

New Consumption Spaces for the New Middle Classes? Shopping Centres in Abidjan



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Summary

Since 2011 and the end of the post-election crisis, Côte d'Ivoire has returned to impressive economic growth. The country and its capital are drawing attention from a growing number of investors, and the "Abidjanian middle classes" are widely publicised and sought after. At the same time, Abidjanian consumption spaces have become particularly diversified and transformed. Abidjan provides many options for consumers who are operating in a competitive environment with a wide selection in terms of places, products and services. The new shopping centres are commonly associated with the middle class. But what realities and social developments do they really represent?

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Introduction

The “African middle classes”, popularised by the 2011 African Development Bank (AfDB) report, are regularly set up as a symbol of the continent’s economic and demographic dynamism. Indeed, significant changes have been underway on the continent since the 2000s: good economic performance¹ and high population growth combined with rapid urbanisation.² The reported emergence of 300 million members of the African middle class³ has raised some expectations in economic and political circles: growth driven by domestic demand, potential new markets, democratisation, etc.

However, the “African middle class” category and the related interpretations must be viewed with caution. In Africa, like elsewhere, there is no consensus on how to define the middle classes. The term, which is polysemous, unclear and broad, may cover very varied socio-economic conditions depending on the criteria used to define it. The statistical scaling chosen by the AfDB – a consumption of \$2 to \$20 in purchasing power parity terms per day and per capita – is controversial: what would the social significance of this broad statistical aggregate be?

Research on the topic has shown that the conditions vary widely depending on the country and that so-called “middle class” conditions are far from the image which is regularly spread in the media (the middle class is associated with shopping malls, residential areas, luxury cars, etc.) Rather, they are intermediate social groups with diverse characteristics, mainly made up of households which can meet their basic needs, but which remain in precarious circumstances. The priority is much more to save and consolidate their socio-economic position (which is translated by saving, investing in property, or educating their children) than to consume.

1. The continent as a whole has experienced an average annual growth of 5.5% from 2001 to 2015 according to the World Bank.

2. The urbanisation rate is +3.4% per annum on average according to UN Habitat. The African population increased by more than 370 million inhabitants between 2000 and 2015, reaching almost 1.2 billion inhabitants. See *Perspectives économiques en Afrique 2016. Villes durables et transformation structurelle*, AfDB, OECD, UNDP, 2016, available at: www.afdb.org.

3. See *The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa*, AfDB, April 2011.

These are groups under pressure between high ambitions of upward social mobility and restricted financial capacity.⁴

Although this image of the middle class is misleading, nonetheless significant socio-economic changes are underway on the continent and a growing proportion of households are experiencing an upward trend in their standard of living.

Abidjan is *a priori* an excellent place to study these dynamics. The Ivorian capital has experienced particularly rapid changes in recent years. The return to a degree of political stability⁵ at the start of the decade has been accompanied by annual national GDP growth rate in the region of 8% since 2012. Therefore, the country has returned to impressive economic growth and Abidjan is both, the driver and showcase of this growth.⁶

The relative renewed stability and prosperity have caught the attention of an increasing number of investors and the Abidjanian middle classes have become widely publicised and sought after. Côte d'Ivoire and its economic capital are now receiving special attention in market research and are seen as excellent investment opportunities on the continent. A 2015 PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report estimated that Abidjan is the "leading" African city in terms of middle class growth.⁷ Côte d'Ivoire is also at the heart of the 2015 CFAO study on the middle classes.⁸ Using the AfDB's data, it proposed redefining a "consumer middle class",⁹ estimated at 78 million people for the entire continent in 2010, including 1.8 million in Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁰

4. See C. Nallet, "Identifier les classes moyennes africaines. Diversité, spécificités et pratiques de consommation sous contrainte", [Identifying the Middle Classes. Diversity, Specificities and Consumption Practices Under Pressure.] *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, December 2015, available at: www.ifri.org; D. Darbon and C. Toulabor (ed.), *L'invention des classes moyennes africaines. Enjeux politiques d'une catégorie incertaine*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

5. The mutinies have just nuanced the idea of renewed political stability. See for example, A. Leboeuf, "Les mutineries de janvier 2017 en Côte d'Ivoire: scénarios et options", February 2017, available at: <http://ultimaratio-blog.org>.

6. The city of Abidjan hosts 19% of the country's total population and also accumulates a more than proportional share of the total income generated by households, or 28.7%. See *Enquête sur le niveau de vie des ménages en Côte d'Ivoire*, National Institute of Statistics, July 2015.

7. "Into Africa: The Continent's Cities of Opportunity", PwC, Africa Business Group, 2015.

