

Living today or saving for tomorrow? Perspectives of the Future among ‘middle-class’ milieus in Nairobi

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Abstract: This article examines how looking at perspectives of the Future² contributes to distinguishing milieus in the “middle-classes” of urban Kenya. The rise of millions of Africans out of poverty since 2000 has triggered a debate on the so-called “African middle-classes”. This debate, however, has to date not yet addressed the specifics and differences of particular subdivisions of this middle-income-group that would help to understand what is significant beyond their similar financial situation. In response to this gap, this text examines how particular views on Future contribute to distinguishing social milieus, i.e. sociocultural groups with different conducts of life. Because perspectives of the Future depend strongly on the societal and cultural backgrounds from which they emerge, these hopes, expectations and other aspects are a good entry point for identifying which elements of life are significant for members of different social milieus in the “middle-class”.

By examining empirical data for the *Neo-Traditional* milieu and the *Social Climbers* – milieus established through empirical data from fieldwork in Kenya for the Project “Middle-Classes on the Rise” – I examine how sociocultural aspects that are crucial for members of a specific milieu also affect their perspectives on the Future. I will show that these perspectives arise from a distinguishable approach to values, patterns of consumption, and in Kenya – as well as in many other African contexts – features like ethnicity, urban-rural ties, forms of religious affiliation or the relationship to the extended family.

Introduction

“Where do you see yourself in ten years?” This question does not only make applicants in job interviews sweat but it is also one of the things parents try to discuss with their rebellious teenage children. Similarly, couples want to know about their significant other’s outlook on life when they plan to get married. Perspectives of the Future are so striking because they tell us much about the speaker and her or his life views. Talking about the future and someone’s plans reveals something about values, ambitions but also about the dreams and hopes of an individual. While parts of Future visions are individual, a considerable part of these plans and hopes are societal, this means part of shared forms of consciousness and specific orientations and idea systems. For example, there are many ways how individuals plan to use their income. Is someone saving to buy a house or does someone prefer to enjoy life in the here and now and spends everything for objects of consumption and parties? These future orientations show different conducts of life that can help us distinguish social groups with special features. Therefore, this article uses perspectives of Future to distinguish socioculturally differentiated groups, social milieus in the “middle-class” of Kenya’s Nairobi. The text refers to an ongoing debate on African “middle-classes” and provides a new viewpoint by combining milieu analysis and the study of future perspectives in order to provide

more in-depth descriptions of distinguishable groups in the middle-income-stratum of Kenya’s capital.

That hundreds of millions of individuals and families have risen out of poverty (United Nations 2015) in the Global South since 2000 has sparked a debate on the “global middle-classes” (Banerjee/Duflo 2008; Kharas 2010; Birdsall 2015) and how they affect societal development. Because in the public opinion of the hegemonic global North the African continent has for a long time been considered as something of a hopeless case, the debate on the economic advancement of many millions of people in Africa is timely and necessary. Corruption, famines, and civil wars are some of the most likely associations when international media wrote and – until today, in many cases still write – about Africa.

This pessimistic view is the reason why the economic growth of many African countries came as a surprise and attracted a lot of attention from the media and development organizations in Europe and North America. Recent debates such as “Africa Rising” and, in particular, about “the African middle-class” (AfDB 2011) introduced an alternative, rather optimistic narrative that referred to high growth rates and many opportunities. Because the main proponents of the debate on economically defined “middle-classes” in Africa were economists and development agencies (McKinsey 2010; AfDB 2011; Ncube/Lufumba 2015), this has generally led to a focus on income and consumption and a weak or even misleading picture of African societies.

Social scientists (cf. Melber 2017; Daniel et al. 2016) have started to criticize this view. Together with other studies, the research project “Middle-Classes on the Rise” in which I participate, has pointed out that the “middle-classes” are often poorly defined, with some institutions determining it at a daily consumption of 2 dollars per head and day, others at 4 dollars or even higher (for an overview of different economic limits see Neubert/Stoll 2018). Moreover, defining these so-called classes on the basis of economic features provides only vague information about income and consumption, whereas the class-concept as generally used in studies on the Global North aims to convey also a group’s shared values, a common consciousness, symbolic positions and elements of lifestyle (cf. Neubert/Stoll 2018). My own research asks if classes really exist in Africa or if they would not be better reconceptualized as economic strata, which do not tell us much about the life worlds of individuals and differences in their conducts of life. Because the class concept, in both its economic and more advanced sociological version, is a transfer from Northern societies, it seems not well-suited to reflect the particular capitalisms, institutional settings and living conditions in Africa. It is, therefore, doubtful that class can grasp crucial elements of life such as the extended family as a household unit, ethnicity or the diversity of lifestyles.

