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# Structures, feelings and *savoir faire*: Ghana's middle classes in the making

Rachel Spronk

## Introduction

From the moment the African Development Bank published its famous report in which it mentioned the 'African middle class' for more or less the first time (AfDB 2011), a fierce debate erupted about whether the use of the term signalled a possible diversion of priorities away from addressing poverty. Such a debate is welcome. As matters of development and global health have become dominant in African studies, it is important to work towards a more comprehensive body of knowledge by researching topics beyond deprivation, crises and catastrophes. Social geographers, economists, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists can calibrate each other with multidisciplinary research on the middle classes in Africa, and respond to global media interest about the 'new' or 'emerging' 'African middle class'. As an anthropologist, I see my role as complementary to quantitative economic and political analyses that focus on specific indicators to tease out patterns of middle-class formation.

Anthropological work on people's ideas and practices adds depth to understanding economic indicators by focusing on how people manoeuvre to take advantage of possibilities in a given political economy. For almost a century, anthropological research on livelihoods has documented how certain groups in Africa, such as missionary-educated women who became female teachers (Obbo 1980) or educated civil servants in the early postcolonial administration (Oppong 1974), have improved their lives as a result of particular circumstances. These case studies provided knowledge about middle-class groups at a time when national statistics and data sets were scarcely available. Budniok and Noll (2018) show that anthropology has always had an interest in what we now term the middle class, even though the term was hardly ever used to explain social mobility.

Among Africanist scholars there is much debate about the characterization of the middle classes (Kroeker *et al.* 2018; Lentz 2015; Melber 2016; Neubert 2019; Southall 2016). The term is an idiom to account for the relatively new phenomenon of increasingly visible socio-economic groups in Africa that are neither wealthy nor poor, and that have been overlooked in much research on political-economic processes. Apart from South Africa, where a small body of literature focused on the black middle classes (Cobley 1990; Kuper 1965; Seekings 2009), scholarly interest in the deepening inequality between an emerging, prosperous elite and the largely uneducated greater population after independence from

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colonial rule was initially dominated by Marxist approaches.<sup>1</sup> Since then, social marginalization and questions of conflict have spurred much research in Africa, resulting in less attention to the livelihoods of those in the middle. Whether these middle groups can be analysed using the term 'middle class', a term that is firmly embedded in Euro-American cultural history and imagination, is a global question (Donner 2017) that needs to be considered. But even in the global North, it remains a slippery concept (Ortner 2003; Skeggs 2015). Rather than seeking clearer definitions or categories, I propose to embrace its contested nature as productive, seeing middle classes not as a category that we can find 'out there' and measure, but as a classification-in-the-making. Middle-class status, or a particular idea of the good life, is a position towards which people strive and hence an aspirational category (Heiman *et al.* 2012; Spronk 2014). Its plasticity addresses the middle class as a nascent concept and category.

In my research in Ghana, I found that people did not recount their lives in terms of 'becoming middle-class' but instead spoke of social mobility, and their narratives articulated the importance not only of economic improvement but also of prestige. Weber's (1946) distinction between class position (economic power) and social status (honour or prestige) helps foreground the role of culture in class practice, as do forms of capital that are not, strictly speaking, economic (Bourdieu 1984). So, within the specific historical contexts of African societies, the question is: how do people end up in the middle? My study of the pursuit of social mobility – of those who have successfully improved their livelihoods – provides knowledge about middle-class trajectories from an intergenerational perspective. I interviewed people who came of age during colonialism, independence, or the post-Cold War period, quite different historical contexts for each of the three generations. My interlocutors did not come from wealthy or elite backgrounds, and there were significant differences in their families' resources. Generally, they worked their way up and did so in different ways. One theme was consistent throughout the biographies: the giant leaps possible for those who became educated. Whether they were the first girl in the family to be sent to school in 1931, or a herd boy in the northern parts of Ghana who was sent to school in 1958, or the first university-educated person in their family in 2003, such leaps often indicated entry into the middle classes of their time. As they recounted stories of struggles and successes, of endurance and failures, a picture emerged of the importance of having the skills to negotiate available opportunities and having personal stamina.

The three generations all spoke of changing times and circumstances, and their biographies fleshed out the ways in which the country's political economy structured livelihoods for better or worse. Williams (1977) urged scholars not only to bring into view the structural economic and social changes but also to analyse the affective qualities of these changes. His notion of 'structures of feeling' helps uncover how individuals' responses to opportunities were shaped by larger forces. Certain conditions of possibility – notably educational attainment, access to networks and access to resources – enabled groups or individuals to improve their livelihoods. According to Ahmed, '[W]hile we can and should

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<sup>1</sup>See Spronk (2014) on why, while class analysis used to be a dominant approach to study African societies, the notion of the middle class was rarely taken up.

follow Raymond Williams (1977) to explore “structures of feeling”, my suggestion is that we might also want to explore “feelings of structure”: feelings might be how structures get under our skin’ (2010: 216). People’s biographies open up vistas of the experiences and evaluations of life as well as the era in which lives enfolded. Yet, the availability of advantageous conditions is not enough to stimulate change; these conditions need to be acted upon to be effective. As will be explored below, in the pursuit of social mobility, *savoir faire* has made a difference.

