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## **“I am African, *iko nini*”**

### *Generational Conflict and the Politics of Being in Nairobi*

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#### **Abstract**

In Nairobi, young urban professionals self-confidently position themselves as Africans, while they are simultaneously reproached for being ‘un-African’. I explore this economy of claims and how it relates to the way the lifestyles of young professionals become the focus of generational conflict. I follow how various actors use the notions African, Western, modern and traditional as reified concepts that comprise a discursive field of practices. Disentangling public debates and individual self-perceptions, it becomes clear that matters of cultural heritage, gerontocratic relations and intergenerational expectations, and shifts in gender and sexuality reflect a field of tension and ambivalence. Young urban professionals display a vibrant cosmopolitan way of being and are the visible results of social transformations that started with their grandparents.

#### **Keywords**

Africanness – cosmopolitanism – cultural heritage – generational conflict

#### **Résumé**

Nairobi a assisté à l'émergence d'un groupe de jeunes professionnels urbanisés qui se positionnent avec assurance comme « africains » même si on leur reproche parallèlement d'être « peu africains ». Dans cet article, j'explore ce positionnement et la manière dont celui-ci contribue à faire du style de vie de ces jeunes professionnels le point de mire d'un conflit intergénérationnel. J'y observe la façon dont les divers acteurs recourent aux concepts « africain », « occidental », « moderne » et « traditionnel » comme autant de notions réifiées incluant un champ discursif de pratiques.

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Démêlant les débats publics des auto-perceptions individuelles, il devient clair que les questions d'héritage culturel, de relations gérontocratiques et d'attentes intergénérationnelles ainsi que les glissements en matière de genre et de sexualité sont le reflet d'un champ de tensions et d'ambivalences. Les jeunes professionnels urbanisés font montre d'une identité à la fois vibrante et cosmopolite et sont le signe visible des transformations sociales qui ont débuté à l'époque de leurs grands-parents.

### Mots-clés

africanité – cosmopolitisme – héritage culturel – conflit intergénérationnel

You're certainly right about the fact that young professionals are often criticized for being un-African or losing their culture or whatever. It's definitely more of a societal discourse than an interpersonal thing between parents and their own children, but it's there and it's very strong. Also, I think that young upwardly mobile people are very sensitive to it, very self-critical as well, and so the criticism of being un-African becomes bigger in their imagination than it might actually exist in reality. Finally, what people describe as an 'identity crisis' is not at all an extreme expression of what I feel or what many of my friends feel. It's really the most accurate way to describe all this ambiguity and mixed up feelings. It describes the feelings of disconnection, guilt, that we betrayed something, our sense of in-authenticity, the fact that we are confronted daily in Nairobi with the fact that we are NOT the average Kenyan, gives many of us a sense of standing outside history. [...] we feel like we don't own our culture in the first place. We fear that we are not part of it, but at the same time we hope that we are not part of it. That's what I understand when he [Robart] talks about an 'identity crisis'.

LAURA, 4 June, 2003<sup>1</sup>

Laura was a very confident and engaged person with, what she called, "African consciousness, you know, being African in this world". After reading the first draft of one of the chapters of my book on young professionals in Nairobi at the

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1 All names in this article are pseudonyms. In the 2004 visit, I presented each participant's autobiographical quotations and anecdotes to them individually, so that they could comment on their accuracy and give me consent to use the material.

turn of the century (Spronk 2012), Laura responded with an email, partly shown above. I had described how young professionals were being criticized for being un-African and how such accusations made them feel uncomfortable, to the extent that some claimed to have an identity crisis. I thought this explanation a little excessive and then Laura wrote in response that it was not. In her email she captured the feelings of ambivalence very well: young professionals feared not being part of what is considered Kenyan culture, while sometimes they did not want to be part of it.

The small group of young female and male white collar professionals that feature in this article, among them ICT professionals, accountants, NGO staff, etc., represent an emerging social group in different African metropolises that is not clearly defined but is nonetheless recognizable (see Spronk 2014a on the (idea) of the middle classes). Since 2001 I have followed one cohort who were then in their 20s. Born and raised in Nairobi, they have garnered the higher education necessary to take advantage of postcolonial opportunities, and to pursue professional careers and middle-class lifestyles. Their lives manifest a cosmopolitan ethos that unites the cultural, financial and political flows of global processes. As Joyce Nyairo pertinently shows in her work, young adults' taste in music, fashion, humour and social concerns signals their appreciation of multiple modes of being (2007; 2011). They are hip, ambitious and critical, and engage with local and global social issues. They see themselves as the *avant garde* of Kenya and their lifestyles testify to the reconfiguration of society that has been taking place in (post)colonial Kenya.

Why are young urban professionals in Nairobi criticized for being un-African, of betraying African culture? Both young professionals and those who so charge them employ the notion of 'being African', yet in different ways. I explore this 'economy of claims' (Saward 2006: 306). By disentangling public debates and individual self-perceptions, it becomes clear that matters of cultural heritage, gerontocratic relations and intergenerational expectations, and shifts in gender and sexuality reflect a field of tension and ambivalence. Young urban professionals are the results of social transformations that started with their grandparents. Yet, a dominant discourse on cultural loss, with its glorification of the past, maintains a static image of the cultural organization of society and ignores how cultural change is intrinsic to life, and endorses the idea of cultural authenticity. Although young professionals respond critically to what they perceive as unfair accusations, there remains a strand of uncertainty. They have to balance four interrelated, but sometimes contradictory, issues: they perceive themselves as explorers of a modern identity; they exhibit half-hearted attitudes towards customary, ethnic ways of living; they reject 'Westernization' and they advocate being African as a mode of identification. I explore what

young professionals call an identity crisis and how this relates to the way their lifestyles become the focus of generational conflict. I follow how they use the notions African, Western, traditional and modern as reified concepts that comprise a discursive field of practices.

### Generations and Conflicts in Kenya

This article is based on a study of love and sexuality among young urban professionals in Nairobi, built on life history research as well as participant observation in their daily lives at work; in their homes; with their families; on occasions like weddings and funerals; and in the context of Nairobi's nightlife, translated into portraits of individual women and men. The research was conducted among 24 women and 25 men, in two phases from February 2001 to February 2002, and then from January to March 2004. Subsequently there have been shorter visits, with ongoing online contact with the participants.

Whyte et al. describe in their introduction how the notion of generation has been at the heart of African Studies from its inception (2008). They formulate three conceptualizations of generation and I borrow from them the third definition of generation as the idea of historical generation or generation as a cohort. They rely on Karl Mannheim:

who systematized in his famous essay 'The problem of generations' (1952) [1927] the idea that not the social organization of kinship, but the history of thought styles comprise a generation. He was concerned with the 'location' of age cohorts within history: people born in the same period of time share common experiences, potentials and 'destinies'. Mannheim noted that while cultural heritage is continuously transmitted, each new generation of youth makes 'fresh contact' (ibid.: 293) with cultural inheritance on the basis of its different historical location. Within cohorts, 'generation units' represent sub-categories who 'work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways' (ibid.: 304). Thus the analysis of historical generations shows how change occurs unevenly, since differences and conflicts are found both within generations and between them.