In order to provide an alternative to class analysis, Dieter Neubert and I have conducted a field study of sociocultural groups (social milieus) in the middle-income strata of Nairobi and Mombasa in the sociological wing of the research project “Middle-Classes on the Rise”. This study has led us to propose the milieu concept, which constructs social groups by common cultural features such as values and typical activities and does not assume, like a class, that structural factors such as income and the position in the division of labor are sufficient to understand groups. Or, in other words, the milieu approach does not primarily study how much money someone has, but it focuses on how people spend their money, why they spend it in this way, and which groups with particular characteristics exist. As an illustrative case study and a red thread, perspectives of the Future show what is meaningful for the life plans of individuals and which elements of life are crucial to someone. Studying Futures is a useful addition to milieu studies as it highlights in a comprehensive way what is crucial for someone. For instance, the research of Futures looks at

whether a person is more concerned with supporting members of the extended family, advancing one’s own financial situation or prefers to spend income on consumption such as buying clothes, electronic gadgets, and going to clubs? This text elaborates perspectives of the Future of milieus in Nairobi to demonstrate that the approach provides new insights.

What is the use of examining perspectives of the Future?

At first glance, the future seems to be something that objectively exists. There was the past and there will be a future. At second glance, we see that when considering the perspective of an individual, the future is something different than just a later moment in a linear temporal order. Future cannot be detached from time, conditions of a place and specific social contexts. Future is always someone’s outlook on Future and depends therefore on the societal and cultural context. To distinguish such subjectively rooted Futures from temporal and other forms of future I will use the term “Future” with a capital letter to mark perceptions. When we talk about future, we usually mean future developments. In this sense, “future” looks at forthcoming events and we usually discuss if prognoses make sense, a prominent topic of research in Future Studies (Bell 1997). In contrast, the approach of this text to perceptions of the future is not prognostic but analytic. Here, we mean by Future a complex set of projections and assumptions in the presence, which refer to a situation yet to come. From this point of view, Futures are something like imaginations and they tell more about their protagonists in the present than about the probability of their hopes, expectations, and prognoses.

In contrast to a scientific conception, Futures – or Pasts – are thus forms of social time, which are bound to the meaning systems of certain actors; they refer to social meanings (for an analytical distinction of time, Futures and Pasts cf. Weidenhaus 2015). There are endless Future imaginations, and any of them relates to the realities of life of its carriers. So, Futures are the product of the living conditions, symbolic orders and ideas of people in a certain position. Scientific positions on Future are never fully objective because they strongly depend on one’s societal and cultural background. For example, a historian’s envisioned future shows traces of the regional and thus cultural context from which it derives. A liberal German historian has a different background than a Marxist Chinese historian whose worldview usually differs significantly from a Marxist North American colleague. Furthermore, it is not just the different political positions of the authors. Different cultural systems of meanings and ideas in a given context change perceptions of the Future. Similarly, it is crucial for Futures if someone takes Europe, the US, Africa or Asia as the focus of the analysis.

There are many theoretical approaches to the analysis of future: Koselleck’s famous “*Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*” (2004 [1965]) examines the historical foundation that constituted visions of the future in premodern and modern Europe. Historian Lucian Hölscher (1999) reconstructs in his book on “*Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*” the notion of future and the genesis of a future horizon in Europe as a history in five episodes from 1770 to the present. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2013) considers “Future as a cultural fact” which means on the one hand that future is a perspective building upon different cultural ingredients such as aspiration, anticipation, and imagination. On the other hand, his approach (ib.: 285-300) emphasizes the necessity of including the mostly overheard voice of the poor in the analysis of futures in an ever more globalizing world.

Other anthropological approaches offer more applicable concepts for empirical research on the

Future. Tamara Hareven (1977) distinguishes historical time, family time, and individual time. Jane Guyer (2008) connects macrosocial elements of different types of time and future, which are related to different phases of social development and different social groups. For example, she points out the rise of "Prophetic time since the 1970s" (ib.: 414 f.) and prophetic future among Evangelicals in different parts of the world like the US and Nigeria. She argues that the expectation of a close arrival of the messiah gives this group a different outlook on future than many other social groups. Groundbreaking sociological theories like Weber's "Protestant Ethics" (2001 [1920]) or Bourdieu's "Outline of a Theory of Practice" (1977) consider imaginations of the Future as central for social organization, conducts of life and related forms of social action. Max Weber describes in the "Protestant Ethics" how the hope of deliverance in the life after death, the inner-worldly asceticism, and the strong work ethics of Protestant groups such as Lutherans and Calvinists were a driving force towards modern capitalism. Pierre Bourdieu created the concept of the habitus when examining how Kabyles in Algeria reacted to the transformation from an honour-based, personalized society to an impersonal, money-oriented capitalism. Under the new conditions, the daughters and sons of Kabyles developed a calculating basic orientation towards life, which resulted in a more nuanced future horizon than their parents. Recently, Jens Beckert stressed the significance of "Imagined Futures" (Beckert 2016) for economic action such as money and credit, investment, innovation, and consumption.

While these and other studies show the significance of prospective planning and expectations for social processes, this article explores the embeddedness of a groups' perspective of the Future in a certain historical, cultural and societal background. Outlooks on the Future are thus useful for understanding the differentiation of social milieus. Which milieu has which characteristics and how do they influence hopes and plans? How do values, lifestyles, economic stability and instability shape the perspectives of Future? These questions are particularly significant for middle-income strata, which can make some, well recognizable economic decisions. In contrast to the poor, the "middle-classes" are not in permanent need (For a discussion of the "middle-class" concept see Neubert and Stoll 2018)³. At the same time, these middle groups do not own the financial means of the rich, who can afford most things they want to buy. Their economic possibilities allow members of the "middle-classes" to make different decisions about how to spend their income, which are related to certain views of the Future. Does someone prefer to spend, invest, or save? And what are the underlying meanings that lead these decisions? Unlike the structural concept of "class", the milieu approach allows differing groups according to sociocultural elements even if they belong to the same socioeconomic stratum (see Neubert/Stoll 2015). For instance, as the case study on Nairobi demonstrates, values, lifestyles, patterns of consumption and other elements like urban-rural ties, the importance of ethnicity or the extended family are constitutive for different perceptions of the Future in the milieus.

