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African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

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*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

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***ONE OR MANY MIDDLE CLASS (ES) IN KENYA?  
TOWARDS AN ANALYTICAL FRAME FOR DISTINGUISHING  
SUBGROUPS***

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**Abstract**

*The current debate considers the emerging African middle class as an economic and political factor that stabilizes economic growth and that strives for democracy. This debate implies that the middle class is quite homogeneous. However, we know from industrialized countries that the middle class is sociocultural differentiated. How is this in Africa? To identify traits and groups of middle classes in Africa we adapt a multi-layered framework. The focus are (socio-)cultural differences among milieus of urban middle classes in Kenya. The framework modifies Bourdieu's sociology by differing the areas of analysis social structure, division of labor, culture, historic socio-culture and influences of a city and of a region. The adaptation of this framework will be exemplified by an exemplary analysis of the milieu of Young Professionals in Nairobi.*

**Key Words:** Middle class; social milieu; lifestyles; future visions; Kenya; Pierre

Bourdieu

## **What is a middle class?**

In current discussions in the economics, in politics and in social sciences the middle class is getting into the focus of attention. Whereas the definition is based on socio-economic criteria (household income and/or household expenditure). According to different sources middle classes are defined for instance between 2 \$ and 10 \$ per capita a day (ppp) (Banerjee/Duflo 2008, 4) or between 10 US \$ and 100 US \$ per capita an day (Kharas 2010). In addition we have concepts that defined middle class relatively to the specific country (Birdsall et al. 2000) and those who tried to define middle class on a worldwide or regional level Kharas 2010; Banerjee/Duflo). Therefore Dominik Darbon underlines the extreme heterogeneity and the fragility of the criteria definition (Darbon 2012).

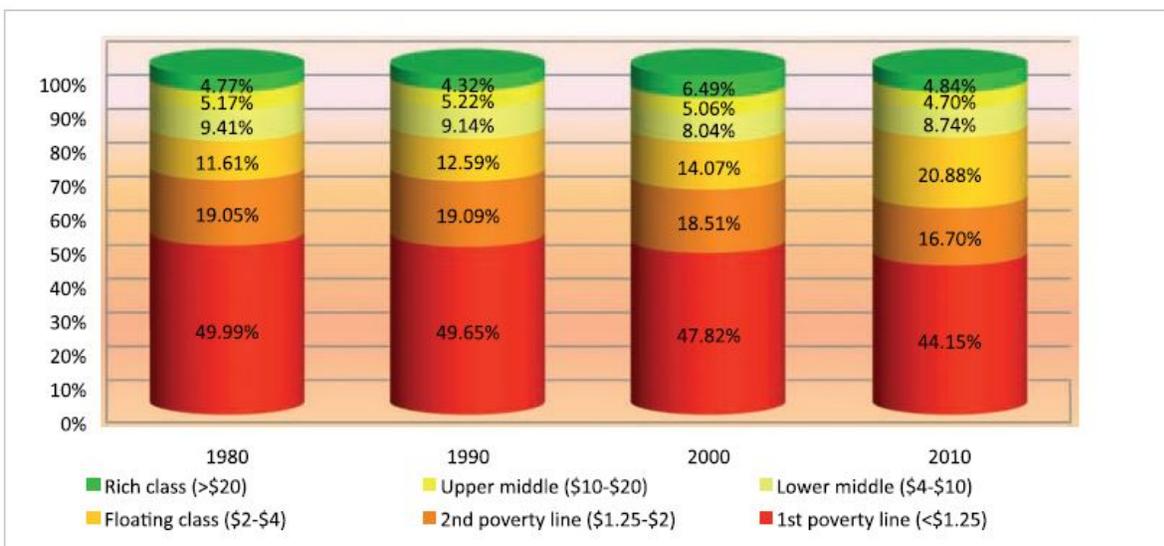
Concerning Africa a report of the African Development Bank (2011) was and is very influential (In the middle of the pyramid). This report presents a model with five or six strata of income

- Below poverty line (< 2 US \$/ person and day)
- floating class (2-4 \$)
- lower middle class (4-10 \$)
- upper middle class (10-20 \$)
- rich class (> 20 \$)

The concept of flow floating class aims at differentiating the middle class between those who just manage to survive and those who have income available that allows to take decisions and to set individual priorities in the domain of consumption. Even with the comparatively low threshold to be part of the floating class respectively of the middle class we see that still nearly half of the African population are poor. Nevertheless the middle class has a considerable size in

One or many middle class (es) in Kenya? Towards an analytical frame for distinguishing subgroups Africa (chart 1). This aggregated picture does not show the differences between different African countries. The size of the middle class (including floating class) varies between 76.6 % in Algeria and 7.7 % in Rwanda (African Development Bank 2011, 22). When we exclude the floating class the largest middle class can be found in Tunisia (45.6 %) and the smallest middle class in Madagascar (1.9 %).