8. Study conducted with Ipsos and BearingPoint in five African countries (Morocco, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Kenya) called "Les classes moyennes en Afrique. Quelle réalité, quels enjeux?"

9. It excluded the AfDB's floating middle class (consumption between \$2 and \$4 per day per capita) and those aged less than 18 years.

10. Côte d'Ivoire has 20.3 million inhabitants according to the World Bank's estimates in 2013.



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The landscape of Abidjanian consumption spaces has particularly diversified in recent years: new shopping centres, a multitude of bakeries and tea rooms and the establishment of many international and local brands.¹¹ This diversification is accompanied by a “move upmarket” for existing spaces. It is not uncommon for local grocery stores, commonly called “Mauritanians”, to expand and diversify their range of products, turning their premises into a genuine, air-conditioned mini-market. The shopping centres – which started to become established in the 1970s and increased in the 1980s in Abidjan¹² – are expanding and changing, and are tending to become consumption, but also, living spaces, where food courts and recreation areas are developing (for example play areas for children), or even sports activities (group gym classes).¹³ Initially, primarily reserved for the elite, and especially expatriates, supermarkets in Abidjan have experienced an appropriation process which has turned them into relatively

11. Particularly, international brands such as Burger King, Carrefour or Décathlon, as well as many local initiatives like fast-food chains based on local products.

12. See S. Bredeloup, “Centralités commerciales, centralités immigrées à Abidjan” in G. Capron *et al.* (ed.), *Liens et lieux de la mobilité. Ces autres territoires*, Paris, Belin, 2005.

13. The opening of the CFAO shopping centre, designed as a living space, has led to a dynamic reconfiguration of other pre-existing shopping centres on the same model.

“common and Africanised”¹⁴ spaces. These dynamics are however far from leading to the disappearance of more traditional consumption spaces, such as the market, small local shops, street vendors, etc. The supermarket is widely seen as “complementary” which “suggests that the increase in modern consumption facilities will not be the end of more ‘traditional’ arrangements.”¹⁵

So, the Ivorian capital provides many options for consumers who are operating in a competitive environment with a wide selection in terms of places, products and services. The new consumption spaces and practices are commonly associated with the middle class. But what realities and social developments do they really represent?

This paper investigates the development of consumption spaces and practices, and their association with the above-mentioned middle classes. In various studies by Ifri on the middle classes, specific attention has been paid to consumption practices, which part of the interviews were about. This time it is reversed from a methodological starting point, beginning with the consumption spaces, by conducting interviews in them directly with consumers. On the one hand, this approach allows to go beyond the statement in order to get direct observation of the practices. On the other hand, this methodological starting point helps to understand the scope of consumers’ profiles and the socio-economic developments that these consumption practices reflect.

So, the shopping centre was selected as a prime place for investigation – in its capacity as a social place. Indeed, it is a social mirror where the different social strata mix and where social connections happen. Symbolic statuses and social positions take place in a place where people are exposed to others and where they are visible to others. For example, in Argentina, despite a sharp decrease in their purchasing power, the middle classes continued to frequent shopping centres, which allowed them to “save face”.¹⁶

14. The 1994 devaluation and the Ivorian crisis leading to the massive departure of expatriates in 2004, are the two main steps in the appropriation process. See H. Quénot-Suarez, “Les panneaux publicitaires à Abidjan: miroirs des marques, marqueurs des consommations. Publicité, consommation et banalisation culturelle dans une Afrique en croissance”, *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, December 2013, p. 47 and afterwards, available at: www.ifri.org.

15. H. Quénot-Suarez, “Consommer dans un environnement incertain. Le paradoxe des classes moyennes africaines”, [Consumption in an Uncertain Environment. The Paradox of the African Middle Classes] *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, March 2012, available at: www.ifri.org.

16. G. Capron, “Formes de l’échange social et accessibilité dans les centres commerciaux latino-américains” in G. Capron et al. (ed.), *Liens et lieux de la mobilité*, Paris, Belin, 2005.

We particularly focused on the shopping centres opened by CFAO in 2015 and 2017, as they were specifically designed for the middle classes.¹⁷ Who actually frequents them? For what practices? Before understanding these dynamics, the issues of the Ivorian middle classes and consumption should be reviewed.

17. Thirty-five interviews were conducted with consumers in the shopping centres. Comments and interviews with management staff were carried out in other shopping centres in the capital, in mini-markets, as well as local shops.

A resurgence of the Ivorian middle classes?

