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## **Identifying the African Middle Classes: Diversity, specificities and consumption practices under pressure**

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**Clélie Nallet**

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This study draws on collective thinking undertaken as part of the work of this research group. The author would particularly like to thank Dominique Darbon, Comi Toulabor, Élodie Escusa and Anna Fichtmüller for their discussions and contributions. She would also sincerely like to thank Hélène Quénot-Suarez for her supervision and her contributions to this study.

# Abstract

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Africa, viewed for a long time as a "lost" or peripheral continent, has been regarded for a decade as the new frontier, and as a growth driver. Its strong economic performance and an increase in the number of potential consumers have attracted the attention of investors. This optimism vis-à-vis the continent mainly has its origin in an African Development Bank (AfDB) report that appeared in 2011, which identifies a middle-class group of 300 million people. However, these figures and the over-emphasis on the concept of emergence of the African middle classes should be treated with caution and requires clarification.

## ***Middle-class income: a partial and largely unrealistic indicator***

Indeed, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of the African middle classes. It is usually based on people's capacity for consumption, but this bias remains a real problem.

International institutions (for example the World Bank), consider people belonging to the middle class to have an income per capita and per day from \$12 - \$15 PPP. Based on this definition, sub-Saharan Africa remains on the sidelines since only 32 million people fall under this category. Therefore, this definition does not account for the social and economic dynamics allowing smaller populations to prosper. This is why the AfDB then established a more local indicator that is supposed to reflect the emergence of a small African middle class, with incomes ranging from \$2 - \$20 per day and per person (PPP), or 300 million Africans.

This category much better reflects the enrichment dynamics at work on the continent, but remains problematic, because the range is very wide and the socio-economic situations are extremely varied. Furthermore, by creating the concept of a *floating middle class* (from \$2 to \$4/d/person), the AfDB includes within the middle-class category people just out of poverty and whose situation remains very vulnerable. Additionally, this group is the largest, and is estimated by the AfDB to be experiencing the fastest expansion in the coming years.

Thus, researchers prefer the term "moderate prosperity" rather than middle classes. This ensures that the dynamics of Western or

developing countries are not transposed on the African continent and that it is kept in mind that the practices of these African middle classes are very specific. Indeed, it is mainly a question of groups fighting to maintain their economic status and resorting to various strategies, such as implementing informal activities to supplement their incomes.

The economic approach therefore gives the impression of a stable group, while the pressure and risks of downward social mobility are at the heart of everyday life of the African middle classes. This is why an approach focused on practices rather than on income seems more likely to cover the reality of the "middle-class" group in Africa.

### ***A practice-based approach of the middle classes***

The African middle classes often define themselves as belonging to the "middle". It should be noted that this self-definition is uncertain: they say they are "neither rich nor poor". The wealthiest appear as a Westernised, consumerist, and even "bling" class which is opposed to the frugal practices of the middle classes, while they enjoy consuming, have to manage their budget as precisely as possible. The middle classes are also contrasted with the poorest ones, because they have achieved a certain degree of independence (for example less reliance on family support) and have enough to eat. Furthermore, this relationship with food is one of the criteria emphasised in interviews to define themselves as middle class.

The African middle classes are developing strategies to safeguard against downward social mobility and to enable social change for their children. It should be noted here that a certain optimism and hope in the future (at least for the children) is another key characteristic of this group. The main challenge relates to the need to keep the household out of precariousness, while providing it with the means to achieve its upward social mobility goals with limited resources.

The most common strategy is to combine activities: in addition to a formal occupation which brings status and benefits, the middle classes have more informal "business" which allows them to supplement their income and to diversify the sources of it. This multi-positioning in different "environments" is also a defining element of the group. Hence, the income generated can be invested in the children's education, whose number is increasingly restricted.

The African middle classes, and in particular the urban middle classes, attach more importance to the nuclear family than the extended family and traditional solidarity. However, this does not imply a "Western" individualisation of habits: parents support their

children (who remain longer single to save money). They also support the rest of the family (brothers and sisters for example), but adjust their assistance. Furthermore, a rearrangement of solidarities is pushed forward: clubs, trade associations and churches (in particular the "new" evangelical Protestant churches, which welcome many new converts who have broken with the usual faith of their family).

The middle classes are therefore mostly in tight, sometimes vulnerable situations, and they make use of all the strategies and all their energy to secure their position. This implies that, contrary to the common idea, the emergence of the middle classes is not directly an improvement factor in political situations: they have not put much into politics, a sector which seems to be too unreliable and time-consuming, if it is not downright risky.

## ***Consumption under pressure***

Drawing on consumption practices, we note that these are mainly "under pressure". Budgets are tight and calculated very precisely. Shopping in malls and dining out are rare and planned as "extras". The household resources are pooled to increase income, particularly if a child, working adult and still unmarried, lives with their parents as a cost-saving measure.

Despite these limited budgets, the middle classes are characterised by their savings practices. Some do it at the banks and nearly all within the traditional tontine-type organisations. These two methods are not mutually exclusive, as it is the norm for the middle classes.

There is an optimisation of purchases particularly in terms of food expenditure. In this perspective, "multi-modal" purchases are necessary. Fresh fruit and vegetables are purchased weekly or twice-weekly in markets selected for their price competitiveness. Non-perishable goods are purchased every two weeks or every month and in large quantities, often in specialist wholesale grocery stores. The middle classes, more mobile than the poor, do not hesitate to make long journeys to optimise their purchases.

Supermarkets, in countries where they are well established, are regarded as expensive places (even if this is not necessarily the case compared to the markets) and largely remain places where occasional "extras" are purchased.

Some supermarkets, in East Africa and in South Africa, have however diversified their product range and offer some staple products (oil, rice, etc.) in large quantities. Thus, they can replace the customary wholesale groceries. Technology purchases are often carried out in second-hand markets, or for the luckiest, ordered from relatives abroad.

Urbanisation and a multiplication of supermarkets and malls have led to a change in eating habits (eating out and consuming cheese in South Africa). However, for many of the interviewees, and depending on the country, supermarkets remain unfamiliar places, reserved for the rich, and mainly seen as places of unnecessary expenditure. Appropriation of these places by the middle classes has occurred in some countries (South Africa, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire) but remains limited in other countries such as Ethiopia which has few supermarkets. Therefore, distrust exists vis-à-vis places of consumption that are viewed as imported.

This same distrust exists vis-à-vis the wealthier classes, who are considered as extravagant and unnecessarily ostentatious. Above all, frugality mainly characterises the African middle classes. However, it would be wrong to state that the middle classes may be out of touch with this ostentatious consumption, and particularly with the places of consumption of the rich, such as the malls. Analysis should not focus on attendance, but once again, on habits. Therefore, when a wealthy Ethiopian eats on a mall cafe terrace after having been to the cinema, a middle-class youngster, who may have seen the same film, will enjoy a take-away pastry: he does not necessarily have the means or the desire to sit down, and furthermore, his stay at the mall depends on public transport, which prevents him from lingering.

The middle classes are therefore really the *in-between* populations. This *in-betweenness* clearly defines their economic capacity, but also well beyond, their everyday practices between formal and informal activities, and between practices of saving and occasional "extras". More than a clear and fixed economic or social status, these practices are defined by their potential for change. They are not free from contradictions, but they symbolise the extraordinary plasticity of these new African "classes" and are – perhaps – constitutive of an emerging identity.

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# Introduction

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The international outlook on Africa greatly changed during the 2010s. The images broadcast by the media have slid from a continent inexorably bound to its sad fate (wars and poverty) to a continent resolutely projected towards a desirable and promising future.

Diagram 1: Headlines from the journal *The Economist* from 2000, 2011 and 2013



The afro-pessimism of the 2000s, much like the optimism of the 2010s, should be carefully considered in a continental context in which the country situations are greatly diversified.

