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The making of the middle classes: From *Kula Raha* to Sophistication in Nairobi

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The debate about the middle classes in Africa has fully started, and it presents professionals and scholars with a unique opportunity: a true chance to engage in multi-disciplinary research where social geographers, architects, economists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and policy-makers can complement one another in investigating this more or less new field.

As an anthropologist, I see my role as complementary to the economic and quantitative analyses that focus on particular indicators to tease out patterns of what makes up the middle classes. In addition, anthropological work on people's ideas and practices and in particular my work on young urban professionals' self-perceptions and everyday lives, is insightful to understand the engagements of what is now being labelled as the "emerging" middle classes. In other words, I would like to use people's experiences to speak back to our scholarly concept of the middle class. In this essay I briefly outline how such a contribution may look like.

Introduction

During 2001 and 2002, I started a study on the lives of young urban professionals in Nairobi, which is, fifteen years later, still ongoing. My interlocutors were then in their twenties, unmarried, ambitious, and they did not come from wealthy or elite backgrounds, though there were significant differences between families' capital and resources. Generally, they have had to make their way up by working hard, by securing a scholarship here or there, and by strategically navigating educational and professional opportunities. They were born and raised in urban areas, which may not sound important nowadays but was quite unique throughout the 20th century, as Nairobi used to be a destination of labour migration; people used to say they had a "house" in Nairobi and a "home upcountry". Between the 1980s, when this group of yuppies was born, and now, new generations have been born and raised in Nairobi, and the distinction between a house and a home remains for some groups while for

others it has lost its meaning. Between the turn of the century, when I started my study, and current days, Nairobi has changed dramatically and the Kenyan society continued to transform. Against this canvas of social reconfigurations, I am interested in the pursuit of social mobility in Kenya over time and across generations. This means that my take on the debate about the middle classes in Africa is one focusing on the middle class as a classification-in-the-making, arising from people's perceptions and practices.

It is important to engage with the current clamour concerning the 'rising' of a 'new' middle classes in Africa in the global media, by historicising what we now call the middle classes. In the 1960s, the concept of class inspired many scholars to deal with a variety of economic and political concerns in African countries. A phenomenal quantity of work on class analysis had been published, which continued into the 1980s before ending abruptly in the early 1990s. The rise and fall of this debate occurred concurrently with the debate about elites in Africa. As Andrea Behrends and Carola Lentz (2012) have shown, these former elites have largely transformed into what we today recognize, in line with their own self-identification, as the African middle classes. The currently deepening inequalities within African societies, as well as the increasing complexities of global economic capitalism and the opportunities and misfortunes they engender on the local scale, are forcing back the analytical concept of class in Africa. It is therefore imperative to (re)think what is meant by the notion of the middle class across time, for whom (scholars, professionals, people themselves), and how it is put to use.

First of all, the term needs to be used with great care as it is difficult to speak of social classes in a country like Kenya. Very often it seems that 'vertical' links across apparent class boundaries impede the formation of 'horizontal' linkages between those sharing the same 'objective' economic situation. Links of kinship, religion, regional affiliation or ethnicity have all tended and sometimes continue to be more powerful than links within the same socio-economic position (Berman & Lonsdale 1992, see also Kroeker in this volume). There can be significant socio-economic differences not only within groups but also within families and even among siblings. Second, as upward mobility is a relatively flexible and instable process, downward mobility is an ever-present possibility. We therefore need to find ways of studying the middle classes that recognizes flexibility and instability over one's life course and even across generations. Third, despite the continuing importance of theorizing the role of the political economy in the analyses of the middle classes, we cannot rely on economic definitions alone and study class solely based on such indicators as income level, education, and consumption patterns. For instance, in Kenya the income of the middle classes depends not only on their salaried positions, as many people engage in secondary, income-generating projects such as real estate, taxis, and trade (for

a more detailed discussion on the problematic analyses of the ADB see further down below). Fourth, as the renewed debates on the middle class show, discussion about the middle classes serve a variety of themes. The current global interconnections between people, goods and ideas force a variety of topics onto the research agenda, such as elites and political economy, growing inequalities, democracy, poverty, and consumption. In these debates, the term middle class is used in widely different ways.