Chart 1 (African Development Bank 2012: 3)



When we talk about the middle class we have to be aware that the widely used socio-economic definitions rely on quite different criteria in the different sources. We even have to consider that the size of the middle class varies considerably between different countries. Already against that topped the circulation one can hardly talk about “the” middle class. In addition we have to be aware that the current discussion is not only talking about existing middle classes in Africa but it is loaded with normative projections about middle class people.

The middle class is seen as the carrier of democratic values and is identified with the civil society. At the same time it is seen as an enterprising and economic engine of growth and development and as important consumers. This reminds one of the concepts of the “citoyen” and the “bourgeois” which have been used since European enlightenment. Both projections are linked to each other and identify the middle class as a carrier of a common set of values and similar interests. The middle class is not only seen as a particular stratum but as defined class in a Marxian sense.

However, this common concept of the middle class is too simple. It ignores at least two problems. First, there is an ambivalent relation between middle class and civil society. Civil society activists and constituencies of civil society organizations often are middle class. But not all members of the middle class are part of this active civil society and not all civil society organizations are middle class based like community based organizations of small farmers<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the civil society in itself represents competing norms and values (e.g. referring to gender, abortion).

In addition the dynamic role of the middle class is not as clear as stated. There is an ambivalent relation between middle class and economic change. Whereas, a part of the middle class pushes for economic liberalization development and change other parts of the middle class are much more sceptical (e.g. claim autochthonous land rights). We also find an ambivalent relation between middle class and entrepreneurship. Many entre-preneurs have a middle class background and comply with the projection as being an dynamic engine of growth. However, many middle class members are employees without an entrepreneurial attitude.

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<sup>1</sup> Trade unions in Africa may be middle class based, because the access to formal sector employment may be seen as an inrance ticket into the middle class.

The projection of a homogeneous middle with a common set of values and similar interests is hardly true. Therefore, the concept of middle class is only at first a heuristic instrument to capture socio-economic differentiation (as seen in AfDB figure)<sup>2</sup>.

We have to admit that the middle class is culturally diversified. We find competing normative orientations represented by different groups. The most obvious cultural diversification in most of the African countries follows the different identities according to ethnic, religious or in the case of Somalia clan affiliation. The importance of these identities varies in the different African societies.

Another normative difference can be found at the level of political values and notions of normative order (Neubert 2011, 2012). We find groups that underline the importance of so called “traditional values” and “traditional political institutions” (chiefs, elders) often in combination with claim for autochthonous rights. We may address them as the “neo-traditionalists”.

This socio-cultural differentiation of middle classes is well known in studies on European and North European countries. They point at different normative orientations on a scale between tradition, modernisation/individualisation and re-orientation (see: Sinus Milieus chart 2). This is based on a large set of criteria and items that describe different attitudes, values and patterns of consumption or even leisure activities.

An example for this analysis are the “Sinus-Milieus” for Germany as developed for marketing research. They do not only describe different consumption patterns but they are also applied on voting behaviour.