The African middle classes, which are often presented as new and emerging, are not in fact a new phenomenon in Africa. The expression had already been used during the colonial period to describe the “advanced”¹⁸ Africans, and then the literate classes who took the reins of power during independence. The use of the term waned after the 1970s, when economic crises and then the application of structural adjustment plans led to the disintegration of these middle classes. It is therefore more a redeployment and reconfiguration of these middle classes, whose conditions of emergence have changed and are less and less related to the countries’ administrative structures.

The case of Côte d’Ivoire is particularly interesting as the history of these middle classes is recorded in the long term. Indeed, they had a particularly significant influence in the two decades of strong economic growth which followed independence.

The “Ivorian miracle” and the “top of the bottom and bottom of the top”

After independence in the 1960s and 1970s, Félix Houphouët Boigny’s Côte d’Ivoire experienced a period of political stability and rapid economic growth driven by the intensification in the production of cash crops, including cocoa, coffee and cotton.¹⁹ People then spoke about the “Ivorian miracle” or even the “20 glorious years”. The growth was indeed remarkable for its scale and duration: more than 7% per year in volume between 1950

18. A name designating a group selected and created by the colonial administrations, made up of those who could speak the colonial and local languages, and which played the role of intermediary between the colonial administrations and the people.

19. The development strategy, driven by the “farmer state” was based on a very sharp increase in commercial agricultural production through intensification made possible by agronomic research, an increase in areas under cultivation and the successful integration of this agro-export model into the global capitalist economic system. However, this growth model was characterised by a dependence vis-à-vis the outside world, both by the influence of foreign capital, labour and technical staff and the choice of export-oriented agriculture as the basis for growth. This virtuous cycle would peter out at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s because of large fluctuations in world prices of these agricultural products and because of the Ivorian state’s debt crisis and the loss of fertility in some soils.

and 1978.²⁰ The rapid growth in trade in goods and services and the monetisation of all areas of business were accompanied by accelerated urban growth in the 1970s. In 1975, Abidjan provided 46.7% of the entire country's value added and accounted for 38.4% of the gross fixed capital formation, 49% of household final consumption expenditure and 67% of that of urban households.²¹

Economic growth was accompanied by upward social dynamics. A state bourgeoisie emerged, but the country also experienced a massive period of emergence of intermediate classes, particularly with the expansion in the number of urban jobs. In this middle class were educated young people with access to intermediate positions in the civil service, to skilled jobs, technicians in private companies, but also lots of small-scale farmers.²² The emergence of these intermediate groups was enshrined in the everyday language in Côte d'Ivoire by the expression: "the top of the bottom, the bottom of the top".²³ The researchers tried to estimate the influence of this middle class at the time, while emphasising the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the intermediate groups, and the difficulty in identifying a middle class which gave rise to some numerical doubts.²⁴ They finally settled on an estimate of around 30% of the Abidjanian population,²⁵ taking the "core nucleus" of the middle classes into account, made up of all the managers, teachers and graduate and skilled employees in the tertiary sector, and by adding the category of modern entrepreneurs and tradesmen, some shareholders, as well as skilled employees.

Disintegration of the middle classes

However, these middle classes were directly affected by the disintegration of the Ivorian production model and the economic and financial crisis in the late 1970s (foreign debt crisis and then the structural adjustment period). These effects had negative consequences on their remuneration and status. The abolition of many state-owned companies and of a large number of positions, and especially wage setting, seriously hit their incomes: from 1978 to 1983, civil servants lost about 39% of their purchasing power.²⁶

20. A. Manou Savina *et al.*, "Les en-hauts des en-bas et les en-bas des en-haut. Classes moyennes et urbanisation à Abidjan", *Revue Tiers Monde*, No. 101, 1985.

21. *Ibid.*

22. J.-P. Berrou *et al.*, "Le réveil des classes moyennes ivoiriennes ? Identification, caractérisation et implications pour les politiques publiques", Working Paper AFD, to be published.

23. A. Manou Savina *et al.*, "Les en-hauts des en-bas et les en-bas des en-haut. Classes moyennes et urbanisation à Abidjan", *op. cit.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. In 1955, the middle classes, mostly made up of Europeans, represented no more than 2% of the city's population.

26. *Ibid.*

At the same time, they witnessed the gradual disappearance of the very foundations of the urban economic base which the middle classes could build their accumulation strategy on – that of investing in highly profitable rented housing.²⁷

GDP per capita steadily declined until 1993. The situation started to improve in the mid-1990s,²⁸ but growth then mostly benefited the upper middle classes, such as those including the major producers, which led to a slight increase in inequality.²⁹ The political competition in the run-up to the 2000 elections weakened this situation. In 1999, Robert Guéï overthrew the president in a coup d'état which marked the start of a long period of unrest and political instability that would only end in 2011.