This change in outlook is supported by the continent's good economic performances that have been recorded since the 2000s and combined with its demographic momentum (population growth and urban expansion). From 1990 to 2012, Africa experienced an increase in overall GDP of 5 % per year<sup>1</sup>, a figure for the first time higher than the world average. According to the World Bank<sup>2</sup>, the region's GDP that was reaching 4.6 % in 2014 should grow at an

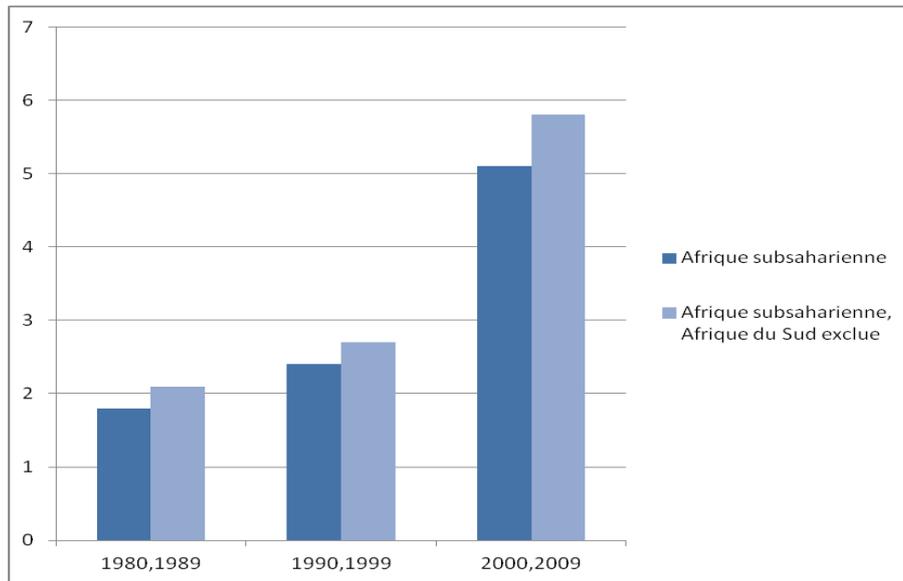
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1. International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook*, "Sub-Saharan Africa", April 2011.

2. World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*. Having Fiscal Space and Using It, January 2015.

annual average rate of 5.2 % for the period of 2015-2016 and rise to 5.3 % in 2017. The GDP per capita is expected to increase, rising from 2.1 % in 2014 to 2.6 % in 2015, and reach 2.8 % in 2017.

**Diagram 2: Average growth of GDP in sub-Saharan Africa (in %)**



Source: World Bank, *Africa Development Indicators 2011*, 2011, p. 20, <<http://data.worldbank.org>>.

This growth also affects both oil- and non-oil-producing countries, with increased effects in the best performing countries. According to the study by the McKinsey consultancy firm<sup>3</sup>:

The continent's "big shots" and their diversified economies – Egypt, Morocco, South Africa and Tunisia – continue to be growth drivers on the continent.

The growth in Algeria, Angola, and Nigeria is sustained by their oil and gas export revenues. The percentage of the manufacturing and service sectors is relatively low in these economies (1/3 of GDP on average) and the future growth of these countries depends on the diversification of their economies.

The transition economies – Ghana, Kenya and Senegal – are growing rapidly, driven by the agricultural and natural resources sectors (representing 35 % of GDP and 2/3 of exports), but also by the growing export of manufactured products, particularly to other African countries.

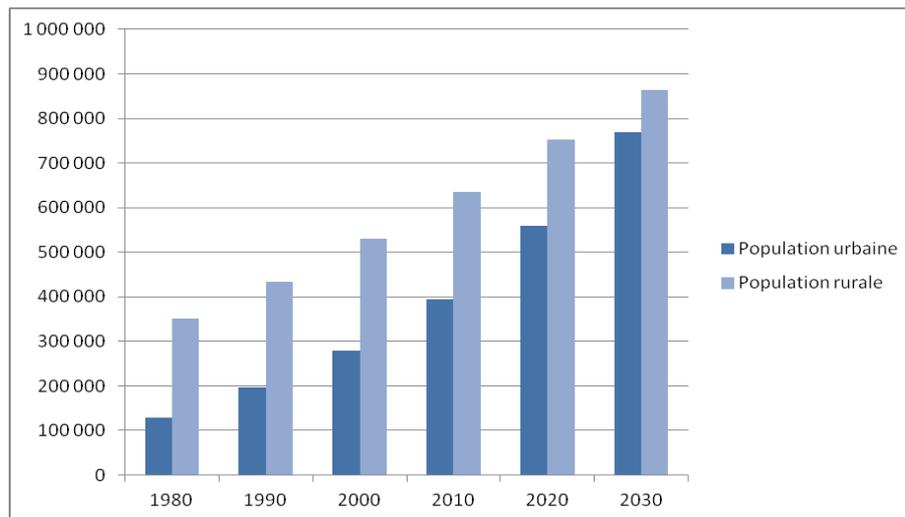
3. McKinsey Global Institute, *Lions on the Move: the Progress and Potential of African Economies*, Washington, June 2010, p. 5-6.

The performance of *pre-transition economies* remains low (with an average GDP of \$ 353/capita/year), but some countries are experiencing rapid growth. GDPs of Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mali are estimated at 7 % on average per year since the 2000s.

It could be said that the African continent also experienced a strong growth period in the 1970s, but that it weakened and collapsed, as it was mainly based on the export of raw materials (oil, cocoa, and coffee). However, the current situation holds characteristics suggesting that the economic growth may be consolidated and continuing even in a crisis. Hence, between 2000 and 2008, oil and natural resources only represented 24 % in the African GDP. Tourism, the banking sector, and telecommunications, driven by the governments' efforts to stabilise the economies and currencies, represent the main part of the growth<sup>4</sup>.

The continent is experiencing a rapid population increase coupled with high urbanisation at the same time.

**Diagram 3: Distribution of the urban and rural population in sub-Saharan Africa (Africa without the Maghreb, Western Sahara and Egypt)**



Source: UN-HABITAT's Global Urban Indicators database, <<http://unhabitat.org>>.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

According to projections, it is estimated that a quarter of the world population will be African in 2050<sup>5</sup>. These are the indicators of economic and demographic dynamism which for many observers represent the promise of growth driven from within by "new consumers" and the opening up of potential markets.

Indeed, the current economic performance allows for a relative but overall enrichment of the population, and the number of households with discretionary income should increase by 50 % over the next ten years to reach 128 million. For its part, the AfDB published a report stating that 300 million Africans belong to the middle class; that is one in three people on the continent<sup>6</sup>. This claim generated a high level of interests in the so-called "African middle classes". They have become a must for investment consultancy firms, business magazines, and international development organisations, foreseeing in their emergence the promise of a virtuous circle of growth and development.

However, these figures and the interpretations related to them should be treated with caution. The economic and demographic changes affect the African economies at different levels, as well as the countries' social structure; it is undeniable that a constantly increasing number of Africans are accessing a certain level of prosperity. Social changes are underway on the continent, but increased use of the term "emergence of the middle classes" to describe these changes raises problems. The temptation to modify our perception in relation to the Western middle classes or emerging countries is great and is particularly unsuitable for understanding local situations.

It is a matter of identifying these populations, which are classified too quickly under the encompassing heading "middle classes", in their movements, diversity, and specificities. Who are these Africans who are experiencing an improvement in their living standards? What impact do these dynamics have on their lifestyles?

The first point addresses the issue of defining these African middle classes as proposed by international development institutions. Yet, these definitions are imperfect and might restrict or conflict with the actual African middle classes. Therefore, this study proposes rather to identify these classes by their behaviour and their consumption practices, which are considered as the economic reflection of their social position.

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5. UNICEF, *Generation 2030. Africa: Child Demographics in Africa*, 2014.

