

## “We Offer the Whole of Africa Here!”. African Curio Traders and the Marketing of a Global African Image in Post-apartheid South African Cities<sup>1</sup>

« Ici, nous offrons toute l'Afrique ! ». Commerçants de bibelots africains et commercialisation d'une image africaine globale dans les villes sud-africaines après l'apartheid

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## “We Offer the Whole of Africa Here!”

### African Curio Traders and the Marketing of a Global African Image in Post-apartheid South African Cities<sup>1</sup>

Where as South Africa has become an increasingly popular destination for migrants from all over the world and more specifically the African continent since the late 1980s, this has also been accompanied by widespread xenophobic reactions that recently degenerated into massive violent attacks (Mattes *et al.* 1999; Landau 2006; Crush 2001)<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, tourism has become more and more important to the country’s economy but also central in transforming its image internationally in the post-apartheid context. Interestingly, one of the few areas of seemingly successful and peaceful encounter of South Africans with African migrants is that of African curio or crafts markets which have opened in most South African large cities and along tourist routes. This article only focuses on those markets for their specific connection with current African migration. In that respect, they are different from other markets (such as the famous *muti* markets<sup>3</sup> or the fresh produce market at City Deep, Johannesburg, for instance) that might have been, at some stage in South African history, connected to migration networks but no longer play that role. If the African crafts markets are comparable in many ways to other markets in South Africa, in

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1. The author would like to thank Sarah Davies Cordova, Assistant Professor of French, Marquette University, Wisconsin, for her editing of the English version of this paper.
  2. The most complete report on the xenophobic attacks to date is the CORMSA Report, 2008.
  3. *Muti* is a Zulu word meaning medicine. *Muti* markets are markets offering traditional medicines sold by traditional healers/diviners (*sangomas*) and herbalists. They can be found in most South African urban centres. Two famous *muti* markets in Johannesburg are the Mai-Mai and the Faraday markets which have received much attention and investment from the Johannesburg Municipality recently in a (so far unsuccessful) attempt at turning them into tourist attractions (except in Durban where the *muti* market is part of the City’s tour). These still mainly attract Black South Africans.

terms of formalisation processes, management models and marketing of “Afrocentricity”, they are the only ones that both “stage Africa” to a mostly non-African public and constitute a real encounter with the rest of the continent. What I try to do in this article, beyond documenting what is also a fairly new phenomenon in South Africa and one which has not been researched extensively so far, is to assess the type of imagery of Africa that is produced in the exchanges of goods taking place in these markets and whether it is bound to transform otherwise prevalent stereotyped and negative images of the continent and its inhabitants in South African society<sup>4</sup>.

The paper contends that the emergence of “African markets” in the post-apartheid urban landscapes filled the niches created by the production of commodified images of the country (Rasool & Witz 1996) and, by extension, the continent. The nature of urban transformation deriving from these “uplifting experiments” in formalising street trade is referred to here but remains beyond the scope of the present paper<sup>5</sup>. Rather, the analysis focuses on the creative process at work around the identification and multi-layered reading of a “cosmopolitan” African identity as a strategic and tactical tool by different groups of actors (South African municipal authorities, retail private actors and migrant traders)<sup>6</sup>. Based on empirical material collected over a two-year period, the paper tries to show how this process has fulfilled actors’ immediate and contrasted needs but has not necessarily led to countering negative clichés on African migration in the long run. It thus tries to make use of the theoretical framework of the notion of ethnic entrepreneurship in its application to the South African context.

The paper explores how and why these groups of actors identified a renewed image of Africa as the catalyst of their various expectations, in the 1990s and 2000s South African contexts of migration and of political and urban change. It documents the practices and activities of the African curio trade in South African cities, the products sold, the trade networks

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4. The paper is based on extensive fieldwork carried out in 2006 and 2007 in and around Johannesburg and the observation of other cities such as Durban and Cape Town as part of a research project entitled “African Traders and the City” pertaining to two research initiatives (FSP-CEPED and ANR MITRANS CNRS research programmes, see [www.ifas.org.za](http://www.ifas.org.za)). It relies on original qualitative data from this fieldwork (over 50 in-depths interviews with migrant traders from Congo, Cameroon, Senegal, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Malawi, market managers and local authorities). The author would like to thank reviewers for their comments and suggestions on the ethnographic data in particular.
  5. These are part of the FSP Ceped and Mitrans projects mentioned in note 3.
  6. This reading in terms of a strategic and tactical use of a “cosmopolitan” African identity was first identified by Loren B. LANDAU and Iriann HAUPT (2009) in relation with migrants’ self-exclusion practices. My intention here is to expand it to other actors and rather analyse it as a repertoire offering many actors (public, private and migrants) multiple opportunities to (re)position themselves in the South African context.

and the imaginaries on which the perceptions of migrants, market managers and municipal councillors rely and in turn continue to fuel. After painting the specific cultural and political context of the South African tourism industry and offering a brief overview of the circulation of products and people, that is the dissemination of new trade and migration networks towards and within South African cities, the paper tries to unpack the imagery of Africa that is conveyed to South Africans and international publics as well as its genealogy.

### Conceptual Framework and Methods

Although this work is drawn from research aimed at reexamining our understanding of transnational trade migration, this specific paper only partly makes use of that conceptual framework. Transnational trade migration has essentially been envisaged in the literature from two main perspectives: one inscribing migrant traders' activities within broader structural and historical constraint systems and another insisting on the agency of actors and their capacity to overcome these systems and develop survival strategies. Following the example of MacGaffey and Bazenguissa's approach to Congolese traders (2000) or Riccio's work on Murid transnational networks in Italy (2006), the present paper rather envisages a middle-path. Both tendencies have demonstrated their limitations in offering convincing analyses, either because they are looking at transnational trade networks from above (institutions, structural economic constraints) or from below (traders' strategies and tactics).