The recurrence of the “Ivorian miracle”?

Have we been witnessing a recurrence of the “Ivorian miracle” since 2011 and the end of the last post-election crisis? It is true that the country is experiencing a very rapid recovery in the economy (8% per year on average) to the point that over the last year, Côte d'Ivoire became the second country with the highest growth rate in Africa behind Ethiopia.³⁰

The growth is driven by investments, particularly public investment.³¹ It has also been largely stimulated by household consumption since 2012. Domestic demand plays a key role, driven by increasing incomes (a near doubling of the SMIG [minimum wage],³² reform of the cocoa-coffee industry³³, increase in civil service jobs and wage increases³⁴).

These indicators are therefore promising for the development of new Ivorian middle classes, also widely sought after by investors. However, nearly one Ivorian in two (46.3%) lives below the national poverty threshold

27. Government leases were abolished in 1983. The state stopped paying for leased accommodation from April 1982. There were no bank loans for building housing and the end of foreign loans resulted in affordable housing building programmes being stopped.

28. The Ivorian economy then benefited from the devaluation of the CFA franc, from a recovery in the prices of export products and from a large amount of development assistance and private investment. See L. Czajka, “Income Inequality in Côte d'Ivoire: 1985-2014”, WID. *World Working Paper Series*, No. 8, July 2017.

29. D. Cogneau *et al.*, “The Fall of the Elephant: Two Decades of Poverty Increase in Côte d'Ivoire (1988-2008)”, *Technical Report 44*, UNU-WIDER, November 2014.

30. Economic Situation Report on Côte d'Ivoire, World Bank, 4th edition, 2017.

31. Public investment doubled compared to its level in the 2000s. See AFD, “Les enjeux de la nouvelle croissance ivoirienne”, *Macroéconomie & Développement*, No. 20, October 2015.

32. Currently at 60,000 CFA francs, or nearly US \$100.

33. The reform guaranteed producers a payment of 60% of the international price. The household incomes of coffee and cocoa producers (around 5 million people) increased. See AFD, “Les enjeux de la nouvelle croissance ivoirienne”, *op. cit.*

34. The number of jobs in the civil services increased from 140,144 in 2010 to 187,780 in 2015. See *La Côte d'Ivoire en chiffres*, Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2016.

according to a study by the National Institute of Statistics (INS).³⁵ Abidjan is less affected by poverty with a rate of 22.7%. The capital is nevertheless heavily affected by inequalities, which are much more marked in urban areas than in rural areas. A recent study shows that the INS household survey under-estimated the inequalities and that Côte d'Ivoire is experiencing a level of inequality comparable to that of the United States.³⁶ Economic growth is strong but not inclusive, the level of income inequality over the recent period is particularly high.

The not so urban middle classes

Estimates vary regarding the presence of the middle classes depending on the criteria selected. The AfDB deems that they represent 37% of the Ivorian population.³⁷ For its part, CFAO excludes the “floating middle class” and comes to 19%.³⁸ A recent research study identifies the Ivorian middle classes by taking an income threshold of \$4 per day as a lower limit and by excluding the richest 5% of the population.³⁹ It concludes that the middle class ultimately represents a relatively small mass of 26.4% of the population and that only 16% of this middle class lives in Abidjan (therefore slightly less than two-thirds). It interprets this result, which may seem surprising, as the expression of the “high level of inequality which characterises the Ivorian capital with a high concentration of wealth in the top 5% of income (itself very heterogeneous) and a large amount of the population living in precarious circumstances.”⁴⁰

One of the main contributions of this study is to identify different intermediate income groups with very different characteristics, confirming that the middle-class category covers several social strata and differentiated social stratification processes. The authors also propose a typology in five components of the Ivorian middle class: the middle class of farmers (25% of the entire middle class), of workers in the informal economy (the largest: 39%), of retired and economically inactive people (15%), the formal

35. Or a daily consumption expenditure lower than 737 CFA francs. See “Enquête sur le niveau de vie des ménages en Côte d'Ivoire”, National Institute of Statistics, July 2015.

36. By making adjustments from the INS survey, the study estimates that the share of the richest 1% increased from 11.57% to 17.15%, the share of the richest 10% from 40.34% to 48.28%, and the GINI coefficient from 0.53% to 0.59%. See L. Czajka, “Income Inequality in Côte d'Ivoire: 1985-2014”, *op. cit.*

37. The AfDB considers the middle class to include Africans with a consumption between \$2 and \$20 ppp per day per capita.