6. African Development Bank (AfDB), *The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa*, April 2011.

# Defining the middle classes in Africa

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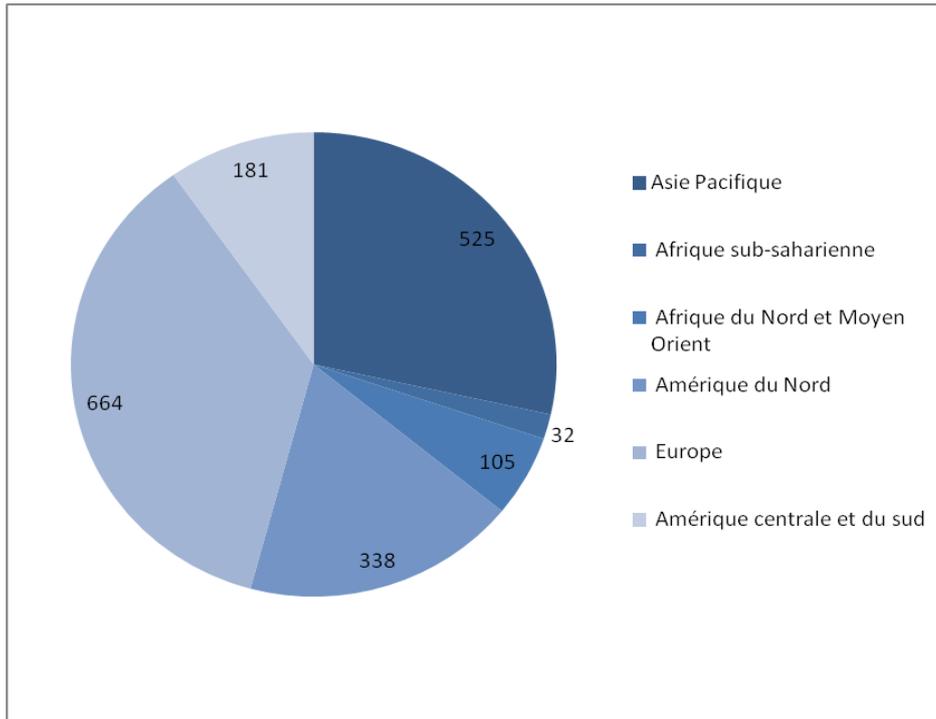
## *Economic definitions for heterogeneous social realities*

The issue with African middle classes, like that of the middle classes generally, is above all a question of definition. As a particularly multifaceted category, it can encompass various or very divergent social realities depending on the definition criteria selected. The first point to emphasise is that, contrary to what press articles as well as expert reports appear to suggest, there is no consensus on the definition of the middle classes or the appropriate tools to define them. Several definitions co-exist and do not indicate the same social realities: some approaches draw solely on economic criteria (statistical grouping of intermediate levels of income or expenditure) and others include more sociological markers (professional status, level of education, social prestige, etc.)

Most frequently, the African middle classes are defined according to their income or their consumption capacity. In 2007, the World Bank published a report stating the emergence of a “global middle class” whose size should double by 2030 and whose pool is mainly in emerging countries (China, India and Brazil)<sup>7</sup>. Their income ranged from the average per capita income in Brazil to the one of Italy (between \$ 4 000 and \$ 17 000 per year, or \$ 12 - 15 per person and per day). With around 30 million people in the category, sub-Saharan Africa appears as relatively on the sidelines of this phenomenon. Defined in absolute terms, this class locally reflects the wealthier populations mainly found in the more prosperous countries on the African continent (South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria).

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7. World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects: Managing the Next Wave of Globalization*, available at: <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org>>.

**Diagram 4: Distribution of the global middle class by geographical area**

Source: OECD, 2010.

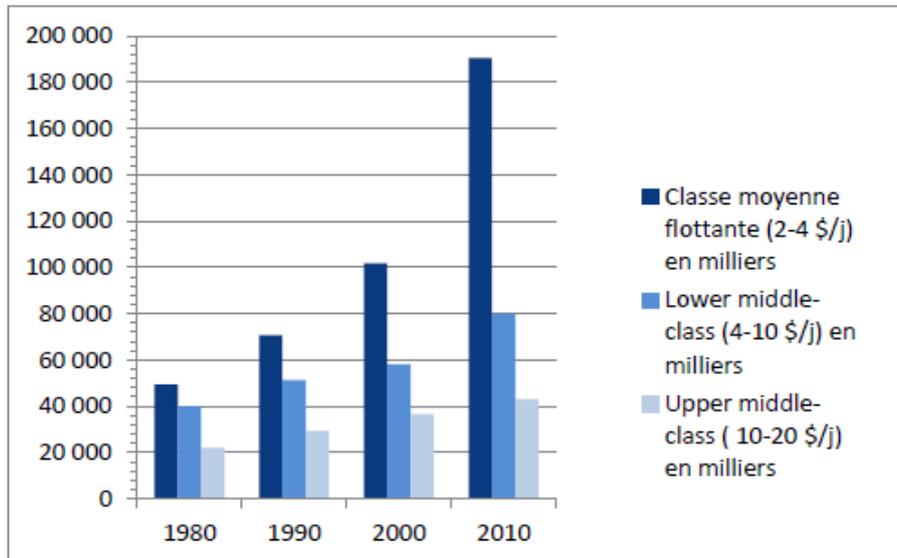
The AfDB recognises that these thresholds are too high across the African continent. How then to consider the African enrichment which, admittedly relative, nevertheless represents a major development? The AfDB decided to define a local middle class, which, it must be emphasised, corresponds to the average situation within African countries involved, and not to global criteria. The AfDB then proposed its own classification for Africa, which includes people with a consumption capacity per day and per capita between \$ 2 and \$ 20 calculated on purchasing power parity<sup>8</sup>.

The AfDB divides the middle class category into sub-categories: the "floating middle class" (or "floating class", that is to say from \$ 2 - \$ 4 consumption capacity per day and per capita), the "lower middle class" (\$ 4 - \$ 10) and the "upper middle class" (\$ 10 - \$ 20). The floating middle-class group corresponds to situations still marked by precariousness. Its members have emerged from great poverty and can meet the basic requirements (food and shelter), but once these expenses have been covered, their room for manoeuvre is very limited and the risk of downward social mobility hovers over their situation. The members of the lower middle class experience more stable situations and have disposable income beyond the compulsory expenses, which at least allows them to invest small

8. All of the following statistics are in PPP.

amounts in the future. The *upper middle class* has a discretionary income and significantly greater savings and investment capacities.

**Diagram 5: Distribution of the "middle class" by sub-group according to income**



Source: Charles Leyeka Lufumpa (dir.), *The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa*, Market Brief, AfDB, 20 April 2011, p. 3.

This statistical category should therefore be treated with caution. Given the spread of the statistical range considered, it encompasses a range of individuals with particularly diverse and divergent socio-economic characteristics. Some are in unstable conditions very close to precariousness, while others have notably more comfortable situations.

### Who is "middle class"?



© Joan Bardeletti, South Africa, Johannesburg.

According to the AfDB's definition, these two South African women, but also the waiter, belong to the African middle class. The waiter is part of the lower segment, the "floating middle class". His job as a waiter guarantees him an admittedly modest but monthly salary in hand that he supplements through the tips he gets and through an informal "personal business" that he does run. So, he manages to satisfy his basic requirements and to have a little room for manoeuvre which varies between months.

As for the young women sharing oysters, seafood and white wine in this high-end restaurant, despite the wealth suggested by these indicators, their situation is not as prosperous as it appears. This outing is a particularly expensive "extra" that they allow themselves once a month. They park their cars, which do not match the luxury of those visible in the photograph, not in the restaurant's car park, but in a neighbouring area.

These observations show, firstly, that the AfDB's "African middle class" category includes heterogeneous social situations, and secondly, that it is essential to pay close attention to the practices of its members (particularly contributions related to informal activities that are very difficult to measure); the appearances and images broadcast by the media are sometimes misleading.

Extract from "The Middle Classes in Africa. Social Sciences and Photography" exhibition, Musée d'Aquitaine de Bordeaux, 29 November 2014 to 22 February 2015.

## A vulnerable "averaging"

While some countries such as South Africa and its black diamonds<sup>9</sup>, and Ghana and its upper middle class of professionals<sup>10</sup> combine the significant presence of a "global middle class" and of a "local middle class", most of the continent's middle class is in contrast to the income pyramid and involves people whose income is very low, ranging between US \$ 2 and \$ 4 per day. The floating class subgroup is quantitatively much larger than the other AfDB middle class sub-categories and is growing rapidly (see Diagram 5).

Therefore, the main issue of ongoing social change on the continent lies in emerging social categories which are far from extreme poverty while remaining close to a somewhat vulnerable situation. It calls into question a segment of the middle class that has gained "moderate prosperity"<sup>11</sup> but remains vulnerable and whose strategies are focused on ways to minimise this vulnerability. Therefore, the majority of the African middle class is not indicative of a wealthy middle class walking around in shopping centres, consuming European food, or having large cars. It is a set of households in tension, which for example, will not use the car at the end of the month, because there is no money for petrol, or which very often uses public transport. This concept of "tension" is essential to remember and to take into account in order to understand the strategies of these middle classes, for example particularly with the use of credit or bulk purchases, but also with the use of informal or second-hand markets (clothing and technical equipment) to kit themselves out<sup>12</sup>.

