

## Aspiration, exclusion and belonging in South Africa and Kenya

Introduction

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## **Aspiration, Exclusion and Belonging in South Africa and Kenya:**

### **An Introduction**

#### **Preben Kaarsholm**

The five papers contained in the thematic section that follows have come out of discussions that were begun at a symposium hosted by the Global Studies programme at Roskilde University in Denmark on 29-30 April 2015. The debate was continued half a year later at a workshop organized by WISER at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg on 7-8 October 2015, and was rounded off for the time being at a smaller meeting, at which this publication was planned, held in Ilha de Moçambique on 26-27 August 2016.

The Roskilde symposium brought together an international group of scholars from South Africa, Kenya, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, and focused on ‘Consumerism, regulation and informality in South Africa and Kenya: A discussion of two African settings.’ The event was called ‘a symposium’ because presentations were meant to be experimental and to try out new ideas, rather than well-rounded papers summing up the results of research already conducted.

One inspiration for discussions was an article by Achille Mbembe in the *Mail and Guardian* 26 September, 2014 with the title ‘Class, Race and the New Native,’ which presented a snapshot of large-scale transformation in South African society. Mbembe argued that the most significant ‘event’ in the post-apartheid period had been the transformation of South African society from a ‘society of control into a society of consumerism.’ An increasingly dispossessed class of subalterns had moved away from civic forms of struggle for democratisation to ‘styles of mobilization (that) take the form of litigation, violent protest or... riots’. Capital had been ‘denationalised,’ asserted Mbembe, investment in South Africa had decreased, and significant elements in the development of local capitalism had been ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (of land inter alia) and ‘expanded domestic consumption financed by rising levels of household debt.’ Mbembe’s most startling claim was that the ‘form and substance of democracy and citizenship’ had been conflated with the ‘rule of consumption’: The so-called transition to democracy had in fact been a transition to a debt-driven capitalist development that widened economic inequality and led to a further expansion ‘black poverty.’

Another inspirational text – whose argument moved in a similar direction to that of Mbembe, and had its foundation in extended empirical research – was Deborah James’s book on *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*, also published in 2014 by Stanford University Press. At the April 2015 Roskilde symposium, the participants used Mbembe’s article and Deborah James’s book as the basis for a comparative discussion of two African settings. Two ex-settler colonies, South Africa and Kenya – one of them an 'upper-middle income', the other a 'low-income' society in World Bank classification (Kenya was then upgraded in July 2015 to the status of 'lower-middle income') – were both caught up in intense and contradictory social and political dynamics and seemed to represent both converging and disjunctive development trajectories. A comparison between them seemed to be a good starting point for a discussion of similarities and differences between individual African countries – including key themes of economic growth; regulation and control; production, ownership and consumption in relation to democratisation; employment and work; marginalisation and informality; identifications of self and political mobilisation.

In Kenya the question of the formation of a national capitalist class had been high on the agenda in economic growth periods. Land ownership was a constant and contested source of accumulation, and alongside urban commerce and entrepreneurship rural wealth had generated significant economic dynamics; formal employment seemed to play a much smaller role than in South Africa. Gender dynamics and the rise of a class of professional young women contributed to an increase in conspicuous consumption.

Likewise, registration, control and regulation in post-independence Kenya appeared to have been less pervasive. Unlike in South Africa, the state had not significantly combined its repressive role with that of provider of welfare and predictability. Instead, informality offered opportunities at all levels of entrepreneurial activity, but also constant economic insecurity. What did this mean for the prospects of emerging middle classes and young men and women in the informal labour market? Was Mbembe right in assuming that – in a sense – credit makes for more democratic forms of consumption, while at the same time significantly increasing inequality and contributing to dispossession?

New forms of violent and non-violent mobilisation of young, unemployed men and women made significant impacts on the political cultures of Kenya as well as South Africa. In both countries there were on-going popular uprisings against corruption and impunity – but what targets exactly were such protests directed against? Were the forms protests took influenced by the

histories of the two nations? In what ways were new forms of resistance and revolt in post-apartheid South Africa and post-colonial Kenya related to local versions of control, regulation, and to global forms of insurgence? How did young people envisage the foundations and enabling contexts of their livelihoods and economic futures? How did groups of immigrants and issues of immigration enter into local politics contestations regarding exclusion and belonging?