38. By excluding the “floating middle class” between \$2 and \$4 ppp. However, those with a consumption between \$4 and \$20 ppp per day per capita remain.

39. In CFA francs, the lower and upper limits of the middle class are respectively about 28,400 and 135,000 CFA francs per capita per month.

40. J.-P. Berrou *et al.*, “Le réveil des classes moyennes ivoiriennes ? Identification, caractérisation et implications pour les politiques publiques”, *op. cit.*

intermediate middle class (4%) and that of executives, managers and intermediate occupations in the public sector (17%). The last two groups are over-represented in the city and particularly in Abidjan. The description of these groups shows that the households identified and grouped in the middle-class category are not just different in monetary terms, but highly heterogeneous in social, cultural and political terms.

Broad diversity is hidden behind the middle classes, commonly presented as predominantly urban, based on a trend of affluence and increased consumption, reinforced by images of new shopping centres. A study of these consumption spaces allows to pinpoint the socio-economic dynamics which occur within them.

New consumption spaces and practices

The two shopping centres chosen are made up of a supermarket, a shopping mall with various shops providing goods (clothing, cosmetics, children's games, new technology) or services (telephone, dry-cleaning, insurance), a food court and a relaxation area.

The first one, which opened in 2015, is in the Marcory district, an area where large stores were already established. Its 20,000 m² surface area is divided into three parts: a food court with five restaurants, a mall with 55 stores and a Carrefour hypermarket. The second, which is more recent (2017) and smaller, is located in the Palmeraie district, a more residential area where large building projects are underway. Nearly two years after it opened, the Marcory shopping centre had already welcomed 7 million people and Palmeraie more than 920,000 people between 1st June and 31st December 2017. We observed that while the first one is frequented by people living in various districts in the capital, the second seems chosen more for its proximity to the place of residence.

These shopping centres have been specified as prime places for investigation, as they were designed for the middle classes. Who frequents them since they opened? For what practices? The study is based on qualitative interviews carried out with 35 consumers,⁴¹ in the supermarkets and food courts.

Major trends

The socio-economic profiles of the consumers surveyed are relatively varied and their uses of the space are diversified. Some walk, visit, shop around, alone or with their family and others quickly do their monthly shopping in the hypermarket, while others allow themselves a moment of relaxation in the food court.

In our sample, the trend is quite young (people aged from 23 to 51 years and 35 years on average), quite mixed (16 men and 19 women) and with relatively small-sized families (23 single people, 9 married, 2 divorced, and

41. The interviews, lasting from 30 minutes to 1 hour, focused on socio-economic trajectories, standards of living, consumption, but also social, economic and political practices.

21 households with 1 to 4 children, but mostly 2). We observed that generally purchases are made by both women and men.

The professional profiles are relatively varied. For example, the consumers are engineers, gendarmerie warrant officers, computer programmers, military personnel, hairdressers, electricians, special needs teachers, secretaries, company directors, employees in the humanitarian sector, waiters, small businessmen, insurance advisors, psychologists, or even students. Although all business sectors are represented (public, private and self-employed), the most numerous are private sector employees.

Our consumers are also highly educated. The vast majority (31 out of 35) completed higher education. They are also quite mobile people. Half of the respondents have travelled to Europe or, to a lesser extent, to the United States, and 9 of them have lived abroad for a few years (usually in France) before returning to Abidjan in recent months or years. The return of relative political stability and a climate of economic growth encouraged them to return to settle and often to start a business.

Incomes and social positioning

The range of the monthly incomes of the households surveyed is extensive. It is between 200,000 and 5 million CFA francs (US \$362 - \$9,050). The average is 646,250 CFA francs (US \$1,169) and there are about ten with more than one million CFA francs (US \$1,810) and six with more than two million (US \$3,620). The households have between one and six dependants (mostly three).

They all have additional incomes to that coming in from their official work activities.⁴² These additional incomes come, for some, from small businesses in the informal sector, but especially for the higher incomes, from property or land (plantations and raising livestock in rural areas). These properties, which generate significant income or avoid significant rental costs, play a key role in the household's economic situation, by significantly increasing its available income: "My father was an engineer so we could have a house. I've inherited it. My outlay is just the water, electricity, and vehicle maintenance," (respondent 22, a businessman, aged 40 years).

Our consumers' incomes are slightly higher. They are all more than three times higher than the Ivorian SMIG (60,000 CFA francs). If we put these figures in perspective with those selected by the last quantitative study to define the Ivorian middle classes,⁴³ only about ten respondents are part

42. The household incomes take this additional income into account. However, these figures should be treated with caution, since they are taken from statements. It is possible that some are undervalued.

