
A Class Defined “by Consumption”
The Grocery-Shopping Practices
of the Lower-Middle Classes in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Summary

The black middle class in Johannesburg is a much debated but ill-defined phenomenon, treated more often by economic players than by social scientists. Far from static and clear, the concept of the middle class is for us relevant insofar as it reveals crucial dynamics of the society. Looking more closely at the daily tactics and strategies of the lower-middle class aspiring to a better life, we discovered practices of consumption and saving in groups establishing webs of social networks within the community. In this way, social groups are being constituted. People's own discussion of their habits makes it possible to identify collective representations. While doing that, we try to remain aware of stereotyped inventions on the subject of black people and consumption that pervade not only public discourse but also the views of our interviewees¹.

¹ I should like to thank H el ene Qu enot-Suarez, Claire B enit-Gnaffou and Denis Constant-Martin for their valuable comments and references. The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

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Introduction

Johannesburg, a “world-class” shopping city

“Food is something people love to buy here. You’re grateful you can afford the basics².”

When one crosses over the river of railways on Nelson Mandela Bridge, entering the inner city of Johannesburg, one’s gaze cannot help but be caught by the gigantic screen board advertising Coca-Cola (see Picture 1 and Picture 2, p. 5) on one of the tallest buildings of the capital’s skyline. A typical first outing suggested to a foreigner would probably be to spend an afternoon in one of the 22 Californian-type malls scattered through the metropolis, where one can buy the basic necessities: a phone, a SIM card, a map and some groceries. As the official website of the city of Johannesburg³ – “world-class African city” – describes it:

“Here is one thing that no other city in the country can offer like Johannesburg does: shopping. Shopping for Africa. From the upmarket Sandton Shopping Centre and Nelson Mandela Square to the fun Oriental Plaza and not-to-be-missed Rosebank Flea Market, Joburg is a shopper’s paradise.”

Johannesburg, one of the few capitals in the world neither close to an ocean nor crossed by a river, grew up out of a mining camp when gold was discovered in the ridge of the Witwatersrand in 1886. Behind the yellow mine dumps that one can see from the Central Business District, Soweto (South Western Township) – the country’s largest township – is also proud to offer its estimated 1.3 million inhabitants⁴ the most modern and spacious malls in the country. The township of Soweto and its thousands of *matchboxes*⁵, began to be built in the 1950s, separated from the city by the mine

² Lauren, 42, librarian, Eldorado Park. Interview, January, 17 2012.

³ “Joburg, my city, our future”, official website of the city of Johannesburg, www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=182#ixzz2Gu6dzqZQ.

⁴ About one-third of the city’s total population: 1 million according to Census 2001, later estimated at 1.3 million in 2008. We have so far been unable to access the results of Census 2011 at the Soweto level.

⁵ 70,000 of these small houses were built by the City Council in the first decade to accommodate non-European populations forcibly removed from mixed areas judged too close to the city by the government. There would be 120,000 of them nowadays. See Philippe Guillaume, *Johannesburg, Géographies de l’exclusion*, (Éditions Khartala & IFAS, 2001): 21.

dumps and industrial zones. Today, Sowetans can choose between three giant malls to enjoy a typical suburban outing. The closest to Johannesburg is Southgate Mall, which was the first to open in the southern suburbs in 1990, situated in a Coloured⁶ and white working-class area but close enough to the township to attract its black⁷ consumers, even during apartheid. The advent of democracy in 1994 opened a huge, partly untapped retail consumer market. Jabulani Mall and its 100 stores opened in 2006 "in the traditional heartland of Soweto"⁸. The following year, the property developer Richard Maponya⁹ wanted to prove that the most up-market clothing brands like Guess or Levis were able to find buyers in the township. He built "the largest mall in South Africa"¹⁰ with more than 200 stores and an average footfall of 900,000 visitors per month, next to the street where Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu grew up.

⁶ The category "Coloured" was coined by the apartheid regime to designate populations which did not fall into the white or Bantu African or Indian categories. It designates individuals born of mixed marriages between Dutch or other European settlers and Africans, the indigenous Khoi-San people and the descendants of slaves imported from Southern Asia and Africa. The artificially created group gained some "cultural" relevance throughout the years and shares Afrikaans as a common language. They account for 10% of the South African population and form the majority in the Western and Northern Cape provinces.

⁷ In this article we use the term "black" as a constructed category in the precise socio-historical context of South Africa and by no mean as an objective group. This category is still meaningful and used daily in our set of interviews. In its most common sense, and as referred to by the last census in 2011, "black African" is shortened to "black", in place of the former "Bantu" or "Native" apartheid label. However, in the Constitution, "black" refers to all individuals formerly disadvantaged i.e. Indians, Coloureds and Africans.

⁸ See the mall website: www.jabulanimall.co.za/

⁹ South African entrepreneur and property developer, Richard Maponya.

¹⁰ See the mall website: "Ekasi with something for everyone", www.maponyamall.co.za/home/index.asp

Picture 1: Nelson Mandela Bridge

It links two neighbourhoods of Johannesburg's inner city: Braamfontein and the cultural precinct in Newtown.



Source: the author, January 2013

Picture 2: The Coca-Cola advertisement sign visible from the neighbourhood of Newtown, cultural precinct of the city.



Source: The author, November 2012

Bringing the opportunity to shop, or at least to do some "window-shopping", to the heart of territories, to which non-Europeans were forcibly moved, is seen, in public discourse¹¹, as well as by South Africans, as a sign of the successful transformation into a post-apartheid non-racial South Africa. If a sentence could embody this new class of black consumers, eager to enjoy what the world of mass consumption has to offer, it could be: "Now we can afford!"¹² In the 1990s, when the apartheid laws were being progressively repealed, new horizons opened up for several generations of black people. The answer to the demand for transformation was the recent implementation of affirmative-action-type policies¹³. Each sector of the economy has been given racial quota targets (Black Economic Empowerment scorecards) to reach in terms of employment, but also regarding share distribution and corporate training. These scorecards now condition access to public tenders. Currently, in the province of Gauteng¹⁴, the main pools of semi-qualified clerks' jobs are the public sector (including the large semi-public companies called *parastatals*) and the service sector, such as banks and insurance. Despite being more and more contested, the law has considerably boosted the employment of historically disadvantaged individuals (HDI). Denominated as blacks in the Constitution, the group officially encapsulates Indians, Coloureds and Africans, hence 91% of the population. Collectively, they share a common historical fate, first segregation and professional constraints, and then, for a number of them, a rapid upwardly-mobile trajectory in the last 15 years. Yet, as the scholar Roger Southall¹⁵ would justify it, and as it is used in everyday language, we will use the word "black" to designate black Africans, as is done in common parlance. In this sense, black people make up 79.2% of the population¹⁶ and their historical trajectories differ from those of their Indian (significantly) or Coloured (slightly) counterparts.

¹¹ Lali Mohlabane, Region D Johannesburg Municipality manager for programmes and strategy: "Over the years, Soweto, has risen from the apartheid era rubble to being one of the country's main tourist destinations. The township has transformed; once consisting of mainly matchbox houses and dusty roads, today it has middle-class and even upper-class housing. A number of high rise buildings, malls and shopping centres can also be spotted, another feature that contributes greatly to the changing look of the area". Lali Mohlabane, "Changing face of Soweto", *Johannesburg municipality website*, accessed on February 7, 2011, <http://www.joburg.org.za>,

¹² Recurrent sentence from a set of interviews conducted in 2011 in various shopping malls and houses of middle-class families in Johannesburg when asked "*how is your life different now compared to that of your parents?*"

¹³ In 1998, the Employment Equity Act was passed www.agsa.co.za/Portals/1/ACTS/EEA.pdf and in 2003 the Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment Act www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=68031.

¹⁴ The wealthiest province of the country, an economic hub of 12.3 million inhabitants, responsible for a third of South Africa's GDP, incorporating the two capitals Pretoria and Johannesburg.

¹⁵ Roger Southall, "Political Change and the Black Middle Class in Democratic South Africa", *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 38 (2004): 521-542.

¹⁶ Census 2011, Statistics SA, accessed on December 15, 2012, <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census2011/default.asp>

Discrimination was applied gradually and differently depending on skin colour (hence referred to as a "colour bar" in the different types of permitted jobs in the industry). The right to own a business or even a house (using accumulated capital) given to Indians or Coloureds allowed some to move up from the working class to the middle class even during the apartheid era.