Our object here is in fact much more the encounter, in its cultural and political dimensions, and its aftermaths and how the circulation of people, goods and images concur to transform prevalent perceptions of African migrants and Africa in post-apartheid South Africa. Therefore, I have tried to locate the dynamics observed within the growing literature on post-apartheid cultural transformation and more specifically, the role played by tourism in that transformation (Hugues 2007; Jansen van Veuren 2003; Koch & Masyun 2001; Schutte 2003). I have also taken into account historical evidence in order not to consider those transnational traders as “free electrons”, who would not only be isolated from their country of origin but also without a past and cultural assets. In doing so, I have used available literature on African migration to South Africa (Bouillon 1999; Landau 2007; Landau *et al.* 2006; Morris 1999) as well as literature on the cultural dimension of African diasporic trade (Coombe & Stoller 1994; Stoller 2003) and on new forms of mobility, liminality and urbanisation in Africa (Landau 2005, 2006; Malaquais 2006). An approach in terms of ethnic entrepreneurship (see part 4 “We Offer [...]”) was favoured here.

## Tourism, Urban Regeneration and African Migrants

Tourism in post-apartheid South Africa has benefited from the post-1994 unprecedented opening to global tourist itineraries of various forms (classical game and nature tourism, cultural and heritage tourism, and increasingly business and global events tourism such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2003 or the coming 2010 Soccer World Cup). Whereas tourism used to be mainly domestic and reserved to the white elite, its demographics have changed drastically in the 1990s. As the number of foreign tourists has more than doubled since 1994, tourism is now the fastest growing sector of the South African economy. In 2006, tourism represented 8.6% of South Africa's Gross Domestic Product and allowed for much hope in terms of development potential (Pisanti 2007). However, there is much controversy around the figures of tourism in South Africa. If it is estimated that the number of tourist permits granted has gone from below a million a year in 1990 to over 9 million in 2007, one should bear in mind that international tourists only account for one quarter of this figure, the rest being people from the region, mostly travelling for non touristic purposes (Barnes 2008; Hugues 2007). Tourism research literature on South Africa has focused on certain cultural and identity aspects, notably the exploration of new forms of heritage tourism (Nuttall & Coetzee 1999), of community tourism and its boom in townships and rural areas (Preston-White & Rogerson 1990, 2003), or the exploration of media constructed images of South Africa and its past that tend to essentialise the country around animal wildlife, primitive tribalism and modernity (Rasool & Witz 1996). Mathers and Landau (2007) have recently explored the paradoxes of "Proudly South African" tourism and the ethical problems it raises in terms of racism and xenophobia.

But tourism in post-apartheid South Africa has not just been about increasing the number of overseas tourists. It has, since 1994 in particular, become part and parcel of the nation-building enterprise undertaken by the South African government as well as a grassroots trend to display the transformation of identities in the new political dispensation and to exhibit it as a self-redefinition process and a new face to the rest of the world (Hugues 2007: 273), with a specific emphasis on heritage sites, from struggle "*lieux de mémoire*" such as Robben Island to cultural villages and township tours.

The literature on migrants' trade activities in post-apartheid South Africa has paid scant attention to the involvement of migrants in the tourism industry. It has essentially focused on documenting trade as a self-generating income earning activity or as an opportunity for job creation and capacity-building for local populations (Rogerson 1997; Peberdy & Rogerson 1999). Other works try to understand the roots behind xenophobic treatments of migrant traders by local authorities and populations (Landau 2005, 2006).

The transformation of post-apartheid South Africa from a refugee-generating nation into a new "eldorado" for international migrants and refugees from all over the continent and beyond has now been relatively well

documented (Bouillon 1999; Crush 1998; Crush & Williams 1999; Wa Kabwe-Segatti 2006). One of the most visible loci of this “new” African presence is the market. Historically, South African cities have been characterised by racial and social segregation and a fluctuating sense of public and private space. By African or European standards, South African markets are few and far between, even in a city like Johannesburg considered as the economic hub of the country and the continent. The large fresh produce market that used to be the heartbeat of the city in Newtown before the arrival of the National Party to power, was relocated outside the city, at City Deep, as part of the modernisation works that were carried out in the 1960s and 1970s (Guillaume 2001; Chipkin 1993). Until the 1980s, street trading and hawking in inner city Johannesburg and the suburbs was strictly regulated. With the repeal of influx control and of the Group Areas Act in the mid-1980s, this activity started to become a durable feature of the city (Morris 1999). However, it is not before the early 1990s that markets of a new type appeared. With the advent of democracy and the (re)opening of the country, African curio markets, first as a transformation of already existing flea markets (the Rosebank Rooftop market or Bruma Lake in Johannesburg), and then as specific ventures, became in their turn a new feature of South African cities and tourist sites.

In this urban post-apartheid context, one spatially more marked by fragmentation than by economic and social continuity (Tomlinson *et al.* 2003; Harrison *et al.* 2003), curio markets seem to have fulfilled three types of expectations: those of African migrants in search of “respectable” income generating activity and of market niches; those of South African market management business entrepreneurs seeking to diversify their activity and conquer new markets; and those of South African local/municipal institutions in search of formal economic activities to counter “urban decay” problems. The diversification of retail points was then a general trend in all South African cities, a point confirmed by Landré (1999). In Rosebank, an upmarket shopping area of Johannesburg, the African Craft Market has become a new identity marker while a Community Improvement District, a public-private urban renewal partnership, was set up. The initiatives allowed the suburb to compete with other upmarket shopping areas like Sandton and Hyde Park while keeping that different, “laid-back” style. Purely private ventures like the Bruma market in Johannesburg or the Chameleon Village market near Hartbeespoort in the North West, have helped to formalise growing informal retail nodes<sup>7</sup>. Increasingly, markets are conceived by these local stakeholders as nodes, combining a potential for job

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7. Interviews with The Mall managers (Nicole Greenstone, Leila Daya and Alvine Macaskill), Rosebank, 18/09/2007; Bruce Jones and Vanessa Naidoo, B&B Markets Company, Rosebank, 14/08/2007 & 15/08/2006; Ian Ollis, Democratic Alliance Ward Councillor for Rosebank, 13/08/2007; James and Richard Crooks, owners and managers, Chameleon Village Market, Cramerview, 12/10/2007.

and growth creation with a social function, that of endowing a suburb with a certain identity, and therefore marketing it locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. It is now worth turning to the actual setting up of the trade networks that allowed for the creation of these markets over the past two decades.