43. We are talking about the study by J.-P. Berrou *et al.*, "Le réveil des classes moyennes ivoiriennes ? Identification, caractérisation et implications pour les politiques publiques", *op. cit.*

of it. The others belong to the richest 5% of the population. The study regards household incomes belonging to the Ivorian middle classes as between 28,400 and 135,000 CFA francs (US \$52 and \$247) per capita per month. This is equivalent to a monthly household income of between 100,000 and 500,000 CFA francs (US \$181 and \$907). A study on housing programmes in Abidjan is similarly estimated by considering the incomes of the lower strata of the middle classes to be around 180,000 CFA francs (US \$329) and the average incomes around 290,000 CFA francs (US \$530).⁴⁴

A significant proportion of the consumers surveyed are therefore positioned above this average income. The majority of respondents (27 out of 35) nevertheless consider themselves as being part of the middle class.⁴⁵ On the one hand, this is due to the attractiveness that the category exerts in terms of social self-positioning.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the cost of living in Abidjan impacts on household budgets, especially for those who rent their homes. For example, we can say that some tenants with incomes above 500,000 CFA francs, are in average socio-economic conditions for the capital, with rent expenses being 70,000 and 250,000 CFA francs (US \$128 and \$457) per month. Finally, the very unequal situation among the richest 5%⁴⁷ may explain why some wealthy categories, comparing themselves with even more affluent categories, position themselves in the middle-class category.

Substantial economic capacities

Regarding the economic practices and budget management of the consumers surveyed, we can however confirm that their financial capacities are relatively high. Indeed, they almost all have the capacity to both, consume, save and help significantly. This also corresponds to how many describe what “middle class” means: “It is what is sufficient and may give another person a helping hand.” So, respondent 31, an accountant with an international company, states: “With my husband, we have 700,000 CFA francs (US \$1,281) per month, which is a large amount for Abidjan. We divide our wages into three: a part for saving, a part for everyday expenses (water, electricity and shopping) and a part for emergencies (parents, cousins)”. The additional incomes (for example from land in rural areas) are

44. A. Yapi-Diahou *et al.*, “Les classes moyennes dans les périphéries d’Abidjan. La clientèle des promoteurs des espaces en recomposition, in J.-L. Chaléard (ed.), *Métropoles aux Suds. Le défi des périphéries?*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

45. Four say “privileged” or “wealthy” and 4 “at the bottom” or “close to the bottom.”

46. Studies of the middle classes, regardless of the geographical area, show that positioning themselves subjectively as middle class is gratifying. This allows categories in precarious circumstances to not position themselves as too poor and wealthy categories to not position themselves as too rich.

47. See L. Czajka, “Income Inequality in Côte d’Ivoire: 1985-2014”, *op. cit.*

often paid directly to parents, brothers and sisters: “The income from the fields is for the extended family and our wages are for us” (respondent 32, a hospital director).

The use of free time is also indicative of a certain prosperity. The consumers’ leisure activities are indeed particularly diversified: trips to restaurants and cafes, sport, choirs, spas, trips to the beach, fishing and shopping. These practices do not correspond to those of the majority of the “African middle classes”, who admittedly have a discretionary income, but which is generally limited and does not allow them to simultaneously save, invest, consume, reallocate and enjoy themselves so significantly.⁴⁸ These indicators result in us noticing that our consumers – who, mostly, can simultaneously consume and secure their future – are partly in the middle and upper strata of the Ivorian middle classes, but mainly in the more affluent categories.

Mixed consumption practices

The amounts allocated to household purchases (all places of purchase combined, food and maintenance products) vary between 60,000 and 400,000 CFA francs (US \$108-724) and on average 172,500 CFA francs (US \$312). The consumption practices are mixed. Usually, at least three different places of purchase are visited during the month: the market, supermarket and local shops.

“Depending on price and quality, for shopping, I vary from one place to another. I go to Top Budget for bulk purchases of staple products, to Carrefour for specific products and fresh products, and especially products for the baby (child food and child care products). I go to the market for vegetables, sometimes for meat, it’s relatively cheaper. I buy clothing in second-hand stores or at markets. The budget for the child is 100,000 CFA francs per month (USD \$183). And shopping for us is 100,000 CFA francs as well.”

Respondent 4, monthly household income: 450,000 CFA francs (US \$ 823).

The market continues to occupy a key place and is the place of so-called “staple” purchases. The supermarket is rather a source of supply for fresh products and specific products (for children for example). However, the trend is changing and the supermarket is offering local staple products at prices that are often cheaper than the market. Some people come to stock up once a month on non-perishable, local staple products in large quantities.