9. UCT-Unilever, *Black Diamond: On the Move*, Institute of Strategic Marketing, Cape Town, 2007.

10. J. Hamidu, "Ghana la stabilité politique: une affaire de classe moyenne ou un partage du pouvoir par une élite de *professionals*?", in *L'invention des classes moyennes africaines. Enjeux politiques d'une catégorie incertaine*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

11. This term is borrowed from Chinese sociology and defines situations of emerging from great poverty which still remain insecure. Studies by the LAM/Sciences Po Bordeaux research group on the "African Middle Classes" demonstrate that this category of "moderate prosperity" better matches the realities of social changes underway in the African countries than the term "middle class", which underpins the idea of wealthier and more stable situations.

12. É. Escusa, *A Class by Consumption: the Groceries Shopping of the Lower Middle Classes in Johannesburg, South Africa*, Note de l'Ifri, 2013.

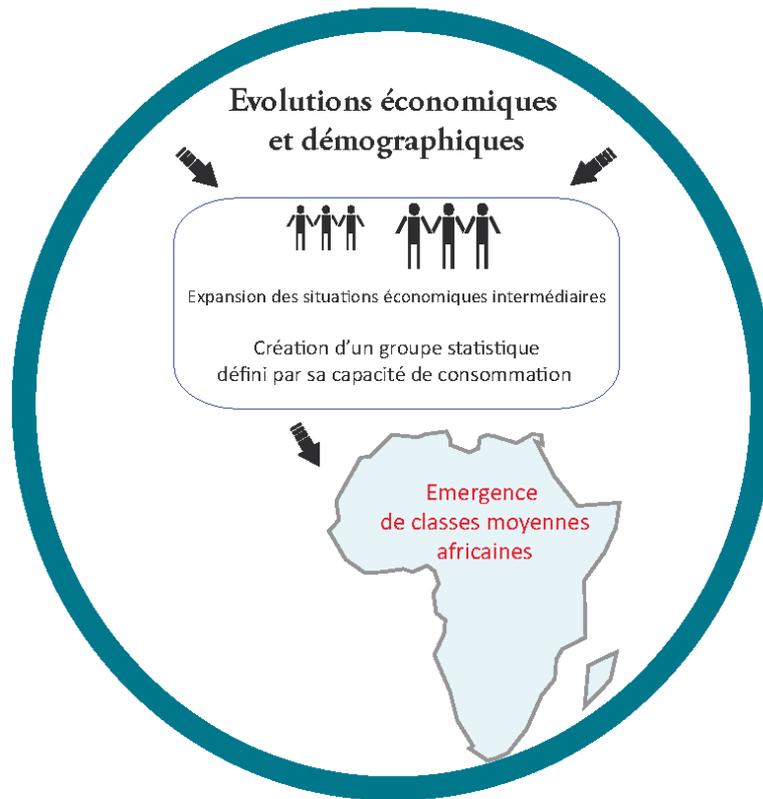
## ***Delusions and limitations of the economic approach***

Hence, the economic approach as proposed by the AfDB shows its limits. While the vast majority of these so-called "middle classes" experience particularly vulnerable and unstable situations, the African middle classes, as they are presented, give the illusion of the emergence of a large stable middle group (Diagram 6).

The fact remains that these statistics highlight the beginnings of an improved standard of living: the capacity of millions of households to potentially and modestly improve their lot. International development institutions, investors, but also the public authorities of African countries, are increasingly turning to these categories, which by their size are seen as a major economic and political issue in the coming years. However this emergence is not necessarily viewed positively. So, if for international development institutions and financial consultancy firms they embody the hope of a growth driver, social harmonisation, and the emergence of new consumer markets, their development generates distrust from some African governments who see a potential opposition group: the African middle classes are as much "consumer classes" as "dangerous classes". These categories, whether called "middle classes" or for example "poor but active people" by the Ethiopian government, are subject to expectations, hopes and fears, and are mobilised for what they are expected to produce (economic development, democracy, opposition) without any actual discussion about their make-up or study of their behaviour.

In order to capture these ongoing sizeable social changes, it is therefore necessary to go beyond a quantitative approach and to consider markers of household trajectories and lifestyles which are often difficult to quantify.

Diagram 6: Mapping the logic of the AfDB report



Source: Clélie Nallet, *Classes moyennes éthiopiennes: Étude empirique d'une assignation catégorielle incertaine*, thesis for PhD in Political Science, Université de Bordeaux, 2015, p. 27.

## Identification by behaviour

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Understanding and defining the middle-class categories involves paying attention to their behaviour, portrayal, and expectations in their plurality and their specificities. The following points are drawn from household surveys conducted in various cities in Africa<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, it is in the cities where the economic opportunities and services are concentrated that these middle classes are most present and identifiable, even though they are not completely missing from the rural environment.

### *How do these middle classes self-define?*

*"I'm in the middle: neither rich, nor poor. I'm in-between in my opinion. I can afford basic necessities." Maeza, Ethiopian, 34 years old.*

*"I am getting by, that's all." Salim, Nigerian, 36 years old.*

*"The middle class, that depends on the seasons. One day, you have money and there you are middle class, the following day the money has gone and you find yourself back among the poor." George, Ugandan, 32 years old.*

*"I am medium. I have a good income but no extra." Genene, Ethiopian, 63 years old.*

*"I am neither rich nor poor. I am there, in the middle." Larissa, Cameroonian, 55 years old.*

*"I don't know whether to say I am part of the middle class or not. But I think I fall among the average. The average is normally considered to be middle class." Patricia, Ugandan, 36 years old.*

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13. These surveys were conducted by a group of researchers (LAM/Sciences Po Bordeaux) with the so-called "African middle classes" in Uganda, Guinea, Togo, Ghana, Ethiopia, Cameroon, South Africa, Niger, Kenya, and Mozambique. This research group is led by Dominique Darbon and Comi Toulabor and has mainly published in: P. Jacquemot (dir.), "Les classes moyennes en Afrique.", *Afrique contemporaine*, 244 (4), 2012 et D. Darbon & C. Toulabor (dir.), *L'invention des classes moyennes africaines. Enjeux politiques d'une catégorie incertaine*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

Men, women, single or parents (generally of two children), in their thirties or sixties, shopkeepers, civil servants, business owners or employees, these so-called "middle classes", as diverse as they are, group a set of people and households together who feel that they belong to a "medium" or "middle" area (*AmaPhakathi* in isiZulu or *Mekakelegna* in Amharic). They have in common that they spontaneously self-define in the negative, both as "not rich, not poor." They differ from the poorest as they can meet their basic needs (eating three times a day and shelter), but feel far from the wealth of the richest who can afford everything, while they live without "extras" or almost. They initiate an economic, but also a moral barrier between them and the "rich", by describing the behaviour of the latter as ostentatious, idle, *bling*, or even individualist. They are proud to say that they made it on their own and succeeded through their efforts and hard work. This moral concept is essential as it forms the basis of a middle class identity. Moreover, some governments and international institutions rely on this to justify a greater interest in the middle classes at the expense of the poorest populations. Those who "remain poor" are then viewed as not having "taken responsibility for their own situation", although they have the means to succeed, as evidenced by the growth of those who have improved their lot<sup>14</sup>.

### ***A vulnerable but ambitious "in-betweenness"***

As aforementioned, the lowest categories of the middle classes are particularly vulnerable to changes in political and economic conditions, hence the idea of "seasons". A large part of their daily energy is dedicated to protecting themselves against the risk of downward social mobility, maintaining an average standard of living, and implementing tactics for economic and social advancement for themselves, but above all for their children. It is surely what best defines these "in-between" populations: a tension between rising socio-economic aspirations, a capacity to plan for the future and the better, and implementing strategies to achieve these objectives with limited means. Business activities, multi-positioning and the importance of the informal sector.

While the social categories with medium incomes are actually increasing and changing, the so-called "emergence" of African middle classes is misleading. The middle classes are not a new phenomenon in Africa. The expression was already used during the colonial period to describe "advanced" Africans, thus defining a group selected and created by the colonial governments, made up of those

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14. D. Darbon, "Nom de code "Classes moyennes en Afrique": les enjeux politiques d'une labellisation de groupes invisibles et vulnérables", *L'invention des classes moyennes africaines. Enjeux politiques d'une catégorie incertaine*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

who could speak both colonial and local languages and the literate classes capable of taking the reins of power at independence. The use of the term waned after the 1970s when the economic crises and the application of structural adjustment programmes annihilated the middle classes.