This article is based on research conducted in 2011 and 2012. It takes ethnographic studies of personal life stories as a starting point. I was based in Cape Coast but travelled throughout Ghana to interview people. The aim was to select people of different ages, ethnicities and employment backgrounds. All were living in urban environments, a vital factor for the middle classes, as employment, professional networks and lifestyle practices such as consumerism are usually found in urban areas (Clark 2003). I followed sixty-four people (thirty women and thirty-four men), the youngest of whom was twenty-one years old and the oldest ninety-eight. To ensure the anonymity of the interlocutors, I use pseudonyms and have also changed descriptions of ethnicity, marital status, religion, occupation or residence when these characteristics are not directly relevant to the analysis.

### Structures of feeling, feelings of structure

Case studies can provide a deeper understanding of larger social patterns effectuated by political-economic regimes. The political economy in existence during the late colonial era shifted only slightly after Ghana’s independence, but then altered significantly in the 1970s and transformed again in the 1990s. During these shifts, the government, industrial and business sectors expanded and diminished and developed in different ways over time. Williams (1977) writes that we tend to focus on the formal and systematic aspects of political, economic and social institutions and their material aspects or the finished products of life: the institutions, structures and ideologies of the political economy. This ‘reduction of the social to fixed forms’, he argues, impedes a view of more ‘emergent formations’ (*ibid.*: 132). These cultivating formations that do not have to await definition, classification or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures are what he calls ‘structures of feeling’: the ‘meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt ... are elements of a social material process ... social formations of a specific kind’ (*ibid.*: 133). This quality of social experience is ‘historically distinct from other qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or period’ (*ibid.*: 131). Structures of feeling enable us to focus on how specific historical contexts of political rule, economic structure and social organization shape personal experiences and livelihoods.

Changes in the political economy – for example, a shift from a cash-crop economy to private corporatism – affect national, regional, community and family structures; they may create problems for those who relied on and benefited from the older structures and they may also create new possibilities for others. Looking at social change as emerging formations, rather than seeing change only as the effect of a political and economic reconfiguration, opens up

new questions about the way in which people forged their way into another period. As the interaction between the political economy and people's lives was pliable, depending on transnational factors and local affairs as well as on people's appreciation of the conditions of possibility, the question is: how have structures of feeling been enacted?

Located at the intersection of larger structures and personal experiences, agency brings into view the micropolitics of change; in one of my interlocutor's words, how to 'seize changes, accept your losses and soldier on!'<sup>2</sup> Biographical interviews generate data that permit an analysis of how migration to urban centres, education, monetization, professionalization and new economic opportunities formed women's and men's lives (see Miescher 2005 on Ghana). Life stories, or life histories, generally fall into two categories: as windows into historical realities that can compensate for archival and scholarly lacunae; and as narrations of a presented reality that defines and constructs the self. I follow Miescher (2005) in taking a middle road, where I consider self-narration to be primary data through which people (re)presented themselves and gave meaning retrospectively to their life course. As shall be shown below, people located their experiences in economic, political and social history (Reynolds White 2014); when we foreground people's understandings and feelings we can see that those experiences are the basis of agency interconnected with larger structures (Ortner 2005). Agency, the capacity to enact, is not some natural will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of culturally constituted feelings, thoughts and conditions of possibility. Attending to agency provides insight into when and how people have acted on the world, even as they were acted upon by political-economic structures.

Describing practices and ideas alone cannot provide a compelling account of agency; an analysis of agency must delve deeper and explain the motivation for individual investments. Rather than privileging 'the personal' or 'the emotional' above 'the structural', recent feminist approaches have analysed their complex imbrication (Bear *et al.* 2015; Mahmood 2011; Moore 2014). So, whereas Williams is interested in the emergent character of the structures of feeling and particularly their importance as temporal phenomena, I would like to concentrate on what he calls the affective elements. Although he aims to focus on the 'affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a particular kind', by defining these elements as 'a structure: as a set with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension' (Williams 1977: 132), the locus of analysis moves away from people's experience as data. Exploring the interaction of affect and structure therefore requires analysis not only of 'the structures of feeling' but also of 'the feelings of structure' (Ahmed 2010: 216). Structural changes are articulated through, and simultaneously are acted upon by, people's ideas and practices. Experience – or thought as felt and feeling as thought, the involvement in and evaluation of the everyday – can best be captured by scrupulously following people's narrations of their unfolding life. Experience thus captured does not articulate some kind of truth but is an articulation of mediated feelings and understandings.

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<sup>2</sup>Interview with Mavis Oworae, aged fifty-four, 2011–12.

Life stories focused on agency, as interlocutors recount their upward social mobility, run the risk of presenting a steady stream of successes. This has not been the case in this study. On the contrary: in the process of recording a biography, older people in particular started talking about the difficult times or their regrets. Still, a person's interpretation of how their life has unfolded can provide insight into how the political economy (in)forms their lives and is simultaneously acted upon and appropriated. The life stories in this study were characterized by a narrative structure of 'perseverance'; every interlocutor elaborated on painful decisions and struggles. Their accounts of agency made visible how people navigated hierarchies, inequalities or clientelism as well as opportunities, alliances or scenarios. And while life stories include omissions, accentuations and meanderings, they demonstrate the making of middle-class trajectories.

