight for racial equality unfolded under their noses. What can we make of this embarrassing chapter in the history of modern Japan?

Relations between Japan and South Africa officially started in 1910, when the former established an honorary consulate in Cape Town. Japan, then an emerging nation in East Asia, looked at South Africa, then a dominion of the British Empire, as a promising market and a gateway to Europe and America. However, the white government of South Africa rejected Asians, including Japanese, as ‘prohibited immigrants’, making it difficult for them to conduct business in the country. The

Japanese government lobbied hard to obtain special treatment for its citizens, becoming increasingly proud and self-righteous as Japan grew into the only imperial power based outside the West. In 1930, in the hope of increasing exports to Japan amid the Great Depression, the South African government finally agreed, albeit informally, to allow Japanese to enter and live in the country. This agreement is generally regarded as the origin of what is now known as the ‘honorary white’ status of Japanese under apartheid (Morikawa, 1997: 36-37; Osada, 2002: 39).

Japan and South Africa resumed economic and diplomatic relations after the interruption of World War II, with the former re-emerging as a non-Western economic powerhouse and the latter inviting international criticism for implementing apartheid. In 1961, the year South Africa seceded from the Commonwealth, the South African government confirmed that Japanese were to be treated as whites under the Group Areas Act, which attracted negative publicity to Japan’s economic support for white minority rule (Osada, 2002: 143; *Time*, 1962, January 19). Finally, in the late 1980s, Japan unwittingly became the largest trade partner of increasingly isolated South Africa, a relationship duly criticized by the United Nations and even by the United States, much to the dismay of the Japanese government. It was only then that Japan introduced economic sanctions and other measures against South Africa, implementing its official stance of anti-apartheid, which had been repeatedly expressed to no avail (Osada, 2002: 82).

Japan’s relationship with White South Africa, though unfortunate, was not anomalous but reflective of a dilemma that Japanese often faced in the course of modernization/Westernization. Ever since they made their debut in the modern, West-centered world, the Japanese have generally been well-disposed toward the West/White even though they waged a few wars against its hegemony. Under the same hegemony of the West Japan’s relation with Africa developed, often mediated by Westerners, who would instill Japanese with white justifications for black subjugation (Fujita, 2005; Russel, 2009 [1997]). After its decisive defeat in an attempt to replace the West in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan seems to have acquired membership in the West, as much for its outright pro-American policy as for its economic and social development. However, being a non-white nation, Japan could never have fully identified itself with the West as an empire of white nations. Indeed, ‘race’ — or, to be precise, ‘skin color’ — has remained a fateful, insurmountable difference between Japan and the West, no matter how avidly the former Westernized itself (Majima, 2014). This modern Japanese

dilemma found a rather awkward solution in the ‘honorary white’ deal in apartheid South Africa, which some Japanese embraced, while others loathed.

A quick reflection on Japan’s involvement with apartheid thus raises some uncomfortable questions about the racial consciousness of Japanese. How do they conceive of themselves and of others with darker or lighter complexions? Are they historically and geopolitically disposed to look up to whites and look down on blacks? If so, how does such consciousness manifest itself and possibly change in post-apartheid South Africa, where people of all colors bear the enormous burden of social complications left behind by institutionalized racism? What, in short, does it mean for Japanese to live in post-apartheid South Africa?

I intend to explore these questions in the coming years through a serious engagement with Japanese individuals in post-apartheid South Africa. This attempt, admittedly, is as much personal as academic — the self-questioning of an Africanist Japanese anthropologist who longs to share in South Africa’s ongoing struggle for a better future for all.

## **2. Preliminary Fieldwork**

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2016, April 21), 1,488 Japanese citizens reside in South Africa as of July 2015. I conducted a short preliminary fieldwork among the Japanese community in late August–early September 2015 in order to determine the details and prospects of my research on their racial consciousness. The fieldwork was centered on open-ended interviews with seven Japanese residents of Johannesburg, South Africa’s largest city, where I myself once lived in 2003–2005.

According to the 2011 census, Johannesburg has a population of about 4.4 million; it consists of 76 percent blacks, 12 percent whites, 6 percent ‘coloreds’ and 5 percent Indians/Asians (Statistics South Africa, n.d.). It is the economic capital of South Africa attracting business expatriates from the global North, including Japan, along with migrant workers from poorer neighboring countries, such as Zimbabwe and Mozambique. While affluent foreigners avoid the city’s unsafe central district, a new business precinct in the north, called Sandton, is flourishing with headquarters of international corporations and agencies. In addition to such Japanese firms as Toshiba, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) has an office in Sandton, working under the jurisdiction of the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Further northeast, adjacent to Johannesburg, lies Pretoria, the political capital of South Africa,

where the Embassy of Japan is located and hosts diplomatic expatriates. Hence the two cities alone accommodate a sizable portion of the Japanese population in South Africa — around 400 in Johannesburg and 200 in Pretoria, according to an informal estimate.

