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Aesthetics, Statistics, and the Debate Around Ghana’s Middle Class **“Our definition of the middle class... has to do with the ability to mask poverty”**

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Recent conversations around Ghana’s growing middle class have elicited excitement, despite the lack of agreement over a definition of what makes the group. For a country with socialist roots, the emergence (or perception) of a class system is at times controversial. While there is no doubt that class stratification persists in Ghana, a serious inquiry must be made into the question, does a class system *actually* exist?

Africa Rising?

An *Africa Rising* narrative has been emanating from Western and African investors who claim that sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the next frontier for economic investment and business. This new hype is largely attributed to a 2010 McKinsey Global Institute report which touted Africa ripe for new investment opportunities and high rates of return (McKinsey Global Institute 2010; Pitcher 2012: 163). Part of the *Africa Rising* allure is growing consumption capability and power across the continent, which analysts claim is the rise of a middle class.

Indeed, it is hard to find an article that addresses the new African middle class that does not focus heavily on consumption. Market analysts, financiers, and politicians are excited over an increasing number of malls, cars, and cellphones, which are held as proof of Africa’s rising (Cohen 2013; Dzawu 2013; Rice 2012). Consumption is not the only thing observers are enthusiastic about: there are hopes that with this new purchasing power and education levels, the African middle class will “drive growth and democracy” (Fletcher 2013).

But not everyone is convinced. Amidst the excited reports and narratives, more and more people are speaking out against the *Africa Rising* myth, calling it just that. Opponents say that “institutions such as the African Development Bank (AfDB) and World Bank” may be blinded by their own ambition and “obsession” of “accurately quantifying this African middle class” (Fletcher 2013). Skeptics of the *Africa Rising* narrative question whether this new growth

constitutes a middle class, noting that judging class status simply based off of patterns of consumption does not provide realistic insight into daily livelihoods, resources, educational status, or even income. Materiality is far from telling, Anne Pitcher argues: “many Africans may now own cell phones, but most are excluded from access to adequate shelter, a steady supply of electricity and water, and a decent income” (2012: 167).

Enter Ghana

In Ghana, the emergence of a middle class is celebrated as well as contested. Officially, the Ghanaian government does not provide information about or categorization of a class system. In 2009 the late President John Atta Mills suggested that a class system was growing out of greed, corruption and consolidation of power rather than a more equitable dissemination of resources, wealth, and power. In this instance, a class system was perceived to threaten development rather than enhance it.

A short while after Pres. Mills condemned the creation of a Ghanaian class system, Ghana was bumped up to the category of a lower middle income (LMI) country after a major calculation error was discovered which revealed “that the economy had been undervalued by 60%,” thus moving Ghana to LMI status in the eyes of major lending institutions such as the World Bank (MacDougall 2011: 46). Seemingly overnight the country’s gross domestic product per capita (GDP) shot up “from under \$800 to \$1,363” (Moss and Majerowicz 2012: 2). Ghana’s graduation to a LMI nation was celebrated as a major development feat, and was used heavily by the ruling National Democratic Congress party as a mark of good governance and development.

While the newly discovered economic value and GDP were impressive on a financial, statistical, and economic level, what of the average Ghanaian? Certainly while the government was excited about their new status, “Ghanaians themselves probably felt no wealthier or less debt-burdened” after being declared LMI (Moss and Majerowicz 2012: 2). However, this updated status entails major significance for the average citizen, as it will affect the way Ghana proceeds with development schemes and programmes.

In a report published in 2011, the AfDB claimed that 46% of Ghanaians belonged to the middle class (Douglas 2013). At first glance, this number is staggering. However, AfDB’s criteria may be less than convincing: according to the bank, the middle class is comprised of “individuals or households that fall between the 20th and 80th percentile of the consumption distribution or between .75 and 1.25 times median per capita income, respectively” (African Development Bank 2011: 2). It also considers those who “spend between \$2 and \$20 a day” a part of this middle bracket (Douglas 2013). The difference, of course, between having \$2 and \$20 in daily purchasing power is phenomenal. Critics were quick to call out the AfDB on these shoddy numbers, who, surprisingly acknowledged that 60% of those labeled middle class by their standards “remain barely out of the poor category [and] in a vulnerable position” (African Development Bank 2011: 1).

Kofi Benti, Vice President of *Imani*, a highly visible and influential think tank in Ghana argued that the Ghanaian “definition of the middle class does not have to do with disposable

income or comfort. It has to do with the ability to mask poverty” (Douglas 2013). Such a description is highly telling. Is class more about aesthetics than comfort?

Looking at the Numbers

Statistics from the 2010 Ghanaian census help provide a big picture of where people are employed, and acts as a useful tool in trying to locate the Ghanaian middle class. These numerical data show that a majority of Ghanaians are employed in vulnerable positions (e.g. informal marketeers) and are nowhere near owning modes of production, the common Marxian standard for the upper class. For starters, 8 out of 9 employed Ghanaians work in the informal sector, which often creates difficulty obtaining capital due to strict regulations set forth by Ghanaian banks:

District	All Employment Sector	Public (Government)	Private Formal	Private Informal	Semi-Public/Parastatal	NGOs (Local and International)	Other International Organizations
All regions	9,782,655	641,633	708,043	8,364,649	13,750	49,894	4,686

Similarly, 8 out of 9 Ghanaians are employed in occupations that would traditionally be labeled working class. The fact that almost 8 million Ghanaians are employed in lower-rung jobs while a mere half a million are dispersed in middle-brow occupations (and another half a million in elite positions) suggests that perhaps there is more of a two-tiered system in Ghana than three: the poor and the comfortable and wealthy. Thus, a middle-class in terms laid out by the AfDB and similar scholars is but a false categorization. Upholding such an idea could be detrimental to the development of Ghana, as it provides a false sense of security, "progress" and standard of living. Furthermore, the auspice of a uniform, functioning middle class creates an illusionary aesthetic that may not point to emerging markets, good governance and development, but rather, a large part of the population that struggles on a daily basis to survive and provide. For example, a recent report from the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER) “suggests that approximately 250,000 young [Ghanaians] enter the job market annually of which two percent, or about 5,000, find employment in the formal sector” (McTernan 2013). The rest are unemployed or join the other 8 million Ghanaians working in the informal sector (i.e. agricultural labourers, street hawkers, petty traders), which is rife with vulnerabilities and uncertainties (Osei-Boateng and Ampratwum 2011).

AfDB’s fatal flaw is not distinguishing between individuals in the \$2-\$20 spending/day range. With such a considerable difference in spending power and implications, there does not seem to any benefit in calling this group the middle class.

¹ Adapted from the 2010 Ghana Statistical Service Report “Employment Sector of Employed Persons”

The question then remains: “where is Ghana’s middle class”? Why is the government of Ghana, development partners such as the AfDB and the World Bank creating an elusive “middle class” for Ghana?

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