It has been stated that households pertaining to the middle-class income range do not seem to produce a subjective identity as a social group, hence their invisibility¹⁷. The black middle class in Johannesburg is not conscious of its existence as a group, hence it does not represent a class in the Marxist sense. In other words, looking at different patterns of consumption, or collective lifestyles¹⁸, could we then identify social categories sharing similar behaviours? Are these routine and daily practices of consumption significant enough to constitute a social category? Food stands as the first expense of the average South African household (26.4% of their monthly expenses¹⁹). For the purpose of this paper, we thus chose to examine the food-shopping practices of some households of the lower-middle class in Soweto, Eldorado Park and Johannesburg. We used consumption practices as a point of entry into their daily lives and as an opportunity to engage in dialogue with them, while pursuing a broader objective – to gain a better understanding of their lives, mind-sets and representations. The aim is not to reduce their identities simply to one of consumers, being well aware of the normative public discourse²⁰ on the subject and hoping not to reinforce it.

In the first part of this article, we shall tackle the issue of the problematic definition of the emerging middle class: an ill-defined new phenomenon, which creates particularly high expectations, especially when encouraged by marketing-focused research. We shall try here to use qualitative academic research to help us distinguish between popular myths, political rhetoric and public discourse and also to look beyond, in order to discern the daily practices and discourse of our interviewees²¹. We shall come to see in the second part, however,

¹⁷ Dominique Darbon and Comi Toulabor, "Quelle(s) classes(s) moyenne(s) en Afrique ? Une revue de littérature", *Document de travail, Agence Française de Développement* (2011). Hélène Quénot-Suarez, "Consumption in an uncertain environment, the paradox of the African middle classes", *Note de l'Ifri*, (March 2012).

¹⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *Esquisse d'une psychologie des classes sociales*, (Éditions. M. Rivière, 1955). Halbwachs is among the first to highlight the importance of lifestyle and judgement of taste as social "markers". These concepts will be at the core of Pierre Bourdieu's analysis, especially in *La Distinction, critique sociale du jugement*, (1979).

¹⁹ *South Africa survey, 2010-2011*, South African Institute of Race Relations.

²⁰ Detlev Krige, "Consumption and identity", in *Power, identity and agency at work in the popular economies of Soweto and black Johannesburg*, (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2011):111-119.
<http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/10143>.

²¹ This paper is based on two sets of interviews at household level: one in May-July 2011 in various areas of Johannesburg on food-related practices (cooking, shopping and eating); the other one in January-March 2012 dedicated to an ethnographic study of a Coloured middle-class neighbourhood in the township of Soweto. A coded questionnaire and a semi-directive interview have been used, collecting - narratives

that a shared discourse on self-identification is perceptible after all. This discourse focuses on the idea of how powerful one can be, when one can afford basic necessities and still have the opportunity to buy more, notably thanks to easy-to-access consumer credits. In the third part of this paper, we describe how the most trivial practices, such as eating cheese, choosing one's favourite supermarket or joining a savings club to buy groceries in bulk at the end of the year, can, because they are shared among a relatively homogeneous income group, come to define a social category.

on people's personal and professional trajectories, place in society, and representation of the neighbourhood and other racial communities.

Global, Lower or just South African? Which middle class are we talking about?

Middle-class identity is like a constantly moving spectre, emerging by default. The more blurred it becomes, the more it is invoked and claimed by individuals as an easy-to-wear identity.

Mirages and fantasies about the Black Diamonds: the ambiguities of the public discourse

In South Africa, as a symbol of a yearned for transformation, the growth of a black middle class is celebrated along with other post-apartheid achievements like the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)²², which attempted to provide housing, electrification and water for the majority of the population housed in the townships, when Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki²³ were in office. According to a study undertaken in 2011²⁴, South Africa is now said to be one of the most socially mobile societies in the world. “Where in the US it takes on average four generations for a poor American to reach the income of an average family, it takes one generation in South Africa”. Leaving aside the scientific value of some of these studies, the “new” social group is the subject of everyone’s fantasizing: those of marketing institutions trying to segment and assess its purchasing power and those of the business community and the opposition party questioning the economic accuracy of racial redress policies²⁵. Since 2005, a label has even been created and propagated with success by the University of Cape Town’s Unilever Institute: the *Black Diamonds*. The study *Black Diamonds 2007: On*

²² Between 1994 and 2001, 1.1 million cheap houses eligible for government subsidies were built and 1.75 million homes throughout the country were electrified

²³ Presidents of the Republic of South Africa from 1994 to 1999 (Mandela) and from 1999 to 2008 (Mbeki).

²⁴ Jos Kuper, the Head of Kuper Research, who led the Futurefact survey 2011, Unilever Institute, quoted in Babalwa Shota, “We must claim victory but also admit defeat”, City Press, accessed October 30, 2011, <http://m.news24.com/citypress/Columnists/Ferial-Haffajee/We-must-claim-victory-but-also-admit-defeat-20111029>

²⁵ Jenny Carghill, *Trick or treat: Rethinking black Economic Empowerment*, (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2010).

the Move estimated their growth at 15% a year but without much transparency regarding the research methodology. Since then, the name has been taken up in common parlance, as a synonym for the black middle class, along with stereotyped attributes of the "happy few" owning expensive cars, and living in the white Northern suburbs.

The survey has been conducted every year to help market analysts understand the black emerging market better and it should be viewed as a marketing tool: however, it raised a wider public debate in 2007-2008 which is analysed by Detlev Krige in his PhD dissertation²⁶. Some black journalists relayed the opinions of those who criticized an external label reducing them to mere consumers. For example, Jekwa Sizwekazi, columnist writing in *Finweek*²⁷, argues that "the Black Diamond profile seems to perpetuate the urban myth of black professionals as being greedy, money-hungry consumers who live their lives for no other purpose than to spend conspicuously, clinging to some unfulfilled desire to become just like the white man."

What is noteworthy is the question of moral values that is often raised in the debates about the black middle class. If the group is emerging, it should abide by ethical principles and re-distribute wealth to the majority of the poor black population, supporting the idea of a "black patriotic bourgeoisie" that the ANC has aimed to create since the National Democratic Revolution²⁸. The disillusionment stems from the unrealistic expectations focused on this group of black upwardly-mobile individuals. Some political analysts blame the black bourgeoisie for the current social crisis in South Africa, currently unable to achieve a "second transition"²⁹ that would lead to further development of the state and a normalization of democratic life³⁰. Newspapers convey this sense of a post-apartheid moral decay regarding the new rich and their practice of conspicuous consumerism.

"The virtue of hard work drummed into our little African, kinked-out heads by our docile parents during apartheid started eroding as we watched (at first in awe) the lifestyles of former comrades with whom we had been in

²⁶ Detlev Krige, 2011, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Jekwa Sizwekazi, "Black Diamond is a dirty word", September 6, 2007.

²⁸ Joel Netshitenzhe, "The National Democratic Revolution, is it still on track?", *Umrabulo, ANC publications*, 1, 1996. "This bourgeoisie is referred to as 'patriotic' because they are said to be concerned about the interests of the nation as a whole, in terms of the RDP, and want to see South Africa succeed in a way that benefits the majority."

²⁹ ANC, "The second transition. Building a national democratic society and the balance of forces in 2012", *discussion document for the National Policy Conference*, February 27, 2012.

³⁰ Roger Southall, "The ANC: Party Vanguard of the Black Middle Class?" in Arianna Lissoni, Jon Soske, Natasha Erlank, Noor Nieftagodien, Omar Badsha (eds), *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*, (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2012).

Pierre Haski "Afrique du Sud, Marikana ou l'échec de la bourgeoisie noire", *Rue 89*, August 28, 2012, www.rue89.com/2012/08/28/afrique-du-sud-marikana-ou-lechec-de-la-bourgeoisie-noire-234897

*the trenches transformed 360 degrees. [...]The country's economy, then and now, has no chance of growing without the purchasing power of the black middle class. But without active political awareness, education and values, you had nothing left but fertile ground for the germination of blind seeds.*³¹

A new middle class?

South Africa stands out in the African continent at many levels. The history of colonisation and segregation, the rapid industrial boom triggered by the discovery of diamonds, then gold, at the end of 19th century have shaped an historic working class³² and a class-based Marxist prism of analysis still to be found today among South African scholars. The emergence of a black middle-class - petty bourgeoisie in the Marxist vocabulary – in South Africa was being documented by scholars as early as the 1980s. For some, it can be explained by the progressive softening of the apartheid distribution regime and its migrant labour system³³, while others emphasize the attempt by the National party to win over pro-capitalist strata³⁴. Some have mapped the class structure³⁵, many more debate the size and composition of the contemporary black middle class³⁶, but rare are researchers dealing with class identity and culture.