### **A brief history of middle-class formation in Ghana: conditions of possibility**

Behrends and Lentz (2012) analysed three generations of educated professional women and men from the northern parts of Ghana, born from the 1920s to the mid-1950s. Their pioneering work preceded the current discussions on the middle classes in Africa and provides an important investigation to start from. They concentrate on women and men from a marginalized part of the country, their professional careers, and their moral obligation towards kin and region. The focus on one region and one ethnic group provides an in-depth analysis of the details of local developments against the background of national ones. The diverging narratives about social mobility and questions of belonging across time provide valuable insight into the gendered and generational feeling of structures (see also Behrends 2002). While their definition of generation follows the local changes in educational ideals and opportunities, I pay more attention to three eras that are distinctive of the country as a whole. I thus use a larger frame of years so as to include the post-Cold War era. Both our studies take a historical perspective on the changing conditions of possibility for the development of the middle classes.

Middle classes across time and space appear not as repeated instantiations of structural laws of history, but rather through the convergence of socioeconomic forces in specific times and places that create the conditions under which middle-class cultural logics and subject positions become possible and instrumentally desirable for certain people. (Liechty 2012: 274)

Ghana's international economic and political connections date back many centuries due to the trans-Saharan and transatlantic trading routes. According to Arhin (1983: 17), the 'incipient classes' in the nineteenth century in southern Ghana emerged as a result of economic and political transformations that provided possibilities for class distinctions: 'education and enterprise went together in the differentiation of classes'. Later, at the turn of the twentieth century, the introduction of a cash-crop economy, and especially cocoa production, spurred social mobility for many Ghanaian families (Hill 1963). With the advance of the colonial administration, the need for African employees in European businesses and the colonial

administration provided job opportunities, mainly for young men. After the Second World War, the continuing need for government employees, during both the colonial and postcolonial eras, contributed to the rapidly growing middle classes (Kimble 1963; van den Bersselaar 2011), especially in the south, where more favourable conditions such as trade opportunities, the cash-crop economy and access to education existed. The first decade after independence was a generally optimistic era when President Nkrumah revealed his plans to create a modern nation. Besides the political upheaval of coups (1966 and 1972) and their consequences, the oil crisis of 1973 hit the economy hard and an era of precarity began, with cutbacks to health, education and other social infrastructure enforced through the structural adjustment programmes imposed by the World Bank. The 1980s were a time of political and economic turmoil due to government mismanagement and economic decline, and the emergence of the middle groups that had started after independence came to a standstill. The 'gloomy Eighties' were followed by the liberalization of the economy in the early 1990s. Since then, the privatization of various sectors and an expansion of business have provided opportunities for more Ghanaians to improve their lives, with middle-class neighbourhoods now dotting the suburbs of Accra as well as the cities of Kumasi, Tamale, Tema and Takoradi. At the same time, inequalities have also increased, as has the number of graduates without employment.

Middle-class formation is thus related to and dependent on particular social and material forces. Based on my study, three enabling conditions for the pursuit of social mobility can be delineated: education, social networks, and access to financial resources of various kinds. First, educational attainment has been and continues to be an important factor, and one that has always been more accessible in southern parts of Ghana (Foster 1965). According to Behrends and Lentz (2012: 140), 'education has been the most decisive factor of social differentiation. Particularly in the early decades of school education, parents often enrolled only a selected number of children in school, and thus only single members of a given family became social climbers.' The first Education Ordinance in the Gold Coast was passed in 1882, but it was left to the missionaries to develop. In the interwar years, educational access did expand, but it was not until the massive proliferation of the postcolonial administration, when an enormous workforce was needed and when the administration invested heavily in schools, that Ghanaians of different origins gained access to formal education (Skinner 2009). Higher education has been and remains a critical element in finding a good job and notably in achieving prestige. As Newell (2002) argues, building on the educational aims of the colonial administration and missionary societies, Ghanaians used literacy to carve out new cultural, social and economic spaces for themselves.

Since the colonial period, a typical route to climb the socio-economic ladder is to attend teacher training college (TTC). In order to have a good supply of teachers, access to TTCs has always been free, in contrast to polytechnic schools and universities where the fees have often increased, and more dramatically so since the turn of the century. A narrative I found across generations is that people strategically chose to attend a TTC as a way to obtain a higher education. After graduating from a TTC, they went to work for the Ghana Education Service until they were eligible for a study leave to pursue an undergraduate degree, then they returned to work again to compensate for the study leave. This was repeated

up to doctoral level. Loretta Lamptey (aged thirty-seven in 2011), for example, aimed to earn a PhD in mathematics. When we met she was finishing her master's thesis and her 'five-year plan' was to finish teaching at the prestigious school where she was employed and then look for greener pastures in the private sector.