In short, the middle class is not a coherent category, depending on the discipline or profession it is employed differently. Therefore, the notion needs to be formulated in such a manner so as to study the dialectical and mutually constitutive forces and processes of the economy, political systems, cultural configurations and social responses.

In order to tease out the successful pursuit of social mobility by my interlocutors, I employ the notion of middle class as an aspirational category (Heimann et al. 2012). My contribution to the current debate is to look at the notion of the middle class as the (imagined) goal and result of people's ambition to climb the social ladder. In other words, I do not study middle class as something that we can find 'out there' and measure within the population of Kenya, but as a classification-in-the-making. The focus then shifts to changing opportunities of social mobility as historic processes. Heimann et al. (2012) have written a compelling collection of articles exploring global economic changes through the lens of the middle class, concentrating on what constitutes a 'middle class' in different moments in time. They address, particularly, the theoretical implications of rethinking traditional tools of class analysis. For an anthropologist, people's preoccupation with middle-class lifestyles, ideas and practices is crucial:" middle classness [has] become an increasingly powerful category for aspiration, longing, and anxiety in many parts of the world" (Heiman et al 2013: 7).

In climbing up the social ladder, people's self-perceptions and ideas tend to shift as they feel that they are taking a different route compared to others in their social network or families. For example, in colonial Kenya, missionary education became a route for social mobility. With it, the question of polygyny (commonly referred to as polygamy) has always been discussed as something that does not benefit 'modern' individuals, and under colonial and Christian influences, couples have taken up monogamous marriage in order to distinguish themselves as 'modern'. Social stratification thus connotes broader processes that have different impacts on communities, families and individuals: while it creates opportunities for some, it severely disadvantages others, sometimes even within the same family. Societal transformations have always caused shifts in the social organization of society, and have always enabled the emergence of new forms of consciousness and new modes of living.

In this essay I aim to explore the notion of middle class and to analyze how the material dimension, and in particular political and economic elements, is dialectically intertwined with the immaterial or ideational dimension, that is the generation of middle class subjectivities, including people's perceptions, feelings, and relations. Essentially, I propose to analyze *how* people live, rather than *what* they do for a living and how that is related to social status. I explore how the process of social stratification, by which people are grouped into a set of hierarchical social types, can be explained in terms of access to resources, education, networks and the way that these all come together to command personal prestige. The dense transfer point is aspiration; the ambition to work hard, endure, while imagining a better future. I will argue for the study of the middle class as a process in which personal circumstances and social background are negotiated through imagination and action, through desires and practices.

Class, What Class?

In 2011, the term middle class gained popularity in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa after the African Development Bank published a report titled "The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa". The idea of the middle class was eagerly picked up by the Kenyan media. When asking Nairobians what, according to them, the middle classes in Kenya comprise of. By adding their responses together, a picture of a group emerged that has the following characteristics: Many times, my interlocutors mentioned salaried positions as a characteristic of the middle classes. They had certain professional groups in mind that worked in the private as well as in the public sector, such as doctors or university professors. When elaborating, they also added other professional groups such as successful entrepreneurs. By inclusion of these groups, the focus shifted towards practices of expenditure such as owning a housing or a car and spending on various lifestyle practices, but also to having certain mind-sets, and in particular being cosmopolitan (Spronk 2014). Having higher education or continuing the pursuit of education was considered pivotal for the middle classes. The middle classes were also seen as an urban socio-economic group. In other words, what people considered middle class was often a way to measure success and therefore status. Moreover, the middle classes could not be located as a distinctive and stable group within society, as people shifted the characteristics in their explanations. The elderly that I spoke to always mentioned the importance of higher education first, while younger generations emphasized wealth. From their explanations it became clear how my interlocutors made distinctions between elite or higher middle class families, that is, groups who started from a wealthy position, and people or groups who climbed up the social