### The Circulation of Products and People: the Story of an Encounter

Under apartheid and in the years immediately afterwards, South African “ethnic” craft retail was fairly limited. It mainly offered crafts from neighbouring countries (Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe). It was characterised by little variety and adaptation to customers’ tastes and finally, by a geographical distribution in South Africa that was shaped by apartheid heritage tourism policy, a policy that mainly valued colonial sights. This scarcity and poor creativity was also a direct legacy of apartheid policies in terms of basic and vocational education, entrepreneurship, residential segregation and artistic and cultural policy. African curio markets were therefore mainly informal, concentrated in the rural areas in the vicinity of touristic sights and offered what locals were able to make there. The first markets to benefit from the “ethnic” trend that materialised in the early 1990s were the “flea markets” of Bruma Lake for instance in Johannesburg and Green Market Square in Cape Town, although they did not offer at the time the variety and volume that exist today. The curio market industry peaked around 1998-1999 and has stood on the verge of saturation since, according to Bruce Jones, Managing Director of the B&B Company, one of the major market management companies in Gauteng. The current context reflects growing competition and therefore tension resulting from three main factors: first, the import of Chinese crafts whose quality has significantly improved since the early 2000s and which have since had a direct negative impact on South African craft making and retail; second, the increase in the number of shopping malls, markets and broadly speaking craft retail points throughout the country with malls evolving towards more lifestyle and more interactive retail spaces in direct competition with markets; and third, the lack of interest for crafts markets from the emerging black middle class, characteristically more attracted to malls and other types of goods<sup>8</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, none of the first generation (late 1980s-early 1990s) African migrants interviewed indicated having come to South Africa with the clear idea of establishing themselves as curio traders. Most of the Congolese interviewed mentioned for instance the constraints of the South African labour market as the main incentive for entrepreneurship, mainly

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8. Interviews quoted in note 6.

because their qualifications are not recognized and their legal status (refugees, asylum seekers or temporary visitors) represents a liability. This is consistent with what Bouillon (1999) or MacGaffey and Bazenguissa had documented in the 1990s for Central Africans in particular, showing that they were initially mainly involved in qualified occupations and trade or smuggling activities of a different nature (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa 2000: 48-49) and with the results of the Wits-Tufts-IFAS 2003 and 2006 quantitative surveys undertaken in Johannesburg among 600 migrants in selected neighbourhoods<sup>9</sup>. Occasionally, some brought samples of curio items in their luggage as assets they could easily exchange for cash on their way South. Things such as malachite beads or Kuba cloths from Congo or some “wood”, that is wooden masks and statues from Cameroon, were brought in people’s luggage during that period. Very clearly, although the actual history of that trade remains to be written, some diversification and stratification occurred. Over a few years, traders moved from dealing in products originating from their home country only to a variety of sources, from retail to wholesale and *vice-versa* and from informal to formal activities. Product diversification seems to have been rather recent (since approximately the early 2000s) whereas specialisation (or passage between) activities (retail, wholesale, craftsmanship), supply strategies and retail techniques seem to have evolved rapidly from the early 1990s onwards. The trajectory of BF is quite typical of these diversification, segmentation and specialisation processes:

“Having arrived in South Africa in 1994 from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire at the time), BF started curio trade by asking his family back home to send him beads of malachite that he would transform into necklaces and bracelets and sell to retailers at the Bruma flea market on the road to the Johannesburg airport. This activity enabled him to save enough money to start his own business, on the street, outside the main Mall at Rosebank, one of Johannesburg’s affluent suburbs, in the late 1990s. From outside the market, he moved inside like others during the formalisation process of the Rosebank African Craft Market in 2000 and opened his own shop. He prospered in this activity, passing from malachite to the selling of Kuba cloths and masks and statues from West and East Africa until January 2007 when he decided to sell his shop to become a wholesaler in Kuba cloths only and use all his network of former colleagues from Rosebank, Bruma and beyond as his first customers” (BF, former shop owner and currently independent wholesaler, Johannesburg, 19/05/2006, 18/08/2006 & 22/09/2007).

Whereas passage from retail to wholesale activities seem to depend more on traders’ good fortunes and sense of where they can make more profit than to follow some economic model, supply strategies seem to have clearly evolved towards segmentation: fewer and fewer traders still travel directly back home as most buy from wholesalers who come to them, sometimes directly at the marketplace. Some orders are still placed with relatives

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9. For more information in these surveys, see <[www.wits.ac.za/migration](http://www.wits.ac.za/migration)>.



back home (that is particularly the case for Bamoum people, Cameroonians originating from the Foumban region, South West of Cameroon, neighbours of the Bamileke group, also traditionally involved in trade<sup>10</sup>) or some Congolese specialising in Kuba cloths. In such instances, the family network is crucial in organising the sending of a shipment by sea or air. Even for those using family networks back home to replace stocks, some specialisation has occurred with those back home increasingly becoming professional supplying agents (as well as craftsmen sometimes, especially in Cameroon) and those in South Africa specialising in retail. BA, from the Foumban region in Cameroon, who owns a shop in Rosebank, explains:

“In a way, I wouldn’t like my brothers and sister to come over here. I have three brothers and one sister who are married. They make different products for me. If they leave, it will be difficult to find replacement for that. We work like a clan, so if they travel, really, it will be difficult for me to replace them” (BA, shop owner, Rosebank African Craft Market, 05/09/2006).

The airfreight and money transfer agencies, operated by the Congolese in particular (such as Full Service in Yeoville and Kin Express in Observatory, Johannesburg), are pivotal in enabling those flows which have grown from informal and haphazard suitcase arrangements in the 1990s to fairly professional transactions in the 2000s. As BF, the Congolese trader quoted previously, explains, he now hardly ever travels back home but has set up his own supply network, relying partly on personal ethnic/family ties, partly on formal and semi-formal intermediaries:

“I have a young one (*‘un petit’*) from Kasai in Mweka [Kasai]. I call him to place my orders [...] he knows every nook and cranny there. I send him the money through the agencies and he then sends a parcel with Hewa Bora<sup>11</sup>. With my SARS VAT number<sup>12</sup>, I can then take these through customs. We have invoices for that. Of course, the amount is slightly inferior to the actual amount of the goods so that we pay less. There is absolutely no need to bribe anyone at O.R. Tambo [Johannesburg International Airport]. The only thing that is sometimes expensive is storage fees” (Interview with BF, independent wholesaler, Johannesburg, 22/09/2007).