Second, social networks have been an important mechanism to access resources. Social networks are based on kinship, regional affiliation, ethnicity, school affiliation, religion and occupation. People are keenly aware of the importance of networks, and those without an extensive network invest heavily in them. For example, the Lions Club proved to be an important sounding board for people who are entering the middle classes.<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Nimpon (aged twenty-seven in 2011) was very clear about his motivation to become a Lions Club member: 'I come from a very poor background, all the way from Yendi [a town in north Ghana], and I know nothing. I realized quickly in school I'd have to work hard and find the right friends.' Gilbert explained how he had been industrious in setting up a small business with fellow students to repay his student loan but had been duped several times. He felt more secure engaging with fellow Lions Club members, and they had also tutored him. Networks have material and symbolic value: besides providing access to resources, being well connected reflects positively on a person, implying social recognition, a good reputation and financial ability. In a volatile political economy, one needs others.

Third, having (had) access to financial resources at different moments in one's life course is important. Whether relatives' financial help is for education or to start a new business, being able to get support from the extended family is crucial. In the absence of family capital, scholarships were often and continue to be a means to make a favourable start. Since the liberalization of the economy, many people have also obtained bank loans for specific purposes, such as school fees, start-up capital for a business or wedding costs, with repayments deducted from their monthly salaries. Another form of capital based on trustworthy connections is loans given by friends. It was striking how many people preferred not to rely on family capital but rather opted for loans from non-kin. They explained that these loans came attached with fewer expectations and were clearer-cut. Thomas Ntimu (aged seventy-four in 2012) reflected on his decision not to involve kin:

Yes ... looking back ... perhaps I was a little too egoistic, but I had to. I deliberately decided to invest the little money I had for my education [a long-distance diploma from the University of London in the 1960s], very much against the liking of my relatives. Because I offended them and because I didn't want any ties with them through loans, I have always looked for money elsewhere ... I had to.

Similarly, voluntary associations played a crucial role in mediating social change after independence and in what Little (1973) calls an 'emerging class structure'. These associations proved a vital element in social mobility for those with less

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<sup>3</sup>The international Lions Club is a social organization like the Rotary Club, dedicated to meet the needs of communities on a local and global scale, and to create business networks between members.



access to resources and networks, such as women. In the early days, associations were formed based on employment (clerks, policemen, teachers, nurses) and people found mutual support and recognition as the majority of members were migrants and found themselves disconnected from their usual ties such as kin.

These structural elements, or conditions of possibility – education, social networks and financial resources – enabled people to pursue upward mobility; they were the domains within which the middle classes encountered social transformations and forged their lives. Nevertheless, a person's access to these three factors alone cannot explain social mobility; that access needs to be acted upon to have an effect. So, a crucial element in the formation of the middle classes is the motivation of individuals to make a change. This agency is variable, which explains why there are class differences within families in African societies, often in combination with contrasting access to opportunities (see also Behrends and Lentz 2012). Douglas Mensah (aged forty-three in 2011) explained his relative success compared with his brother: 'He is lazy. We got the same opportunities, our father has provided us with the same opportunities, but he refused to take them with both hands.' Their mother died when Douglas and his brother were toddlers, and his father, a civil servant, had raised them alone; Douglas said he 'gave us all he had to get on in life'. I was hesitant to conclude that Douglas's brother was idle, but, as far as I understood it, he was unable to find durable employment and struggled to build a livelihood, whereas Douglas had more *savoir faire* to get things going. The formation of middle-classness has also been dependent on poise and savviness, a kind of capital that is subtle yet powerful.<sup>4</sup>

Life stories provide insight into how agency is enacted by those who learned the knack of navigating chances. The following life stories are organized into three major eras characterized by different political-economic structures: the late colonial era and early independence, the postcolonial era, and lastly the post-Cold War era.

### Late colonialism and independence

Most scholarly work on colonialism focuses on the political character of colonization, its negative impact on communities, and the role of elites, which in anglophone Africa differed markedly between settler societies such as Kenya and Rhodesia and those with indirect rule, like Ghana (Fanon 2008; Mazrui 2005; Mudimbe 1988). The volume edited by Barber (2006) provides a different view of the colonial experience by analysing the eagerness and joy of a small non-elite group whose individual writing and enterprising efforts were enabled and provoked by local, small-scale print publication. She argues that literacy was a 'key mode of social and personal self-positioning' and expressed a cultural innovation in the constitution of new kinds of self-representation and personhood (*ibid.*: 7). The life stories in my study also resound with a sense of aspiration and drive

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<sup>4</sup>It goes beyond this article to explain why I do not follow Bourdieu's analytical framework of capital. Briefly, his analysis rests on the ideas of transmission within a group and appropriation between groups that articulates a social structure that is not quite applicable to postcolonial societies such as Ghana.

that is usually not associated with colonialism, as, for many people, the oppressive political system also provided opportunities to leave kin and start a new, independent life. Elderly interlocutors working as clerks, employees in shops and civil servants recalled the colonial time as an era of possibilities.

Nana Kobla Kyerewaa came of age during colonialism. He was his parents' seventh child, born in 1933 in a village on the southern coast of what was then called the Gold Coast. His parents were educated in the local missionary school. His mother finished primary school and became a trader in textiles. His father also finished standard seven and then worked at the Public Works Department of the colonial administration. There he met an Englishman, and he worked with him for a long time. When the Englishman returned to England in the 1950s, he left Nana's father his Ford car, which made the family very proud. When Nana finished secondary school, he joined his father, who was a road overseer when the coastal road was constructed; this was an exciting time for Nana, as he could see 'the country becoming modern'. His parents had been determined to educate their children and care was taken to get them into good schools. His eldest brother went to Mfantshipim in Cape Coast (one of the very few prestigious secondary schools). After graduating, he worked in the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra as an assistant, and then got a scholarship to England. However, this brother died tragically, which was a terrible blow to his father, who lost interest in the other children and their education. After that, they had to find their own way into higher education without the financial support of their parents.