This article presents results from the project "Middle-Classes on the Rise", and follows one strand of the research.⁴ The text investigates how the examination of Futures can contribute to understanding "middle-classes" through a case study in Nairobi. In the next sections, the text introduces the concepts of social milieus and perceptions of the Future. Then, both concepts and data from field study demonstrate how two milieus in Nairobi, the *Neo-Traditionals* and *Social Climbers*, are also distinguishable on the basis of their perspectives of the Future.

Milieu theory, data and methods

In order to distinguish social groups in the same income stratum, this text uses the concept of social milieus, which has been discussed in detail other publications of the author (Neubert/Stoll 2015: 4-8; Stoll 2017: 87 f.; Neubert/Stoll 2018). Milieu studies are common in German Sociology (for an overview see Isenböck et al. 2014) and result from critiques of vertical approaches such as class or “Schicht” (social layers) (For a comparison see Geissler 2006: 93-120; Rössel 2009: 335-358; Graf 2016: 29-47). Already in the 1980s, the concept of class seemed to be too simplistic and one-dimensional to respond to the challenges of the rise of postmaterialist attitudes and lifestyles, the decreasing importance of established class solidarities and trends towards individualization that characterized Germany and other countries in Europe and North America. The hiatus between the structural socioeconomic positions and sociocultural realities of life, attitudes, and practices had become too big. Due to these changes, milieu and “Lebensstil”-approaches (for an overview over Lebensstil see Otte/Rössel 2012) became more flexible alternatives that could include sociocultural influences. Moreover, the use of the milieu concept in market research (Sinus 2015) had a significant impact on theoretical debates as well. Milieus are here macro-/meso-units that describe groups of individuals with a certain basic orientation in life. The milieu concept allows a non-deductive reconstruction of realities of life on an empirical basis. It distinguishes groups based on sociocultural influences such as shared values, patterns of investment and consumption and ways to spend free time. Moreover, after the study of cultural aspects, it is possible to integrate socio-structural factors such education, income, or work in the analysis.

While most milieu studies focus on Germany, there are differences in the relation to social structure. While one strand of research ties the concept closer to Bourdieu’s (1984) understanding of “class” and his vertical analyses of society (for instance Vester et al. 2001), another strand of research stresses sociocultural impacts and adds positions of privileges and marginalization on a different dimension (Hradil 1987). Gerhard Schulze (1992) examines shared forms of knowledge and increasingly distinctive aesthetic preferences in Germany. Another strand of research is the study of micro-milieus (for an analytical distinction between macro/meso- and micro-milieu concepts see Rebstein/Schnettler 2014), which focuses on the phenomenological tradition and on a detailed description of “Kleine Lebenswelten”, such as bodybuilding (Honer 1985).

In our research, we have used a descriptive approach that is open to socio-cultural particularities of Kenya. The open character of the milieu concept allows reconstructing characteristics of social groups in the Global South without presupposing vertical structures. In Kenya and other African settings, sociocultural influences such as the extended family, ethnicity, rural-urban ties, specific forms of religiosity (Neubert 2005) can be crucial for individuals as the case study for Nairobi demonstrates.

There are, of course, limits to milieu studies and open questions. The degree to which members of a milieu share characteristics and interact at certain places varies. In spite of shared basic values and some common activities, these aspects do not tell us much about social cohesion and patterns of interaction of those in a milieu. Or, in different words, it is an empirical question how close the areas of life in a milieu are connected. Do members of a milieu spend only limited parts of their leisure time together or the major part? According to our research design, not everybody can be identified clearly as a member of a certain milieu when someone shows strong influences of more than one social milieu. In most cases, it is possible to find characteristics which link someone to a milieu. To consider this it makes sense to differentiate cores of milieus and spaces in-between for those who are close to a milieu but who do not share all characteristics.

For the construction of milieus in field research in Nairobi and Mombasa, we used a contrastive approach that followed the strategy of identifying groups with distinctive conducts of life in the middle-income stratum. We started with groups that were visible in public and rather easy to access. Among these were, for example, dedicated Christians, which we contrasted with groups that were obviously different, such as young hedonistic professionals who are career-minded but also frequently visit bars and clubs. After studying visible groups, we examined people with different conducts of life centered on rather closed networks such as ethnic communities or the nuclear family.

Perspectives of the future among “middle-class” milieus in Nairobi

Nairobi has today about three million inhabitants. The city is Kenya’s capital but also an important hub for the East African region. Nairobi’s economic power and the good job opportunities make it attractive for Kenyans and foreigners. Moreover, the strong presence of international companies and non-government-organisations with institutions such as the United Nations main office for Africa are part and parcel of the city’s specific profile. Poverty and inequality are highly visible in everyday life as well. Studies estimate that around 60 percent of the population (UN Habitat 2013) live under the poverty line. This leaves about one-third of the city’s population in the middle-income stratum. These and more significant elements for the construction of milieus are bound to Nairobi and differ in one way or another in other Kenyan cities.