Developing contacts with them, I found the Japanese in Johannesburg loosely knit into several networks with overlapping membership, the most inclusive of which was the Japanese Association of South Africa. Also known as the *Nippon* (Japan) Club of South Africa, the association was established in Johannesburg in 1961, reflecting the growing economic bond between Japan and South Africa (Morikawa, 1997: 56, 147–154). At the time of my research, the association, according to its secretariat, had a membership of around 500, consisting mostly of short-term expat families based in Johannesburg or Pretoria. The secretariat itself operates from Sandton in Johannesburg, with an office rented from the JETRO, which suggests the association's close ties with the Japanese government and business community in South Africa. Besides organizing such functions as a New Year party and a Spring Festival, the association accommodates such hobby groups as a choir and a football club, thereby serving as a network node for the Japanese community in and around Johannesburg.

The Japanese Association is also tied to the Japanese School of Johannesburg, the only one of its kind in South Africa, located in a quiet suburb of Emmarentia. Established in 1966 for the children of Japanese families, the school grew as the city's Japanese business community grew; as of 1981, the school had 95 students (Morikawa, 1997: 153). At the time of my research, the school had some 30 students in elementary to middle-school levels, with eight teachers, including a headmaster, sent from Japan by the Japanese government. The headmaster estimated that there were about 60 more Japanese children in the city who could have joined his school; apparently, they go to local schools where they study in English and mix with South African children, as their parents wish. Still, the Japanese Association, if not the business community, is central to the school's administration; its governing body is filled with association members working for the Japanese corporations stationed in Johannesburg, such as Fujifilm, Marubeni and Sumitomo (Japanese School of Johannesburg, 2015: 21). The school also provides the association with a venue for various activities, most importantly for its annual Spring Festival, which reportedly drew 2,770 visitors, including non-members, in 2015 (Nippon Club of South Africa, 2016, March 18). Hence the school can be considered a focal point of the association, although its importance may not apply to the Japanese community as a whole.

While the Japanese Association and the school cater mainly to short-term expatriates staying a few years, most of my informants have lived in South Africa much longer — up to 22 years. They are in varied circumstances; some are self-employed, while others are locally employed by Japanese or other organizations; some are single, while others are married with children; some are uncertain about their future, while others are prepared to make Johannesburg their final home. All in all, they live in South Africa on their own will and at their own risk, unlike those who have been temporarily sent there by their Japanese employers, often well-paid.

The long-term Japanese residents in and around Johannesburg constitute a loose network of probably around 50 members who exchange information and occasionally hold a get-together. Their involvement with the Japanese community seems to vary; while some work for the association and/or send their children to the school, others have no contact with the community other than visiting the Spring Festival. In either case, long-term residents often work with short-term residents or have a job related to Japan; hence they are involved in Japanese networking in South Africa to a greater or lesser extent. My impression, however, is that long-term residents are not particularly keen to associate with short-term residents, who come and go. We can tentatively assume that there are certain differences between the two groups of Japanese in terms of not only lifestyle and household budget but also racial experiences, relationships and consciousness.

As regards the core question of race, I touched on the issue in every interview I had with Japanese in Johannesburg; I made my research intention clear to them. Their responses ranged from a complaint about the incompetence of black workers to a lecture on the oneness of humanity, not to mention an annoyance at being frequently mistaken for Chinese. Some informants told me interesting anecdotes that either belied or conformed to my preconceptions about Japanese racial attitudes. I learned, for instance, about a Japanese long-term resident who would go clubbing in Alexandra, a predominantly black and low-income township near Sandton, where I thought no Japanese, except for anthropologists, would dare visit. I also heard about a Japanese short-term resident who casually referred to black people as *kuro-san* (a somewhat more courteous Japanese expression for ‘nigger’) without knowing that the very person he was talking to, a Japanese long-term resident, was actually married to one. Interestingly, however, I often found my informants disappointingly, if disarmingly, unconcerned with race as an issue of their own — or perhaps they pretended as such in an attempt to escape the anthropologist’s scrutiny and tacit judgement.