10. The Bamoum, from the Nigero-Congolese linguistic group and Ntu sub-group, probably date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their expansion goes back to King Mbwe-Mbwe’s reign and the organization of a professional army around the capital Foumban. Trade was then developed towards the coast and the interior with cola nuts. The use of slaves in agriculture enabled an elite of traders and specialized craftsmen to emerge and rule from Foumban, a town located between Douala and Bafoussam, the Bamileke capital in the North-West (SELLIER 2005: 137).
11. Hewa Bora is a Congolese airline based in Lubumbashi, Katanga, with several direct flights a week to Johannesburg.
12. SARS stands for South African Revenue Service. Most traders in formal markets and wholesalers are now registered with SARS and pay VAT on their imports and sales. All traders interviewed in Johannesburg and Cape Town concurred to confirm BF’s perception of customs services at the airport and the reliability of the SARS number.

The money transfer agencies do not operate within the South African exchange regulation system as they normally should. In that sense, they remain informal or illegal even if the cellphone cash transactions and reference number system they rely on are efficient and reliable enough to allow for their durability. Kin Express for instance opened in the mid-1990s and has since expanded its activity to airfreight and bed and breakfast.

Another important transformation that has taken place since 2000 is the spread of those markets along the main touristic roads and around touristic sights. From the main centres in Johannesburg (Bruma, Rosebank), curio markets of various sizes and degrees of formalisation have appeared in Soweto, outside the Hector Pieterse Museum, and at the Hartbeespoort Dam (Cramerview) along the R512 that leads to Sun City and the Pilanesberg Nature Reserve and beyond. In Cape Town, from Green Market Square and Long Street, they have spread throughout the region, along the wine route, and are found in Stellenbosch, Franschhoek, and along the Coast and the Garden Route, in Hout Bay, Hermanus and Knysna. They can now also be found in all South African major secondary cities (Nelson Mandela City, ex-Port Elizabeth, Durban, Bloemfontein) and in small touristic towns, such as for instance Graskop in Mpumalanga (along the Northern Drakensberg Route). Wholesalers, a little like 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries peddlars in the remote regions of the colony, get on buses with sports or shopping bags full of their products and thus regularly replenish the stocks of their customers (either African migrants or local shops) in those remote localities. Given this territorial dispersal, African migrant shopkeepers no longer commute between large urban centres and those smaller touristic towns. They tend to settle close to their shops and only travel back to the larger centres whenever they need something out of the ordinary or want to reconnect with the “home community”. Some have set up shops in several places, as business ventures where the partners manage different shops and buy stocks jointly. Mr and Mrs K., a couple of Congolese traders, started at the Johannesburg Bruma Lake market in the 1990s, and then set up two shops at the Hartbeespoort Chameleon Village Crafts Market and then another one across the street at the municipal market. After having commuted between Johannesburg (an hour and a half drive from there) for two years, they decided to keep one flat in Johannesburg for their children (attending high school and university there) and one for the two of them in Brits, a small town nearby, where most of the Chameleon Village African traders of Congolese, Cameroonian and Senegalese origin, now stay<sup>13</sup>.

Except in the case of some better established Senegalese and Cameroonian traders who travel directly to supplying countries about once a year (Côte-d’Ivoire, Senegal, Cameroon and Gabon) to organise stock replacement, most traders interviewed have become specialised in retail and wait

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13. Interview with Mr and Mrs K., Chameleon Village Market, Cramerview, 01/10/2007 & 15/04/2008.

for wholesalers to come and contact them at regular intervals. The entire sector has developed over the last ten to fifteen years and brought to the heart of South African cities products and people from the rest of the continent. The whole sector fulfilled a “need for Africa” that was not only aimed at international tourists but at South Africans in a period of unprecedented transformation of their political and cultural self-representations. Let us now turn to the various functions filled by this specialised trade activity.

### “We Offer the Whole of Africa here!”: South African Curio Markets as the Ultimate Simulation

After a more detailed depiction of these markets seen as performances, this last part explores the somewhat classic paradox of the “ethnic entrepreneur” as theorised and documented by C. Quiminal (1991) and M. Timera (1996) on Soninkés; or A. Tarrus (1995), M. Peraldi (2001) and E. Ma Mung (2006) on North African traders in France and Light (1972); A. Portes *et al.* (1989); R. Waldinger *et al.* (1990), R. Coombe and P. Stoller (1994) in North America; or its application to the South African context and its specific relation to Africa on the one hand, and to the notions of “global” and “modernity” on the other.

The most formalised and specialised African crafts markets (Rosebank in Johannesburg, Long Street in Cape Town and Chameleon Village near Hartbeespoort) offer different variations around the theme of African crafts. One common feature is the profusion which mobilises all senses and contributes to creating a specific atmosphere. The multiplicity of colours, materials, products, sizes of shops, circulation patterns and musical backgrounds (sometimes playing some distinctly Congolese rumba and ndombolo or Senegalese yela), all compose striking scenes and produce a certain “vibe” as South Africans like to put it. The main actors in this African “drama”, the traders, have, over the years, learnt how to embody their roles skilfully. They may stand outside their shops or at market entrances, especially at quiet times of the day, sometimes adorned in the clothes or jewels they sell (large “boubous”, African “Madiba” shirts, bead necklaces, large Zulu round hats for women). Some of them draw customers to their stalls thanks to the typical reverberating sound of West African drums (“djembés”) that easily fills the entire facility and seems to invite all to walk towards the origin of the call. There is a subtle balance<sup>14</sup> though between chaos and order, between exuberant cascades of masks and colourful cloths hanging over from the ceiling and clearly delimited paths and stalls, toilet signposting and credit card payment tills. The traders’ more or less conscious and sophisticated performances are also carefully framed in order

14. Itself the result of sometimes harsh negotiations between shopkeepers and management.

for them to embody this “tamed” and apprehensible Africa: typically, they will be wearing name tags and clearly identifiable security jackets on top of their attire and where and how long they exactly stand and talk to customers will be regulated by market managements.