The middle-income stratum in Nairobi is socioculturally heterogeneous as shown in the construction of milieus. We discovered the following social milieus, which differ in their conducts of life and also in their perspectives of the Future: The members of a *Pragmatic Domestic Milieu* focus on work and family with no particular career ambition. A milieu of *Young Professionals* (Spronk 2012) consists of people between 20 and 35 years who have strong aspirations but who also live a consumption-oriented, hedonistic lifestyle. There is a *Christian Milieu* whose members are active in church groups and who combine religious values with the will towards economic advancement. Another milieu are the *Cosmopolitan Liberals*, who combine pro-democratic commitment with a clear career profile and who often work in international areas such as for development organizations or non-government-organisations. The text presents the *Neo-Traditional Milieu* and the milieu of the *Social Climbers* as examples that demonstrate how perceptions of the Future mark strong social differences. I have chosen these two case studies as they show two very different ways how people in the middle-stratum set priorities in their lives, particularly in their outlooks of the Future. While *Neo-Traditionals* give the extended family and the local community a prominent place in their views of the Future, *Social Climbers* focus on the advancement of themselves and their nuclear family. In both cases, questions of emotional affiliation, of belonging to a community and of individual hopes are taken into account – but their responses differ significantly.

*Neo-Traditionals*⁵

Characteristics of the *Neo-Traditionals*

Most ethnic groups (Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya etc.) in Kenya consider a certain part of the country as their home region. Almost all Kenyans have emotional affiliations to these rural places, but the degree of this emotional bond and the frequency of contacts varies significantly. *Neo-Traditionals*

have intense ties to their ethnic community and their home area. Their ethnic language is important for them – even though they speak mostly Swahili and English as well. They were born in the countryside and went to Nairobi to work. Members of this milieu have close relationships with their extended family and their communities in their rural homes. They send remittances to parents, relatives or even neighbors and friends. This includes financial obligations such as the payments of school fees for siblings and cousins, hospital bills or the costs of funerals. The distant family is crucial for members of this milieu, and it is common to support relatives financially or to share a flat with them in Nairobi. The respect for parents, uncles, grandparents and older people from their community, in general, is one of the most important values among this community.

Social ties of *Neo-Traditionals* in Nairobi consist, by and large, of persons from the same ethnic group and region. Members of this milieu are from all age groups but they share their local language and many traditions and customs. The feeling of belonging to the same local and ethnic community is part of their self-understanding. Typical activities are the building of a house for themselves and family members in their home area. Usually, they invest money in farms or ground in this area as well. Due to the importance of the rural community, their aspirations focus more on their local and ethnic group and less on their professional environment. As a result of the focus on the community and due to financial obligations, their career plans appear to be less ambitious than those of members from other milieus. Even those interviewees who attended a university, often spoke in interviews about their motivation to support the community in their home area. The emotional connection to their community makes it for *Neo-Traditionals* evident to return to their home area when they retire and to be buried there.

Neo-Traditionals can be found in all socioeconomic strata, not only in the middle stratum. Even with a higher income, their references to their home communities do not vanish but their position in the community can improve, and men can become respected elders. For men and women in this milieu, it is a central orientation to become a successful farmer and the respected grandfather or grandmother of a big family.

Perspectives of the Future among the *Neo-Traditionals*

Neo-Traditionals' strong connection to the community in their rural home and their ethnic community is reflected in their perspectives of the Future, plans, and conducts of life. Many members of this milieu follow to a high degree the previously dominant life as “Peasants in cities” (Mangin 1970); Nairobi is the place to earn money, and the countryside is the place to invest it. Even after many years of living in Nairobi, the countryside remains their “home” and thus the emotional center.

How do members of the *Neo-Traditional* milieu see their Future? The orientation towards their ethnic community and to typical “tribal” values is crucial. This affiliation is stronger than in other milieus which focus mostly on their individual interests and the nuclear family and often to a limited degree the extended family. In contrast to other milieus, the extended family, the local community in their villages and their ethnic group remain crucial for the future plans of *Neo-Traditionals* as interviews show. A particularly insightful source of information are perceptions of the Future among young members of the *Neo-Traditional milieu*. Their outlooks on their future life show how to which degree the emotional connection to the group in their rural home persists, even in a phase of increasing globalization. As an example, this text shows some comments by two female interviewees who grew up in small rural communities, one in the ethnic group of the Kalenjin in a small village and one in a nomadic Massai village. For both of them, the mutual

solidarity with the family and friends in their places of origin is crucial. The interviewees consider the groups in their home areas as a local and ethnic unit which shares a culture and its values. The interviewee's relationship to their community has an emotional dimension and is not just a functional connection as the passage from an interview with a 23-year-old woman from the ethnic group of the Kalenjin demonstrates:

We have this togetherness in our community. (...) whenever someone is in need, the people, the tribe people really help you. And when you get out of that community, nobody really comes and talks for you. (Interview N., 14/04/2014)⁶