ladder within their life course. The meaning of the term middle class is obviously in flux. For example, the difference between pointing out education (older people) and riches (younger people) demonstrates not only a historical shift, but also a pluralistic understanding of the relative success of middle groups. As an anthropologist, I argue that the narratives that people use to (re)present themselves are important empirical variables to 'measure' class and to understand the middle class in the making.

So, people's narratives are an important starting point to paint the larger perspective of social transformations. As we cannot speak of more or less clearly demarcated social classes in Kenya, I decided to study the pursuit of social mobility in order to see what enables persons to climb the social ladder. Everybody of course aspires to a good life but not all people have the ambition in combination with abilities and opportunities to enact their ambitions. From my study, it appears that three elements play an important role.

Material characteristics

First, an important factor in the pursuit of social mobility (and hence the making of the middle class) has been, and still is, education. Already in the early colonial times, lower positions in the colonial administration became accessible for local Kenyans. In 1924, the first Education Ordinance was passed but it was left to the missionaries to develop schools. For a long time, missionary education was the only education available for (a selected few) Kenyans (Mwiria 1991). But it was not until the massive expansion of the postcolonial administration that an enormous workforce was needed, and the postcolonial administration invested heavily in schools that gave Kenyans from different origins access to formal education. Up to today, higher education is a critical condition for finding a job in the professional sector. The historical formation of a professional class that allowed relative financial independence for young adults has been a crucial factor for people to take a different route than their parents had taken. White collar jobs were and continue to be illustrative of social mobility. Salaried positions give people a sense of stability that they need in order to plan their lives, while simultaneously education has become a symbol of prestige.

Second, having access to some resources, at different moments in one's life, is important. A typical, but not exclusively, resource is family wealth. Whether it concerns relatives' financial assistance for pursuing education or for providing initial capital for a business investment - being able to fall back on the extended family at some point in life can be crucial for successful social mobility. In the absence of

family capital, scholarships were often a means to make a favourable career start. A typical route to climb the social ladder, which existed since the colonial times and is still valid today, is to attend a Teacher Training College (TTC). In order to have enough teachers for the many primary and secondary schools in the country, access to TTCs has always been relatively uncostly, in contrast to polytechnics and universities that charge ever-increasing fees and which continue to increase dramatically. A typical narrative I found across generations is that people aim at attending TTC as part of a larger strategy: after graduating, they work for the Ministry of Education until they are eligible for a study leave to obtain a bachelor degree. Afterwards, they work to compensate for the study leave. This is then repeated up to PhD level.

Another form of capital involves loans that are based on non-family but trustworthy connections such as distant relatives or good friends. It is striking how many people preferred to rely not on family capital but rather on loans from non-kin. They explained that these loans had less expectations attached and were more clear-cut. Since the liberalization of the economy, banks have expanded their lending policies. Many people that I know have taken various bank loans for different projects, which are deducted from their monthly salaries, such as school fees and initial capital for starting a business. The third important mode of having access to resources is networks. Social networks are based on a wide variety of milieus and can be formed on the basis of kinship, regional affiliation, ethnicity, having attended the same school, religion, and occupation. People are keenly aware of the importance of networks and persons lacking an extensive network invest heavily in them. For example, in my research I have focused on the Lions Club that, although identified as an elite club, has many members who are far from being part of the elite. In fact, it is remarkable how the club functions as a place for people to become connected. Networks have material and symbolic value: besides having access to finances and other resources, being well-connected reflects positively on a person. It implies social recognition because it reflects a good reputation, social skills and financial ability. Networks provide respect and, in turn, access to resources and opportunities: being well-connected is helpful in advancing one's career and doing business.