Lest it be merely impressionistic, I refrain from discussing the Japanese racial consciousness any further at this early stage of investigation. Suffice it to say that, though this fieldwork was short and unstructured, I found it quite valuable in obtaining a fairer picture of the Japanese community in post-apartheid South Africa. Given that their racial consciousness can be as vague or disguised as it is varied, discussing it would surely be less straightforward than bashing a straw man from the apartheid era — the honorary white.

### 3. Research Ethics

I plan to repeat fieldwork in South Africa for a few more years in order to obtain qualitatively and quantitatively meaningful data about Japanese racial consciousness and related traits. The Japanese community in and around Johannesburg will be surveyed with a web- and paper-based questionnaire; each respondent will be given a choice to either remain anonymous or to volunteer for an in-depth interview with the researcher. The questions will be devised to elicit self-reflection on the respondent's attitudes about race, as well as to obtain basic information, including age, gender, and length of residence in South Africa. If it works as I hope, this survey will provide me with more informants with whom to share my research interest, as well as some statistical insights into the Japanese community in post-apartheid South Africa. Needless to say, whether it works depends on how much trust and cooperation I can gain from the community — this may be the biggest challenge for such research.

The anticipated ethnographic difficulty reminds me of a controversial work by an acclaimed anthropologist, *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* by Vincent Crapanzano (1986 [1985]). This work constitutes a critical commentary on apartheid posing as an experimental ethnography of the white residents of a Cape village pseudonymously called Wyndal. Exploring 'the effect of domination on the dominating' (Crapanzano, 1986 [1985]: 22), the American scholar characterized white South Africans as caught in a 'primordial fear that comes from the absence of any possibility of a vital relationship with most of the people around one' (ibid.: 20), thereby nervously 'waiting for something, anything, to happen' (ibid.: 43), including the end of their domination.

Published and well-received in the West at the height of international condemnation of apartheid, this book drew largely negative reactions from white South African scholars. In fact, the 'natives' not only read the ethnography but also found out the real name and location of Wyndal, identified some villagers cited under pseudonyms,

interviewed them, and responded to the foreign author, unlike in classic anthropology (Boonzaier et al., 1985). Apparently, the book caused a scandal in Wyndal (actually Franschoek) as its key informants ‘not only easily recognized themselves in the text, but have discovered that many quite intimate and confidential matters were revealed by Crapanzano’ (ibid.: 65). With this scandal as a start, the native anthropologists raised some important questions about his work, among which I am most concerned about Crapanzano’s moral stance, or rather, his fieldwork ethics of withholding it from the people of Wyndal.

Crapanzano made it clear to his audience that he was not a ‘neutral observer’ of the system but was ‘morally and politically outraged’ at apartheid (1986 [1985]: 22). Yet he tried to ‘bracket off’ the outrage while in South Africa ‘in order to be as “objective” as possible’ (ibid.: 24). Hence the audience was left to wonder how much he shared his views with the people of Wyndal, to whom he evasively introduced himself as ‘an American social anthropologist who had come to South Africa to study the nature of stereotyping’ (ibid.: 26). His ethnography hardly reveals any conflicts he might have had with the villagers, since its structure is not so much dialogical as ‘plurivocal’ (ibid.: x); it consists largely of direct quotations from various villagers on various issues, hardly presenting conversations, let alone discussions, between the villagers and the anthropologist. According to some villagers interviewed later, Crapanzano stirred up little controversy while in the village, behaving like a ‘very embracing, open-minded guy who enjoyed the company of his hosts, avoided the coloureds as much as possible and actually played the same music as his hosts’ (Boonzaier et al., 1985: 68). Hence the native anthropologists criticized Crapanzano for ‘pumping out information while presenting himself as a friend, as an American sympathizer’ (ibid.: 68) in order to write a book in which he cast himself as a ‘moral judge’, as ‘someone who is morally superior and certainly outside, judging the poor residents’ (ibid.: 67).

I share Crapanzano’s belief in anthropology as an ‘investigation of otherness’ that is also an ‘investigation of our own possibility’ (1986 [1985]: 48). I doubt, however, that he achieved such investigation with regard to his white others in apartheid South Africa. In conducting fieldwork among them, Crapanzano played down his subjectivity as a moral actor, despite or because of his outrage against the object of investigation. He withheld his outrage from the people of Wyndal, thereby precluding not only moral conflicts but also moral interactions with them. Consequently, his book, *Waiting*, resembles a work not so much of anthropology as of undercover journalism, devoid of critical reflection by the author on his own subjectivity — on his disgust, contempt, and

‘certain sympathy’ for the people whose values he found reprehensible (ibid.: 24). Crapanzano thus failed to delve into ‘something of ourselves’ that ‘we in Europe and America’ would see in South Africa, which ‘they’ in South Africa would resent (ibid.: 48).