For the views of Future of these two interviewees in their mid-Twenties, the community was a very important point of reference. They feel responsible for their home area and criticize other ethnic groups which are considered as less solidaristic:

(...) when it comes to the, to the financial aspect, they [other ethnic groups, F. S.] are very individualistic. Hey, and then they don't develop their own homeland that much. They really live in the city, most of them, that is what I realized. And they live a good life in the city, they love the good life. (Interview N., 14/04/2014)

Neo-Traditionals' views of the Future contain individual and collective elements at the same time. Their career aspirations are intertwined with the long-term solidarity with their "community". The affiliation to their home area and members of their ethnic community focuses on their motivation to develop their home region. For example, owning a piece of land in their rural home and building a house there is not just an economic investment. This personal attachment to land is an important difference to members of other milieus who would buy the land as an investment with no emotional attachment. A 26-year-old female interviewee who grew up in a nomadic Massai village describes in her envisioned Future both individual and collective goals. She says she studies in Nairobi at a private university because she wants to go somewhere in life but also wants to give something back to her community:

I love education. and I want to be someone in life. I want to, what I want, my major goal in life is to help my community understand that the only constant in life is change. (Interview L., 25/08/2013)

She says her main goal is to show the Massai community that there is a different way of living than cow herding and that the Massai can reduce the size of cow herds. She aims to preserve the community and to improve the life of its members by changing some established ways:

They are not going to keep cows forever, large numbers of cows, that's what I am talking about right now because they keep a large number of cows when there is no rain, a lot of them die. See now that's a big loss to them, they become stressed, see. So I want to, I want, at one point in my life, I want to be able to show the Massai another way of surviving, in the same way keeping their culture. Yeah. Like they can practice other ways of farming, like, yeah. And because right now in Kenya they are the people with the largest portions of land, and with the way the economy is growing, I would love that one time; I would love, in the future I would love to have many Massai doing real estate because they have enough land for that. 'Cause right now everything is changing, even the environment is changing. They will not be able to keep large numbers of cows. It's not like I support environmental pollution [smiles; F. S.] but I know it is happening. And unless something happens or unless somebody teaches them another way of living, they are going, they will not, there will be no Massai in the coming years. (Interview L., 25/08/2013)

The interviewee L. adds that she wants to start a project to dig bore holes which could bring water to the Massai. Furthermore, she wants to teach people from her Massai community so that they can negotiate contracts. According to L., right now members of her ethnic group frequently sell land for 20.000 Shillings which is worth one million Shillings. She wants to change this exploitation by teaching members of her ethnic community about prices and forms of negotiation.

The extended family but also the local and ethnic community are central to members of this milieu as the interviews prove. In contrast to other milieus for whom the nuclear family and individual career are the main references, young *Neo-Traditionals* make it a central aim to improve the lives of their extended family and community. N., The 23-year old woman from the Kalenjin, wants to go to Australia for studies and then return to her home area. She says she needs 10 million Kenyan shillings (around 110.000 US Dollars at the time of the interview) for three years of studying in Australia. She does not just rely on family resources as she plans to work in Australia. For her studies, she wants to collect most of the money for the first year in Australia through several fundraising events:

(...) as I told you, our community sticks together. So. And I told you they are not so rich and they are not so poor. So, if let's say you have a fundraising unit, you'll get not so much money, but people will come and try to help, even if they give you five hundred shillings, one thousand. (Interview N., 14/04/2014)

The modest sums of 500 or 1.000 shillings show that N. expects many small donations. She will need many supporters to get even the 3.5 million shillings which she calculates for her stay during the first year in Australia. For N., the relationship to her local and thus ethnic community is reciprocal. After her return, she plans to teach members of the Kalenjin community to work in other economic fields than just farming (Interview N., 14/04/2014).

The community can be a resource – similar to social capital in Bourdieu's terminology. This solidarity can support a member of a local community and helps to realize future plans. The flipside is that these ties to the local community can be a hindrance for more individualized career plans. Another interviewee (J., 13/08/2013), who is in the milieu of the *Christian Religious*, mentions difficult situations in her father's village after he had had economic success in Nairobi. The population in his home village considers him to be part of the community and expects him to share his assumed wealth with them. This example shows that the extended family and the community in the home area can threaten someone's economic advancement. It can be a necessary condition for individual success to weaken the connection to the extended family and the community in the rural home. In this respect, differences between the milieus are striking. *Social Climbers* (Case Study 2) would not have been able to improve if they had to share large parts of their income with the extended family and the community on the countryside.

Social Climbers

Characteristics of the *Social Climbers*

The perception of the Future of *Social Climbers* is strongly directed towards improving and consolidating their economic position. They come from modest backgrounds and found ways to make more income than the majority of Nairobi's poor who are, however, still their neighbors. In contrast to those with great aspirations from lower strata who still struggle to make an income over the poverty line, *Social Climbers* already had some success. Nevertheless, their situation is far

from stable and an accident, a disease or another incident can spoil their plans. *Social Climbers* are usually between 25 and 40 years old. They are married and grew up in the countryside. In contrast to *Neo-Traditionals* and *Christian Religious*, members of this milieu are led by a very strong ambition for socioeconomic success and not primarily by cultural values.