The Johannesburg workshop in October 2015 was different, and more finished papers were presented, which had been circulated to participants in advance. The workshop brought together a similar group to the one that had met in Roskilde, but included a significant number of new participants, not least from South Africa and Kenya – some of whom participated through video conferencing. At the same time, the workshop had a greater focus on comparative method and the ways in which different modes of comparison would make sense. The effort was not so much to venture into a systematic comparison of South Africa and Kenya, but rather to work towards a framework for a joint discussion of two African economic, social, and political environments with different levels of wealth, poverty, and inequality, both of them facing challenges of accommodating at the same time new forms of growth and aspiration and new forms of marginalisation. South Africa and Kenya were both countries which had from the 1990s undergone comprehensive democratic reforms with constitutional frameworks being introduced, within which such contradictory dynamics had to be addressed. A comparative perspective would help to bring South Africa out of its isolation as a case of 'exception' in the context of Africa, and to highlight what was outstanding and could be learnt from the parallel trajectories of growth and democratic struggles in another major African country like Kenya.

The Johannesburg event nearly coincided with another workshop organised on 21-22 September 2015 by Deborah James and Max Bolt also at WISER and the University of the Witwatersrand – with some participants attending both. This workshop had a comparative perspective as well and addressed 'The New Middle Class in the Global South' – a selection of papers from this workshop will be forthcoming as a special issue of *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*. The two meetings interacted fruitfully, and insights from the 'New Middle Class' workshop have fed into the revised papers included in the present collection as well. The focus here, however, is not only on middle-class aspirations, but also on those of working-class people, the unemployed, immigrants, and members of the *lumpenproletariats* of South Africa and Kenya.

A comparative perspective has been rare in the context of African studies, which have traditionally had an ethnographic or area studies focus, aiming either to delineate the specificities of a particular African cultural setting, country, or region, or to bring out the great lines of what is characteristic of ‘Africa’ as a whole.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, some of the recent quite intense scholarly debates around different modes of doing comparison have had relatively limited reflection within studies of Africa. For example, ideas of ‘connected comparison,’ of ‘entangled histories,’ or ‘histoire croisée’ as developed in writings by Lynn Thomas (Thomas et al. 2008), Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (Haupt and Kocka 2009), and Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (Werner and Zimmerman 2006) have only to a limited extent been deployed to address African developments. Important recent ventures have been made, though, in publications by Andreas Eckert, Javed Majeed and Isabel Hofmeyr, or Tim Glawyon, Lotje de Vries, and Andreas Mehler (Eckert 2009; Majeed and Hofmeyr 2015; Glawyon, de Vries and Mehler 2018).

It is therefore also not surprising that comparative studies of South Africa and Kenya are not commonly found – exceptions in recent literature being studies by Jacqueline Klopp and Elke Zuern and Loren Landau and Jean Pierre Misago (Klopp and Zuern 2007; Landau and Misago 2009). At the Roskilde symposium, the Johannesburg workshop, and then finally at the editorial get-together in Mozambique in 2016, we made an effort to open up a bit further what we see as a highly promising field for future research. In the thematic section that follows we present some of the outcomes of the discussion in the form of five articles, which have all been thoroughly re-worked. The contribution by Lynn Thomas on ‘Consumer Culture and “Black is Beautiful” in Apartheid South Africa and Early Postcolonial Kenya,’ which opens the collection, is an example of connected comparison, bringing together not only South Africa and Kenya, but also Black African cultural endeavours and discourse in the USA. In the paper by Deborah James, which follows on ‘New Subjectivities: Aspiration, Prospects and the New Middle Class,’ African born-again churches are brought into play as important channels for the articulation of new middle-class aspirations in both South Africa and Kenya. The next paper by Bodil Folke Frederiksen and Preben Kaarsholm – ‘Amaoti and Pumwani: Studying Urban Informality in South Africa and Kenya’ – uses comparison of settler-colonialist urban policies in South Africa and Kenya as an entry into the discussion of different types of informality in Durban and Nairobi. In their essay on ‘Documentary Evidence:

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<sup>1</sup> In the field of political culture, classical examples of these two kinds of comparison are Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s collection on *African Political Systems* and Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg’s *Personal Rule in Black Africa* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Jackson and Rosberg 1982).

Navigating Identity and Credibility in Africa's Urban Estuaries' Jacob Rasmussen and Alex Wafer set out to explain the struggle for footholds and shifting possibilities for residence among slum dwellers in Johannesburg and Nairobi, and their making use of ID documents. Finally, in the last paper in the collection, 'The Failure of the "Single Source of Truth about Kenyans": The National Digital Registry System, Collateral Mysteries and the Safaricom Monopoly,' Keith Breckenridge analyses ways in which South African experiences of public-private partnerships in the field of registration of debtors and credit-worthiness have been put to work in Kenya, thus introducing new forms of 'bank-supported population registration' and biometric citizenship.

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