It is therefore more a question of redeployment and reconfiguration of these middle classes whose conditions of emergence have changed and are less and less related to countries' administrative structures. Members of the African middle classes quickly establish themselves in various business sectors (public/private/self-employment and formal/informal). Furthermore, it is one of the main characteristics of these African middle classes: they develop resource gathering and risk minimisation strategies by diversifying their business activities. They usually combine an official profession (small business owners, employees, shopkeepers, civil servants) with more informal activities that increase their income significantly. All these different types of activities prevent them from living in precarious conditions and provide some comfort.

<p>"In order to change my life, I get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and I go to bed at midnight." Maeza, Ethiopian, 34 years old, single, manager of a hairdressing salon and who sells butter for hair that she makes herself at home.</p>	<p>Income from main occupation: 1700 ETB (\$ 83 in current dollars)</p> <p>Other source of income: 1000 ETB (\$ 49 in current dollars)<sup>15</sup></p>
<p>"I am a teacher and I have a bar for additional income. My parents help me for my children's education." Anita, 31 years old, married Ugandan and the mother of three children. She teaches in a business school. She also has a graphic design company with her husband and she is the owner of a bar.</p>	<p>Main income: 2 million UGX (\$ 689 in current dollars)</p> <p>Other sources of income: 3 million UGX (\$ 1034 in current dollars)<sup>16</sup></p>

The examples of Maeza and Anita show that these multi-activity strategies characterise members of the middle classes,

15. Extract from a survey conducted in February 2012 by Clélie Nallet at Addis Ababa.

16. Extract from a survey conducted in September 2014 by Anna Fichtmüller at Kampala.

whether they belong to the lowest (Maeza) or the highest (Anita) segments of this broad category.

This fact is illustrated by civil servants situation. Their official status provides them with a certain social prestige, wage stability, and some formal benefits (social welfare and paid holidays) and more informal ones (easier access to credit for example). However, their salary is often insufficient to guarantee them a middle position (with the exception of the Gabonese case<sup>17</sup>). If the national law does not generally allow civil servants to combine activities, they circumvent this restriction by different tactics. For example, for Togolese military personnel, the wife is the ideal figurehead for declaring other businesses. Some specialise in the management of Internet cafes, petrol stations, rented houses, taxis, motorcycle taxis, transport lorries, and others have built actual businesses in the construction, civil engineering or security sectors<sup>18</sup>. The networks that they frequent during their official occupation often become potential clients for their "personal business".

The emergence of middle classes in Africa mainly stems from the expansion of the so-called informal sector which is found in a variety of service and production, repair and manufacturing activities, which at least are partially opting out of government control. According to the International Labour Organisation, the informal sector in Africa may represent 42% of GDP and 61% of urban employment, and it is the source of over 93 % of new jobs created during the 1990s<sup>19</sup>. Even though the informal sector is regularly associated with poverty and with "survival jobs", middle classes' main occupations as well as their additional business activities are one of its constituents. The family home is often the place of additional informal and lucrative business activities: renting out a room in the house, preparation and sale of hand-made products, or even raising chickens or setting up a gym in the *back room*.

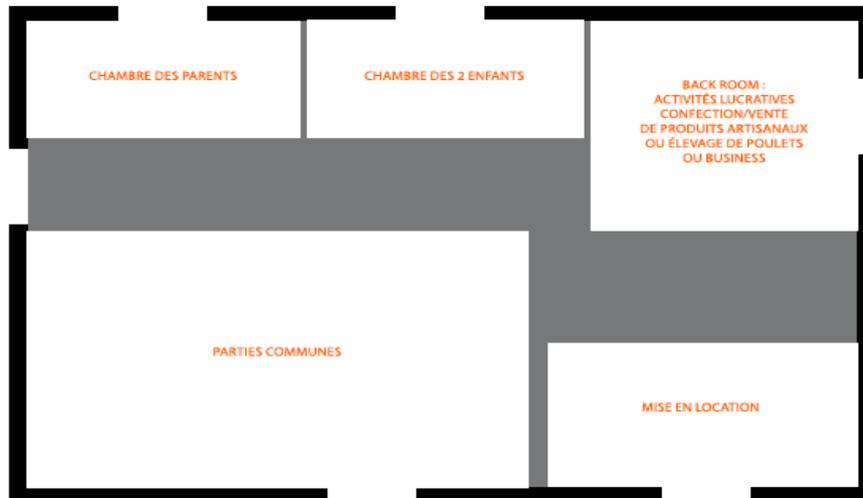
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17. M. Soiron-Fallut, "La classe moyenne fonctionnaire au Gabon. L'État comme valeur refuge", *Afrique contemporaine*, n°244 (4).

18. C. Toulabor, "Corps habillés et stabilité politique au Togo: l'esprit de corps d'une catégorie sociale en uniforme", dans *L'invention des classes moyennes africaines. Enjeux politiques d'une catégorie incertaine*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

19. S. Kante, *Le Secteur informel en Afrique, Vers la promotion d'un travail décent*, working paper on the informal economy, employment sector, ILO, 2002-15, 2002.

Diagram 7: the house as a place of diversification of resources



Source: design Clélie Nallet, at the "Middle Classes in Africa. Social Sciences and Photography" exhibition, held at the Musée d'Aquitaine de Bordeaux from 29 November 2014 to 22 February 2015.



© Elodie Escusa, South Africa, Johannesburg.

Rosa is a young South African woman aged 33 years. She is currently unemployed and lives with her mother, who is a retired school teacher, and her 3-year-old daughter in Eldorado Park (a

former *coloured* township) in Johannesburg. She has a few income-generating business activities: she sings for a band and she also sells beauty products at home. Nevertheless, the project which is closest to her heart is setting up a gym in the room used as a garage at the back of the small plot of the family home. She also wants to participate in an Internet training course.

"I put some equipment in the garage for my personal use and I realised that some neighbours came to ask me if they could come to exercise here. Gyms in the shopping centres are too expensive for people from here. I would like to renovate this room and enlarge it, because many people of my age in this area (former *township*) are overweight."

*Extract from a survey conducted by Élodie Escusa in Johannesburg, January 2012.*



© Clélie Nallet, Ethiopia, Addis Ababa

Tadesse, a young 32-year-old Ethiopian man introduces himself as a "young entrepreneur". He returned to Ethiopia two years ago, after having worked in Dubai for a car rental company. Today, he "is dabbling in a lot of different things" and is trying his hand at business project consultancy, car hire in Addis Ababa, and is diversifying his business in accordance with the economic conditions. He is raising 450 battery hens in a shed in the grounds of the family home, which brings him around 5000 ETB (\$ 231 in current dollars) per month.

*Extract from a survey conducted by Clélie Nallet in Addis Ababa, March 2012.*

## ***Goal of upward social mobility: model of the nuclear family and the importance of education***

*"Before thinking about having children, you must have a job, build a house, have a stable life, and be able to provide them with the best schooling." Yves, Cameroonian, 32 years old.*

*"I want to invest in these two." Koffie, Ghanaian, 43 years old.*

*"When I was little, it was potatoes, potatoes, and potatoes, but my daughter will always have a choice." Tigist, Ethiopian, 40 years old.*

The pursuit of social advancement is inseparable from the idea of the middle class in Africa. It is a question of doing better than their parents and of planning even better for their children. To do this, the "not rich, not poor" develop controlled matrimonial strategies. They believe they should not have more than two children so they can be brought up in the best conditions. The vast majority of households include two children, and for those who have not yet started a family, it is a question of waiting for the right moment (having a well-paid job, owning their own house, etc.). Concretely, this is reflected by a significant lengthening of the period of being single among middle-class youngsters. For example, in Addis Ababa, out of a sample of 150 households surveyed, 95 % of these middle class members aged 25-38 were single, while their parents were mostly married between 15 and 20 years old<sup>20</sup>. The ultimate goal of members of the middle classes is to provide their offspring with the "best education possible". The middle classes share a strong belief in the importance of education as a means of social advancement and in the need to constantly improve their level of education, whether it is their own level of study (evening courses or return to study), and/or vicariously, that of their children.

The financial sacrifices to meet the expenses of educating children in private institutions are great and the portion that households dedicate to it varies according to the countries' education systems, but may reach one-third of the household's income. The schools are selected for their quality rather than their closeness, which often involves long journeys and an additional cost.

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20. Results of a survey conducted by Clélie Nallet from 150 "middle-class" households in Addis Ababa.

## ***Access to networks and reconfiguration of solidarities***

If education is the priority, it is also essential to have a good network. The latter enables access to opportunities and important information for achieving upward social mobility aspirations. Networks of colleagues, friends, and matrimonial alliances appear as the preferred forms of social solidarity. The young are increasingly leaving the old solidarities in order to build networks of interests or affinities, based for example, on belonging to the same school or profession. Clubs, associations, and professional groups are growing, as well as public spaces for sociability.