Their focus on the socioeconomic elevation of the nuclear family is one conduct of life that distinguishes them significantly from other milieus. For example, while characteristics such as connections to the extended family and their ethnic group or to churches exist, they are less important for *Social Climbers* than for *Neo-Traditionals* or *Christian Religious*. The aspirations of the *Climbers* are focused on the socioeconomic advancement of their nuclear family. They could not maintain their position if they had to fulfill obligations towards the extended family or to neighbors at their rural home. Most of the *Climbers* have found a way to arrange themselves with possible obligations which could decisively affect their investments in education or in their business. Some members of this milieu must, however, still struggle with different emotional and financial aspects because it is difficult to fulfill expectations of their extended family and local community without giving up individual interests.

Other "middle-class" milieus aspire to climb up the social ladder as well, but they follow this goal with less determination than *Social Climbers* or they are already in a safer situation.

Perspectives of the Future among the *Social Climbers*

Future is for *Social Climbers* the idea to improve the socio-economic position of oneself and the nuclear family. Members of this milieu save a very high share of their income for investment. They prefer to save for investment and avoid to spend money on clothes or phones as members of most other middle-income milieus do. *Social Climbers* live for an aspired but uncertain better future rather than in the moment. The main difference to the poor is not that they have a higher income. It is more important to see that they have acquired something like their own taxi, a workshop or at least a socio-economic position which gives them a more or less regular income and that allows them to work realistically on further improvement. Just like the vast majority of Kenyans, they have several sources of income and own, as an example, a motorbike, which they rent out to a *boda-boda* (bike taxi) driver.

In contrast to the poor, *Social Climbers* can develop midterm strategies and sometimes even long-term plans. Many members of this milieu still act opportunity bound because they work in rather unstable jobs or they constantly try to find occupations in which they earn more. The rise of the *Climbers* depends to a high degree of their socioeconomic stability, which means they must find ways to secure a more or less permanent flow of money to cover all expenses. Income from enterprises vary, and even among employees, job changes are the rule rather than the exception. Often *Social Climbers* cannot rely on a stable income and must consider phases of unemployment or without orders. This affects their imaginations of the Future.

A paradigmatic example for a *Social Climber* is the taxi driver R. who was able to stabilize and advance his position during the time span of three field trips between July 2013 and August 2014 when he was finally able to reach a central goal by buying his own taxi. Some biographical information illustrates a situation in life that is similar to many *Climbers*. R. was born in 1981 and he is the father of a girl (born in 2011) and a boy (2013). In 2009, he came to Nairobi where he had different jobs. At the end of 2010, he went for one year to Iraq and worked in the civil part of the army to support the American military. In November 2011, he came back to Nairobi,

and in January 2012 he started to work as a taxi driver for a company. He spent up to 16 hours a day working and waiting for clients. R. and his wife were able to save up to two-thirds of their income. With his savings and with a credit from his mother he managed to buy his car at the end of 2013. In 2014, R. started to work as a self-employed taxi driver.

Buying a car and working thus as an entrepreneur is a mid-term goal that R. has reached through his saving oriented conduct of life. He and his wife have been saving for some years, and now there is a positive outcome because R. depends no longer on his employer and can keep all the money he makes. He still must pay the credit for the taxi back, but owning a car gives him the opportunity to save more and to work flexibly. In another interview (14/10/2014), R. says that his life has changed and that his economic situation is now much better than before. He emphasizes, now he can save 30.000 Kenyan Shillings (KES) a month and not just 20.000 KES like before he got the car. R. is already focussing on the next midterm Future goal which is to buy a plot of land as an investment. Every four months he gives 20.000 KES to the owner of a plot of land in Bugoma, 50 kilometers away from his home area. R. does not want to build there for himself but uses it as a way to make money. He recognized that people on the neighboring plots have already begun to build houses. Furthermore, he thinks of buying a cow because milk prices have risen in Kenya and milk is "like gold" now.

Revealing about R.'s perception of the Future are the rationales behind his investments. When asking why he does not buy a second taxi, he responds that it is very expensive to buy on loan, and he has not enough clients to guarantee a regular rate for another taxi. His calculation is realistic and has a mid-term goal (looking at the next years). It is not absolutely clear when he wants to sell the land again, but he diversifies his investments. Moreover, he was also able to take care of an invisible social obstacle to individual advancement, as he succeeded in limiting the claims of relatives and friends to a level which does not slow down or prevent his ambitions. In an interview (Interview 14/08/2014), he admits that some people are jealous of him. Yet, when the author asked him if some people think that he used witchcraft to acquire the car, R. said he and the people in his hometown slaughtered a goat and thus made his success acceptable for his community. In the interview, he admits that his extended family is probably not aware how successful he is and they just say he "is not thin". To put it in a nutshell, R. has found a very effective way to manage expectations without cutting the relationship to family and friends.

Other interviewees such as J. (Interview 13/09/2013) from the *Christian Milieu* had more conflictual experiences. She says the community from her father's rural home place wants to participate in his acquired or just suspected wealth. The people there become hostile when they have the feeling he does not want to share. According to J., family members often do not work but rent their plots of land to someone for money, and they spend this money in a short time span. Then, they come back to family members and ask about money for food, school fees, and other things. In contrast to such claims, the taxi driver R. supports now and then his father, but he found a way to pacify possible overwhelming claims.