WHYTE ET AL. 2008: 6

Generational tension and conflict have always been part of African societies (cf. Cole 2011; Alber et al. 2008). In a study of a Giriama (ethnic) community in Kenya, Parkin (1972) describes how the younger householders became

the wealth accumulators during colonialism, with the elders losing out. He describes the painful tacit acceptance and elders' sense of loss of respect. The paradoxes of economic and social transformation I will describe are reminiscent of the ones described by Parkin. Most of the work on generational conflict in Africa focuses on impoverished groups of young people, or youth (cf. Cole 2011). For example, a collection on intergenerational conflict in East Africa focuses on socio-economic changes and challenges. The articles describe the discontent of elders with the divergent lives their younger relatives take, as well as the reasons why young people decide on different lives, the inability of youths to start meaningful lives as adults because of unemployment and other poverty-related problems (Burgess and Burton 2010). I aim to look at a different group, middle-class Kenyans, to rethink the link between deprivation and generational conflict. The nature of generational conflict (in the past, or between different socio-economic groups) may not be so different, while the similarities may be more interesting, that is, the co-forming process that is at the heart of generational conflict: the inevitability of cultural change and how cultural changes give rise to generational variance and disagreements.

There is a long history in Kenya of younger generations looking for greener pastures than their elders envisioned. For example, colonial laws created new possibilities for individuals who wanted to escape from the gerontocratic social organization of life largely based on gender and age hierarchies. Women used colonial law to get divorced, schooled or emigrate (House-Midamba 1990; Kanogo 2005). The lives of these wayward women typically disrupted "the web of social relations that define and depend on them as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers and lovers. Often these women directly or indirectly challenge normative expectations of respectability; they were no longer the 'good' wives or daughters they are supposed to be" (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001: 6). Women migrating to Nairobi (Stichter 1987; White 1990), the female Nairobi bean traders (Robertson 1997), otherwise outstanding women (Kanogo 2005) and single or divorced women became the focus of moral anxieties. Robertson shows that the decades before independence marked the height of Kenyan men's anxieties over the social mobility of women traders, usually phrased as 'insubordination' and 'un-African' (1997: 95). After independence these anxieties took the form of state harassment (1997: 272). Men were not excluded from these moral reactions. Gerontocratic power structures imply a hierarchy of men, and hegemonic idea(l)s of masculinity are threatened by men who differ from the norm. In every generation, younger men were being told to maintain certain definitions of masculinity, while the practical and legitimizing foundations of the patriarchal ideology have been disintegrating (such as being

the main provider when increasing numbers of women also have salaries) for several generations of men now (Spronk 2014b).

A characteristic pattern of this cohort of young professionals was that their grandfathers had been among the first migrant labourers to work in Nairobi or on settler farms, while their grandmothers had stayed behind at the rural homesteads. Male labour migration affected marriages, sexual patterns, family life and community participation considerably (Robertson 1997; Mutongi 2007; Kanogo 2005; White 1990). The grandparent generation had been eager to educate at least some of their children, and many had sent children to mission schools in the rural areas. The mission school-educated parents of today's young professionals were among the first larger group of Kenyans to receive formal education, allowing them to enter the administration of the newly independent nation-state and migrate to Nairobi to set up a family. As they became more involved in life in the city, their bonds with their rural homes weakened (House-Midamba 1990), which did not occur uncontested (Stichter 1988). For the children of this second generation, the young professionals whom I studied, the bonds with the rural homes had become even weaker. Their parents' efforts to incorporate them into activities at home diminished as the focus on city life grew. Urbanization, education and professionalization marked these families' lives. The young professionals were therefore the products of particular favourable circumstances that were applicable only to a small emerging middle-class in postcolonial Kenya. They can be seen as being in the vanguard of postcolonial transformations.

In short, every generation manoeuvred (new) ways of making a living and every generation had possibilities to take different routes compared to their predecessors. Then and now, these lives and actions reflect and produce contradictions and contestations of power within the intersecting and shifting landscapes of the individual, family, community, nation-state and global arena. Young professionals in Nairobi make visible that the social organization of gerontocratic relations and Kenyan cultures have been changing for a century.

### **Global Nairobi**

Nairobi is what one can call a 'worlding' city (Simone 2001), reflecting the practice of the global homogenization of urban space in Africa. It is the regional headquarters of international banks, non-governmental organizations and transnational corporations, and a major site for accounting, legal, and informational services. Both the private and NGO sectors are well represented because Nairobi functions as the regional centre in East Africa. The cityscape is domi-

nated by office developments, shopping malls and hotels. White collar employment is expanding, as are residential areas for the middle classes, all paralleled by the emergence of the media and entertainment centres. These developments are taking place alongside informal ways of living and working that are characteristic of the poorer groups of the Nairobi populace. The gap between the small wealthy elite and the impoverished masses has increased steadily over the last decades (Bigsten et al. 2014), while the debate about the (idea of the) 'rising' middle classes has only begun (Spronk 2014a).

It is difficult to speak of social classes in Nairobi. It often seems that vertical links across apparent class boundaries impede the formation of horizontal linkages between those who share the same objective economic situation. Links of kinship, religion, regional affiliation or ethnicity have all tended to be more powerful (Berman and Lonsdale 1992) than links of class in Nairobi or throughout Kenya. Nevertheless, class matters. One of the interesting outcomes of globalization has been the emergence of large groups of people in Kenya who subscribe to global trends in religion, consumerism, nationalism, sports and popular culture, without having access to the mobility nor the symbolic capital that are associated with cosmopolitanism. Yet, they form a different group than the young professionals and the difference lies in their limited relations to modes of capitalist production, (access to) resources and status. Material resources are the basis to engage in processes of social mobility (education, professional labour, in connection with social, political and economic networks). They are also the basis to invest, redistribute, consume and hence acquire prestige. A useful approach is to analyze the middle class not as an objective socio-economic indicator but as an aspirational category (cf. Heiman et al. 2012).<sup>2</sup> The question then becomes how the material dimension is dialectically intertwined in the generation of class subjectivities (people's perceptions and feelings) and relations. Young professionals form a social group that has gained opportunities through education to distinguish themselves from those who have less means of progressing up the socio-economic ladder. As a result, they see themselves as the *avant garde* of Kenya.