Nana opted to attend a TTC – 'It was the only option I had,' he told me – while his sister got a scholarship to the prestigious Achimota secondary school in Accra. A neighbour of his age, who had done less well than him at primary school, also attended the Achimota school with his sister, which inspired Nana even more. He recalled thinking, 'Hell, I will get there somehow. If he can do it, I must.' He started teaching and studied at the same time; first he did O levels, followed by A levels.<sup>5</sup> After that, he wrote to the Ministry of Education requesting access to higher education. When I asked him how he got the idea to write to the Ministry, he answered: 'I don't know, I guess I was desperate and then one becomes inventive.' He received transport money to leave for the UK and a bursary to study, and he left in 1955 for further studies.

First, he studied horticulture at what he called the Queen's Gardens in London.<sup>6</sup> A job in gardening had been a dream from his schooldays, when there had been a teacher with a passion for gardening who had invited him to join him. Since then, gardening had been a hobby. Yet, it was not what he wanted to do as a profession. When he saw a scholarship for accountancy, he started 'plotting' a way to get it, as he was not qualified enough. He got a private teacher, passed the exams, and applied successfully to pursue accountancy. When he finished in 1968, he was immediately recruited by an international company where he worked until he retired at sixty. He was recruited to work in various African countries, including Ghana, Zambia, Kenya and Sierra Leone,

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<sup>5</sup>O (Ordinary) and A (Advanced) levels are both stages of secondary education in the Commonwealth countries.

<sup>6</sup>These were most likely the Royal Botanic Gardens.

about which he said: 'It was the time of making a new Africa, of doing it together, without the whites. We were proud to be that first generation.'

Nana met his wife during his time in England. They were, he said:

two lonely souls in the heart of the colonialist enterprise. Yes ... our relationship is so solid, because of how much we needed each other in those days. We suffered together, we fought, and we have done so well, but only because we always stood together. My parents were not happy with my choice [in wife] and I was forced to disappoint them.

He explained how he had 'disappointed' his relatives several times, for example by not consulting them on major life decisions or by not participating in family gatherings and projects. In the first years of their marriage, he and his wife were 'forced to be egoistic' as they had little money and decided to use it to provide their children with (expensive) education and to continue the wife's education rather than redistributing it back to the family. As he explained: 'We wanted a modern family. I wanted to focus more on my children.' Nana has three children, two daughters and a son, who have been educated in the UK. All his siblings were educated and the sisters especially have done very well, entering professions as engineers, university professors and higher-level civil servants. One of his brothers became a trade union chairperson later in life, and when his assets were frozen during the coup of 1979, 'his children built him a house'. By mentioning this, Nana meant that this brother was his only sibling who had not managed to solidify his career and wealth for old age.

Nana set out in life at a time when not many people in Ghana imagined taking a different route from those of their relatives or fellow villagers. Compared with the postcolonial and post-Cold War eras, only a few sought greener pastures. They thus felt like 'explorers', the term Nana used to indicate his time in the UK. His motivation was not just to work towards a good life but also to be part of a new generation and to take part in the process of building a new Africa. Nana's life story also shows how *savoir faire*, having the capacity to take the appropriate action, or what Nana called 'inventiveness' and others called 'plotting', had been crucial at certain moments, such as writing to the Ministry at a young age.

### The postcolonial era

In the early postcolonial era, the expanding administration of the government formed the basis of a rapidly growing middle class. While the years after independence vibrated with expectation and ambition, this hope soon faded due to political turmoil and economic decline. Despite some bumps under Nkrumah, a relatively flourishing economy provided opportunities for families to engage in the cash-crop economy and the expanding public sector. Serious economic decline followed in the 1980s, and structural adjustment programmes severely reduced employment possibilities and access to basic services such as health and education (Konadu-Agyemang 2000), thereby curtailing the conditions of possibility.

Jennifer Agbodeka was born in 1956. When I asked Jennifer whether she wanted to tell me her family's history she responded that she had a nice story to tell. Her father's parents were fishermen; her maternal grandfather attended middle school and her grandmother attended a few years of primary school

around 1900. By contrast, Jennifer's father was the first in his family to get an education. Both of her mother's parents 'believed' in education and all their children were educated in the local missionary school in the eastern region. Jennifer's parents also encouraged their children to get educated. Her two brothers and one sister have relatively good jobs in the lower strata of public and private companies. Among her siblings, she has achieved the most: 'I have done well, because of the competitive environment' – that is the message she wanted to convey.

After her O levels she obtained a diploma in journalism in 1978. She was twenty-two, 'very young' in her own words, when she started working at the Ghana Broadcasting Company (GBC), a job she got by chance as she was asked once to stand in for an assistant. She explained:

To make a long story short; it was my chance in life ... It was an exciting time, very exciting, you travelled a lot, we had access to Castle [the government seat], we were perhaps in total with one hundred employees at GBC [which included radio and TV], and some twenty of them were women. It was quite interesting working with men; we ran the same shifts, it was the same work for all, there was no discrimination. I learned a lot in that time. I had to prove myself because I was young and a woman. After a few years I wanted to enhance myself.