In the contemporary economic literature on middle classes produced mainly by international financial institutions, two social categories should be distinguished. On the one hand, the Global Middle Class (GMC), a category coined by the World Bank and the OECD³⁷ to designate a middle range of incomes in the emerging countries, in terms of purchasing power parity (ppp) dollars, between \$4,000 (the average income per capita in Brazil) and \$17,000 per year (the average income per capita in Italy) – in other words from

³¹ Among many articles on this subject written by black journalists or columnists, see Bongani Madondo, "The life and trial of a South African child", *Mail and Guardian*, December 21, 2012, accessed on December 23, 2012, <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-12-21-00-jub-jub-the-life-and-trial-of-south-african-child-star>.

³² Judith Hayem, *La figure ouvrière en Afrique du Sud*, (IFAS & Éditions Khartala, 2008).

³³ Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Natrass, *Class, race and inequality in South Africa*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005).

³⁴ Roger Southall, "Political Change and the Black Middle Class in Democratic South Africa", *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 38 (2004): 521-542.

³⁵ Owen Crankshaw, "On the doorstep of management: upward mobility of African workers in the metal industry and its implications for trade union organisation" *South African Sociological Review* 6 (1993): 1-18.

³⁶ Southall (2004) *op. cit.*, Laurence Schlemmer, "Lost In Transformation? South Africa's Emerging African Middle Class", *CDE Focus* 8, (2005), Sean M. Muller, "The Black Middle Class: The Challenges of Joining Two Economies", in *Making Mistakes, Righting Wrongs, Insights into black Economic Empowerment*, Duma Gqubule (ed. Jonathan Ball and KMM Review Publishing, 2006): 187-220.

³⁷ The Economist, 2008, 2009 ; World Bank, 2007, 2008; Asian Development Bank, 2010; OECD, 2010

\$12 to \$50 a day per person. Sub-Saharan Africa is on the margin of this phenomenon, but a Global Middle Class is still growing in the continent's wealthiest countries like South Africa, Ghana or Nigeria. On the other hand, some researchers³⁸ chose to add sociological criteria to an economic definition in order to take into account the context of dire poverty. They came up with the Local Middle Class (LMC) category which has a daily spending level of more than \$2 (above the poverty line) and is characterised by its behaviours, preferences and expectations in terms of consumption and lifestyle.

Applied to the South-African context, the GMC would typically be represented by a professional or corporate executive, who owns a detached house in a wealthy suburb and a car and sends his children to private schools, hence matching the "Black Diamonds" profile (UCT-Unilever study³⁹). While the LMC includes features of recent emergence from poverty for a first-generation of upwardly-mobile individuals. That's what we call the lower middle class or "petite prospérité" ⁴⁰. Since we aim at identifying patterns attached to a trajectory of social upward mobility, we will look at the households enjoying a disposable income at the end of the month, even small and fragile, a house and a regular salary. Our interviewees roughly earn between R6,000 (600 euros) and R15,000 (1500 euros) per month per person. It matches the analysis of the African Development Bank which attributes to the lower-middle class a daily consumption level of between \$4 and \$10 a day, which would represent 19.8% of the South-African population (43.2% if the more vulnerable "floating class" were included)⁴¹.

Being "in the middle", a default identity

The households we interviewed do not relate to the word "middle-class", which appears to them as an external label associated with a wealthy suburban lifestyle. But there seems to be a common discourse, borne out by other research projects⁴², of "being just in the middle": not in the "high class", not among the poor either, who

³⁸ Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee, "What is middle-class about: the middle classes around the world?", *Bureau for Research and Economic Analysis and Development (BREAD) Working paper*, 163 (2007).

³⁹ UCT Unilever Insitute, "Black Diamonds: On the Move", in partnership with TNS Soffres, (2007).

⁴⁰ This concept has been coined and developed by Dominique Darbon, professor of political science at the Institut d'Études Politiques, Bordeaux, and is at the origin of a research group on Middle Classes in Sub-Saharan Africa to which the author belongs. It comes from the Chinese concept of "xiao kang".

⁴¹ Charles Leyeka Lufumpa, "The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa", *Market Brief, Banque africaine de développement*, (2011): 2-5, www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/The%20Middle%20of%20the%20Pyramid_The%20Middle%20of%20the%20Pyramid.pdf

⁴² In our research group, see Clélie Nallet, "Trajectoires d'émergence : classes moyennes d'Addis Abeba entre prospérité et précarité", *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 27 (2012).

struggle every day to put food on the table. The only common self-identification used is that of being neither rich nor poor.

A paper based on an empirical study, in which 2,559 people were surveyed in Soweto⁴³, showed that multiple meanings are given to the word "middle-class", which reflect the diversity of individual trajectories of those who identify themselves as middle-class. They also found that 66% of their panel see themselves as middle-class. The Futurefact survey in 2011 shows that at the national level, 51% of urban South African adults think of themselves as "middle-class". Hence a social group with blurred edges, a kind of reassuring identity that suits several life paths and standards of living and that is claimed by many people for different reasons. The social context provides meaning to the notion of being in the middle (phakathi in isiZulu). As Phadi & Ceruti explain:

"The material available to fill the symbolic container 'middle-class' differs according to social position and the horizon it opens up for you. [...] Middle-class identities are generated by a continuous process of comparison up and down"⁴⁴.

Individuals locate themselves by default, looking up to their richest neighbours and looking down at the poorest in their street, who are struggling to make ends meet. By default in the middle, because like Julian and her husband⁴⁵, they consider themselves lucky to earn a fixed salary (there will usually be at least one in a middle-class household), but still with a strong will to better themselves inspired by the view of the two-storey extended house standing in their street. Given the importance of comparison in the process of social identification, we need to look at the social horizon of a household, at the social networks in which it is embedded. The category "middle-class" is relative, and will make sense within a particular social context, or a particular territory. One of our hypotheses is that this horizon is still limited for most of the middle-class South African families we met, especially the ones living in Soweto. Their social interaction takes place in the township, where the members of the various informal savings clubs they belong to reside. If one community's shared imagery can be assessed through the various references made to places during casual conversations, then the imagery of the lower-middle class in Soweto is encapsulated in the township. The city of Johannesburg ("town") is distant, quasi-non-existent in their conversation, except as a workplace, to which they have to commute during the week. The "other" which helps the individual to define himself is thus never far away, in the family, in the past⁴⁶, or in the neighbourhood⁴⁷.

⁴³ Mosa Phadi and Claire Ceruti, "Multiple meanings of the middle class in Soweto, South Africa", *African Sociological Review*, 15 (2011).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*:91.

⁴⁵ Interview December 10, 2012, in Protea Glen, Ext. 13, Soweto.

⁴⁶ The interviewees older than 40 still have vivid memories of the "mixed" former locations like Sophiatown or Vrededorp (Fietas) in the 1950s, when the class a person belonged to was more important than race.

Finding oneself between two myths: the quiet "white" suburb and the vibrant township

Spaces and identities are intertwined in South Africa since space has been used to impose a dominant culture (European) and to define others as dominated (Africans); the former with a legitimate right to occupy and live in the city, the latter with only a temporary work permit. P. Gervais-Lambony notes that this racist policy was unique in two respects: "racism was enshrined in the law and the very unequal distribution of the national territory was, at different scales, strictly based on so-called ethnic and racial identities."

The word *township* in South Africa refers to those public housing schemes which used to be reserved for non-whites. Used loosely it now qualifies a culture, an identity, a way of life as many popular sayings demonstrate: *township life*, *township boy*, *township music*, *township driving* etc. A township consists of vast monotonous rows of identical houses. For security and control purposes, the site is surrounded by an empty *buffer zone* which isolates it from the city centre of Johannesburg. The township was built for economic and security reasons in order to implement an ideology of separate development and a migrant workforce. Its inhabitants were moved there, in most cases, from "locations" which were racially and socially mixed and closer to the city centre. They were allocated government houses for rent in keeping with the idea that black people are temporary migrants in the city.

The Black Diamonds study showed that 12,000 households moved from the townships to the suburbs every month in 2007. Since then, the pace has slowed down, largely due to the economy (rising prices and interest rates) and the National Credit Act which made loans less accessible. Some have also returned to the township, spreading ideas about how life was individualistic and boring in the suburbs. Adam, principal of a Secondary school, describes his experience in Little Falls, Roodeport, west of Johannesburg.