Whereas the current young professionals in Nairobi follow their predecessors such as the taxi drivers in colonial Nairobi, or the civil servants during early

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2 The debate about social class in Africa has recently been revived after it petered out at the end of the 1980s. The debate centres now on the (idea of the) rising middle classes and the challenge is how the material dimension (i.e. a more or less Marxist understanding) is dialectically intertwined in the generation of class subjectivities, i. e. people's perceptions and feelings, and relations (Spronk 2014a).

Independence, who were the hip and ambitious in their times (Furedi 1973), the contemporary group of urbanites that aspires to be the *avant garde* in Kenya, if not East Africa, takes a different route, and as a result they fill a particular position in the public space. Although the term young professional is sometimes used by themselves and others, I employ it to indicate the group I wish to highlight. They are the most visible users of Nairobi's source of pride: the growing number of conspicuous buildings ranging from offices, shopping malls, gyms and the many upmarket bars and clubs in the city's nightlife scene. They typically feature in the media; many items are about and for young professionals. For many other Nairobians, young professionals embody a certain ideal, and by way of local magazines, pull-outs in newspapers, radio and TV, they are able to have a taste of such lifestyle. Young professionals are the driving force behind a middle-class popular culture (Spronk 2011). They display a vibrant cosmopolitan culture, which is, as I will argue, the bone of contention between those who claim they are un-African and young professionals who claim to be truly African.

In the (recent) literature about cosmopolitanism there is a trend to describe it as the cultural habitus of globalization. The studies on migration, transnationalism, and diaspora have spurred the debate on cosmopolitanism, and accordingly, especially ethnic or culturally diverse global cities are often invoked to visualize and materialize the notion of cosmopolitanism. According to Devadason, there is a distinction between cosmopolitanization, which points at increasing global interconnections and its awareness, and cosmopolitanism, which indicates a normative orientation towards difference representing the globalizing of minds (2010). This distinction is helpful to understand the difference between the majority of Kenyans who are, indeed, aware of global interconnections of which they sometimes form a part and many times not, and young professionals who are more implicated in the processes of cosmopolitanism. Through their transnational networks of friends and relatives, professional spheres, and mass media engagements they are more than the average Kenyan embedded in relations and imaginations linking them with others beyond Kenya. In fact, Appiah's (1997) term 'rooted cosmopolitanism' links cosmopolitanism with a particular geographical space. It suggests "the possibility of a world in which everyone is ... attached to a home of one's own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people". Or as Werbner (2008: 2) argues, "cosmopolitanism has to be grasped as an ethical horizon – an aspirational outlook and mode of practice". To understand the young professionals in Nairobi, taking cosmopolitanism as a perceptual ability and as a transformative personal capacity (Wardle 2010) is more helpful than inves-

tigating cosmopolitanism as the experience of (ethnic, national or cultural) diversity (cf. Appiah 2006).

These young professionals do not fully correspond to what has become known as Afropolitans (Tuakli-Wosornu 2005).<sup>3</sup> Selasi coined the term in 2005 and especially the last few years it has been picked up and widely used. She charted the rise of the Afropolitan – internationally mobile, highly educated, young people of African descent. Afropolitans according to Selasi's notion are an elite group of privileged middle-class young adults who live in and travel between different global cosmopolitan places, and who enjoy the best education and finest lifestyles. The young professionals featuring here are more locally situated and less privileged. They are social climbers; they come from humble backgrounds and work their way up with small family capital, scholarships and hard work. They appreciate themselves as 'being modern the African way'.

### **Hip and Ambitious in Nairobi**

The young adults in this study came from backgrounds ranging from lower to upper middle class, i.e. their parents were employed as civil servants, teachers and nurses, managers, university lecturers and lawyers. They are generally financially independent because of their reasonably stable jobs. However, this stability is relative. As they do not generally come from backgrounds with wider networks based on patronage, they are more dependent on the irregularities of the employment market. They mainly seek careers in the private sectors where they are able to work their way up, and they are generally very mobile in the job market. Some change jobs up to five times a year, either because of only being able to acquire short-term contracts, or in pursuit of better positions. Some know how to manoeuvre the job market. As a result of the highly fluctuating job market, salaries vary widely. The lowest salary, earned by Dawn, working for a private hospital, was a monthly income of 23,000 KSh (Kenyan shillings), equivalent to 360 US dollars in 2002. People who have become successful like Dorcas (aged 30, accountant in an international firm) and Ongeru (aged 29, junior lawyer in a local firm) earned a monthly income equivalent to 1,500 and 2,000 US dollars. Tom progressed from earning 650 US dollars at a small NGO in early 2001 to 900 US dollars a month in a larger NGO in early 2002.

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3 The author first published under the name Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu and now publishes under the name Taiye Selasi.

Although on average the sample group could be termed successful, there was always a fear of 'falling down' because of their dependence on the fluctuations of employment, or on foreign subsidies in the case of NGOs, or of falling prey to economic changes such as those of the tourism industry.

Young professionals generally have some kind of higher education, whether it is a university degree or a college certificate, as almost all parents invested significantly to provide their children with education. Education continues to play a significant role in the lives of both women and men even when they are employed, as in 2001 27 out of the 49 people in this study were pursuing a degree or course after work. Depending on the stage of their careers, they live in lower class neighbourhoods, like South B, in a self-contained one-bedroomed house, or a small and comfortable apartment in middle-class Kilimani. They visit typical middle-class churches, such as the Nairobi Chapel in the city centre or the Don Bosco and Nairobi Baptist Church (and hardly the Pentecostal churches). Almost 15 years after I met them for the first time, I can conclude that this cohort of young professionals has done well. Apart from a few persons who ended up working below their qualification level and/or in the government sector, the others have secured stable jobs, got married, live in typical middle-class neighbourhoods and have started young families. When, in 2011, I asked Pamela (aged 21 in 2001) how she regarded herself, she answered: "... proud and happy. Proud, because it has not always been easy ... but I laboured on; and happy for what I have achieved: a solid job, money for a small holiday at the beach, you know ..."

One important characteristic of this group is that, unlike their parents who migrated to Nairobi as young adults, these young professionals were born and raised in Nairobi. In this multicultural setting Kiswahili, English and *Sheng* (the slang of youth subculture, made up of different ethnic languages, Kiswahili and English) are the main languages.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, while the majority of young professionals understood the local mother tongue of their parents, they did not speak it themselves. Dana (aged 29) for example, was taking Kikuyu language lessons at the language school of the Anglican Church. Among a group of foreign missionaries, development workers and researchers, she stood out as the only local Kenyan. She explained her actions by asking "How can I be

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4 *Sheng* has always had and continues to have a fast-changing character and youth are proud to be knowledgeable and up to date about it. As a result, every generation has its own version of *Sheng*. For example, when I visited Nairobi in the late 2010s and greeted some boisterous youth on the street, they laughed out loud but were somewhat amazed by my outdated greeting.