Despite a decade of working at GBC, she did not have sufficient finances to pursue further education. It was financially difficult enough to educate her children during the economic crisis in the 1980s.

It took two decades before Jennifer could finally get a loan for her own further studies. In 2003 she started an undergraduate programme in business administration, focusing on human resource management, while also working. She insisted, 'Education opens the way to progress. Experience also counts, but the papers are a must. So you have to go along and get more education.' After obtaining her degree, she worked for a few years and then continued with a master's programme in communication studies. Her husband's encouragement has been critical, she explained: 'My husband has always supported me. You know, in public service the pay is low, so he encouraged me to study more. I could go to classes and come back home late. It was not easy, working and studying, it was a compromise, but I managed.'

When we met in 2011 she was the managing director of a private media company. It was, she said, a 'challenging and interesting' position, and she worked long days and often could be found in the office at the weekend. She had a large portfolio, as she detailed:

I am not only responsible for the human resources, but also for the finances, the quality of programmes, everything. With people who are older than I am, it's not at all easy: you have to give them instructions, counsel them, and you have to do that with tact. Here, where only a few women got the opportunity [to rise like I have], where we are not seen as the head, it demands a lot of tact [to be a director]. When they do wrong you have to punish them, but you have to do it with fairness. It's challenging. Women command respect more easily because not many get there [to this level]; they see you as an achiever. [But] there is the perception that when women get there [into higher positions] they want to lord over men, so you have to fight that [image]. But I worked hard, I moved into that position, I want them to know me as the example of what you can achieve. Authority doesn't come with age only, but also with merit.

Gender and equity were recurring and important themes for Jennifer as she reflected back and looked towards the future:

Something I'd like to see change for my daughters is that their husbands will be more equal to them. I think such things need time. Because ... although we [my husband and I] are both working, he is still seen as the provider and the woman assists. Never mind I earn more than he does ... Before, women were more subordinate. I am more empowered than my mother, and my daughters will also be more empowered. I tell them so. Education and empowerment means to make a living so as to be more independent.

Jennifer reflected on the process of social mobility:

It has not been easy climbing the ladder, but at the end of the day if you have achieved what you set out to do ... there is satisfaction, inner fulfilment, you don't look back at the problems. I fulfilled my dreams. The problems didn't overwhelm me, I did not get frustrated; I looked ahead of me and went.

Jennifer's biography is marked by the economically precarious 1980s; she was fortunate to get the chance of the job at GBC when the company was still financially viable, and she managed to stay employed during the time of mass unemployment. Her motivation was what she called 'enhancement': to work towards a good life as a woman. Her narrative reveals how women's lives were structured by having fewer chances compared with men to develop professional careers. In each generation, my study shows, more women got an education and entered the professional workforce. Compared with Nana, Jennifer's *savoir faire* concerned manoeuvring gendered structures that favoured men over women and confronting gendered expectations as an ambitious woman and mother who worked as a professional.

### The post-Cold War period

In the mid-1990s, Ghana transitioned to a democracy and a liberalized economy. The state-controlled public sphere changed into a liberalized commercial space with many private media channels; these broadcast a multitude of visions of culture, identity and belonging (De Witte and Meyer 2012) with local and international origins. Moreover, the opening up of the market attracted transnational telecommunication companies such as MTN and Vodafone and led to an increase in the number of Ghanaians who could afford access to mobile telephones and the internet. Similarly, the presence of tourism, international non-governmental organizations and other global institutions and collaborations increased.

While many scholars highlight the exclusionary effects of what is termed 'neoliberalism', the last cohort in this study reveals that neoliberalism also has 'emancipatory potential' (Miyazaki 2006). Since its economic liberalization in the 1990s, Ghana has experienced economic growth. It reached middle-income status in 2010, although gross domestic product (GDP) growth dipped sharply from 14 per cent in 2011 to 4.2 per cent in 2014, causing a steep currency devaluation and inflation, to rise to 8 per cent in early 2019. The expansion of the formal private service sector created an arena in which the aspiring middle classes could

develop, as opportunities in the government sector had diminished over time. Like elsewhere in Africa, young people found employment in the private sector, for example in the booming ICT industry at the turn of the century, which provided those from poorer families and without networks the chance to enter the workforce, become independent from relatives and make a career for themselves (Pijnaker and Spronk 2017; Spronk 2012). This generation worked and continues to work extremely hard. The conditions are demanding and the private sector is rife with exploitation, but the way in which they manoeuvre through the job market is exemplary, showing that they have not only the skills and knowledge but also the stamina to make their way. Scholars are often sceptical of the neo-liberal discourse of governments and transnational agencies ‘in which self-determination, choice, and entrepreneurialism are valorised, even while opportunities for prosperity have been dramatically undercut’ (Shipley 2009: 524). This is true for the majority of Ghanaians, but not for all.