Among these networks, those related to religion have an important place. A significant number of members of the African middle classes have converted to the new evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which provide them both with access to a network of upwardly mobile people and the certainty of divine election and the blessing of their efforts at advancement<sup>21</sup>.

Therefore, it is necessary to qualify the concept of individualisation that might be expected in these middle classes. It is a matter of reconfiguring the solidarities which become the preferred solidarities rather than traditional and incurred ones. They are particularly important in uncertain social, economic, and political contexts and basically contribute to the risk minimisation strategy required by the African middle classes.

## ***A class in tension and on the move***

Thus, identifying the middle classes in Africa requires taking an interest in the ongoing movements, trend changes in social and professional status, styles, and lifestyles. These categories, far from being stable and fixed, are shifting and the individuals who make them up are in permanent tension. This is hidden by the use of the term "class" that reflects a fixed and stable status and position. The tensions are numerous, including maintaining their comfort and improving their personal situation through education, to reconcile the requirements of the world they come from and those of the world they aspire to live in. These tensions also include protecting themselves against family pressures to share resources, organising the advancement of their children and ensuring a better life for them, which imposes new expenditure in education and healthcare in

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21. C. Mayrargue, "Trajectoires et enjeux contemporains du pentecôtisme en Afrique de l'Ouest.", *Critique internationale*, n°22 (1), 2004, p. 95-109.

particular, a conflict between generations which no longer replicates an acquired social status, but on the contrary propels them into difference and rupture.

In addition, the middle classes develop and capitalise, often without worrying about anything else other than their own industry. Contrary to the widely-held view according to which the middle classes will automatically invest in "just causes" and work for the "common good" is an illusion. The surveys show that in the different African countries, the middle classes are focusing their energy on maintaining their standard of living and scarcely invest in time-consuming and risky social and political mobilisations<sup>22</sup>. However, they are recognised by their practices of saving, outward modesty and work. Their consumption practices are characterised by these tensions, between realities of the present and aspirations, between limited resources and plans in search of stability and comfort.

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22. D. Darbon et C. Toulabor (dir.), *L'invention des classes moyennes africaines. Enjeux politiques d'une catégorie incertaine*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

## Consumption practices under pressure

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The "middle-class" households live on a budget that remains particularly limited for most of them. Above all, the objective is to secure their situation, for example, by setting aside small amounts each month, and if the budget allows it, to consume other things than staple products. These so-called "extras" or "luxuries" by the households are diversified according to their sub-categories<sup>23</sup>.

### **"Floating" group**

Aylu is an ironworker. He learnt this profession through training offered by the Ethiopian government and set up his own small business three years ago with a micro-credit provided by the public authorities. His wife, Sahay, has a nursing degree but cannot find work. Since the birth of their son a year ago, she has put her job search on hold and looks after the child. In order to improve the family income, she sells *injera* (a flatbread which forms the basis of Ethiopian cuisine) to the neighbours that she makes in their small kitchen. They rent a one-room apartment in one of the many buildings in the capital. They dream of having their own house, a separate room for the child and of improving their situation in order to have a second child.

Estimated monthly household income: 2100 ETB = \$ 309 PPP

Income per day and per capita: \$ 3.4 PPP

#### *Main expenditure*

- Food: 30 %
- Expenses for the baby: 10 %
- Rent: 56 %
- Savings group: 4 %
- Very low transport costs: they walk to save money.

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23. The examples are taken from a study conducted by Clélie Nallet in Addis Ababa between September and December 2013.

### **Intermediate group**

Beza and Amare are in their sixties and parents of three children, and have always worked in the civil service. They have gradually risen through the ranks and they have now a relatively comfortable income. They made it a point of honour that their three sons went through higher education. Their eldest son is now an IT specialist, the younger one is a technician in the national airline, and the youngest left "to try his luck" in the United States. They own a large house that they purchased during the communist regime in the 1980s, they rent a room to a student and house their eldest son, his wife and child for free in the outbuildings, as well as Beza's sister and her daughter since her divorce a year ago. In addition, they also fully bear the costs of the latter two.

Estimated monthly household income: 6500 ETB = \$ 1000 PPP

Income per day and per capita: \$ 8.3 PPP

#### *Main expenditure*

- Food: 50 %
- School fees for their niece: 20 %
- Public transport: 10 %
- Savings: 10 %
- House maintenance: 5 %
- Extras (coffees and some dining out): 5 %

### **Upper group**

Abi, 32 years old, proudly introduces himself as a "young entrepreneur." He is self-employed as a consultant specialising in development economy for government and international organisations' projects. He also provides computer maintenance services. After having taught for several years at Addis Ababa University, he decided to "set up his own business" three years ago. He is starting to be recognised in his field and dreams of starting his own small business with employees to manage even more contracts, and above all to have the means to accomplish building his own house, which has been at the foundation stage for a year. In the meanwhile, he lives with his parents to save for the future.

Estimated monthly household income: 6000 ETB = \$ 923 PPP

Income per day and per capita: \$ 20 PPP

#### *Main expenditure*

- Restaurant for lunch: 30 %
- Recreation (gym, cinema, and bars): 10 %
  
- Contribution to the household's expenses (purchase of meat, healthcare costs): 10 %
- Building his house: 30 %
- Set aside for his professional projects: 20 %

## How "to access" their wishes?

The majority of members of these middle classes, it should be noted, have consumption capacities below \$ 10 per day and per person, and combine rigorous management strategies of their budgets and "cope" in order not to slide into precariousness and to achieve their advancement objectives. They combine universes that are often wrongly analysed as contradictory: the informal and formal sectors, tradition and modernity, institutions and solidarity networks.

### Careful budget management and resource enhancement

The household budget management is squeezed around a small family nucleus and the often numerous financial demands of the extended social circle are meticulously selected. For example, significant amounts are mobilised to deal with the grandmother's healthcare costs, the younger brother's school fees, and housing a sister and her daughter following a divorce. However, strategies are thought out - for instance, when it comes to housing - to avoid hosting relatives or casual acquaintances the father of the family may have and who would be likely to show up unannounced and stay for an indefinite amount of time. In Niamey, a journalist with a relatively comfortable income - due to the profits he makes raising cattle in his native village - voluntarily lives in a small and shabby room in the capital to avoid visits from "his cousins, uncles, former class mates, their families and friends"<sup>24</sup>. For the same reasons, a relatively wealthy woman in Ouagadougou decided not to finalize the building of her house and prefers to share a room with her daughter<sup>25</sup>.

The family resources of the middle classes are pooled and used in the household, as Abi's portrait shows. At 30 years old, he earns twice the salary of his parents. However, he remains in the family house, is accommodated and fed for free and is hence free from significant expenses of daily life, but bears the occasional expensive costs: providing meat during celebrations of religious festivals, bearing the hospitalisation costs if needed.

The financial organisation is most often based on pooling the incomes of the two heads of households: the total income is entrusted to the woman, who manages the daily household expenses. When one of the two earns significantly more than the other, the lower income (generally the woman's one) is set aside each month almost completely, in order to be able to cover unexpected costs (illness, death, bankruptcy).

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24. C. Nallet, "Entrer et vivre dans la "petite prospérité" à Niamey. Résultats d'une enquête auprès des ménages", *Afrique contemporaine*, n°244 (4), 2012.

25. H. Quénot-Suarez, *Consommer dans un environnement incertain. Le paradoxe des classes moyennes africaines*, Note de l'Ifri, 2012.

## **Saving: managing unexpected costs and achieving their dreams**

Housing is a major expenditure item for the middle classes with very varied situations depending on the land tenure systems in each country. In South Africa, the lower middle classes spend large amounts each month to pay off their mortgages, while in Ethiopia, the saturation of the property market leads to high rental costs (for example Aylu and Sahay) or to staying in the family home (the example of Abi), while dreaming of ownership (Abi, Aylu and Sahay). Putting money aside each month is a significant challenge for these indebted middle-class tenants or property owners.

Saving is an essential characteristic of the middle classes which affects not only access to property but also to everyday life. Households diversify the means and networks: they save small amounts in a bank account as well as *via* organisations that they set up between groups formed around community, professional, neighbourhood, or even age affinities. These informal savings groups are known as *tontines* in West Africa, *stokvels* in South Africa, or *ekub* in Ethiopia. The amounts saved have different roles: they represent a safety net in the event of unforeseen circumstances (hospitalisation and specific systems for the organisation of funerals), or even start-up or investment capital for tradesmen and small business owners.