African and not speak an African language?" Dana did not blame her parents for failing to teach her Kikuyu, although she was adamant that her children would be educated to be bilingual.

It was most discomfoting for young professionals to meet with relatives who did not reside in Nairobi because they could not easily converse: "Imagine, me being a so-called Kamba [laughs] and when I meet my cousins we can hardly speak with one another ... [serious now]. It's too embarrassing; in fact, my grandparents mock us and it makes me feel bad" (Tom, aged 26). Many recounted that when they were adolescents they were expected to attend the weddings and funerals of their relatives upcountry, but once they had left their parents' house they attended such family gatherings less and less to avoid the embarrassment. Another reason for not speaking a vernacular is that 14 out of the 49 young professionals have parents with different ethnic or national backgrounds. Among them, young professionals spoke mainly English and Kiswahili, sometimes mixed with *Sheng*. At their workplaces, English was the official language. Jokes, interestingly, were often told in a mix of Kiswahili and English and sometimes stereotypical vernacular phrases were used to poke fun at a particular ethnic group. They deplored not being able to speak a vernacular, though at times they used it as a means to show their commitment to overcome 'tribalism', perceived as one of the worst socio-political maladies in postcolonial Kenya.

They proudly referred to themselves as trans-ethnic – nontribal – when they discussed the debilitating ethnic rivalries in Kenyan politics. They criticized the political actors for betraying Kenya with 'tribal' politics that only resulted in regressive development instead of developing the country. In 2001/2 they believed that their generation would make a difference and they voted en masse for the Rainbow Coalition. After the 2007/8 political violence, however, they were less convinced. Within their families they were less vocal about their trans-ethnic attitudes since older generations tended to be mono-ethnically oriented. Their parents did not interfere much in their lives, except for the expectations that some elders held regarding the ethnic background of future spouses. Several recounted how their parents carefully inquired whether their daughter or son also believed it would be more suitable to marry someone from their own ethnic group. Other parents openly told their children not to dare to bring home somebody from another ethnicity. Yet, they actively dated persons from different ethnic groups and their social networks, such as their neighbourhoods, churches and, most importantly, their professional lives, were inter-ethnic. Their friends were often work colleagues, reflecting how the professional context had become an important social environment. It should be noted that some ethnic groups are underrepresented in the professional

sphere.<sup>5</sup> Their trans-ethnic position is the result of specific characteristics that distinguish them as a group of socially mobile young professionals and cut across existing patterns of ethnicity.

In effect, a young professional subculture has developed that displays a vibrant cosmopolitan consumer and popular culture. They have the financial means to spend on clothing and recreation, including going out to the dozens of bars, clubs and restaurants. Although not all young professionals go out on a weekly basis, the majority do, and Nairobi nightlife is mainly determined by the shifting popularity of music and places that are considered most hip. Friday and Saturday are “the nites” to go out dancing and people meet up in small groups and travel to different places on a single night, depending on where the fun is. An enjoyable evening out can include *nyama choma* and *ugali* (roasted meat and pounded maize meal) in an open air residential restaurant, followed by dancing in one of the many stylish clubs such as Carnivore or Klup House, while others like to dine at one of the restaurants and go on to a hip bar or watch a late night film. Often people meet after office hours to have a drink at places that are in vogue such as Kengeles, which is in fact only visited by young professionals, or have a snack at Steers, a trendy fast food restaurant. A significant majority work out in one of the many gyms that have sprung up in one decade, or swim in one of the many pools at the international hotels.

Young professionals’ role models are black US actors, media personalities from across the continent and the diaspora. Their taste for music ranges from Congolese *Lingala*, US Rhythm & Blues, local hip hop and gospel to Ghanaian highlife. They have unlimited access to the Internet via their work and hence communicate with friends and relatives abroad, while staying in tune with global trends by surfing the Internet, reading and writing blogs, vlogs and magazines, listening to music, and watching films from all over the globe. Whereas in the 1990s they leaned towards South Africa, since the turn of the century their scope has been broadened to the global space of the African diaspora: blogs and Facebook have expanded the scope of their contacts as well as of cultural exchange. For example, Rebecca Njeri’s online article called “Afrikanah” (2013)<sup>6</sup> is inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s famous book *Americanah* (2013) and inflected by a particular Nairobi flavour. Young professionals may not read Adichie’s novel but Njeri’s blog was widely shared because she articulates the tensions and ambiguities they experience – as outlined in this article –

5 Due to historical migration and education patterns, not all ethnic groups are proportionally represented in the social category of young professionals.

6 See online magazine African Youth Journals, <http://africanyouthjournals.com/2013/06/01/afrikanah/>

very well. Theirs is, in short, a bustling world of signifiers and representations of a global nature, where being African brings different groups from various continents with diverse definitions of Africanness together.

Leisure is crucial to the lifestyles of young professionals, and enables them to "be hip and ambitious" (Tom, aged 26 in 2001). There is a tendency to revert to conspicuous consumption when writing about the middle classes in Africa which displays a very narrow understanding of the way ongoing transformations in capitalist modes of relations generate class subjectivities. Of course, symbolic capital gains value at the cross-section of class and status, where one must not only possess but be able to appropriate objects with a perceived or concrete sense of value (Bourdieu 1984). Leisure and consumption, then, is the realm to distinguish oneself. Yet, the implicit moral judgment in the literature about conspicuous consumption in (mainly South) Africa that reduces class practices to consumerism tends to be ahistorical and apolitical (cf. Heiman et al. 2012). Leisure, for example, is the site for creative (re)generation. In Nairobi, it is also a realm where young adults create a new sexual morality. Especially the nightlife is the arena to celebrate the sexual culture of young urban adults. This subculture is (so to speak) pregnant with eroticism, an eroticism that is intrinsic to how amusement is being globally construed in the media in terms of fashion, art, music and dating. Eroticism is at the heart of contemporary global lifestyles, linking sexual pleasure and entertainment and this eroticism is what disturbs elders, but also younger Kenyans who are distinctly not young urban professionals, most.

As Whyte et al. note, sexuality and gender are at the heart of the relations between generations and their tensions in various ways (2008: 17). Reproduction, in a literal and figural sense, is crucial to the generation of a family, group or nation. Sexuality is also an integral part of the normative and practical order of everyday life and gives meaning to gender roles. These notions of gender and sexuality create a deep-seated mechanism central to the construction of normative subjectivity and thus of social cohesion. This social organization of sexuality is experienced as fundamental to a society or community. Therefore, transformations affecting this organization bring about changes in the larger moral system and often invoke a moral response, which typically becomes couched in terms of cultural heritage in public debates.