*"Many years ago I bought a house in a white area, in a so-called white area. But I couldn't really stay, I couldn't adapt to it. Because you live in an area where you have no community life you know.. you do not attend a mosque, you do not go to the same school, those are things we are used to. [...] It's difficult when you don't know anyone. You don't know your neighbours. [...] And rates and taxes are so high. The middle-class people cannot survive in the suburbs."*⁴⁸

The so-called "European way of life" has disappointed a number of the new arrivals in the white suburbs. This polarized discourse contrasting townships and the suburban way of life is also a

⁴⁷ Detlev Krige shows how identity is structured around the neighbourhood inside Soweto in *Power, identity and agency at work in the popular economies of Soweto and black Johannesburg* (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2011): 100.

⁴⁸ Adam, 52, interview on February 14, 2012 in Eldorado Park.

collective tale that can conceal a more complex rationale on the subject of economic and social obstacles. Further on, the Unilever study reads: "An average of 15% of black middle-class incomes are spent on extended family". Younger people would spend as much as 20% of their incomes supporting their immediate and extended families. Despite all the incentives to purchase and a "culture of malls" as week-end leisure places, upwardly-mobile individuals retain some "traditional" behaviour, rooted in their community or family. Their personal dilemmas, torn between their new life as young professionals, a strong attachment to family traditions and an enduring sense of community are finely portrayed in recent works of creative literature⁴⁹ as well as the South African documentary film "Forerunners, South Africa's new black middle class" released in 2011, in which Martin Magwaza, a thirty-year old businessman in the pharmaceutical industry, describes his townhouse, close to where he works:

"This is a house, not a home. Relationships here (in the suburb) are transactional, like a hotel... purely functional."

One should note that the township was also a tool for constructing identity. First, it ensures that racial groups are separate, building racially homogeneous neighbourhoods (Lenasia for the Indians, Eldorado Park for the Coloureds, Soweto for the Africans). Then, within the African township, ethnic groups are distinguished (Zulus, Xhosas, Spedi etc.). Philippe Gervais Lambony⁵⁰ speaks of a South African territory imbued with nostalgia: displaced populations, destroyed houses and places erased from the map. After being robbed of their right to the city, their African attachment to it has yet to be invented.

Far from static and definitive, the concept of the middle class is relevant for us insofar as it reveals the crucial dynamics of society: identification processes always being repositioned and challenged, and social and professional trajectories where individuals negotiate their position within extended family, community and finally society at large.

⁴⁹ Zakes Mda, *Black Diamond*, (Penguin Books, 2011). Kopano Matlwa, *Coconut*, (Jacana Media Ltd., 2007).

⁵⁰ Philippe Gervais-Lambony, *Territoires citadins. 4 villes africaines*, (Éditions Belin-coll. Mappemonde, Paris, 2003).

“I can afford,” therefore I am?

Nowadays black lower-middle-class households in Johannesburg and Soweto are among the first of their families to have access to mass consumption, which existed before 1994, but “in town” (Johannesburg), in a world dedicated to Europeans, where they, the blacks, were only temporarily tolerated. They discover new products with enthusiasm. They spend a lot of time and energy shopping for groceries. They are in the middle of a transition, retaining some meals they define as more “traditional” and filling (*pap* and meat), while adding more and more new products and tastes to their diet.

We observed that the black middle-class identification (by itself and by others) is very much linked to the power stemming from a stable income, which makes it possible to meet the essential needs of the family. Hence they initially see it as an achievement to be able to put food on the table every day. They can afford what they need and sometimes more (both in quantity and quality). When asked about how they would define their position in society, several of them use this ability to provide to define their middle-class status.

Definition through the power to purchase

“I can afford” is a relative concept shared by the majority of them. Its meaning can range from *“I can afford enough food to eat every day”* to *“I can afford anything that I want”*. Affordability is linked to self-sufficiency and dignity. It expresses a feeling of being empowered by the fact that you can buy things. It confirms that a crucial relationship exists between the black lower-middle class and consumption. From our interviews, we note that this social group enjoys a status and a purchasing power which represents a victory over the past. Most of them come from a working-class background that they recall vividly.

Lindiwe, a 35-year-old woman, manager at a call centre⁵¹:

“I come from a very very poor family. I struggled for myself to be where I am today, I’m not yet there but I am definitely starting to get there and I’m definitely in the middle class cause I can afford. If I wanna get this orange juice (on the table), I can get it. At least, I don’t sleep hungry; there is always food on my table, so it’s more than enough.”

⁵¹ Interview at her workplace in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, May 27, 2011.

Thanda, a 51-year-old woman, admin officer in an NGO⁵²:

"I would say I'm middle-class cause I can afford some things. I don't have to make an effort to buy the basic things I need and then, I have some leftovers. Some people struggle just to buy the basics you know."

The ability to buy and possess consumer goods is also central to the image projected by the others. Marketing and research institutes⁵³ keep trying to profile and segment South African middle-class consumers. While previously the state was the agent responsible for categorising people so as better to govern them, it is now corporations and marketing firms which label consumers as a market to address. A set of ten Living Standards Measures (LSMs) has been issued by the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) to which business people and market analysts continually make reference. The Living Standard Measure is based on a list of goods (TV, fridge, car, etc.) and services (water, internet) enjoyed by the household. It aims at segmenting the market of South African consumers according to their actual standard of living, and not their incomes. Hence, we can find a portrait of our typical lower-middle-class person: he/she has at least a Matric diploma⁵⁴, lives in a city, owns a vehicle, has good access to the country's media and to municipal services. The only pitfall of the adage "Tell me what you bought and I'll tell you how much more you can purchase", is that it encourages people to over-extend their spending power to achieve a socially acceptable level of consumption.

The trap of credits, accounts and hire-purchase

In South Africa, any definition of a middle-class lifestyle centres on the amount of goods owned or other income indicators has a blind spot: the widespread use of consumer credit, credit cards or "accounts" and hire-purchase. A FinScope Consumer Survey conducted by FinMark Trust in 2011 showed that 26% of consumers borrowed from credit-providers to buy food. Sixteen percent borrowed to pay for transport, 7% acquired credit to pay school fees and 5% to pay electricity bills. The National Credit Regulator showed that there were 60 million accounts belonging to only 19 million consumers in the country.

"It is no longer that consumers are borrowing to buy a new car, but to get food on the table. That is why there is an increase in unsecured lending, because it is used for consumption to survive"

⁵² Interview, May 18, 2011.

⁵³ UCT Unilever Institute of Strategic Marketing, South African Audience Research Foundation (SAARF), Eighty20 South Africa or the Bureau of Market Research UNISA.

⁵⁴ Diploma at the end of secondary school, equivalent to the British A-level or the French Baccalauréat.

- reported Bernadene de Clercq head of the personal finance research unit at the University of South Africa (Unisa)⁵⁵. Moreover the trend seems to have escalated in the last two years since substantial increases⁵⁶ in petrol and electricity prices.

Credit offers are everywhere: in the streets, on walls, on newspapers and TV advertisements. Furniture stores offer all their merchandise on hire-purchase, popular clothing brands like Truworths, Edgars or Woolworths (clothes and groceries) offer "loyalty" credit-card accounts to their customers, which open a monthly account for them to be paid only at the end of the month. A large number of my interviewees, mostly women, showed me their "account cards" with a certain pride, even if these are issued too freely without a proper affordability study. Lauren, among the most sensible, who "tracks her debt", explained to me how, according to her, indebtedness is an evil created at the time of the country's liberation.

*"Things have changed you know. We created a debt we are not used to. Our standard of living has been raised. And now they overextend it, they want more and everything, now. Democracy is a good thing but it created evils."*⁵⁷

At the end of apartheid, 90% of the population, formerly forbidden to open bank accounts, was, all of a sudden, a lucrative market for the private banks to tap. Consumption credits and loans were issued too freely, also to give a boost to the economy. This went on until 2005 when the government decided to tighten the conditions for loans and credits with the National Credit Act. It gives some rights to the client to be informed regarding all the clauses, to register at a specific interest rate and forbids black-listed people to take out another loan. Since then, signs offering informal credit to black-listed clients are mushrooming on township walls. A month dedicated to "saving" was launched in July 2011. On that occasion, Pravin Gordhan, Minister of Finance, was encouraging an "entrenched savings culture":

"It means South Africans must develop an attitude of saving for major expenses and goals, instead of relying on easy credit and long repayments to purchase whatever luxury good seems desirable at the time (the car that adorns the neighbour's driveway or the watch that weighs down their wrist⁵⁸)."

⁵⁵ Quoted in the article "South African consumers borrowing for basic needs", *Mail and Guardian*, October 24, 2012, Penwell Dlamini, <http://mg.co.za/author/penwell-dlamini>

⁵⁶ Statistics South Africa says the consumer price inflation rate rose to 5.5% year on year in September.