Those three markets stand out as specialised in “African arts and crafts” and sharply contrast with others such as the Sunday Rosebank Rooftop Market (or Flea Market), the Bruma Flea Market in Johannesburg or the Green Point Arts and Crafts Flea Market in Cape Town where African crafts stalls are interspersed with old European antiques, Indian incense, German sausages and Italian fresh bread stalls. They are also different because they are permanent, daily markets and not weekly events (except for Bruma). Besides playing a different economic role (the permanent markets are the most regular sources of income for market management companies), they bring in a more specific type of customers drawn there either by the “African flavour” or a specific shopping purpose. Traders-customers interactions are as varied as the possible range of transactions that can take place given the variety of products and it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate in depth customers’ perceptions but some recurrent trends can be mentioned. Customers are equally distributed between international tourists of all origins and mainly White and Indian South Africans. Strikingly in the minority, Black South Africans might venture into those markets as part of a collective corporate, school children or pensioners tour. This limited attendance reflects more general cultural and shopping habits, as for instance in cinema or museum attendance. Most traders interviewed perceive customers along stereotypical lines: Americans and Germans are the “best buyers”, French, Italians and Spaniards like to bargain and chat a lot, Indians are considered “difficult and mean” and Chinese are “complicated” because they come in large groups, buy a lot but at very low prices. Customers from tour operators have very limited perceptions of who the traders are and spend on average between twenty and forty minutes in the markets. Traders either dissimulate their non South African identity if they have the feeling customers are looking for South African souvenirs or highlight it, especially in the case of Francophone traders with French, Swiss and Belgian tourists when they think it might increase their sales. The type of very insistent selling style displayed by “souk” traders in North Africa has no place in South Africa. Any too insistent approach to customers will be reported to management and will not be tolerated either by other traders or customers. If from time to time young shop assistants try to stop customers by barring the way through alleys and by “kindly forcing” them to enter a shop, they might be disciplined if their behaviour is noticed by market management. The markets’ by-laws almost always contain some paragraph about “*the* appropriate behaviour” for traders to adopt. When it comes to transactions, those will be performed in a low voice and promises of a “very good price” will materialise into offers that usually start by quadrupling the price actually expected. Secrecy and harsh competition among traders may

sometimes lead to violence in the form of verbal abuse and even physical fighting over accusations of “stealing customers” or “breaking market prices” but these remain the exception rather than the rule<sup>15</sup>. Finally, increasing shares of the sales now come from online corporate orders directly placed with market managers (particularly at the Rosebank Market<sup>16</sup>), a dematerialised transaction that transforms the traders into manufacturers.

As an “ethnic” niche market, African craft sale in South Africa relies on a specific type of marketing in which the salesman or shopkeeper is perhaps as important as the product itself. In a way, the salesman, who is, most of the time, his own boss and wears the two caps of trader and salesman, personifies the authenticity of the products on display. As in any other similar “ethnic” niche markets worldwide, well described by Alain Tarrus (1995) or Emmanuel Ma Mung (2006) in the case of “Arab” green-grocers in France, products are only one part of the exchange taking place in the transaction. The cultural background of the trader, the story he tells about the product, the contact he develops with his customers, the bargaining, the language he speaks (especially Francophones with French-speaking tourists) are all part of the game and tend to transform the purchase into an experience that goes beyond the mere acquisition of goods. As some traders in our survey note, some customers do not only come to these markets to purchase goods but to meet with “Africans” and find out about their country of origins, the language they speak, etc. Paradoxically but unsurprisingly given the legacy of segregation in South Africa, for some tourists but also for some South Africans, these brief encounters may be the only ones they have with black people in their everyday lives or during their visit to the country. In this respect, the curio business in South Africa only constitutes one aspect of a wider process described by Rasool and Witz (1996: 4):

“In this world where almost nothing is left to chance [the world of tourism marketing], South Africa is being asked to negotiate its own images, to suggest the style of its wrapping. The possibilities are bounded by the dazzling promise of an ordered modernity, with the United States as the yardstick, and a primordial tribal backwardness, with images of Third World violence, chaos and poverty as its measure [...]. Unable to escape these parameters, South Africa is having to propound its African-ness’ as the embodiment of the continent’s possibilities for modernity, the engine room’ of Africa’s economic development [...]. In the process, South Africa, in the peculiarities of its modernity, is being inscribed as a world in one country’, reflecting not merely human diversity, but the very image of the world itself.”

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15. Those observations are drawn from the months of participant observation conducted at all three sites and visits to other markets. Although instances of fights were reported by all traders interviewed and market managers, only one fight and a few minor arguments were witnessed directly.

16. <<http://www.craft.co.za/African.aspx>>.

African crafts markets in the post-apartheid period are one such expression of purported “Africanness” inside a modernised “wrapping” in which the African transnational trader is the willing, sometimes unconscious living embodiment (and even *raison d’être*) of this primordial versus modern tension. It is specific to the type of goods sold and the position of this retail sector in the South African tourism industry. This in itself distinguishes it from the kind of cultural processes at work among the Congolese traders described by MacGaffey and Bazenguissa (2000: 50) in Europe, which corresponds more to a hybrid and syncretic cultural production geared towards a self-definition in an alien context. The kind of cultural processes to be observed around curio traders in South Africa is probably much closer to that of the Senegalese and Malian traders described by Stoller (2003) in North America. Stoller documents how West African traders have made use of African Americans’ taste for Afrocentric products in order to develop their businesses. His argument is mainly that the mimetic faculty is the main framework in which West African traders organise their trade in North America: “By marketing Afrocentricity<sup>17</sup> at outdoor markets, at trade expositions, in mainstream retail stores, on catalogue pages or in the virtual markets found on the Internet, a simulated Africa has emerged in North America. By understanding the importance of the copy, West African merchants, who, like their forebears, are known for their economic adaptability, have marked Afrocentricity and profoundly enhanced the profitability of their enterprises in North America” (Stoller 2003: 91).