### **African Moral Guardians**

According to Nzioka, an Africanist discourse, the framing of cultural change in terms of a morality that is supposedly distinctly African, has been reaffirmed

and strengthened in the Kenyan public sphere since the moral panic in reaction to the AIDS epidemic (1996). Halfway during the 90s, AIDS provided “a golden opportunity for moral entrepreneurs to advocate for a return to ‘traditional normal’ sexual behaviour”:

The conservative moralists, led by members of the clergy, and the “traditionalists” see HIV/AIDS as a consequence of wanton and wild promiscuity, permissiveness, and moral decadence often associated with the adoption of Western liberal moral values. Despite the enormous conceptual difficulties of what could be termed as “African” in a culturally pluralistic country like Kenya, the moralisation of HIV/AIDS has provided the conceptions of what they consider to be an “African traditional way of life”. [I]t calls for the revitalisation of “African” sexual culture; a heightened sense of puritanism from the clergy who remain opposed to a liberal sexual culture that accommodates the use of condoms; political sloganeering of “patriotic” politicians who enhance their popularity through anti-Western rhetoric; and a forum for voyeuristic journalism and sensational reporting by newspaper editors ...

NZIOKA 1996: 566

The Africanist discourse is articulated in heated debates that are frequently expressed via the media. The main actors postulating particular sentiments of cultural heritage are older men in power positions in the government, religious institutions and kinship organizations. Their role as moral guardians is sometimes supported by older women and disempowered men whose social role as elders is – at least in their opinion – not recognized.

With the liberalization of the media in the early 1990s, the media have become an important outlet for the various groups of actors mentioned by Nzioka. An interesting category are letters to the editor where the authors express their concern about the young(er) generations because they articulate succinctly the opinions of many. The following letter to the editor to one of the largest dailies in Kenya, entitled “I am disgusted by modern youth”, is a typical example of the zealous efforts of ‘concerned Kenyans’, as they often call themselves, trying to reach others by writing to newspapers, and speaking at funerals, *harambees*,<sup>7</sup> church services or family gatherings:

7 A *harambee* is a fund-raising ceremony in the form of a party where the organizers take care of guests in the expectation that the guests will make a contribution. It can be held for a wedding, a hospital bill or a communal goal like a church building.

In traditional African society, the situation was different [compared to nowadays]. There were values of spiritual uprightness and ethics, which guided society in its sexual behaviour. Sex before marriage was a crime and virginity was a virtue. But today, the traditional way of life governing African societies has been thrown out the window and such values are discarded. What you see now is that young people smoke, drink and have sex.

OCHOMO 2001<sup>8</sup>

This is emblematic of the sentiments that young professionals often encounter. Elsewhere in the letter the writer is quite clear about the cause of AIDS – an excess of the ‘joy of life’ in contemporary society due to a disregard for African morals. The sensitive issue of sexuality-gone-astray has been replaced by the generative concept of immorality. ‘Immorality’ has a dominant rationale: it explains how sexual behaviour has grown out of bounds and how it has become a banal commodity. From the time when Kenyan cultures were still authentic until the present, a growing process of immorality is supposed to have taken place gradually together with the breakdown of traditional influence. Immorality is directly related to ‘Westernization’ (see also Hodgson and McCurdy 2001; Sackey 2003).

The notion of Westernization has become a structuring idiom for many Kenyans to account for the current malaise Kenyans are suffering from. The corrupting force behind this erosion and negative change is usually taken to be foreign – particularly Western – influence. Africanist discourse is nostalgic by definition, postulating African in opposition to Western, implying pure from impure. Ochomo (the letter writer) goes on as follows:

The behaviour of Kenyan youth makes me loathe. As you roam town streets past cinemas, theatres, discos, video halls, churches, schools, universities, and public offices, you cannot avoid seeing the latest hairstyles and clothes. The young people are always smoking and drinking, and I shed tears as I see them dressed in transparent clothes just because the attire is fashionable. If you came to Kenya from another part of the world with a dress which exposed your buttocks and proclaimed it to be latest fashion ... in a few days, most of Kenya would be flooded with half-naked youths.

OCHOMO 2001

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8 Ochomo, K.L. (2001) How to prevent spread of AIDS. *Daily Nation* pp. 7.

This letter is an example of the volatile sentiments when it comes to the idea of preserving cultural heritage: the social organization of gerontocracy is considered to be at stake. The issue of exposure is often mentioned to indicate the problematic relationship between (global) media and commodities and their reception into local systems of meaning. External influences cause people to abandon their African morals, leading to immoral behaviour which is thought to result in sex for leisure rather than reproduction in marriage. Ochomo, and many like him, loathes his contemporaries who are participating in the globalizing 'joy of life', exemplified by fashionable attire. These volatile sentiments of the inter-generational conflict are typically expressed in the public sphere because they articulate the loss of cultural singularity that is experienced by many Kenyans. Within their families the pitch is less explosive, as many young professionals are respected by their relatives for their success, but then it becomes more personal, as shall be outlined below.

These highly contested issues of cultural heritage, generational expectations, lifestyle options and cultural identity bring with them a field of tension and contradictions, sometimes resulting in feelings of anxiety. This field of tension comprises four interrelated, but sometimes contradictory elements: young professionals perceive themselves as explorers of a contemporary identity; they exhibit half-hearted attitudes towards customary ways of living; they reject 'Westernization' and advocate Africanness as nodes of identification.

### Explorers of a 'Modern' Identity

Eve, the new glossy magazine which appeared in Kenya in 2001, was advertised as "the essence of Africa's new woman". This phrase articulated a feeling shared by many women, like Tayiani: "I believe we as modern women have the obligation to move on where our mothers could not go further. They were more constrained by tradition, whereas we go beyond parochial ethnic sentiments as is so common in this country. I am African, a modern African woman". Tayiani embodied this ideal: she was a beautiful, slim woman, always well dressed and carried herself around with dignity, having a slightly reserved attitude. This ideal is not really different compared to earlier ones (see Weinbaum et al. 2008), and it shows how every generation sees itself as different in order to position itself. She was a prototypical 'sophisticated' woman and conscious of it. Women like her personify, more than men do, the sophisticated personae that are portrayed in the media; 'new' women are more noticeable than men, because they have entered a public domain that used to be the preserve of men.

But even more than differentiating themselves by fashion, young Kenyan professionals perceive themselves as different from other Nairobians because of their liberal attitudes. Both women and men often explain their choices in relation to their parents' or grandparents' lives and sometimes in relation to people in the rural areas. Kinyua (Tayiani's husband) explained: "We, our generation, will make a difference I think. Things have changed so much and it all comes together in our generation. I marry Tayiani because of the modern woman she is, I could not marry a woman from upcountry because ... our styles are different. I think the future of Kenya as a modern nation depends on us". When asked why he could not marry a woman from the rural area, he explained that, for one thing, such a woman was more 'traditional' and would not want to pool incomes as Tayiani and he had decided to do. And indeed, for a couple to pool two salaries was considered the most 'modern' thing they could do because it breaks with the normative gendered division where husband and wife are responsible for different needs of the nuclear family. Many women and men place themselves in opposition to the unequal relationship of their parents, mentioning their mother's subordination, their father's extramarital relationships, or a failed marriage that they attribute to their father's dominance. Some men capture the essence of a contemporary relationship by saying "a modern marriage is a monogamous marriage". All women refer to the need for equality in a relationship and the need for women to be career women. They also delay marriage and to them it is 'unrealistic' to avoid premarital sex, which is an affront to widely shared sentiments where premarital sex has become the symbol of 'immorality'. Moreover, sexual pleasure is an objective of a healthy life and essential to their self-perception as a modern person.