48. See C. Nallet, “Identifier les classes moyennes africaines ; D. Darbon et C. Toulabor (ed.), *L’invention des classes moyennes africaines*, op. cit.

Generally, the shopping centre is appreciated for the quality, freshness and diversity of the products it offers, as well as for its environment which is considered pleasant. The majority appreciate the diversity of the services offered (shopping, relaxation, entertainment), but not everyone makes the same use of it. While some insist on the fact that the place is “elegant”, “pleasant” and “trendy”, others prefer to distance themselves from this “fad”: “We come here because it’s next door, that’s all” (respondent 24). These variations in practices and perceptions are related to the differences in socio-economic status, but also in social origins and trajectories. The different groups that we have identified, relating to the different uses of the place, are indicative of this.

The groups/consumer profiles



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Those who pick and choose

Our first group visits the shopping centre regularly (one to several times a week). They are in the lower income bracket of the sample (household incomes between 200,000 and 400,000 CFA francs [US \$366 and \$732]). Despite their regular visits, their financial capacities are relatively limited and do not enable them to:

- Fill their shopping trolleys in the supermarket. However, they regularly visit, sometimes coming out without purchases, sometimes with some products. They appreciate the quality and freshness of the products, study and meticulously compare the prices, and regularly come to observe and take advantage of special offers. So, a female seamstress comes several times during the week, alone or with her family, to buy some vegetables and finally decides on the china plates that are on special offer (respondent 3). These people do not have their own vehicle and use public transport, which also limits their ability to make bulk purchases.
- Buy products in the shops in the shopping malls. Although, some products could be affordable in terms of their budget, they mainly perceive these shops as places which are not “for them”. These places exert a symbolic/legitimate distance over them which generates forms of self-censorship within an apparently accessible and undifferentiated space.⁴⁹
- Enjoy an entire meal in the food court. However, they sit there and have a coffee or a part of their meal (a dessert for example). They appreciate this space in which they can relax, alone or with their children, who have access to the adjoining play area. For this group, the shopping centre thus constitutes more a leisure area than one of systematic consumption, that they largely visit during the weekend: “I am close to the bottom [of the social ladder]. But, this place is also for people like me. Even if you have 2,000 CFA francs (US \$3), you can come too. Even for a small croissant on Sunday.” (respondent 3, a seamstress).

49. These self-censorship effects originating from the underlying relationship between the spatial, normative, and commercial order in the shopping centre have been highlighted by many sociological studies. G. Capron, “Formes de l’échange social et accessibilité dans les centres commerciaux latino-américains” in G. Capron et al. (ed.), *Liens et lieux de la mobilité. Ces autres territoires*, op. cit.

Those who do their shopping

The second group demonstrates a pragmatic and effective use of the commercial space. They are in the upper income bracket of the sample (700,000 to 5 million CFA francs – US \$1,281 and \$9,150). They come one to four times a month to fill up their shopping trolleys and do almost all of their household shopping in the supermarket. Purchases from the market are generally made by the household staff. All have travelled and many of them have lived abroad for some years, often in France. They highlight the practical and familiar aspect of the place, they find “all products” and rediscover “their usual ones”. They do some shopping in the stores in the mall, but rarely, because they have the opportunity to buy the same products cheaply while travelling abroad. While they come occasionally with their families, they particularly come to do the entire shopping, without lingering in the shopping centre and avoid the weekend which is considered more crowded. Some highlight the symbolic, objective and social distance, which separates them from those who come here to “stroll”: “There are lots of average Ivorians in the stores. They may just come to buy two or three articles” (respondent 18). Regarding the smaller shopping centre at Palmeraie, respondent 33 states: “I get the impression that people come to look and leave. I have money, and money is made to be spent, not to be saved. I act like I was going to die tomorrow.” This respondent, whose household income is among the highest, approaching 3 million CFA francs, describing themselves as a “shopping addict”, is nonetheless not representative of the majority of the members of this group. Indeed, most of them do not spend frivolously and carefully study prices before choosing products. They focus on saving and securing their socio-economic condition (see the inset below). They adopt controlled consumption practices, and some, for example, do their shopping with their telephone in hand, in order to simultaneously calculate the amounts that they are spending.