In short, access to education, resources and networks are all productive possibilities that are interdependent and co-produce conditions permitting to climb up the social ladder or to improve one's socio-economic position.

Ideational Characteristics

Third, there is more to middle class than the material importance and economic comfort of social mobility. It is also about prestige, about social status. These are the more immaterial qualities that nevertheless remain closely related to material ones. Weber's (1946) distinction between class position (economic power) and social status (honour or prestige) helps to bring the role of culture in class practice to the foreground, as do also other forms of capital that are not, strictly speaking, economic in nature (Bourdieu 1984). By focusing on the way people forge their lives, we can see how the idea of middle class operates as a middle ground where aspiration and praxis come together. This can be done through various registers that are crucial cultural mediators: lifestyle choices such as housing, family planning, religious affiliation, and practices of redistribution are all interesting lenses through which to study how prestige is cultivated. In my work I focus on sexuality as an analytical lens through which to study social change, or in this case the making of the middle classes, as people distinguish themselves from their poorer, wealthier, 'traditional', or established fellow Kenyans.

Cultural institutions such as marriage, bride-wealth, female circumcision, and polygyny are interesting vantage points to tease out how social transformations impact communities, families and individuals. Since the colonial era, matters of sexuality have always been fiercely discussed, as older generations felt their authority fading away and as the younger generations seized opportunities to forge a different life. My proposal is that one way to study how social mobility translates into the formation of the middle classes is by looking at how people balance their mostly progressive ideals with more conservative social expectations. The focus on sexuality unearths other elements of middle class formation, namely ambiguity and conflict. Middle classness may be desired, but it is also many times contested. Furthermore, its course and outcome are often unclear.

In February 2015, I visited one couple that got married in 2001, I named them Tayiani and Kinyua (Spronk 2012). I can safely state that they embody the middle class, as they are often pictured in the global media: cosmopolitan, well-paid professionals with a young family of three children. I have written on how the family struggled with their wish not to practice the custom of bride-wealth, which was very much against the wish of Kinyua's family, who felt terribly offended. For Tayiani and Kinyua, such a custom was not in line with their life perspective on marriage as a commitment between equals, on a loving relationship in which the couple is central regardless of family expectations. Eventually, Tayiani and Kinyua found a compromise, but not without much tension and anxiety. When married, the contentious issue was always how to deal with the expectations of the extended family, in terms of housing and financing them, or participating in family meetings. At some point, the couple

moved to Zambia for Kinyua's work and both explained what great years these have been. The move consolidated their marriage and, in their words, made them strong to face the never-ending demands of their relatives. They were criticized for pooling their incomes (indeed a radical decision), or for investing in 'nonsensical' matters such as family holidays. In short, they were rebuked by relatives for not complying with expectations of how marriage life should be. Being with them in their lush garden in their house in Kilimani, it did not take long before another issue they have been struggling with arose. Kinyua is his father's first born, and his relatives expect him to take part in the clan's council of elders. To Kinyua, this is out of the question, as it goes against his constitution to partake in an organization that he called "backward" and "un-Christian".

What is interesting in Kinyua's explanations about the way to deal with such expectations is the shift that seems to have occurred over the last fifteen years. This time, he positioned himself as a Christian who does not want to engage in traditional practices he does not believe in. Whereas before he would explain his different approach to life as being modern. Christianity has always played an important role in taking a different, many times understood as "modern" route in Kenya: from missionary education for women to criticizing female circumcision. Religion has been a register through which to distinguish oneself. What I see now is that my interlocutors, apart from a small minority, have generally become more religious compared to fifteen years ago. Here, a new interesting question about the making of the middle class appears: whereas as young adults they were quite clear about gender equality, a topic that I have investigated through the theme of female sexual pleasure (2005), now being in a different phase of their lives, one of raising young families, a subtle shift has occurred. With adulthood, marriage, and starting a family, new responsibilities appeared. My interlocutors found in their churches like-minded people as well as a place to discuss demanding life questions. Through their increased participation in religious institutions, a more conservative way of life became meaningful. Many times, the religious discourse gave rise to a different gender perspective than they had as young adults. The interesting question is whether the middle classes tend to become more conservative when it comes to gender and sexuality, as their participation in religious communities becomes more important.