They are ambitious to reach certain goals in their careers as well as their personal lives, and they approach life with the arrogance of successful youth. This confident attitude towards life is likely to offend older people, as it negates their role as advisors. For example, Tayiani and Kinyua (aged 28 and 30 at the time) decided to get married (they were the only couple in this study) after four years of courting. Before announcing their wedding plans to their families (from two different ethnicities), they painstakingly discussed how they wanted to involve their families in their wedding. They finally agreed that they wanted to exclude the customary bride wealth requirements. They anticipated their families' disappointment and despite their wish not to offend their families, they decided to make their own plan:

Tayiani: "We discussed it carefully and it is both our wish not to pay bride wealth because ... we don't believe in it, it's so ... it is a tradition that has lost its value, well, for us. It has something awkward, to be bought and

Kinyua feels the same, he doesn't want to sort of buy me. You know, why has this tradition persisted while others vanished?"

Kinyua was initially criticized by his relatives for being 'disrespectful' of custom. But more than that, he had "dared to question what they considered of importance". During the negotiations with his family, some uncles carefully expressed doubts about Tayiani's potential to be a good wife, as she was somewhat 'un-African'. The more or less independent position of young professionals is frequently explained as disrespectful because they can, if they want, sidestep their relatives. At these moments, notions of Africanness are often invoked to incorporate them into the larger moral networks of family and ethnicity.

### Young Professionals' Position towards Customary Ways of Living

As noted above by Laura: "We fear that we are not part of it [our culture], but at the same time we hope that we are not part of it". In Nairobi, current notions of 'Africanness' implicate authenticity, i.e. not 'Westernized', and, paradoxically, the people who are seen as most authentic are also those who are sometimes looked down upon. Young professionals often position themselves in opposition to rural lifestyles that are seen as 'backward' or 'traditional'. For example, in the thorny discussion about female circumcision, I often heard that it was a tradition that 'persisted' only in rural, 'traditional' areas. This thinking implies a binary opposition of rural as 'tribal', uneducated, unsophisticated and ignorant on one hand, and of urban as educated, sophisticated or 'modern' and knowledgeable about contemporary lifestyles on the other hand. The implicit traditional-modern polarity is misleading here. The polarity is not so much about Kamba, Meru or Gusii ethnic cultures versus Western ones, but about the attempt to overcome rural illiteracy, poverty and general inferiority.

When asked with what kind of traditions and customs they grew up, the majority responded that they had "not been brought up with traditions". Dawn (aged 27), for example, explained how her brother's funeral had been 'colonized' by her relatives much against the will of her parents. Her brother had drowned on a holiday at the coast in the late 1990s, and according to her relatives a death like that should be carefully treated in order to ward off malevolence. Dawn's case is interesting because her "lack of cultural education", as she named it, was intentional on the side of her parents:

I had no clue ... my parents never told us about these things; they [the relatives] had all kinds of ideas about how the body should be treated

and all. My father ... he did away with tradition. He says it's useless; he's quite strong on it. I mean, we belong to a clan of the Luhya with the goat as a totem, so we should never eat goat. My father, to rebel, always eats goat and we have grown up eating goat meat. I never knew this before.

Many others had heard about certain taboos and rites, such as wearing red slippers to ward off evil spirits, but they were never taught to do so themselves. Others responded with some embarrassment, like the men who were circumcised in hospital without ceremony.

Whereas the initial reactions may have been that most of them did not grow up with traditions, they would eventually mention bride wealth or present the Masaai ethnic group as performing traditional dances. Traditional dances are an interesting phenomenon in Kenya. Former President Daniel arap Moi institutionalized 'traditional dances' that were re-imagined and codified to serve political purposes (see also Coe 2005; Neveu Kringelbach 2013). Since then, traditional dances have been established to enliven state ceremonies and other official functions. For many young professionals these dances were taught at school and have become one of the more tangible traditions. According to Coe, this kind of (national) cultural heritage functions on the premise that culture can be learned and highlights the degree of estrangement involved. Whereas on the one hand the debate on cultural heritage presumes the naturalness and inevitability of cultural identity, on the other hand the painstaking efforts to emphasize its importance and debates about its contours demonstrate its precarious nature. It is difficult for the majority of young adults to designate traditions in their own life, as they have learnt a specific notion of what counts as traditional.

In fact, the notion of tradition is employed variably by young professionals. In its first meaning, tradition is used when a custom is considered to be unfavourable or out of date, for example female circumcision or bride wealth. Tradition here acquires a negative meaning. The second way is related to the national discourse on cultural heritage and in this way it acquires a positive meaning. For example, in contrast to Tayiani and Kinyua, a friend of Grace explained to me how she considered bride wealth to be a good tradition, because the ceremonies involved, symbolic presents and the uniting of two families were truly African. In this sense 'tradition' comes to stand for African-ness. Despite realizing that social and cultural change is inevitable (see Laura's comments above), young professionals are self-conscious about their lack of correspondence with a wider cultural – in the sense of what they perceive as authentic – culture or group. As Martha (aged 24) once said: "It feels sometimes like betrayal of being African". This sense of betrayal was shared, to some extent,

by all those I met. They felt “in-between” (Atieno, aged 25), or as Robart (aged 23) explained, “we have an identity crisis”. Rather than feeling confident and proud about the cultural diversity they are acquainted with, such as Selasi intimates with the notion of Afropolitan, these quotations highlight how much the discourse on cultural identity has become politicized.

### ‘Westernization’

Since contemporary consumer culture is seen as Western in origin, the perceived problem – for both young professionals and wider Kenyan society – is the uncritical acceptance of material and non-material entities from abroad, as the two following examples show. They react to what Chakrabarty (1992) analyzed when looking at how modernity operates by way of exclusions and by the constitution of difference that together generate the Euro-North American sense of a unified subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> The first example is an excerpt from e-mail correspondence with Fredrick, while the second is part of an interview with Pamela (both aged 22 at the time):

Frederick and I were e-mailing about the difference between the crazes about the World Cup Football in 2002 and the European Cup in 2004:

“Going by several columnists’ articles, the loss of authenticity has aggravated the folly of Africa sinking further into the abyss that it finds itself in. The articles of Bindra “if we are not authentic, we are total failures” and Buke “don’t watch European football, it’s neo-colonialism” hit the point about the malady that dogs our continent. Aping takes the credit for this loss of identity. We cannot simply do things the right way. Our development policies, too, are geared towards benefiting Western agendas. Africans suffered immense wrongs of a calculated nature, such as the imposition of foreign languages, the formulation of suppressive (under)development pacts and policies and the portrayal of anything African as backward. We need leaders with insight and originality, not a bunch following blindly the dictates of donors and their pockets. We need to shed off our old colonial mentality of embracing filth we are told is good for us”.