Faith Biah grew up in the north-eastern region of Ghana. Aged twenty-eight in 2012, she is the youngest of five siblings. Her parents attended middle school; her father is a mason and her mother a petty trader. Her eldest sister finished university and is currently pursuing a master’s degree while working as a higher-level civil servant. The second child is her only brother, who completed junior high school and who worked as a mason with her father. The third child, a sister, started as an insurance broker and worked her way up to be a manager in an insurance company. The fourth child, also a sister, is a nurse. Faith is a banker with one of the largest banks in Ghana. She told me about her childhood:

I guess I had a happy childhood. My parents cherished us. I had wanted to become an athlete but I competed in the school’s athletics competition and had the last position, so I gave up. In secondary high school, I received an award as the best student in conduct and academic ability. Throughout our life, our parents inculcated in us the desire to be independent ... We were made to go to the forest to fetch firewood and mangoes for sale, and we used the proceeds to buy some of our basic needs. That taught me discipline.

When Faith finished secondary school she taught in a private school in Sunyani in order to raise money for her university education. However, the pay was low and she applied to the Ghana Education Service for another job. She was then posted to a remote village in the western region to work in the Adult Teaching Programme. She taught the villagers in the late afternoon and worked with them on their farms in the morning. She explained: ‘They gave me a plot and then I also had my small farm which helped me a lot [financially]. I learned a lot from them. Farmers are always seen as uncultured because they are uneducated, but that’s not the case. I learned a lot from them about life.’

In 2004 she was admitted to the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, and in 2008 she was awarded a degree in business management and French. She then did her national service at the Consolidated Discount House in Accra: ‘That was when I finally established my career as a banker; I enrolled with the Ghana Stock Exchange and loved it! I wrote the exams and passed.’ She found work in a consultancy firm, continued her education, and applied to the bank where she worked for confirmation of her position. The competition was stiff, her probation period was extremely demanding, and after one

year she was hired. 'When we were finally confirmed ... I was awarded the award for best employee. I was so proud. I was promoted last year and received an award again as the second-best worker,' she said matter-of-factly, trying not to boast, though her pride was visible. She continued: 'I achieve whatever I want to achieve. I am very progressive because every year I improve myself in education, and in any work that I do I am classified as among the best if not the best.'

During our first meeting she told me that she had got married the previous year and that it had been a wonderful day. We looked at the photo albums carefully. She explained that her parents' marriage had been a good example for her; the family atmosphere was always open and everybody spoke their minds freely. The only difference in her marriage, she asserted, would be that she would have fewer children. She had one serious relationship before she got married:

The reason why I broke up with him was that he was not mature enough. I was looking out for maturity and openness in my potential spouse, and I saw this kind of maturity in my husband; he is a good Christian and he is very honest. My family members only advised me that my husband was a bit old and that I should find out whether he has children with another woman. What binds us together is good and frank communication ... My life is good, God has truly blessed me. My plan for the future is to go to the Ghana law school to become a lawyer. My children should be greater than me and I have to really support them in school. What makes me proud is when I put a smile on someone's face. That's why I want to read law so that I can be a voice to the voiceless.

Faith's biography narrates the story of success that can be found across the media; such life stories are recounted to illustrate that diligence, commitment, faith and perseverance will pay off in the long run. While her self-presentation articulated the importance of achievement as it is also found in neoliberal discourse, it was more a form of self-presentation as is commonly found in Ghana, where narrations of achievement and success are highly valued. In contrast, in our discussions she often returned to her time in Sunyani and her bonding with the farmers. Her fond memories of a time when she came of age as a young woman have apparently impressed more on her than she can articulate in common parlance and have stimulated a sense of pragmatism that has shaped her *savoir faire*.

Nevertheless, it is worth reiterating that Faith's story is not representative, as many have not been as successful as she has been. Against a backdrop of wider precariousness, the younger generation's motivation to succeed appears to come from their fear of remaining poor like most Ghanaians. As the political economy has become more competitive and state social support has diminished, the immense pressure to be successful is characteristic of this younger generation's experience.

## Conclusion

What features in these narratives and biographies from the previous century to the present time is how people were geared towards a horizon of a better life when pursuing social mobility, for example in terms of material comfort, health, sophistication, a so-called modern marriage, a smaller nuclear family, and much more. The pursuit of social mobility brings a focus on the middle class as a

classification-in-the-making, arising from people's desire to improve their livelihoods, and on an ongoing process rather than on one that has a final destination. Rather than looking at the middle class as a coherent category based on economic characteristics, considering it as a nascent category embraces the slipperiness of the term. Such an approach 'substitute[s] the question of what constitutes the middle class ... in favour of an exploration of when, where, how, and why being middle class becomes an option, a possibility, desirable or a problem' (Donner and De Neve 2011: 8).