It is not surprising that rather than buying new clothes, the taxi entrepreneur R. gets them at the Toy Market, one of Nairobi's second-hand markets (Interview 14/08/2014). He says many of his friends in Nairobi do not care about clothes and wear sportswear, in contrast to the friends at his rural home who are interested in fashion and who care about good looks. Unlike them, R. prefers to pay the rates for his car, keep it in good condition and save the money he makes instead of spending it on commodities. These priorities are typical for a *Social Climber*. In spite of his high saving rate, R. does not totally renounce consumption. He owns a flatscreen TV and

a home entertainment laptop but saving for the future remains crucial. In addition, he prioritizes the education of his daughter.

R.'s midterm orientation to reach out for a better future in the next years is dominant but not without some references to long-term elements. He says he plans to go back to the countryside at the age of 55. When he is older, he does not want to be stressed about money. His plan is to own some businesses like his father who was a teacher but who also had a restaurant, a mill and who farmed maize.

Another example of a *Social Climber* is the entrepreneur C. who manufactures doors and windows in his welding workshop in the neighborhood of Kahawa Wendani in Nairobi (Interview 13/10/2013). He started a business by offering battery charging to people in 2005, with a starting capital of 2000 KES (then around 25 US Dollars). C. had a good income through several contracts, mostly from the British Army Training Unit in Kenya. With his earnings, he bought a car and the equipment for a workshop. Owning a car is perceived as marking considerable success because only "middle-class" people and above can afford this. His old pick up is not very representative, and so he uses it mostly for his work, not for transporting his children. He also bought some land in Nairobi not far away from his apartment, but it is an investment without emotional attachment. His business allows him to pay rent for his apartment, his garage and all family expenses which are according to him around 50.000 KES per month. He strongly depends on contracts and must save enough for long phases without work. At the time of the interview, C. had no contract for three months, but he still could take care of everything. For one of his last contracts, he received 1.2 million KES (then around 13.000 US Dollars) but from this money he had to pay workers, maintain machines, his car, and settle other costs. In his perception, competition has made it harder to earn money as a welder:

Because we have grown, you see we are very many, who are doing this work. And if you are not careful, what you'll have done, you'll do a very big job, but at the end of the day, you'll get nothing. (Interview C., 13/10/2013)

C. is used to intense phases of work and phases without work. When he has a contract, he employs several people. He created a small firm from nothing but he is still in a vulnerable position. Sometimes he can save 200.000 Shillings (around 1.600 US Dollars) or even more, but he must save this money and hope that it will get him through periods without work.

Like many *Social Climbers*, C. grew up in the countryside in a low-income family with eight siblings. Unlike members of the milieu of the *Neo-Traditionals*, he does not have a strong emotional affiliation to his rural home. He goes there usually only on Christmas, and he has no obligation to share his income with his extended family. He just sends sometimes 2.000 KES to his mother. Such contributions are financially rather marginal to him but socially a necessary precondition for his economic success. The fragile economic advancement affects his plans and his main foci in life. He made considerable progress and concentrates on the growth of his business and the well-being of his family in Nairobi. The family is, in this case, the nuclear family, not the extended family, not the village in the countryside and not the ethnic community. C. has plans to build a house to save on rent, and in five years, he wants to own an apartment, a good car and he wants to be able to go often to restaurants with his wife and his children.

in five years? (...) at least I have now, I have settled in a house, I have changed my business where I'm not paying rent, surely I should be having a good car. a car that can be able to take my boys to school, bring them. And I know I should, by then I

should be now be able to take my people out and eat some Nyama Choma [Kenyan barbeque; F.S.] somewhere. Yeah. That’s how, those are the wishes. And to make my family happy. You see when the family’s not happy, you are not happy. (Interview C. 13/10/2013)

Just like the taxi driver R., the welder C. has a midterm orientation, which gives priority to social advancement and economic stability in the next years. *Climbers* limit their short-term consumption, yet they are not necessarily driven by long-term goals such as developing their rural home community like members of the *Neo-Traditionals* nor by the hope of deliverance in life after death like *Christian Religious*. In spite of high saving rates and reinvestment of their income in their businesses, *Social Climbers* prioritize the education of their children, and they send them to good schools if they can.

The perspectives of the Future clarify, which characteristics distinguish the *Climbers* from other “middle-class”-milieus. *Social Climbers* condense their Future on the well-being of their nuclear family. Even though they have connections to their rural home and are members of a religious community, they consider these ties as secondary. It is important to understand that questions of self-understanding, solidarity and conflicting expectations are intrinsically bound to financial spending and how they envision the best Future. For many Kenyans, it is a painful but inevitable choice whether they want to support their families financially or loosen the emotional ties and try to improve economically.

Conclusion

This text elaborated how perceptions of the Future can help to differentiate social milieus and their sociocultural characteristics in Nairobi’s middle-income stratum. Outlooks on the Future bring together many elements that are distinct in each milieu. The variety of significant elements allows us to analyze forms of sociocultural differentiation in the “middle-classes” of Nairobi. Instead of narrowing Future down to temporal aspects and plans, it proved fruitful to take the actors’ point of view. What is crucial for the members of a milieu? Perceptions of the Future refer to the most important elements in the life of different factions of the middle-income stratum. Thus, the envisioned Futures of milieus reveal sociocultural differences such as particular sets of values, elements of lifestyles and other influences such as urban-rural connections, the meaning of ethnicity and religion.