The South African situation bears many resemblances to that of West Africans in North America in terms of an encounter between African traders and a local emerging Afrocentric culture with its own economic, cultural and political dynamics. The main difference is perhaps that the monolithic vision of Africa which is promoted in the South African markets is not supported by the Afrocentric trend that can be observed for instance in South African design (in black-owned brands such as Strange Love, Stoned Cherrie or Sun Goddess) but by mainly white economic interests and their concentration in the retail and tourism industries. This certainly explains both the success of these markets and their limitations in terms of audiences reached in South Africa. The opening of these markets has filled a gap in both tourist attractions and crafts retail at an opportune time. For some, the “African” market has transformed the image of the suburb and positioned it *vis-à-vis* tour operators and other business districts in a more and more competitive environment (this is the case of Rosebank for instance which offers an “outdoor, cosmopolitan relaxed vibe”, according to one interviewee, compared to Sandton, Johannesburg’s most affluent but more

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17. The term, borrowed from Stoller here, is preferred to “Afrocentrism” which bears a resolutely negative connotation. Afrocentricity and Afrocentric are used here mainly to describe what, in representations, discourses or forms, places African references in the centre or enhances them.

formal and enclosed neighbourhood). For others, the opening of the market has simply placed them on the map of tourist attractions, a goal that could only be achieved thanks to their “African” identification<sup>18</sup>. However, as Stoller notes, considering marketing Afrocentricity only as “an economically astute response to ever changing local market conditions” does not explain the multiple dimensions encapsulated in the phenomenon. The retail of “African” curios certainly represents a boon for corporate South Africa, from interior design chains to market management companies. The retail business in African curios is estimated to have more than doubled in the last ten years (according to Bruce Jones, B&B Company and Richard Crooks, Chameleon Village). But it certainly does not stop there.

As the Rosebank Market floor manager puts it, entering the market is almost “a shock to your system” that comes from the “intensity of these foreign faces”<sup>19</sup>. Interestingly, it is this “shock” that people, tourists and South Africans alike, are encouraged to seek. The architectures of these markets have been designed to meet this ambition of copying and recreating. A case in point is the Rosebank African Craft Market which, like many instances of South African shopping mall (and leisure) architecture<sup>20</sup> in fact, vaguely mimics or replicates an external reference, here the Dogon architecture with high terra cotta towers and hints at urban township culture with the use of corrugated iron. The architect’s description is indicative of the intention:

“The building was designed to house street vendors who were seen as a security threat to surrounding business. The structure is simple and is wrapped in a rich crafted African fabric. It screens the ugly façade of the Mall parking garage. The building promotes accessibility and creates usable public open space within and around it to encourage interaction, retail activity and public participation. The internal pedestrian street allows movement through the building. The interior is reminiscent of markets in Dar Es Salaam [*sic*] or Nairobi. The building is a tourist attraction as much for what is on sale inside as for the building itself”,  
<<http://www.kateottenarchitect.com>>.

It thus reflects a series of tensions between primitiveness and modernity, authenticity and artificiality, mystery of the origins and a positivist legal sale context, apparent chaos and profusion, orderly organisation of the stalls and shops, and enclosed space which easily gives rise to a somewhat parochial mentality and an open space where people (customers as migrant traders) merely stroll through, village/local setting and cosmopolitan networks

18. Interviews quoted in note 6.

19. Vanessa Naidoo, B&B company, 15/08/2006.

20. The simulation of exotic cultural or historical themes characterises South African leisure, retail and housing architecture. Famous instances are the Moyo restaurant chain or the Sun City complex for “ethnic Africa”, the Emperor’s Palace and Montecasino Casinos for “Ancient Rome” and most Gauteng gated communities and clusters for “Provence” or “Tuscany”.

and atmosphere, truly South African and global. I will try to unpack some of these here.

This notion of replica or perhaps even, as Stoller shows for African markets in North America, of simulation, as he calls it after J. Baudrillard’s use of the word (1983), is very much present in the sense of feigning the symptoms of something to the point that symptoms become the only tangible expressions of the new reality. Conducted systematically in several markets, interviews revealed an ambition common to both mall managers and traders, which is to make “Africa” entirely available to all (“We offer the whole of Africa here!”). This undefined and holistic notion of “Africa”, a primitive, creative, and decorative one (the notion of “dégor” is central), is paired with modernity as conveyed through the reassuring space of modern facilities, credit card payment, “first class toilets” and secure parking lots<sup>21</sup>.

This monolithic but reassuring vision of Africa is not just the South African Eurocentric avatar of the genre, it also expresses itself along the lines of essentialised ethnic (and sometimes gender) categories inherited from apartheid times. This imposed ethnicity is not just expressed verbally as I could realise in many interviews, but it is also translated in the markets’ by-laws that impose product exclusivity, to “prevent undue competition”. For instance, South African women selling beadworks play the part of the “Ndebele ladies” and cannot deal in other crafts, Kenyans are restricted to selling giraffes and elongated Masai figurines or colourful Masai blankets, Senegalese deal in either masks, djembés or Chinese imports (glasses and belts) and Congolese will invariably offer Kuba cloths, malachite and colonial, Tintin-style figurines. However, the availability of products described in the first part and increasing competition have resulted in diversification. The markets’ by-laws tend to lapse over time and most traders consider diversified and plethoraic stocks as the best guarantees of better sales. The result is that most stalls now offer a diversity of products, even if each shop continues to specialise mostly in one type of items. KS, from the Chameleon Village Market explains: “Before, as wholesalers, we would only sell things from our country of origin, the DRC, but now as retailers, we get what sells most easily, ‘from Cape to Cairo’ (laughter)”<sup>22</sup>. What matters above all in the eyes of the traders is the abundance of goods in the shop as BP, a Congolese trader from the Rosebank Market summarises: “If you have stock, you’re fine. If you keep your cash, you’ll regret it. If you have stock, you sell”<sup>23</sup>.

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21. Countering disorder and filth, two notions that were systematically associated with street hawkers and their activities, is consistently presented as the goal pursued in these various projects to formalize trade, according to interviewed mall owners, managers and councillors.