The majority of the African middle classes have a bank account. However, they remain attached to informal saving methods, which are often preferred to bank savings, especially for the floating group: the social pressure exercised by these savings groups "forces" them to set small amounts aside, even if the end of month is difficult. Savings and banking facilities do not necessarily work together, and the services offered by the banks are often poorly adapted to the tensed situations of the middle classes. In South Africa, the middle classes invest largely in services offered by credit agencies which have adapted their range by using group solidarity to guarantee the repayment of loans<sup>26</sup>.

## **Food and heterogeneous consumption tactics**

For the majority of African middle class families, food is the main expense. Finding supplies at the best prices takes up a large part of family discussions and discussions between neighbours and colleagues in every country. The members of the African middle classes make the best of their situation and know how to optimise each of their consumptions by diversifying the places of purchase and gambling at the same time on grey markets and access networks for bargain-hunting. The prices of products are particularly variable from

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26. É. Escusa, "La *lower middle class* à Soweto. Consommation et pratiques de socialisation", *Afrique contemporaine*, n°244 (4), 2012.

one place of purchase to another. For example, at Conakry (Guinea), the price of vegetables varies by 30 % depending on the place of purchase. Jeans cost around 180000 fg (20 € in current euros) in shops, against 80000 fg (8.88 € in current euros) or 100000 fg (11 € in current euros) depending on the market.

The African middle classes are developing heterogeneous consumption tactics with which a steady income allows them to increase their purchasing power.

Non-perishable, staple food purchases are made in large quantities, one to two times a month. The products purchased vary significantly according to the countries and dietary habits. For example, in Ethiopia, it is mainly oil, sugar, lentils, and dry weights, and in South Africa maize flour, oil, eggs, instant coffee, and milk powder. In the majority of African countries, these purchases are made in specialist wholesale groceries. Vegetables are usually purchased at the markets once or twice a week. Members of the middle classes often make long journeys in order to go to the markets where products are the cheapest. Finally, additional purchases are made in small local shops. Many products, for example milk, meat, and eggs, are bought in small quantities according to the available budget. These last products are at the centre of the middle classes' financial worries who would like to add them to their meals more often. Supermarkets are rather places for purchasing superfluous products in very small quantities (biscuits, small packages of personal care and baby products). Paradoxically, these supermarkets can also be semi-wholesale supply points. In South Africa, the supermarkets have adapted their services: they offer *hampers* (a basket with an assortment of staple products such as oil and flour in large quantities) and have adjusted their promotional offers to the pragmatic strategies of the salaried middle classes with a concentration of purchases at the end of the month, during the weekend following pay day<sup>27</sup>.

Dietary innovations exist (as we will see below), but remain limited and occasional, as the African middle classes are in permanent tension between their desire for "extras" and a limited budget. Moreover, eating habits are deeply cultural and change slowly. Meals are served mainly at home and leftovers are often taken for lunch breaks, even if having lunch in restaurants or *fast food chains*, with young people going there more often, is tempting. The end of month for the salaried middle classes is usually marked by a return to "staples", dishes with a consistent basis (rice in Togo, maize flour in South Africa, and *injera* in Ethiopia), sometimes accompanied by vegetable sauce and split peas.

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27. *Ibid.*

### Equipment and grey markets

The common markers of this class are to be found in their home. If the styles of the interiors vary according to country, ages, religions, and means, some essentials are typical for these "neither rich, nor poor" populations.

The furnishing is made up of essentials: the sofa, often imposing, armchairs, chest, on which framed the children's graduation photos, usually taking pride of place, and the dining table. In terms of equipment can be found the fridge to keep the products cool, the stereo and the television and its famous *soapies*, popular television series produced in South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia or Brazil.

The level of equipment of the African middle classes is often much higher than what might be expected given their incomes, because they go to informal/illegal and/or second-hand markets (technology, clothing, etc.)

**Diagram 8: Interior of an "average" Ethiopian house**



© Clélie Nallet, Ethiopia, Addis Ababa

**Diagram 9: Local stalls in Addis Ababa  
(mattresses and household equipment)**



© Clélie Nallet, Ethiopia, Addis Ababa

The mobile phone is essential and equipment in new technologies is increasingly sought after (laptop and smartphone). Those who can afford emphasise the importance of buying products from Europe or the United States and not China. They obtain them through informal networks of resellers or ask relatives who are part of the diaspora to send them directly. Those who are less wealthy and less connected buy the "Chinese models" at a low price and often second-hand on the informal markets.

### ***Innovations in supply: potential but selective consumers***

The African cities increasingly offer diverse consumption opportunities in terms of products and places. The supermarkets and malls<sup>28</sup>, real institutions in countries like Kenya and South Africa, have been growing rapidly in recent years on the continent. These large supermarkets have established themselves in the comparatively poorest countries (like Ghana) and in traditionally French-speaking

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28. The malls are shopping centres offering a wide range of services: shops, cafes, restaurants, travel agencies, hairdressers, amusement arcades, cinemas, etc.

countries (like Senegal) which are less accustomed to malls<sup>29</sup>. Are these places frequented by the African middle classes? Even then, parts of the answer are found in the great diversity of countries' situations.

### Distrust of the West

In South Africa, these places have definitely changed middle-class consumption practices: their presence has caused a change in the numbers of meals and their form (meals taken outside and taken away in boxes), to even the nature of the products consumed (access to vacuum-packed cheese and to manufactured products and drinks). For the "lower black middle class" in Johannesburg, yoghurts in small portions and confectionery are at the top of the *luxuries* list, the slice of cheese has become an essential element in the make-up of sandwiches and *fast food chains* are an almost inevitable weekly family outing<sup>30</sup>.

**Diagram 10: Purchase of consumer products by the South African middle classes**



© Élodie Escusa, South Africa, Johannesburg, June 2011

These innovations in dietary habits have been made gradually and they remain strongly marked by the history of the consumers' social (and in the case of South Africa racial) positions. For example, group shopping continues to be favoured by black women from the lower middle class in Soweto. This stems from apartheid: when the segregation system was loosened a bit, this opened the doors of

29. H. Quénot-Suarez, *Consommer dans un environnement incertain. Le paradoxe des classes moyennes africaines*, Note de l'Ifri, March 2012.

30. É. Escusa, *A Class by Consumption: the Groceries Shopping of the Lower Middle Classes in Johannesburg, South Africa*, Note de l'Ifri, 2013.

supermarkets to black women, and they preferred to go there in groups to reassure and protect each other<sup>31</sup>. The selection of products consumed by the lower black middle class is also directly related to the country's history: the fact of being able to consume – "I can afford" –, frequenting supermarkets as well as the slice of cheese in the sandwich are regularly valued as symbols of "catching up" with the standards of living of white South Africans, and as a certain revenge on history<sup>32</sup>.

While we have seen that the economic dimension is decisive in the choice of places of purchase, it is clearly not enough to explain the frequentation of a given location and the consumption of a given product. The symbolic dimension is just as decisive. Therefore, the question is not only "can I afford it?" but "is it a place/product for me?"

Studies conducted in Uganda and Ethiopia demonstrate that the middle classes hardly frequent these new places of consumption, often seen as places reserved for expatriates:

*"I buy my vegetables at the market and the rest in the supermarkets. Finally, when I say supermarket I am not talking about hypermarkets. I have no need for Nutella, Camembert, or vacuum-packed chicken. I am talking about the groceries that you see along the streets."*  
(Sahay, Ethiopian, 35 years old, cook in an expatriate family).

The imported products such as butter, cheese, and chocolate are not found on the menus of the Ugandan or Ethiopian middle classes, and are often considered unnecessary, being a "waste of money" which only the "rich can afford the luxury" of purchasing. In the Ethiopian case, these products, out of touch with dietary habits, are not viewed as attractive. However, some youngsters from the upper middle class group in Addis Ababa admit to often purchase staple products (oil and sugar) and some "extras" (biscuits) in the medium-sized supermarkets which are growing in the capital. The practical aspect and the closeness of these places are emphasised:

*"When I get home after a long working day, if I am missing something I just go down below, it's probably more expensive but everything's there."* (Gizaw, 35 years old, accountant.)

In Uganda, some members of the middle class put forward their distrust of imported goods, particularly because of GMOs, therefore preferring the quality of local products, usually considered as "organic"<sup>33</sup>.