FREDRICK aged 22, 28 June, 2004

9 Hence the need for a history of modernity that will ‘provincialize’ Europe (Chakrabarty 1992).

Pamela: "You see, the point is that people want to be sophisticated.

Okay, it's like, we want to be modern ... But then Africans should not take in everything unquestioning[ly]; we tend to think that everything is better if it's from the West."

Rachel: "In what sense?"

Pamela: "Well ... you know we grew up with taking the West as an example, better schooling, better technology, hospitals ... more advanced. And of course these things are good for us, but we tend to look down on our own things because of the West being more advanced. Like ... if I see jeans "made in Kenya" I don't like to buy them; if my friend brings me jeans from London I am happy, even though they were made in the export processing zone here in the industrial area! You get my point?"

Rachel: "Ok ... And why is it a problem for you?"

Pamela: "Because ... it's wrong to downplay our own stuff, to admire Western, because we should be proud of being African; we should not want Western stuff, like clothes and these gadgets."

Rachel: "Gadgets? Like ... a mobile phone?"

Pamela: "Yes, they are wanted because they are Western".

Rachel: "But your mobile phone is probably made in China or Taiwan, so what's Western about it?"

Pamela [laughs]: "... OK, no, that's not the point, the point is ... that this mobile is a modern thing; therefore Western and ... we should be careful for wanting it because it's Western."

Fredrick's writings convey the anger I often encountered, while Pamela's words show the more complex nature of 'Westernization'. The desire to seek new experiences is central to the lifestyle of this emerging middle class (like others around the globe). Moreover, items associated with a privileged status are desirable if not necessarily *avant garde*. Frequently, these signs of 'sophistication' are seen as originating from outside Kenya and are therefore not value-free; that is, they are labelled as 'Western' and therefore 'un-African' (see also Burke 1996). Whether something actually originates from the West or not is not the issue; it is the association with the West that causes the friction. The attribution of a lesser status to African things and people is the core issue. However, as Pamela indicates, both Africans and non-Africans engage in this unequal assessment, which is a painful realization.

'The West' remains a source of suspicion, as young professionals draw a line between the Transatlantic Slave trade, colonialism and Apartheid, to contemporary 'enslavement' by powerful Western institutions like the World Bank and

international corporations. Moreover, in their role as young professionals they experience Western dominance in a direct manner at work. Some have experience of non-Kenyans getting promoted more easily than Kenyans; of whites with lesser qualifications getting into similar positions to Kenyans; or of senior officials being recruited from outside Kenya. Even if they do not experience this first hand, it is often a topic of debate and rumour. Furthermore, Nairobi's range of inhabitants reflects a certain segregation of high-class non-Kenyans such as diplomats, and the higher ranking employees of the United Nations Headquarters, international corporations and international nongovernmental organizations, which are well represented in Nairobi. These groups form a small but distinctive white class that, in the experience of many young professionals, exclude even educated and trained Nairobians. All in all, 'Western' dominance is perceived as a structural problem between blacks and whites as they read about the eviction of African immigrants from Europe, hear reports of racism in the United States or discuss the subordinate position of African countries in international politics.

In Nairobi, such frustrations are channelled into the notion of 'Westernization', which has become a generic concept to account for a variety of different anxieties regarding social transformation and cultural identity. Young professionals are preoccupied with what they called being 'modern the African way'. What this means, exactly, remains vague; it is more a phrase used to articulate fears of losing some kind of singularity labelled 'African'. Yet, as shall be outlined below, Africanness is far from well-defined too. In the end, Frederick's frustration originates from the fact that young professionals like him are intricately connected to these power relations in the pursuit of their ambitions and lifestyles. Young professionals feel part of Kenya, while they also feel very different from the majority of Kenyans. Their half-hearted attitude reflects a field of tension and anxiety, and they often find themselves looking for suitable responses. This search centres on balancing 'how not to Westernize' and how to take account of their African heritage, while searching for the definition of a contemporary identity. Central to this identity is the use of a reified notion of Africanness.

### Africanness

The majority of young professionals identify themselves as Kenyan and African, and a smaller number would add an ethnic classification. Pamela (aged 22) phrased it as follows: "Kenyan, I am Kenyan in the first place, but that means of course being African, and yes ... I guess I should also mention being Meru

..." She was hesitant to call herself Meru because of her strong belief in trans-ethnicity as a political goal. Others problematized the label Kenyan, like Maurice (aged 27): "I am African, I belong to Africa, calling myself Kenyan ... does not cover it all, Kenyan is a British invention." Dana (aged 29), on the other hand, the one mentioned earlier who studied Kikuyu because her parents who are Gikûyû did not teach her the language, did not identify herself as such but as African. It may seem contradictory that she chose to learn the language if she felt no identification with the Gikûyû identity, but the fact that for her it signified Africanness shows how varied and flexible the realities are. Similarly, whereas for Taiyani and Kinyua the custom of bridewealth was problematic, for Grace it functioned as an expression of her African identity. On the other hand, Kinyua and Tayiani changed their Christian names in their early 20s because to them, these were 'Western' names, whereas for Grace this was not an issue at all. Interestingly, Kinyua's name is a Kikuyu name and although he was always very careful to avoid anything Kikuyu, his name meant African-ness.

This flexible way of identification between Kenyanness and Africanness while downplaying ethnic identification is not shared with other groups in Nairobi with similar characteristics, such as young professionals who were not born and raised in Nairobi or lower middle-class people who were born and raised in Nairobi. The majority of the people in Kenya identify themselves with an ethnic group, although this is certainly more flexible than usually assumed by scholars (Nyairo 2011). The divergent pattern results from, first and most importantly, the inability to speak an ethnic language which forces them to identify beyond ethnicity. Second, they form a subgroup as young professionals that is trans-ethnic by definition. Thirdly, they eagerly participate in the intellectual debates and creative classes where discussions of Africanness are central. Columnists, radio presenters, blog authors, musicians, etc. are closely followed and the debates are typically continued at the office or after work over drinks. There is a particular pride in being Kenyan and the vibrant popular culture in Nairobi and its leading function in the region is an important engine for recognition and expression. Feelings of Kenyanness are invoked particularly in relation to national events, such as sports (for example with the international success of Kenyan born athletes) beauty pageants, but also when Kenyan authors, musicians and actors are internationally recognized. Kenyanness for them is a source of pride and as Kenyans they rejected the post-elections violence. Kenyanness then became a tool to oppose the livid and undermining sentiments sweeping the nation. According to Nyairo and Ogude, "the idea of Kenyanness is its inherent diversity and contradictions" (2005: 10), which is exactly what young professionals embody.