22. Interview with KS, 01/10/2007.

23. Interview with BP, 12/09/2006.



Not only have traders who were not familiar with curio trade acquired specialised knowledge on the products' origin, material, production processes, etc, but they have also clearly developed those skills beyond the limits of their countries and communities of origin. This type of knowledge transmission is empirical and relies on mutual teaching as well as self-teaching through African arts and crafts books that most traders possess and use regularly. Thus Senegalese or South Africans now sell Congolese Kuba cloths and Congolese might sell Kenyan wooden animals. BP, the Congolese trader from Rosebank quoted previously, explains:

“When I first came, a friend of mine, D., welcomed me. He was selling art stuff. But I didn't pay attention. To me, this was like a hobby [...]. My girlfriend of the time encouraged me to do that and my friend D. too. My family back home didn't know about it, even until today. They have no idea what it's all about, selling wooden' things [...]. Back home, I wasn't interested in that but as I've travelled throughout the country, I could remember the different styles and the sort of things that artists would make in Kinshasa at the Academy of Fine Arts. And my friend D. had books I learnt from [...]. Now I sell things from the DRC, Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon, Nigeria and Benin” (BP, 12/09/2006).

Economic interest certainly explains part of this diversification and readiness to learn about other craft traditions. Yet, it also represents a deliberate tactic to circumvent and resist what is neatly perceived as domination from management and categories imposed from above. The circumventing is initially mainly economic as the market by-laws are perceived by traders as limiting business but it is also a matter of resisting as a group and offering a competing understanding of “African values” diverging from those artificially imposed from the outside. It also contributes to show management that, in this very constrained environment, where traders occupy inferior positions and are subjected to the markets' by-laws<sup>24</sup>, they still control the source of income and the business culture around it. For instance, at the Rosebank African Craft market, despite an absence of durable representation and organisation, traders managed to oppose management's vision of a payment system with the use of labelled prices and a single till that would have transformed them into mere sales people. The market entrance now displays a sign that reads “This is Africa. We bargain!” It stands as the one by-law imposed by traders and not management.

24. By-laws are established by management in all markets without any durable form of representation or organisation on the side of traders. By-laws regulate shop rental, products, behaviour on the market, access to the market and hiring of shop assistants. In all markets, management imposes sanctions on those who contravene the by-laws. Sanctions can take the form of temporary shop closure (the shop is taped and the owner is denied access) or even exclusion from the market for disciplinary problems (mainly stealing and drinking). Most traders interviewed found by-laws fairly acceptable and even desirable for some. Instances of severe disciplinary measures were by and large very few according to information gathered from management and traders. Rent prices were far more resented than the by-laws.

Interestingly, this motto (that can be found at other markets in various forms) also defines a boundary between the inside and the outside on the basis of identification to a monolithic Africa, secluded from the immediate outside world (South Africa). One of the traders sheds further light on this demarcation by explaining: “Often people say, when you’re outside you’re in South Africa, but when you’re inside you’re in Africa”<sup>25</sup>. As Stoller indicates in the case of West Africans trading Chinese goods displaying Afrocentric mottos in New York’s African markets, African traders in South Africa (as well as South African vendors of similar goods) find themselves caught in a number of ironies. Although they are geographically located on the African soil, the type of Afrocentric discourse these traders face is far less structured than in North America where its philosophical and pseudo-historical bases have translated directly into public holidays (Kwanzaa) and the creation of a growing folklore. The marketing of African curios has so far been rather unsuccessful with South African black audiences who display little interest for crafts markets in general and have a clear preference for trademarked goods<sup>26</sup>. The audience for this specific type of Afrocentric goods is thus mostly from outside Africa and non-black South Africans. The other complexity is the relation to Africa both in terms of boundaries and in terms of racial identity. Unlike in North America where it is remote, in South Africa, Africa is present but at the same time needs mediation (the Rosebank motto raises other questions: where does Africa start? Where does it stop? How does one reach it?). Again unlike West Africans in North America, who stand as ontological strangers, African traders and black South African traders alike (that is the very insiders) are caught in this simulation of Africa thanks to or because of the colour of their skins. The simulation reaches a kind of *mise en abîme* in the South African context and confirms that no singular reading of these phenomena can be offered, notwithstanding the transnational dimension of these African import-export networks in their Asian connections. A Cameroonian national passing for a Congolese refugee and trading fake Senegalese masks made in China to a South African interior decorator seeking to give an “African flavour” to an international guest house is one of the most stereotypical situations observed in any of these South African markets.

Products’ commodification is another interesting expression of the kind of cultural hybridisation simulation may lead to. Information gathered by traders and market managers over the years on customers’ tastes have progressively shaped the manufacturing of products. The classic rules of retail marketing (constant trend renewal, adaptation to travel requirements, price diversity in line with customers’ socio-economic backgrounds) and the competition of the South African retail context have imposed themselves on African crafts. Products are either conditioned differently from the place of production or by traders once in South Africa. Wooden sculptures will

25. Interview with KP, Rosebank market, 01/09/2006.

26. Interviews quoted in note 6.

be polished and varnished, Congolese elongated figurines will be painted black and wrapped in beads, Kuba cloths will be sowed over cushions and bags, Senegalese batiks framed, and malachite pieces carved into Mandela heads. Increasingly, those products find their way into the more mainstream interior decoration retail chains (Mr Price Home, @Home, Woolworths Home) where they do reach Black South African customers.

Those economic and social exchanges lend themselves to multiple readings that pinpoint the various dimensions and frameworks at play. What is perhaps most specific to the South African post-apartheid context is the fact that the mimicked reality (Africa) acquires a reality of its own (crafts and their conveyors are this reality to many) in the midst of the actual environment of the transaction (South Africa and its people are part of Africa), an “Africa” that is both omnipresent and distant enough to require mediation. The African unmarked goods sold on South African markets are not trendy commodities such as for instance Mandela T-shirts or Malcom X caps in America for which the power of the sign itself replaces the meaning it is based on. They are the material culture through which Africa becomes real to many, international tourists, white and black South Africans alike, in an African country today.

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### Tourism, Entrepreneurship and Migration in a Globalised Regional Context

This paper intended to examine how African curio markets participate in a broader process of image negotiation at work within South Africa and more broadly speaking between Africa and the rest of the world.