⁵⁷ Lauren, 42, librarian, Eldorado Park, January 17, 2012.

⁵⁸ Keynote address at the 10th anniversary of the South African Savings Institute and launch of Savings Month 2011 speech by Finance Minister, Pravin Gordhan. <http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=19955&tid=37235>

The official rate of households' debt as a percentage of their disposable income is said to be 78.2% in South Africa⁵⁹, which is less than the French figure of 82% and the American one of 140%, but which according to debt experts, does not reflect the actual amount of debt contracted by South African households. "Loan-sharks" in the streets or scattered consumer debts are not always registered as part of each individual's official credit record. Deborah James, in her study on personal economies of wealth, aspiration and indebtedness⁶⁰, revealed that the people most affected by indebtedness after 1995 were those in the middle of the scale. She explains that the "borrowing problem" of salaried workers, especially the black African recipients of state salaries (nurses, teachers, policemen), or middle- to low-level employees in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) is the greatest concern.

"Whereas African families whose parents were already middle-class, had owned real estate/property, and had been relatively well educated themselves, were least likely to get into serious debt on this account, families that had been most rapidly upwardly-mobile, especially the new swathe of civil servants in country areas, were far more vulnerable."

There is such a frenzy of consumption around "pay-day"⁶¹ that some of our interviewees were actually in a stretched position from the 20th of the month. "These people are working-class at month-end" says one of the ladies interviewed in the "Classifying Soweto" project⁶². Supermarkets are packed at the weekend following the 25th and the trolleys are full. Some families, even with two comfortable salaries, like Daniel and Maggie and their two daughters, earning R30,000 a month, admit that they cannot buy meat in January because they had excessive expenses during the Christmas holidays. It is noticeable that January is indeed an unusually quiet month in the townships because "the rand is low for everyone"⁶³. To be able to eat during these 'lean' spells at the end of the month, many people rely on *spaza* shops "which cater for the community" as it is commonly said. Most of them are home-shops, actually set up in a kitchen or a garage, and they implement an "eat first, pay later" policy, especially during the last week of the month. But then, a large part of salaries goes first on repaying debts for what was bought on credit during the month.

⁵⁹ South Africa Survey 2010-2011, South African Institute of Race Relations.

⁶⁰ Deborah James, "Money-go-round, personal economies of wealth, aspiration and indebtedness", *Africa Journal*, (2010).

⁶¹ On 25th of the month for most employees, on 15th for civil servants.

⁶² Mosa Phadi, "Phakathi Soweto's Middling Class", South African Research Chair in Social Change (SARCHI). Eyelight Production, University of Johannesburg, accessed December 1, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqkBEv58wzs>

⁶³ Rebecca, Eldorado Park, January 2012.

The expression of a will to belong

From our fieldwork and set of interviews, we made the personal observation that the more people earn, the less they concentrate their purchases at the end of the month. They like to "indulge", buying "luxuries" for themselves or for their children. As incentives to persuade people to go more often to the supermarket, TV commercials reach out to a wide audience, especially when they are watched by the whole family usually gathered in front of the daily soap-opera around 7 or 8pm⁶⁴ after supper⁶⁵. Supermarket pamphlets are also distributed in children's school bags or in mailboxes. These are called "specials" (see pictures) and they usually target their messages according to the seasonal festivity (*snoek* fish for Easter or chocolate for Christmas). They are carefully scrutinized and discussed by women who are used to exchanging them.

From what Denise says below, we can also understand that this frenzy to shop and the place shopping occupies in their life might result from years of frustration. Twenty years ago black people could not move freely in the city, they were restricted in their everyday journeys, in their access to public transport and to shops. Places like supermarkets were typically a white area, where, at best, non-white customers had a separate back-door entrance.

Denise, a retired English teacher in Soweto, explains:

"We were restricted so much you know, because of the sanctions. For example, we were not allowed to go to the fishery. We had them through Chinese shops in our Coloured community. In the late 1970s, I remember it well, when the first Pick n' pay started, we could go to the first supermarket. That was amazing. We all used to go in a group, that way we didn't care about what the whites could say or comment..."

Detlev Krige stresses the historical dimension of consumption practices in black Johannesburg for forming a sense of identity.

"Though the state and its policy promised urban blacks very little in terms of finding spaces of belonging in cities - through a barrage of legislation restricted their places of work, residence, their movement, and entertainment - urban African municipal townships such as Soweto became spaces of intense belonging,[...] consumption practices and processes in urban spaces such as Soweto, in particular, have for long been acts not only of resistance, but also of self-expression, the fostering of

⁶⁴ "Generations" is screened at 8pm and watched mainly by the black population whereas "7 de laan" is at 6.30pm and watched more by Afrikaans-speaking populations.

⁶⁵ Our observation makes us think that a "successful" one will be the one which makes the whole family laugh or which will trigger questions, hence discussion, among family members.

*community, sociality and the performance of social differentiation.*⁶⁶

It has been documented in Europe in the 1960s that grocery-shopping often represents a margin of freedom for the working classes⁶⁷. For people constrained economically and socially, suffering from insecurity, consumption is seen as a residual space, in which they can express themselves freely. This is enhanced by the notion of catching-up with a standard of living (and spending) already attained by the white population group⁶⁸. "Increase in black earning power. Black Diamonds spending now equals that of whites' spending" was the title of a *Mail & Guardian* article in February 2012, quoting research⁶⁹ which noted that South Africa's income gap would close in less than 10 years, if the average white person's income continued to rise by 5.3% a year while the average black person's income grew by 14.9%. Their spending power was estimated at R250 billion (21 billion €) in 2008. The idea that blacks are catching-up with the whites is very much to the fore in discussions and at interest-group meetings.

Sophie Chevalier⁷⁰ found that those consuming a new range of commodities can be uncertain about what to buy, taking refuge in repeating the choices of others around them. She compares this to the behaviour of new consumers in the USA in the 1920s, immigrants from Europe who were keen to belong to the American society by embracing its consumption patterns. Competition between neighbours is part of life in the township. These experiences of 'peer pressure' are intensified by the pervasive strategies of advertisers, much more far-reaching now than they were in the 1980s. Clothing brands and supermarkets send regular text messages to entice their consumers into opening an account without clearly specifying the interest rates. Shop windows are full of signs encouraging customers to buy items now and pay later, without any deposit being required.

As Halbwachs⁷¹ assumed, we can see here that consumption is not only about trivial purchases of material goods. It is a form of participation in social life. Consequently, consumption practices also shape links to other individuals and groups. Through them social groups are constituted.

⁶⁶ Detlev Krige, "Power, identity and agency at work in the popular economies of Soweto and black Johannesburg" (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2011).

⁶⁷ See the theories of Grignon & Grignon, 1980 and Schwartz, 1990 quoted in Faustine Régnier, "Obésité, goûts et consommation. Intégration des normes d'alimentation et appartenance sociale", *Revue française de sociologie*, (2009/4 Vol. 50): 747-773.

⁶⁸ And to a certain extent by the Indians as well.

⁶⁹ Adcorp Employment Index, an employment services company.

⁷⁰ Sophie Chevalier, "Les 'Black Diamonds' existent-ils? Médias, consommation et classe moyenne noire en Afrique du Sud", *Sociologies Pratiques*, 20 (2010) : 75-86.

⁷¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *Esquisse d'une psychologie des classes sociales*, (Paris, éd. M. Rivière, 1955 -1964).

Self-projection through daily consumption practices: “a class defined by consumption”

Among others, food practices can be used as a means to position oneself in a new “rainbow” society, to “belong” or to feel integrated. We believe, like Michel de Certeau⁷², that there is much more than a simple daily routine behind these behaviours. Consumption can be a type of production. Power, space and identity boundaries are at stake, being re-negotiated and re-defined through interaction with others, every day. Sarah Nuttall⁷³ uses the concept of “self-stylization” to describe the way young people use their shopping practices as “modes of being” and expressing their shifting and complex identities. Detlev Krige speaks of the historical role of consumption in Soweto to differentiate oneself.

That would mean that one attempts to distinguish oneself from others by using a practice (buying or eating a certain product) in a conscious way. But the link can also be unconscious and reversed. Can daily practices, like grocery-shopping, shape people’s identity and create “tacit” groups?

“I’m not a cheese-boy⁷⁴!”