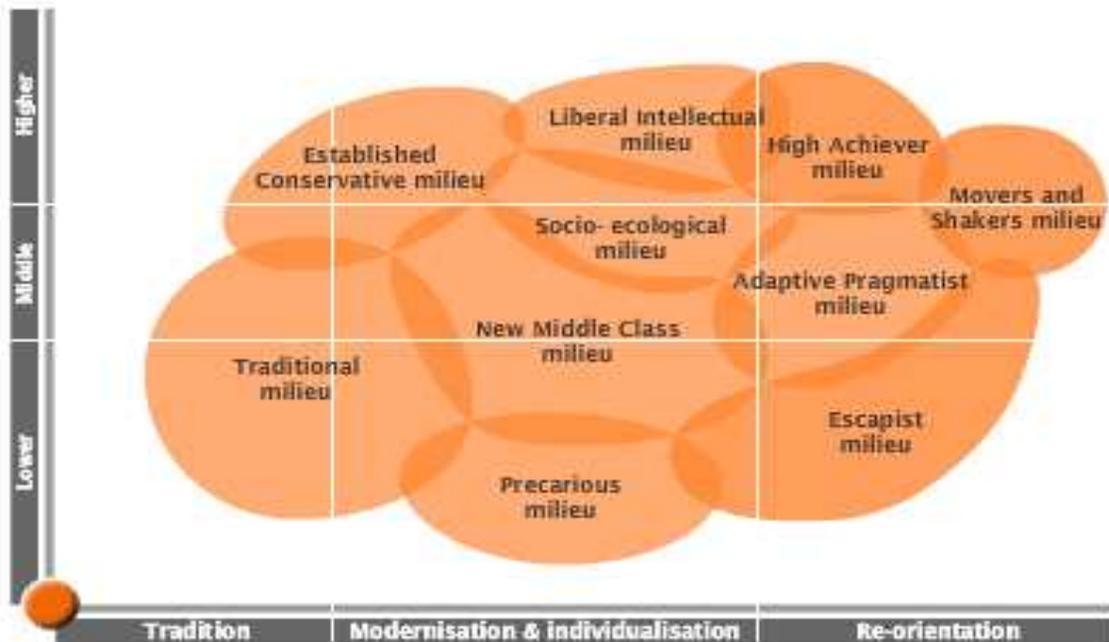
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<sup>2</sup>For an overview on different approaches to capture social differentiation in Africa see Neubert (2005).

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Chart 2: Sinus Milieus for Germany

## The Sinus- Milieus® in Germany 2011



Source: <http://www.sinus-institut.de/en/>

Based on the conceptual knowledge used for OECD countries we want to develop a new framework of analysis conscious that there are other elements of socio-cultural differentiation in developing countries respectively in Africa. We conceptualize the horizontal differences inside the middle strata in the African societies as milieu.

The main points are:

- We find different milieus in the same socio-economic strata
- Milieus range over different socio-economic strata

Criteria for sociocultural differences between milieus are

- Attitudes/values

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- Patterns of consumption
- Leisure activities

These criteria are condensed into orientations

- "tradition"
- "modernization", individualization
- Re-orientation

The limitations of the concept are

- Identification of milieus are descriptive and inductive
- There is no theoretical foundation

In our research project we will try to apply this concept to Africa (Kenya). Whether we may identify socio-cultural groups (milieus) and by which criteria are empirical questions.

Possible milieus (among others) are:

- **Young urban professionals** marked by individual career orientation, late marriage, single households, leisure as partying, stylish clothing, importance of city life, week ties to countryside, ethnically mixed (cf. Spronk 2012).
- **Religious milieu** oriented towards religious norms, family values, leisure time as family time, family ties to the place of origin.
- **Neo-traditional milieu** marked by ethnic identity and "traditional" values, strong ties to place of origin, importance of rural landownership, ethnically homogenous social networks.

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This concept of milieus still has clear limitations. The concept is descriptive with somewhat arbitrary definition of milieus. In the studies of milieus the definition of milieus is based on large scale empirical data this is not yet available. The milieus presented just mark heuristic start points, that have to be verified and further developed by empirical research. There seem to be commonalities of the Kenyan middle class, such as the general high esteem for education and orientation towards social advancement. In addition we identify cross-cutting ethnic ties and ethnic political mobilization (e.g. elections, post-election violence 2008). Therefore milieus do not systematically correlate with voting behavior (as in Germany). For all the reasons mentioned before the concept has to be elaborated and further developed. It should be based on a systematic analytical framework and it should be open for cross-cutting ties and common features of the middle class without ignoring socio-cultural differentiation.

### **Towards an analytical frame**

An important background of our version of the milieu concept are classes in Bourdieu's Sociology and the notion of the social milieu which has been developed with reference to Bourdieu's research (Hradil 1987; Vester et al. 2001). Bourdieu plays such a crucial role because he was able to connect class and social position with lifestyles, orientations and practices. He speaks in his book *Distinction* about classes and equals the socioeconomic position with cultural aspects (1984). At least Bourdieu sorts out groups with different economic and cultural capital. One problematic point is that he does not differ social groups primarily by sociocultural aspects as a main perspective.

His implication on classes in this famous book is that class defines culture and culture defines class. Yet Bourdieu's focus on culture can provide a basis for a new view on social

One or many middle class (es) in Kenya? Towards an analytical frame for distinguishing subgroups groups. So our use of milieus considers cultural as well as structural elements to reconstruct groups in the middle classes.