The cohort that grew up during colonialism and in the early years after independence tell stories of a time that can seem long-forgotten, of learning to appreciate classical music as a housemaid's daughter in a colonial administrator's household, of being part of a group of young adults organizing themselves in a social club to advance their urbanity. Independence brought an immense sense of a new beginning and new opportunities. The cohort that came of age during the 1970s and 1980s recalled 'mountains' of groundnuts in the northern part of the country as a result of successful agrarian policies, and growing up with the first television sets, which was followed by economic collapse and many families falling into poverty. The 1980s were recounted as a dark period of stagnation that stood in contrast to the previous era. Yet stories about 'moonwalking' competitions on campus were also recounted as energetic moments in an otherwise gloomy period.<sup>7</sup> The final cohort knew of the previous eras but could not relate to them. They grew up when the liberalization of the economy was taking off. They may not have had access themselves to the technological possibilities of mass media but at least they were influenced by its proximity. Mass media outlets such as television and later the internet became vehicles to imagine and become part of trans-local networks of like-minded people across the continent and beyond. For example, Pan-Africanism has been taken up among the professional and creative classes in very new ways compared with previous times.

The structures of feeling and the feelings of structure of the political economy during the colonial, postcolonial and post-Cold War periods differed: the conditions of possibility shifted, from the optimism of a free Africa to the gloomy structural-adjustment era to the competitive hopefulness of today. Eugene Ahiakpor (aged forty-nine in 2011) deftly captured the imbrication of the structures of feeling and the feelings of structure. He was a university student in the 1980s and explained how his university days were marked by constant deprivation of teaching and resources, and his post-university years by a stagnant economy and lack of employment opportunities. As an engineer, he was very ambitious, but he had to settle for taking a job as a civil servant. He often compared his days in the 1980s unfavourably with the lives of his children, who were young adults in 2011–12. 'The spirit of these days is different,' he would say. 'There is more faith in possibility nowadays.' He gave the example of how, since 2006, he has tried his luck on the stock market, something he never thought of doing before. To him, this signified the transformation from a barren economy obstructing possibilities to an open economy offering great opportunities (and risks). In a bird's-eye view, in the previous century upward mobility and prestige were

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<sup>7</sup>The 'moonwalk' refers to famous pop singer Michael Jackson's complicated dance technique, to which he gave the name in 1983.



associated with the pursuit of education and stable employment in the public sector, but since the Cold War this has changed dramatically. Nowadays, it is more prestigious to work in the private sector and people expected to compete and manoeuvre in the job market. Dovetailing these shifting conditions of possibility were the ways in which people saw and positioned themselves as women and men, as lovers and partners, as siblings and friends, as professionals, and as much more.

Sketching people's personal trajectories against the landscape of economic, political and social reconfigurations connects political economy to agency. Every era has its conducive and detrimental circumstances; the question is how to seize the opportunities. A focus on agency makes it clear that possibilities are simply not available to everyone, and some people act on them while others do not. The protagonists in the stories of social mobility not only had the education, networks and resources to pursue their ambitions, they also had the resilience, knowledge and skills to enact the chances that came their way. *Savoir faire*, or knowing how to get things going, is an important element in the imbrication of the feelings of structure and the structures of feeling. A focus on agency and experience shows that structural class categories cannot reveal or explain the differences in people's lives and trajectories, and thus presents a strong challenge to simplifying categorizations such as the 'African' middle classes.

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### Abstract

The concept of ‘middle class’ in African societies has been recognized recently but at the same time it resists clear-cut definition. Rather than seeking clearer classification, I propose to embrace its contested nature as productive, seeing ‘middle class’ not as a category that we can find ‘out there’ and measure, but as a classification-in-the-making. Middle-class status, or a particular idea of the good life, is a position people strive towards, but what this entails depends on context and place. The study of the pursuit of social mobility in Ghana during colonialism, independence and the post-Cold War period – of those who have successfully improved their livelihoods – provides knowledge about the middle class in the making in different eras and under different conditions. I propose a three-pronged approach to study this processual nature: Raymond Williams’ notion of ‘structures of feeling’ helps unravel the shifting affective qualities of the changing political economy, while Sara Ahmed’s focus on the ‘feelings of structure’ zooms in on agency as an important tool to analyse how middle-class trajectories unfold over time. Lastly, the availability of advantageous conditions is not enough to stimulate change; one needs the *savoir faire* to enact them.

### Résumé

Le concept de « classe moyenne » dans les sociétés africaines a été reconnu récemment mais résiste, en même temps, à une définition précise. Plutôt que de rechercher une classification plus claire, l’auteur propose d’adopter sa nature contestée comme productive, en voyant la « classe moyenne » non pas comme une catégorie que l’on pourrait trouver « quelque part » et mesurer, mais comme une classification en devenir. Le statut de classe moyenne, ou une idée particulière du bien vivre, est une situation vers laquelle on tend, mais ce que cela implique dépend du contexte et du lieu. L’étude de la quête de mobilité sociale au Ghana durant le colonialisme, l’indépendance et la période d’après-guerre froide, de ceux qui ont réussi à améliorer leurs conditions de vie, renseigne sur la classe moyenne en devenir à différentes périodes et dans des conditions différentes. L’auteur propose une approche à trois volets pour étudier cette nature processuelle : la notion de « structures de sentiment » de Raymond Williams aide à démêler les qualités affectives changeantes de l’économie politique changeante, tandis que l’intérêt de Sara Ahmed pour les « sentiments de structure » porte sur l’agentivité en tant qu’outil important pour analyser comment se développent les trajectoires des classes moyennes au fil du temps. Enfin, la disponibilité de conditions favorables ne suffit pas à stimuler le changement; il faut du *savoir faire* pour les traduire dans les faits.