“Whenever I’m asked how my life is different now from when I was growing up, I reply: I can buy cheese and eat it in chunks now. [...] I started working in 1996 during my first year in college. And guess what the first thing I bought was? Beautiful yellow Gouda wrapped in a red waxy strip. I cut a huge chunk and ate it all. It was a moment of triumph to savour. I’d made it. I was a cheese kid⁷⁵.”

⁷² Michel de Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien, t. I, Arts de faire*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1990) [1980].

⁷³ Sarah Nuttall, “Stylizing the self: the Y generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg”, *Public culture*, 16(3) (2004): 430-452

⁷⁴ *Cheese kid* is a local expression to designate a golden boy, as we will explain below.

⁷⁵ “I can now eat chunks of cheese”, *The Sowetan* (daily newspaper in Gauteng), Ferial Haffajee, October 30, 2011. <http://www.citypress.co.za/columnists/i-can-now-eat-chunks-of-cheese-20111029/>

The cheese market in South Africa is worth dwelling on because it is segmented along class lines. Different social groups have different ways of eating it: they are thus buying the same product but in different forms and packaging. A study conducted in 2011 shows⁷⁶ that consumption of certain specific dairy products could be seen as an indicator of a middle-class standard of living. Indeed, in the whole population, most households use powdered milk in their (instant) coffee, and if "real" milk is bought, it will often be the long-life version, seldom fresh milk⁷⁷. Yoghurt is reserved for kids, to take away in small pots in their school lunch packet. However, in middle-class families, fresh milk (see picture) is bought every two or three days like bread and this represents a habit that sets them apart from families who can just afford long-life milk which they buy to last for a week or a month.

Cheese has a peculiar place in the list of groceries. As shown above, it comes in three main forms: processed slices of Gouda and Cheddar, big blocks and pots of feta. Supermarkets are stocked differently, depending on the community they cater for. Braamfontein, for example, hosts the headquarters of the major insurance company Liberty Life and several banks and colleges; hence the supermarket is a place for shopping at lunch time for white-collar employees and students. As in most supermarkets in Soweto, one cannot find there certain "European" or "sophisticated" items as our respondents call them, like goat's cheese or Camembert or Brie which are all imported from Europe, while some others are produced in the Western Cape: in those cases, however, the cheeses are four times more expensive than processed ones. Only the upper classes buy this kind of cheese to eat as a snack with *apéritifs* or as a starter. The practice is still very much regarded as a "European" way of eating and one cheese is four times the price of a plain processed block of Gouda.

⁷⁶ A study for a private company conducted with the anthropologist Sophie Chevalier in Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria across the South African population about the food habits of the middle class.

⁷⁷ Which is more expensive and more sensitive to transport and storage conditions.

Picture 3: The cheese section of one of the most popular supermarket chains (Pick n'Pay) in the inner city of Johannesburg (Braamfontein).



Source: the Author, 2012

Regarding cheese, practices are very much shaped by the social environment. Contrary to some food habits, like the wide spread consumption of *pap*⁷⁸ for example, cheese has not yet made its way into the average South African kitchen. We found that the most common practice would be to buy processed slices of Gouda or Cheddar, individually wrapped in plastic and use them in sandwiches at lunch or in the lunch boxes prepared for children at school. Here, it is worth noting that these slices are also used in a traditional township meal called "*kota*" or the "township fast food" consisting of chips, cheese and ham stuffed into half a loaf of white processed bread (photo). See how a very modern way of processing and packaging is used as an ingredient in a "traditional" meal served to tourists as "typical South African" food during one of the guided tours of Soweto. Or, as the journalist testifies here in the article quoted above, a large block of processed Gouda or Cheddar is usually bought for the month ahead and used grated or in lunch sandwiches. It is the cheapest way. A sign of distinction for some upper-middle-class families would be to use some feta in a salad. Or when people have some guests over, they would project an image of sophistication and a certain status by offering some cottage cheese as a spread on crackers or a platter of "European" cheeses. The retail company Checkers (hypermarkets)⁷⁹ claims to offer as many sorts of cheese as France, in other

⁷⁸ The most common starch found in a typical daily meal throughout the country: a kind of polenta made by mixing maize flour to cold and boiling water. Recipes vary from region to region.

⁷⁹ Their range of products is very wide: from hi-fi and kitchen equipment to food and toiletries. The lower-middle class seems to go there only when goods are discounted.

words 300 in a vast section called "Cheese World". "At Checkers, we believe that there's more to cheese than Cheddar. That's why we make sure our Cheese World is always fully stocked with all your favourites and more"⁸⁰. The retail chain also organizes a South African Cheese Festival every year which offers a fashion show and cooking classes as well. One expression often comes up in conversation when people are asked about their background. They are usually proud to show that they made their way up the social ladder by themselves, coming from a working-class background, hence the saying "*I'm not a cheese-kid*" (or a "cheese-boy"). In township slang, the cheese-boy is the one who is mocked and envied because his parents could afford to make him a lunch sandwich with a slice of processed cheese. By extension, in the excerpts below, it is associated with a well-off family background.

Walter, in Vooslorus⁸¹, explains:

"I'm not a cheese-boy cause I don't have a big house and a nice car like a BMW. I don't eat Kellogs, eggs and bacon for breakfast every day. If I was a cheese-boy my family would look after me, I won't be looking after my family. If you eat cheese, that means you can afford everything. Cheese is a luxury; it's not something basic you know."

Daniel, in Eldorado Park⁸², argues with his wife who has just said he is one of them:

"Cheese-boys are privileged. They have a car that their father offered to them. I wasn't like that".

It is less widespread than Pick N'Pay and Shoprite countrywide and mostly found in the main malls.

⁸⁰ Checkers website, accessed on January 22, 2013.

<http://www.checkers.co.za/foodandwine/ourproducts/Pages/default.aspx>,

⁸¹ Informal interview in a fast-food restaurant in Melville, Johannesburg, July 15, 2011. Vooslorus is a township in Ekurhuleni, which recently became a *metro* on its own, east of Johannesburg.

⁸² Interview at his house, Ext. 2 Eldorado Park, August 1, 2012.

Picture 4: A "traditional" township lunch

A traditional township lunch called "kota", half a loaf of bread filled with fried chips, a fried egg, a slice of processed cheese and a couple of pink coloured slices of processed meat



Source : The author, 2012

A constrained new mobility

*"[...] the complexity of cities, the flows of traffic across over-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical addresses, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth, which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint."*⁸³

In a country where public transportation is dangerous and scarce⁸⁴, and urban spaces are still shaped by apartheid segregation policies, each neighbourhood conveys a strong identity, with clear-cut boundaries binding people to a limited space, even more so when located on the edge of the metropolis (suburbs and townships can be as much as a 1 hour drive from the Johannesburg city-centre).

⁸³ Ivan Vadišlavic, *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked*, (London: Portobello, 2006).

⁸⁴ Even if things have been changing recently in Johannesburg with the construction of the Gautrain to commute safely (but at a price) between Pretoria, the airport and Johannesburg, and the implementation of a more reliable metropolitan bus service (Rea Vaya).

Confronted by this particular constraint weighing on everyday life, middle-class people benefit from the luxury of having their own car. Nevertheless, they still spend a lot of time commuting. Time here has an obvious economic value (accounting for 20% of an average household's expenses⁸⁵) but represents also a social cost at the expense of children or living conditions.

Nevertheless, in Soweto, people usually use their cars very cautiously given the substantial cost of petrol. The township is a world in itself and offers everything they need, and now even a shopping mall where youngsters can go out during week-ends. Trips outside Soweto are rare, hence, easy to single out and analyse.

For example, let us consider the monthly itineraries of a lower middle class Coloured family in and around Soweto. Starting from one neighbourhood – Eldorado park, the Coloured part of Soweto – and going to different township areas surrounding Johannesburg: namely Westbury, Coronation or Riverlea west of Johannesburg, Eersterust north of Pretoria. All of them are Coloured townships, still mainly inhabited by Coloured people even today. If Johannesburg's geography were to be a draughtboard, a sketch map of these daily journeys (lasting about 1h30 each) would jump from one square to another, always on one colour only. Inspired by Michel de Certeau⁸⁶ concept of "occupying practices" (*pratiques habitantes*), their errands and visits to relatives form a geographical map, which highlights a family's social network and its boundaries. Following the invitation to look closely at routine practices and representations in order to reveal what underlies them, we unpack a mind-map of one household's practicable and off-limits territories.

Middle-class families have a noticeable potential power of unlimited mobility within a territory still very segregated. The car offers this power of free mobility, without the constraints of pre-set taxi or bus routes. It means they can pass symbolical and physical borders: the limits of the township, (across the fields that used to act as buffer zones), the borders of "town" – Johannesburg, or the gates of the former white suburbs. Yet they rarely cross these non-spatial limits, because the destination is more often than not a "like-coloured" or "like-racial" area.