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31. *Ibid.*

32. É. Escusa, "La lower middle class à Soweto. Consommation et pratiques de socialisation", *Afrique contemporaine*, n°244 (4), 2012.

33. A. Fichtmüller, "Vers une émergence des classes moyennes?", *Demain l'Afrique*, Après-Demain n°31, October 2014.

This last example shows how far frequentation of these new places is more related to perceptions than to the actual range of what they offer. Products provided in the supermarkets are doubtlessly no more or less organic than those sold on the local stalls. The frequentation of hypermarkets and consumption of new products is above all a question of image and appropriation.

### **Making the places of purchase their own: Ivorian supermarkets**

The example of the Ivorian supermarkets depicts this appropriation process. Like in many African countries, they appeared paradoxically very early in the largest cities, but were reserved for the elite, foreigners, and above all expatriates who could stock up on wines, meat, or cheese arriving straight from France. Yet, over a long process, these supermarkets have become, if not the usual places of purchase, at least "common places" and they have become *africanised*.

In the Ivorian case, two stages were noted. The first was the devaluation in 1994, which forced the shopkeepers to partly "africanise" the products offered - meat for instance - to get supplies from the local markets. This changed the act of purchasing for Europeans and brought in the Ivorian customers, attracted by "air-conditioned" and pretty shops which supplied - finally- products from home.

The second stage was the Ivorian crisis. The mass departure of expatriates in 2004 made supermarket owners fear the worst, but the political speeches focused on the Ivorian identity paradoxically had – on this particular point – positive effects in that it was removing Ivorians' inhibitions who then considered that what "is in our country, belongs to us." Therefore, the frequentation of supermarkets is not only the result of advertising campaigns, but also economic ups-and-downs and of a long-term sociological and political construction.

Source: H el ene Qu enot-Suarez, *Les panneaux publicitaires   Abidjan: miroirs des marques, marqueurs des consommations. Publicit , consommation et banalisation culturelle dans une Afrique en croissance*,  tude de l'Ifri, Paris, December 2013, p. 47 et suiv.

### Distrust of the rich

This distrust of "Western" consumption is also a way for the middle classes to differentiate themselves from the richest and their practices that they consider ostentatious. The African middle classes place themselves explicitly at a distance from ostentation and emphasise their frugality.

Hence, in South Africa, they will consume cheese, but refuse to be associated with the "cheese kids", an expression referring to those born in luxury<sup>34</sup>. A closer observation of the behaviour of some Ethiopian middle class youngsters shows that they are not totally out of touch with places that they consider *bling* and make occasional and selective use of them. For example, they will go to the cinema in the mall to watch an American blockbuster there, but they will not stop in the bars and shops of the mall afterwards and quickly leave the show so that they can go home by the latest public transport. They will buy an American cake in one of the many bakeshops that have been booming in recent years, offering a wide selection of sweet pastries and hot drinks to eat in or to take away, without ever sitting down there<sup>35</sup>.

The media images of the African middle classes spending their free time in malls are therefore very far removed from the reality, but it is not accurate to state that these places do not affect their consumption practices. Moreover, within a year, the American cake has become a staple of birthday celebrations for middle class families in Ethiopia who can afford it, along with the traditional pieces of raw meat. Those who do not have the means to purchase it eat oranges, which for them are already an expensive "extra."

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34. É. Escusa, *A Class by Consumption: the Groceries Shopping of the Lower Middle Classes in Johannesburg, South Africa*, Note de l'Ifri, 2013.

35. Clélie Nallet, *Classes moyennes éthiopiennes: Étude empirique d'une assignation catégorielle incertaine*, PhD thesis in Political Science, Université de Bordeaux, 2015, p. 27.

## Birthdays



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### **"Floating" group**

Hanna (manager of a small hairdressing salon) is celebrating her 30th birthday with five friends in the only room in her house. The traditional coffee ceremony is decorated with a few orange segments, *popcorn*, and frothed milk in the coffee.



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### Upper group

At Abi's, the children wearing the traditional Ethiopian dress, blow out their "candles" on a large cake with the image of famous and far less traditional mouse.

These last two images demonstrate that it should be remembered that the middle classes do not have the same consumption capacities, depending on their sub-group, but also that *a priori* they do not have an aversion to Western influences. What irritates these middle classes people are the new places (the flashy new bakeries for instance) and the products promoted. Hence, the many billboards in Abidjan are more seen as "polluting" the urban space, than as an invitation to try new products<sup>36</sup>.

The supermarkets may have more success if they appear, as it is the case in Europe or South Africa, as places where savings are made. But for now, they are mostly places of ostentation and loss of a vital social link (comparing to the market) as they contribute to the construction of security.

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36. H  l  ne Qu  not-Suarez, *Les panneaux publicitaires    Abidjan: miroirs des marques, marqueurs des consommations*.

## Conclusion

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Therefore, the middle classes are more shifting categories than actual classes. They can only be identified through their practices and not by estimated income positions, whose calculation is doubtful.

Unlike the elite often educated abroad, the middle classes belong to their territories: they have frugal practices, a work ethic, a lot of hope in the future, particularly for their children, and for many - in Ghana and South Africa - an immense African pride which drives them to only very partially westernise their consumption practices.

While this "emergence" of the middle classes is good news, it must also result in taking the risks involved into account and the blind spots that need to be clarified.

What risks? First of all, the risk of a great social fragmentation. The most dangerous countries in Africa, excluding those at war, are often the richest. South Africa but also Kenya or Nigeria can be found on top of this list. In these countries and in their largest cities, the lack of safety is related to a striking increase in social inequality. The emergence of the middle class could accentuate these risks. Indeed, although 300 million Africans seem to have been lifted out of poverty, more than 700 million people are still poor. Moreover, the change in tune of the international institutions and some governments, such as the Ethiopian one, tend to value middle class "entrepreneurs", instilling the idea, consciously or not, that the poor are those who have not "managed" to take responsibility for changing their situation. This change of perspective is incredibly dangerous. Without a decisive and ideally effective political intervention to regulate these social inequalities, economically sound countries could become more socially dangerous.

Social inequalities are accompanied by spatial inequalities: current studies and investors are focusing on the large cities. These large cities, which are developing rapidly and are extremely connected to the rest of the world, are increasingly opposed to the small towns and rural areas that are often marginalised and lag behind. These spatial disparities are also a source of violence, as demonstrated for example, by the recent tragedy of Garissa, an area historically claimed by Kenya, but also left behind by the central government.

Finally, focusing on rural areas is essential for two reasons. Firstly to analyse, predict, and perhaps limit the increasing disparity with the largest cities; then economically because these rural areas

may become growth drivers for investors. The middle classes also exist in rural areas, in the small Ivorian plantations, in the rich agricultural areas in Kenya, but blind spots remain in economic studies. However, a glance at these rural middle classes helps us understand the originality and specificity of the African middle classes and to shed a too western-centred view. This is why we propose to conclude this study with an example of this rural middle class, a marker of an Africa shifting, contradictory and far from our frames in thought, but dynamic and resolutely looking to the future.

## Rural middle classes: far from received ideas



© Hélène Quénot, Suarez, Kenya, 2010.

Here, we are at C's in 2010, in a marginalised rural area in western Kenya.

He is a primary school teacher. This formal occupation guarantees him a regular income and social status. He combines this formal occupation with an informal business as a gardener in a particular market: organic products for expatriates. He is married and has three children. He is not "typical" of the middle classes as we may imagine them, but he has the economic and social capital of them.

The photo shows that he is wearing second-hand clothes but of good quality. He does not own a car but has a bicycle. His modest house does not have electricity, but it is in a good condition with a new roof and a separate kitchen. He has a generator "to watch his football

matches". He has a large pleasant garden, which is rare in Kenya where house owners prefer to plant maize. You can see that he is able to feed a dog and poultry. In addition, he has beehives. Therefore, he is achieving the ideal of independence (particularly dietary) mentioned at the beginning of this study.

His cultural capital is very important: he speaks four languages (English, Kiswahili, his native language, Luo and Kipokot, his wife's native language). He regularly buys *National Geographic* and loves ikebana.

He owns a smartphone and is very active on Facebook, where he posts photos of his children and flowers to his very extensive network. This representative of the rural middle classes is an "in-between" man, between formal and informal sectors, between traditional lifestyle and the hyper modernity of social networks. It is in these dynamics – and sometimes these contradictions – that lies the heart of the definition of the middle classes in Africa.