In this game of perceptions and representations, African traders have little leeway to offer more creative images of Africa than those they are expected to by either mall managements or customers. These images are often conditioned by an essentialised understanding of African identity prevalent among those who invest and regulate this sector. These images revolve around ethnic specialisation, notions of primitiveness and creativity, wilderness and profusion. The architectures adopted as well as the markets' by-laws are based on the premises of these stereotyped images. Unlike North America where Afrocentricity has become a repertoire (that some may deem fake) shared by West African traders and African-American customers (Stoller 2003), such an encounter has not (yet) happened between African traders and black South Africans, except when commodified African crafts are sold in a depersonalised, branded manner in mainstream retail shops. African curio trade in South Africa is not the locus of renewed images of either Africans or the continent but rather the continuation of the South

African specific combination of primitiveness and modernity that has represented, for several decades now, the main communication imagery of the South African tourism industry.

In their attempt at copying and simulating a monolithic Africa, these markets provide the various actors involved with several possible readings and positioning. To mall managers, they offer new market niches with much expanding potential both domestically and internationally, through tourism and the Internet (online sale), as well as a social good conscience as experiments in formalisation. To local councillors and managers, they offer possibilities to transform the image of their suburbs and to adapt it to the new cultural icons of the country, thus participating in the nation-building enterprise. To migrants, they offer multiple and flexible opportunities to negotiate their more or less durable insertion in the host society. As a respectable income-earning activity, curio markets allow them to merge into an otherwise unfriendly social fabric where their quality as African foreigner is more often than not a stigma. Indeed, curio markets transform this into an asset: by showcasing their “Africanness” and their global ties, they are acknowledged as legitimate participants into the South African economy and society<sup>27</sup>. This seems to confirm the validity of Waldinger *et al.*'s interactive model of ethnic entrepreneurship (1990) which accords equal importance to labour market constraints, the impact of State policies and the ties of ethnic networks.

It is still difficult to assess whether the learning processes and mutual encounters at work within these transcultural spaces outweigh the restrictive and reproductive dimensions highlighted in this paper. They do foster new perceptions of Africans and their historical background within the markets, between management and traders, and among traders, and the products' commodification at work is a form of cultural hybridization. However, South African markets are going through difficult times and have not generated the success they were expected to, which reduces the impact they may have on society. This is perhaps the limitation of copying and simulating. The primitiveness they promote returns many South Africans to an impression of historical *déjà-vu* that falls short of aspirations for a different Afrocentric modernity<sup>28</sup>, for trademarks and symbols that complexify rather than simplify African identities.

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27. Of note is the fact that crafts market traders were not victims of the May 2008 xenophobic attacks unlike Somali shopkeepers in the townships who have for a long time been the targets of violent xenophobic and economic crime.
28. The extremely vibrant Afrocentric South African artistic and cultural scene is a fertile area of such expressions and experiments but encounters with the rest of Africa mostly rely on imported artistic skills supported by State and foreign cultural agencies and not on local African migrant artistic communities (interview with Laurent Clavel, Cultural attaché, French Embassy in South Africa, August 2008). On African migrants' cultural input to Johannesburg's life, see Aboumalig SIMONE (2000) in Nuttal & Michael.

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## ABSTRACT

Based on a two-year fieldwork in and around Johannesburg, this paper contends that the emergence of “African markets” in the post-apartheid urban landscapes filled the niches created by the production of commodified images of the country and, by extension, the continent. The analysis focuses on the creative process at work around the identification and multi-layered reading of a “cosmopolitan” African identity by different groups of actors (South African municipal authorities, retail private actors and migrant traders). It tries to show how this process has fulfilled actors’ immediate and contrasted needs but has not necessarily led to countering negative clichés on African migration in the long run. It thus tries to make use of the theoretical framework of the notion of ethnic entrepreneurship in its application to the South African context. The paper documents the practices and activities of the African curio trade in South African cities, the products sold, the trade networks and the imaginaries on which the perceptions of migrants, market managers and municipal councillors rely and in turn continue to fuel. After painting the specific cultural and political context of the South African tourism industry and offering a brief overview of the dissemination of new trade and migration networks towards and within South African cities, the paper finally unpacks the imagery of Africa that is conveyed to South Africans and international publics as well as its genealogy.

## RÉSUMÉ

« *Ici, nous offrons toute l’Afrique !* ». *Commerçants de bibelots africains et commercialisation d’une image africaine globale dans les villes sud-africaines après l’apartheid.* — À partir d’un travail de terrain de deux ans dans et aux alentours de Johannesburg, cet article montre comment l’émergence de « marchés africains », dans les paysages urbains post-apartheid, est venue combler une niche créée par la production d’images commercialisables du pays, et par extension, du continent. L’analyse se concentre sur le processus créatif à l’œuvre autour de l’identification et des lectures multiples d’une identité africaine « cosmopolite » par différents groupes d’acteurs (les municipalités sud-africaines, le secteur privé et les commerçants migrants). On tente de montrer comment ce processus a servi les attentes immédiates et contrastées des acteurs mais n’a pas nécessairement conduit à renverser durablement les clichés négatifs sur la migration africaine. Le cadre théorique de la notion d’entrepreneur ethnique est ainsi appliqué au contexte sud-africain. Cet article documente les pratiques et les activités de la vente d’objets artisanaux africains dans les villes sud-africaines, les produits vendus, les réseaux commerçants et les imaginaires sur lesquels les perceptions des migrants, des gérants de marché et des conseillers municipaux reposent et à leur tour contribuent à alimenter. Après avoir décrit le contexte culturel et politique de l’industrie touristique sud-africaine et donné un aperçu de l’étendue des nouveaux réseaux commerçants et migratoires inter et intra-urbains, cet article étudie l’imagerie de l’Afrique qui est véhiculée par les publics sud-africains et internationaux et par sa généalogie.

*Keywords/Mots-clés:* South Africa, Africa (imaginaries), tourism and migration, transnational trade, urban regeneration/*Afrique du Sud, Afrique (imaginaires), tourisme et migration, commerce transnational, régénération urbaine.*