It remains an empirical question if there are connections and which connections there are in each milieu between cultural and structural elements. So the framework described in the next sections should rather provide an orientation to grasp social milieus in urban Kenya – it is not the result of empirical research in Kenya but a revision and transfer of the milieu concept to recognize characteristics of social groups.

### **Transfer of the milieu concept to Africa (here Kenya)**

In our application of the milieu concept to Africa we take urban Kenya as an example. We examine how far the transfer of rather general criteria is possible to differ milieus in the Kenyan middle classes. The criteria must be specified to the local contexts of Nairobi, Mombasa and to Kenya as a country.

The five central areas of analysis have been developed in research in European countries, Brazil (Stoll 2012) and Asian contexts (Rehbein 2007). This conception is a reflexion of Bourdieu's Sociology but tries to loosen the focus on social class by a multi-layered perspective to consider the particular situation in societies outside the global North, here Kenya. The research areas aim at opening up Bourdieu's correspondence of social position, lifestyle, cultural practices and orientations (cf. Rehbein 2007). This correspondence is even in European or North American societies not always given. E. g. in the African context there can be a huge difference between the income, the position in the symbolic hierarchy and other aspects like lifestyles. The

One or many middle class (es) in Kenya? Towards an analytical frame for distinguishing subgroups areas of analysis are in reality interwoven but are considered separately in our model to allow a better understanding of the specific living conditions of each milieu. This way the different influences can be taken into account together.

The first area is the social position, the second area the position in the division of labour, the third area is culture, the fourth area are regional and local influences and the fifth area is historical socio-culture. For the transfer of the areas to Kenya an adaptation to the particular socio-cultural settings is necessary because the living conditions differ very much from European states or even from Brazil. For example the extension of the family and the entitlements to the family members are usually much stronger in Kenya. Further examples which have a very specific shape in Kenya are informal labour, the meaning of ethnicity and relations between the city and rural regions. Most members of the middle classes in Nairobi still own some ground and a house on the countryside. The frequency of the visits on the countryside may differ but the connection is much stronger than in Brazilian cities where urbanisation has mostly cut the ties of middle classes to the countryside. **Central Areas of Analysis**

### **Research area 1: Social Position**

The area **Social Position** describes the possibilities to access fields and the ability to change the rules in a field through resources like education, income, symbolic position (cf. Rehbein 2007, 197 ff.; Stoll 2012, 27 f.). This area analyses the distribution of resources but looks even at specific boundaries between social groups. The area social position helps to understand how privileged or disprivileged a certain group is. Thus this area can analyse e.g. which symbolic boundaries separate e.g. rather conservative from more liberal milieus. But even

One or many middle class (es) in Kenya? Towards an analytical frame for distinguishing subgroups factors like the economic class of a family, the access to good education and other factors are relevant.

## **Research area 2 Division of labour**

The area **Division of labour** considers “the division of activities on and between the fields” (Rehbein 2007, 197). This area analyses the position of a social milieu in economic and social fields. It examines the specific relation of all forms of economic and social organization. Which fields exist in a certain social context, how are the fields related to one another and in which of these fields participate the members of a social milieu?

The analysis can look at the different forms of economic activities and of other social fields in which the milieus are integrated. For example the landlord of a squatter area and a clerk in a formal sector enterprise can have the same income. Still their economic and even social environment is strikingly different.

This area of analysis can even help to sort out the particular connection between different forms of production. In Kenyan cities many members of the middle classes do not only earn money as employees or as micro entrepreneurs but they even get money from agriculture on the countryside.

## **Research area 3: “Culture”**

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“**Culture**” points at different forms of actions and rules for actions. Forms of activities and work differ because they are shaped by a wide range of factors like habitus, lifestyle or elements of social origin. This area analyses how things are done in a specific context and which form activities and institutions take. So this area examines the particular forms practices and orientations have in a certain society at a given time. The area is interwoven with the specific social, historical, symbolic and other forms of order of a city and of a society.

An example is the family structure in the different classes and milieus: It depends upon the lifestyle how big the family is and how family life is organised. Family size and family form in Kenya have even changed through modernization and urbanisation. Another central aspect is the lifestyle that people lead: It makes a difference if members of a milieu live more family focused, career or leisure oriented. This area contains many more aspects like forms of housing or even the influence of certain values.

#### **Research area 4 Regional and local influences**

This area analyses first how “the intrinsic logic of cities” (Löw 2012) and other local and regional influences are connected to the middle classes. Second it considers relations between urban and rural areas. Third it looks at globalization effects such as tourism or migration and diasporic influences.