For instance, many women told me how they struggle to fit the image of a subservient wife, expressed in attitude, comportment, or dress code while the relationship with their spouse started from a very different position. Whereas some of them were struggling with this paradox, for others their role as wife and mother meant that they had had to change their former ideas. They then happily lived the life of the ideal respectable womanhood: middle-class, married and mother. Some of my female friends were struggling with what to me seemed like a new ideal in Nairobi: the stay home wife. One

of my friends, who had a good career in media, was actually thinking of leaving her job, whereas fifteen years ago, as a modern woman financial independence was very important to her.

What can we learn from such cases? Gender and sexuality in middle class formation are often moralized and re-moralized, and while often progressive ideals are promoted, such as on female circumcision, polygyny or bride-wealth, at other instances more restrictive expectations arise, for instance with regard to gender roles. In other words, middle-class respectability can also (re)introduce normative ideas and practices. This raises the question about the role of the middle classes in the establishment of civil society, as well as the role of religion in dominant middle-class moralities.

In Conclusion: From Kula Raha to Sophistication

Tayiani and Kinyua are engaged in what I would call the process of the making of the middle class. It shows us how material and ideational qualities come together: the couple are both hardworking social climbers. They received a scholarship here, a training there, and advanced their career through commitment and hard work. Their social status is clear: they are admired as being “sophisticated”, in other words, they gained prestige. Their new life path does not go unchallenged, as they embody shifting cultural practices, which are expressed through diverging lifestyle choices.

They follow up on the taxi drivers of Nairobi in colonial and newly Independent Kenya that were the hip and ambitious of their era. The prestige of these new ‘big’ men was expressed in the phrase *kula raha*, translated as ‘to make pleasure’, and it connotes symbolic meanings of accomplishment (Furedi 1973). The expression *kula raha* has shifted, in co-production with social change that provided new opportunities, from these taxi drivers to new avenues. The taxi drivers of today may well be part of the (floating) middle class (see Neubert and Stoll in this report) but they are not the symbol of its success. In short, middle class formation is a historical process that occurs globally but unfolds within particular local contexts and results in different outcomes.

Further, my focus is on the (young) urban professionals who are likely to become the relatively wealthy middle class. The question is, whether the same process concerning sexuality works out similarly or differently in other socio-economic groups (see Neubert and Stoll). Lena Kroeker (in this report) focuses on a slightly different group for whom relation with relatives is very different. That suggests that different groups use different registers to engage with the making of their middle class status. A comparative perspective might provide complementary insights into the process of middle class formation and thus bring us closer to defining the notion of the middle classes in Kenya.

I would like to make one final note about the broad interest in the middle classes in Africa. There seems to be a tendency in the discussion on the 'new' middle classes to expose them by pointing at their supposedly mindless consumption patterns while implying that they should direct their attention and efforts to improving their own countries. I am not sure whether this argument tells us something about the people being discussed or about the researchers themselves and their expectations. As Jones (2012) argues with regard to Indonesia, many such understandings of conspicuous consumption echo early European conceptions wherein consumption was considered wasteful and socially corrosive, rather than, for example, expressive and creative.

My contribution therefore is, in addition to more economic analyses, to focus on the culture of the middle classes. People have to choose between competing everyday practices regarding careers, housing, family, leisure, etc.; in other words, they have to make lifestyle choices which form and content differ according to each cultural context. The emergence of middle-class culture(s) is about ideas and practices, about aspirations and desires. The material and the ideational should be taken together as productive forces.

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