Respondent 27, a 34-year-old young woman and mother of two children, is a doctor at an international organisation. She is often abroad and lives in Abidjan for three months in the year. She goes to this supermarket once a week. She does nearly all her shopping there and buys local products, vegetables, fresh products and fish: “All the vegetables are cheaper. Even the *attiéké* is cheaper.” She also regularly treats herself to “shopping for pleasure”: “Sometimes I can’t resist cheese, Bleu d’Auvergne to treat myself.” What she cannot find (dried fish for example) is bought at the market by her housekeeper. She often comes alone, but sometimes with her family. Her husband likes to go to one of the ready-to-wear shops that he discovered in Brussels. They have a monthly household income of 2 million CFA francs, own several properties (and rent their home in Abidjan), have two dependent children and help the extended family: “My husband has lots of nephews and nieces that he must help. He pays their school fees. But, we said to his relatives: “this year you will have to manage for some of your children. In my family, we are independent, everyone tries to do everything by themselves.” She insists on her modest background and the efforts that they have made to ensure their financial security: “We do not come from affluent families; we struggled. Therefore, we did not really change our lifestyle too much. My husband is trying to finish his building. He has started a small farm and he has three cows at the moment. The livestock is managed by his parents. As for me, I’m up to three plots of land and one is built on. Money is something which must be reinvested. You should never say ‘I have a lot of money’.” Nevertheless, she attaches importance to appearance: “In my free time, I look after myself, I go to the hairdressers and I have pedicures. Here, appearance matters a lot. Look how the children are dressed to go shopping! We set a lot of store on appearance. When I go out with my son, I make sure we are well dressed. My mother used to say: ‘you must have at least one pair of Bata shoes to be respectable’. That was previously. Now, it’s people who have lived in Europe who are looking for French brands.”

The regulars/ritualised

Among the upper income bracket of the sample, another group likes to visit the shopping centre regularly (mainly the food court). It is near to their home or on the way on their commute. Some come occasionally to relax: “I sometimes come to spend time here and have an ice cream; I really love ice cream. I come here to relax.” (respondent 5, a 34-year-old engineer, without children). Others go there daily, usually alone, for a morning coffee or dinner. These rituals are described as precious moments, as pockets of

relaxation between working and family life. Respondent 6, a 50-year-old gendarmerie warrant officer and a father of three, described his journey as follows:

“I go there every day; I have my espresso and then I go to work in the Plateau district. After work, I come to do some shopping (oil and household products), stroll around the shops, just to take time and have a change of scenery. Considering my wages, I cannot afford high-end clothing; it’s too much for my budget. However, I go to the fast-food restaurants twice a week. I go without my children; they’re allowed to go twice a month. My daughter started to put on weight, so we are trying to control it.”

For this group, the shopping centre is also a familiar, everyday space, where they can consume as much as “spend time” and “take time” to “think”, “take stock of their day”, or “catch up on their plans.”

In these consumption spaces, different social trajectories and positions, social statuses and practices are played out.

Conclusion

Our research consisted of looking for the middle classes in the consumption spaces they are supposed to visit. When we went to these specific areas, we did not find just the middle classes. The standard of living is relatively higher than what was *a priori* expected. This does not mean that they are not present. They are identified through particularly mixed consumption practices. The shopping centre is an alternative place, which they go to relax in, to look for some products at the best prices and to purchase specific products.

We started with the place in order to ask the broader question of the social composition of Ivorian society and the current socio-economic developments. The study helped to highlight misinformation about the issue of the Ivorian middle classes. Basically, they are not found either in the shopping centres or in the capital where they account for 16% of the 26.4% of the Ivorian middle classes according to the last quantitative study on the subject. Therefore, they are not as numerous as could be expected in a relatively prosperous city. This prosperity is more indicative of a highly unequal capital than a dynamic of averaging standards of living.

Nevertheless, these results should be put into perspective with a key issue, the difficulty in defining and understanding these middle classes. While the economic criteria must be decided on in order to assess their statistical impact at national or continental level, these criteria remain particularly flawed, and it is extremely difficult to statistically evaluate a middle-class group. For example, the exceptionally expensive rents in Abidjan put a serious strain on households' standards of living, whose incomes are considered relatively comfortable at national level. The study also demonstrates that access to property, more than income, plays a key role in the ability of these groups to consolidate their standard of living and climb the social ladder.

The study confirms that the middle classes are above all a constructed category and not a social group. The category is made up of different intermediate social groups with varied characteristics and practices, and is interspersed with diversified social trajectories, which are overall upwardly mobile. Finally, the shopping centres and the consumption practices observed in them reflect this growing affluence. An affluence that is played out at different levels: the vulnerable one of the intermediate social groups

which consume sparingly in an environment that reflects their aspirations and ambitions of upwards social mobility, but also that of the higher income groups, who have recently returned to Abidjan and come to rediscover their consumption habits in the shopping centre.



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