The specific context of a city varies strongly. Nairobi and Mombasa have very different economic, social and cultural structures. So the composition of middle classes in Nairobi and Mombasa differs according to the local economic environment and the history of a city. Thus even the integration in global networks of both cities differ significantly.

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While Nairobi is a trade and political center, in Mombasa the port and tourism are main sources of income. In Mombasa exists an old Swahili group among the middle class who are for example jewellers, traders or shop owners. Many members of this group have Arab or Indian ancestors and are muslims or hindus. This group has usually specific elements in their lifestyle which cannot be found in middle class groups in other Kenyan cities. So it is important to look at the particular local composition of the middle class in a city. Other aspects of local influences can be the comparatively relaxed atmosphere of a city which might affect the lifestyle of the local middle classes – e.g. many practices are done in Mombasa with less stress than in Nairobi which can with a high probability be linked to specific ways of this coastal town.

#### **Research area 5: Historic Socio-Culture**

The historic area is mainly immanent in the other four areas: It reflects older forms of social positions, division of labor, culture and city effects which have been integrated into the first four areas. The other dimensions – even in Europe and the US – are under the influence of historic forms of social divisions from colonial times, older divisions of labour, cultural practices and values or even characteristics of a city which have their origin in the past (Rehbein 2007, 198).

In Kenya there are many obvious influences which last from colonial times but there are even other aspects which are not so obvious: While (neo)tribal elements – which have partially just been manifested in the last decades – are a heritage of the past, even entitlements of the enhanced family and connections to the rural areas of the forefathers are relevant as historical particularities.

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A city like Nairobi is shaped through its historically grown pattern as a “fragmented city” (Charton-Bigot & Rodriguez-Torres 2012). Mombasa is characterized through the split between the inner city on the one hand and the port and the coast on the other hand. An influence of the younger past in Mombasa is a new wave of globalization through tourism since the 1980s which changed the face of the city. Thus historical particularities are relevant even on the level of cities.

### **Example: Young Urban Professionals**

Finally we will give an example with the group of the Young Urban Professionals in Nairobi (cf. Spronk 2012) how the research areas can be used to show the specific traits of a social milieu.

The first area is the Social position: Most members of this milieu have tertiary education and are part of the younger generation between 20 and 30 (Spronk 2012, 64). In the division of labor members of this milieu usually work as qualified employees in professional positions or as entrepreneurs.

In the third area of culture one can find a strong career orientation, a high number of single households, ethnically mixed networks and an opening-up of the restrictive sexual moral. In general there is a hedonistic concept of leisure time. Consumption is in this group mostly an expression of (life)style.

In the area of regional & local influences we see that the city (Nairobi) functions as place of belonging. And most members of this milieu have only weak ties to the countryside. This milieu of Young Professionals is very particular for Nairobi. There is no similar group of a

One or many middle class (es) in Kenya? Towards an analytical frame for distinguishing subgroups similar size in a city like Mombasa. A city effect is that e.g. clothes and a hip style in Nairobi are much more important than in Mombasa. The Young Professionals are with their consumption orientation an avantgarde of the high meaning of style in Nairobi and meet on events like the monthly Blankets and Wine Festival.

In the area of historical socio-culture it is significant that diverse socio-cultural backgrounds have a rather small meaning in the everyday life of this milieu. Ethnicity is due to the urbanisation mostly not a very relevant category in the day to day life of these young city dwellers. Another import aspect is that this milieu has formed in the last decade and it is very young.

The Young Professionals differ significantly from other milieus in which lifestyles are more determined by a wide range of other elements, orientations and economic activities. E.g. these other milieus can get their income from a combination of labour and farming, they can have more intense extended family structures and stronger religious, (neo)traditional or (neo)tribal affiliations. It is likely that most Young Professionals change their lifestyles when they get married and have a family. Thus the Young Professionals are an example that milieus and lifestyles are often connected with a certain age. Other groups like religious or conservative milieus mostly show different orientations and practices even if they work in similar professions. In such groups the changes in the lifestyles are probably not as big as they are in a generation bound milieu like the Young Professionals when they start a family.

The theoretical-methodological model we have presented here should be something like a flexible frame which can grasp characteristics of a milieu and which shows its relation to and differences from other milieus. It is a starting point for empirical research which will even lead

One or many middle class (es) in Kenya? Towards an analytical frame for distinguishing subgroups to an adaptation and revision of the areas of research to the particular context of middle classes in urban Kenya.

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