As for ‘we in Japan’, the Japanese anti-apartheid activists were relentless in criticizing ‘honorary white’ Japanese in South Africa. Yet most of them never had a chance to visit apartheid South Africa; hence their criticism, although well-founded, involved hardly any ethnographic engagement with the object of investigation. My aspiration is to have such engagement with the post-apartheid Japanese community in the interest of establishing a dialectical relationship with them. In doing so, I would not hide my moral stance against racism and racial inequality, not even my prejudices against ‘honorary whites’, so that ‘they’ can take issue with me as a person and a social anthropologist. I thus try to involve ‘them’ in my investigation of what I believe is important to ‘us’ all; I suspect that Japanese attunement with white supremacy is not limited to the apartheid era but is a deep-rooted symptom of Japanese modernity.

## References

- Boonzaier, Emile, Peter Skalnik, Robert Thornton, Martin West and Robert Gordon (1985) ‘Review Discussion, *Waiting: the Whites of South Africa* by Vincent Crapanzano (New York: Random House, 1985, 359pp.; London: Granada, 1985, 377pp.)’, *Social Dynamics* 11(2): 65-71.
- Crapanzano, Vincent (1986[1985]) *Waiting: the Whites of South Africa*, London: Paladin [Granada].
- Fujita, Midori (2005) *Afurika ‘hakken’: Nippon ni okeru Afurika zō no hensen*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Japanese School of Johannesburg (2015) *Heisei27nendo gakkō shōkai*.
- Kusuhara, Akira (1988) *Aparutoheito to Nippon*, Tokyo: Aki Shobō.  
(2014) ‘Aparutoheito karano kaihō ha, watashitachi no kaihō demoaru: Nippon ni okeru han-aparutoheito undo no ayumi’, *Gendai Shisō* 42(3): 203-215.
- Majima, Ayu (2014) *‘Hadairo’ no Yūtsu: Kindai Nippon no Jinshu Taiken*, Tokyo: Chūōkōron Shinsha.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2013, December 6) ‘Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, on the Passing of H.E. Mr Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, Former President of the Republic of South Africa’, ([http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_000122.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_000122.html)) (accessed on August 27, 2016).  
(2016, April 21) ‘Minami afurika kyōwakoku (Republic of South Africa): Kiso dēta’, ([http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/s\\_africa/data.html#section6](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/s_africa/data.html#section6)) (accessed on August 27, 2016).
- Morikawa, Jun (1997) *Japan and Africa: Big Business and Diplomacy*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

- Nippon Club of South Africa (2016, Match 18) '2015nen nipponjinkai harumatsuri no go-hōkoku', Facebook, (<https://www.facebook.com/sanipponclub/posts/1024203884307827>) (accessed on August 27, 2016).
- Osada, Masako (2002) *Sanctions and Honorary Whites: Diplomatic Policies and Economic Realities in Relations between Japan and South Africa*, Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press.
- Payne, Richard J. (1987) 'Japan's South Africa Policy: Political Rhetoric and Economic Realities', *African Affairs* 86(343): 167-178.
- Russel, John G. (2009[1997]) 'The Other Other: the Black Presence in the Japanese Experience', in Michael Weiner (ed.), *Japan's Minorities: the Illusion of Homogeneity* [second edition], Oxford: Routledge, pp.84-115.
- Statistics South Africa (n.d.) 'City of Johannesburg: People', ([http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page\\_id=1021&id=city-of-johannesburg-municipality](http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1021&id=city-of-johannesburg-municipality)) (accessed on August 27, 2016).
- Time (1962, Jan 19) 'South Africa: Honorary Whites', p.22, Print.
- Tsuyama, Naoko and Makoto Katsumata (2014) 'Tada, Ubuntu no tameni: Manderu to minami afurika no nagai michinori', *Gendai Shisō* 42(3): 30-51.
- Yamamoto, Meyu (2012) 'Jinshu gainen tositeno "meiyo hakujin": Aparutoheito-ki minami afurika no nipponjin komyunithi ni chūmoku site', *Soshioloji* 56(3): 103-119.

---

Received on February 17, 2017.