Their freedom of movement also affects the choice of malls and supermarkets they go to for groceries. The specific South African constraints described above play an important role in such decisions, among other factors we are going to describe. We notice a pattern of diversification for supply spots similar to the one observed in Europe: consumers keep buying daily essentials (bread, milk or meat) at convenience stores (*spaza* shops) appreciated for their neighbour-

⁸⁵ Income and expenditure survey (IES), Stats SA, 2006, www.statssa.gov.za

⁸⁶ Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien, t. I, Arts de faire*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1990) [1980]. He contrasts the walkers (who use the space) and the watchers, hence two modes of representing space: the itineraries and the "maps". Maps became universally acknowledged in academic discourse, he says, but at the expense of practices.

hood identity, whereas the bulk of grocery-shopping is done in supermarkets. The recent introduction of shopping malls in townships encourages this trend. Contrary to European patterns, these households do not maintain links with informal and rural supply chains, and flea-markets are rare in South Africa. Large retail stores are their favourites for grocery-shopping: Pick n'Pay, followed by Spar, Checkers, Makro and finally Woolworths. The latter (Woolworths) is always associated with hype and an expensive type of shopping. Shoprite is very "local", well deployed in townships, hence the first one to be mentioned as the cheapest by Soweto inhabitants. It benefits from this image of having been the first to "cater for the community".

We observe a keen concern to budget for food expenses even if these households have experienced a rise in their salaries in recent years. This was expressed by several interviewees who complained about the rise of food prices over the last 5 years, and highlight the fact that food is their first expense (they estimate that it accounts for 40% of their income on average). Most of them make sure they benefit from the cost-saving opportunities provided by large retail stores, deploying two kinds of strategies. First, they buy in bulk (from wholesalers like Makro or "hampers" in greengrocers or Fruit&Veg) and buy everything at the end of the month, creating a noticeable "month end pay-day buying frenzy" in the malls. Moreover, they are ready to drive a long way to purchase a good bargain after careful and frequent screening of the "specials" in mailboxes and newspapers (sometimes distributed to children at school). Besides, they all possess a freezer which they stock up with meat and vegetables.

It seems to us, that a "tacit class" is thus being constituted by these shared strategies of grocery-shopping. Most middle-class women look carefully at similar promotions and they will exchange them among friends and relatives. They will find themselves going to the same Shoprite or Pick n'Pay at the same time of the month chasing the same discount offers.

Picture 5 and Picture 6: "Specials" in *The Star* on January 1, 2013



Source: the author, 2011

Social interaction via groceries: the case of women's informal savings and spending clubs

Food accounts for the largest share of South African households' consumption (26, 4%)⁸⁷ and logically, it is the first monthly expense mentioned by the lower-middle-class families interviewed in 2011 and

⁸⁷ South African Institute of Race Relations, *South Africa survey 2010-2011*, www.sairr.org.za/services/publications/south-africa-survey/south-africa-survey-online-2010-2011

2012 in Johannesburg and Soweto. It appears that food consumption is not only determined by income or developments in food prices, but turns out to have a strong social dimension.

In South Africa, *stokvels* is an umbrella term for social, burial and savings clubs, which operate under various names in different regions; for example, *mahodisanas* in Sotho-speaking regions, meaning "to make payback to each other"; *chita* among Hindi-speaking Indians in KwaZulu-Natal; or *gooi-goois* in the Western Cape and Coloured communities – derived from the Afrikaans word *gooi*, meaning "to throw", in this context meaning "lumping money together". The generic official name for *stokvel* and similar self-help saving systems is "Rotating Savings and Credit Associations" (ROSCAs). "In political discourse, mainstream media and the entertainment world the *stokvel* is presented as the quintessential 'African' form of collective saving, an institution that is both indigenous and effective in the collective mobilisation of money in impoverished communities."⁸⁸

A 2003 study entitled '*Stokvels: Making Social Cents*'⁸⁹, found that black adults in South Africa invested approximately R12 billion a year (1 billion euros) in these informal savings clubs. The UCT study revealed that, at the time, one in every two black adults belonged to a *stokvel*. Lukhele⁹⁰ defined a *stokvel* as "a type of credit union, or communal buying group, in which a group of people enters into an agreement to contribute a fixed amount of money to a common pool weekly, fortnightly or monthly, to be drawn in rotation according to the rules of the particular *stokvel*". Traditionally, a *stokvel* receives contributions from its members, and pays each member in rotation until everyone receives a payout. After this, the *stokvel* would be dissolved and a new one formed. Groups meet regularly – weekly, fortnightly or monthly – at individual members' homes⁹¹ and, in those *stokvels* which distributed funds at each meeting, the host of the gathering would be the recipient of the *stokvel* income. Often, the members are from a particular family or a particular workplace, sometimes they are old childhood friends. In this way, social or professional networks are maintained.

In some *stokvels*, members would not take turns to receive a pay-out, but everybody would save up the whole year round for a specific event such as Christmas. All the money plus interest would then be withdrawn and either distributed, or, in the case of the women's societies we want to describe, the lump sum would be used collectively to buy groceries in a wholesaler's or supermarket, then

⁸⁸ Detlev Krige, 2011, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ "Stokvels – More Than Just a Savings Scheme", December 15, 2003, www.unileverinstitute.co.za

⁹⁰ A.K. Lukhele, *Stokvels in South Africa: Informal Savings Schemes by blacks for the black Community*, (Amagi Books, Johannesburg, 1990): 1.

⁹¹ For instance, the Soweto-Eldorado Park *society* has 12 members in order to be able to rotate within a 12-month period. Each member would put in R1,500 every month (150 €) and R17,000 (1,700 €) would be given to one beneficiary per month: the rest of the money would be used by the monthly winner to organize a social gathering in his home.

shared out equally between the women. They are often called "societies" or "groceries savings clubs" and their members are exclusively women. We shall examine them in more detail in order to see how another saving practice for grocery-shopping can create durable social ties between women from different neighbourhoods. The aim is to buy groceries in bulk at the end of the year, in order to be able to prepare for Christmas celebrations without too much of a strain. Each person pays in a fixed amount every month (from R100 to R300 – 8 to 25 euros) to the person in charge, who saves it in a short-term savings bank account⁹². At the end of November, they go collectively to a wholesaler to buy basic necessities that the club members will share: 10kgs of sugar, flour, soap but also luxuries like sweets and chocolate for Christmas.

Ardene: "We save during the year so that we can buy our chocolate and Christmas groceries there. I take R200 every month, and my friends do the same and then I bring the money there on a buying card (like vouchers). We are around 10, it's like a club, so it comes to R22,000 on the buying card in November. In the store they have everything, bedding, stationery for school, apart from groceries, it's a wholesale. The store is accommodating us, so they give you a discount on the card and we buy the «specials» on discount, so each lady will get R2,200, so you get much more for your money. We also try to buy in bulk, and then share so it's economical. »

According to Deborah James, these clubs have been spreading recently. "A range of new savings or rotating credit clubs had been started by government employees (especially women, that is, teachers and nurses)".

In this small-scale activity aimed at saving to buy food, we can discern an empowering feeling of people being in control of their expenses, an expression of solidarity between these women who share the problem of having to buy food for their families on a tight budget and possibly a mouth-watering pleasure of anticipation being able each month to delay substantial expenditure till the end of the year. The adding-value of the "society" lies in the gatherings, where members carefully collect the money and speak about the collective purchases to come, discuss the terms and distribution and what they will be able to do with them, how long they are going to last etc. This also provides a pastime in women's sometimes dull lives, an opportunity for social interaction apart from men.

⁹² 32 day-call accounts are often chosen for this kind of savings, as it offers competitive return rates and access to funds at short notice.

Conclusion

Being attentive to people's own descriptions of their habits makes it possible to unveil social representations, while being aware of the pervasive influence of external actors' "labelling". Through patterns of food consumption, daily individual and collective practices and shared representations about them, we tried to highlight how a social category is being uncsciously performed and constituted.

The ambivalence of the group we attempt to describe is captured in the dialectic between two opposite poles: freedom of choice opposed to structuring constraints. Middle class household benefit from the luxury of mobility: spatially in their choice of residence and daily journeys, and symbolically, up the social ladder. Nevertheless, they are still struggling (as they say themselves: "they are not there yet") and they have to cope with some structural constraints. They live in a post-apartheid city where racial and spatial segregation has profoundly shaped the territory, allocating identities⁹³ and structuring ways of life, practices and representations. In the same way, they enjoy relative freedom through their power to purchase and have the chance of owning a house.