Africanness has a particular genealogy in Kenya, like other postcolonial African nation-states. Appiah (1992), Mbembe (2002) and Mudimbe (1994) have argued that African intellectuals have reproduced colonial premises in their search for Pan-Africanism, Négritude and other classifications of Africanness (see introduction). For example, before and during independence, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, postulated an 'African philosophy' and a criticism of colonialism by advocating progress and development. According to Mbembe, such concepts were synonymous with the concept of civilization: Kenyatta and the new intellectual elite accepted for the most part the basic categories of colonial discourse. The denial of humanity, or the attribution of inferiority, forced Kenyan intellectuals into the position of defending the humanity of Africans, while also claiming that the black race, with its traditions and customs, had a general character. In short, intellectuals reproduced the presumptions they aimed to deconstruct: "dominant African discourses on the self developed within a racist paradigm" (2002: 257). As a result, Kenyan (and other) intellectuals such as Tom Mboya, Ngugi wa Thi'ongo and Ali Mazrui have been instrumental in the construction of the idea of Africans as one race, one people, which has been effectively integrated into the Kenyan collective imagination. The resulting discourse on Africanness is all based on one assumption, namely, the racialized difference between Africans and non-Africans (see introduction). Hence it fed moral anxieties from which the Africanist discourse mentioned earlier developed. Young professionals are grappling with this legacy as, on the one hand, they subscribe to these meanings as it has (in)formed their ways of growing up in Kenya while, on the other hand, the current creative and intellectual class are also distancing from it as their lives have moved beyond the reach of the Africanist discourse. Rebecca Njeri's online article called *Afrikanah* (2013) mentioned earlier shows exactly these shifting classifications and the meanings of Africanness herein, and many of the people I know found recognition in it.<sup>10</sup> In the blog she outlines the history of her family, from colonial times to her generation and she pauses at her mother's situatedness, before outlining how she herself is a hybrid of local and global inflections.

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10 Interestingly, Njeri's opinions resonate with young professionals while Mensa Otobils' teachings are very similar; see next note. I believe that someone like Njeri has more authority because of her social position; being a typical young professional herself. In that sense, young professionals (un)consciously ignore what older generations communicate, which is the main criticism of elders.

### Conclusion: "I am African, iko nini"

In sum, young professionals see themselves as "modern the African way", as they often called it. They cannot escape using the categories 'African' and 'Western', or 'traditional' and 'modern' while in their lives they actually inflate the same categories. Hence they are caught up in the ensuing discussion over cultural heritage and belonging. The dominant Africanist discourse frames them as un-African and they cannot but respond and thereby reproduce the premises of the argument. For many Kenyans, the appeal and wide range of this discourse lies in the possibility of "combining to oppose globalization, to relaunch the metaphysics of difference, to reenchant tradition, and to revive the utopian vision of an Africanity that is coterminous with blackness" (Mbebe 2002: 264). On their part, young professionals fiercely resist normative notions of Africanness, which are attempts to draw them back into the normative and gerontocratic cultural moulds. Instead, they see themselves as African by definition because of their trans-ethnic lives and inability to speak an ethnic language which literally prevents them from identifying with an ethnic group.<sup>11</sup> Their conflicts of loyalty reveal that capitalist processes create opportunity structures of which young professionals are the successful results, while at the same time they embody irresolvable ambivalences as the result of the more unpromising outcomes of capitalist processes (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993).

Nyairo describes how the creative subculture in Nairobi is the realm *par excellence* for the appreciation of a multitude of identities, or modes of being, based on a mix of local and global qualities (Nyairo and Ogude 2005; Nyairo 2011). Groups such as these young professionals are cosmopolitans; their multi-

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11 They are not the only ones concerned with what they called being modern the African way though. The famous Ghanaian pastor Mensa Otabil, whose *Living Word TV* is broadcast weekly in Kenya, voices the same sentiments: "For all of us there is a tension between being African and being modern at the same time" (De Witte 2012). According to De Witte, Otabil's vision of modernity is powerful for many because he integrates notions that are commonly thought to be incompatible. Whereas, generally, 'African' is perceived as cultural heritage when it concerns 'tradition', which is seen as opposed to 'modern', hence 'Western', hence 'foreign', Otabil postulates an African identity as cosmopolitan. He bridges the perceptual gap between African and being modern and developed; he offers people a way of feeling connected to and part of the world, of being global citizens without having to lose their sense of Africanness. Otabil offered a possible way out for young professionals; however, the majority were not (yet) attracted to becoming 'born again'.

ple transnational connections are relational and perceptual, and these connections are not borne from physical mobility but evolve from social mobility. Hence, such groups convey a different perspective to the study of diasporas. Cosmopolitanism is the result of the mutually constitutive intersection between particular aspirational values and a specific perceptual ability. Being the privileged products of particular transformations, they perceive the world differently compared to other Kenyans and as a result aspire to different goals. Their cosmopolitan ethos is thus the result of their specific social position and it demonstrates a process of self-confident interweaving of global and local perspectives. According to Mbembe, Afropolitanism is a way of being in the world on the African continent; “a political and cultural stance in relation to the nation, to race, and to the issues of difference in general” (2007: 28). Among them are many professionals who “in their daily business must continually measure up against not the village next door but against the world at large” (ibid: 29). Whereas Nairobi once fulfilled the role of an Afropolitan epicentre but lost its position to Johannesburg according to Mbembe, the vibrant cultural, political, and aesthetic creativity continues to inspire many young adults and inflame many other Kenyans, and it remains a regional epicentre. Young professionals visualize the dynamic nature of cultural change and that “Africa is less a foundational past than a possible future [...] that becomes collectively imaginable at the intersection of contextually specific ‘spaces of experiences’ and ‘horizons of expectation’ (Palmié 2007: 165).

The lingering generational conflict articulated in the media and via churches, social meetings and political platforms, has a deeper meaning. The more disturbing aspect for their critics is that young professionals embody a moral breach with a past that no longer exists but that is glorified through the Africanist discourse. Young professionals often embody this dilemma themselves. Yet, they are ambitious and they approach life assertively: after one of the discussions about being African Laura responded, half to me and half to invisible onlookers: “I am African, iko nini.” *Iko Nini* is a phrase used at the end of a statement to acknowledge the fact that some people may not agree with the statement but whoever said it, does not really care as she upholds her opinion.

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