Perceptions of the Future in the *Neo-Traditional* milieu are connected to their ethnic community, to neo-traditional values, to extended families, and their rural home areas. This view of the Future is not limited to individual plans, but it has a collective dimension as well. The extended family, the local community, and the ethnic group are central points of reference for *Neo-Traditionals*. Their hopes and imagined good Futures connect individual aspirations with strong hopes for the development of someone’s community. These collective elements produce long-term orientations in the *Neo-Traditionals*’ Future horizon. Consequently, *Neo-Traditionals* have many sociocultural characteristics that affect certain economic practices such as their investment strategies and the reach of their household unit, which extends to distant relatives and even friends.

Social Climbers’ viewpoints of the Future concentrate on their individual social advancement and the well-being of their nuclear family. Sociocultural and traditional elements do not limit the ability of members of this milieu to climb the social ladder. Long working hours and high saving

rates have been their way to rise from the lower socio-economic strata. The *Social Climbers* try to stabilize and improve their social position further. So, they do not spend much money on consumption. The *Climbers*’ midterm orientation on financial success in the next months or years is a bet on an uncertain and abstract Future. For this milieu, socioeconomic elements are more important than cultural values such as ethnic affiliations or religious convictions. This is only possible because *Social Climbers* have no strong obligations to their extended family or to their rural community, often as the result of distancing themselves from their families.

The case study on “middle-class” milieus in Nairobi illustrated how perceptions of the Future can be a starting point to decipher complex forms of social differentiation. The analysis of Futures is especially promising for African countries which have different social structures than European or North American societies. A study of socioeconomic classes would have missed many of the sociocultural aspects that the milieu analysis uses as building stones of group construction. The analysis of perceptions of the Future is a promising approach to reconstruct milieus and possibly other groups in contexts where economic conceptualizations are bound to quantitative data on income or consumption rates. At the same time, it is crucial for the study of Futures to integrate their carriers as well. Outlooks on the Futures are necessarily linked to specific meaning structures and the living conditions of certain individuals and milieus.

While perceptions of the Future are a relevant research topic in itself, they may be useful for comparative research too. For example, which milieus do we find in the middle-income strata in urban centers of other African countries, such as Tanzania’s Dar es Salaam or Uganda’s Kampala? Which specific meaning structures and living conditions are crucial for views of the Future in the middle-strata there? Similarly, a comparison of settings in different continents could provide new insights as well. A study of middle-income strata in Kenya and Brazil could reveal new and surprising aspects about forms of social differentiation (Stoll 2017). In own research on social milieus and their use of time – which includes perceptions of the Future – in the Brazilian city Recife (Stoll 2012), the author discovered substantially different forms of stratification, milieu differentiation (for a comparison of social structure and milieus in both settings cf. Stoll 2017) than in Nairobi. So, a next step could be to compare forms of social differentiation and views of the Future in different settings. Such a comparison could contribute to Area Studies as well as to Systematic Studies because it could demonstrate which forms of differentiation and Future are local or regional and which exist in several contexts of the “Global South”. Finally, such a perspective can consider and revise theories and concepts – such as “middle-class” – which were developed in the “Global North” and which claim to be universal. The research on imaginations of the Future in Nairobi can be the starting point for such a transregional research program.

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Notes

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²This article uses the term “Future” with a capital letter to mark imaginations which are bound to social meanings given by actors (Weidenhaus 2015). Such imaginations differ from scientific and other concepts of “future”.

³This article focuses on qualitative aspects because socioeconomic positions are not sufficient to understand the differentiation of “middle-classes” in Kenya and other African countries. . Many popular definitions such as the African Development Bank’s look only at socioeconomic strata (2011: 3): The Poor Class is less than 2 US Dollars per head and day, the so called Floating Class is 2-4 US Dollars, the Middle Class is 2-4 US Dollars and the Rich Class has more than 20 US Dollars per head and day. A qualitative reconstruction of milieus and their characteristics aims at a better description of realities of life in these so called middle-classes.

⁴The data and many ideas of this text are from the collaboration in the research project “Middle-Classes on the Rise” (Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies/University Bayreuth). In this project Erdmute Alber, Lena Kroecker, Maike Voigt, Dieter Neubert and I (F. S.) examine the middle-income strata of Kenya. Dieter Neubert and I have collaborated closely in the sociological wing. So most of the ideas presented here have been developed together with Dieter Neubert. The empirical data have been mostly collected by the author in 97 interviews and participant observation during five research stays with a total duration of nine months between 2013 and 2016.

⁵We (Neubert/Stoll 2015) use the characterization *Neo-Traditional* because the reference to traditions is crucial. Many of these traditions have been, however, recently invented. For instance, the legitimization of claims to land are often that ancestors have been settling there for decades. In many cases, an historical analysis could reveal something different and this is why I attach the pre-fix “Neo”.

⁶All interviews were conducted by the author in different places in Nairobi.

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