In an uncertain environment, the lower-middle classes are vulnerable and constantly on the move, striving towards the goal of a better life. They deploy strategies and tactics in everyday life so as to make their way up the ladder to ensure that their children have a better life, or simply to maintain their comfortable standard of living. Like Michel de Certeau, we tend to believe that there is an art behind these trivial practices. Silently and out of sight, the lower-middle class redefines the space of the post-apartheid city, creating some marginal space within established systems by crossing boundaries and opening up space for activity at formal and informal levels.

⁹³ Philippe Gervais-Lambony, (2001), *op. cit.*; Richard Tomlinson *al.*, *Emerging Johannesburg. Perspectives on the post-apartheid city* (London, Routledge, 2003).

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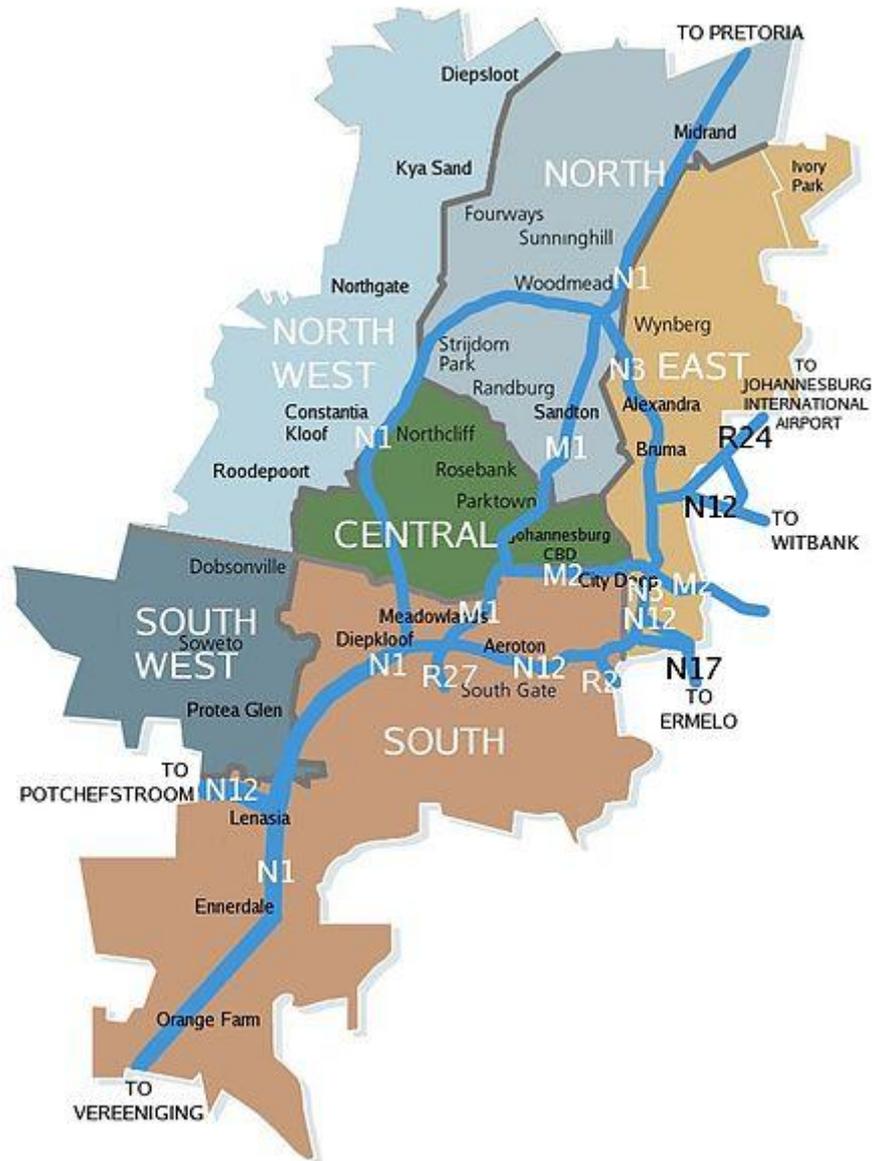
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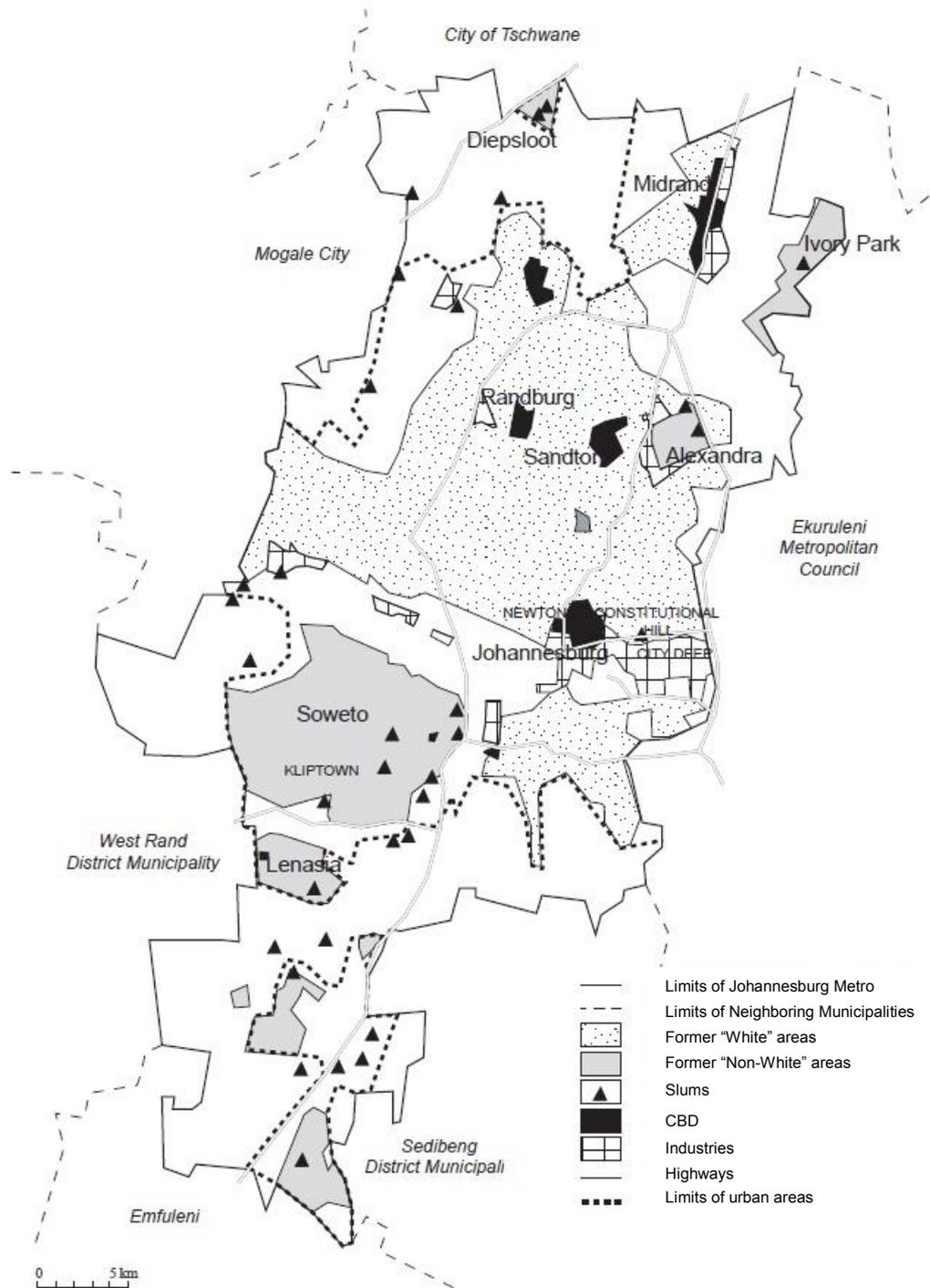
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Appendix 1: Johannesburg map



Source: Wikipedia, accessed on March 1, 2013,
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Johannesburg_map-withannotations.jpg

Appendix 2: Land use in Johannesburg, 2002



Source: Johannesburg Spatial Development Framework, December 2001.

Source: map adapted by Claire Bénit-Gbaffou from Claire Bénit-Gbaffou & Philippe Gervais-Lambony, "Globalisation: a local political instrument in the South African city?", *Transformation*, 57(2005).