

# *Consumption Patterns of the New Elite in Zimbabwe*

*By: Russell Belk*

Working Paper Number 288  
February 2000

# CONSUMPTION PATTERNS OF THE NEW ELITE IN ZIMBABWE

Russell Belk, University of Utah

## abstract

Since Zimbabwean independence in 1980, a small percentage of the black population has become wealthy. This paper and a companion video explore the consumption patterns of members of this new black elite in post-colonial Zimbabwe. Given the violent war of independence and the avowedly socialist objectives of the new government, one expectation might be that the new black elite would seek to distinguish their lifestyles from those of the former colonialists. On the other hand, it could be argued that taking over the privileges of the former colonialists would be regarded as an authenticating mark of status for these black elites. And another possibility, in our increasingly global world, is that consumption referents may not come from Zimbabwe at all, but rather from media images of consumption in other parts of the world. This qualitative study finds that the consumption patterns of these nouveaux riches largely, but not entirely, emulate those of the former colonialists. In addition, informants clearly look to the West, particularly the U.S. and the U.K., for social comparisons. One negative effect of the enhanced economic status of the new elite in Zimbabwe is a tendency to eschew extended family support which is the traditional form of social security in much of Africa. Besides their increased wealth, for some, fundamentalist religion provides another rationale for neglecting extended family. Rising individualism and retreat to the nuclear family promote tension within the extended family and envy among others. Implications for understanding class structure and its implications in developing nations are addressed.

**Keywords:** Social Class, Economic Development, New Wealth, Conspicuous Consumption, Family Structure, Emulation, Lifestyle, Cultural Capital, Postcolonialism, Globalism, Cosmopolitanism

## Setting and Issues

The first European contact with much of Africa came through the slave trade that flourished for approximately 300 years. By the time of the European scramble for Africa between 1880 to 1910, the slave trade was abolished, but the British who created Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) were like other colonialists in seeking to appropriate mineral and agricultural wealth through wholesale land grabs (Reader 1997). The missionaries who formed the religious arm of colonialism were another strong and lasting force in Zimbabwe (Zvobogo 1996). The Scottish missionary David Livingstone exemplified this influence with his advocacy of the 3 C's: Christianity, Commerce, and "Civilization" as a related set of "necessities" in sub-Saharan Africa (Saneh 1989, p. 105). After gaining its independence from Great Britain in 1980, the name Zimbabwe was adopted to replace Rhodesia (Southern Rhodesia before Northern Rhodesia became Zambia and Nyasaland became Malawi in 1953). The name Zimbabwe comes from the Shona term *dzimba dzemabwe*, meaning houses of stone. The term refers to the large

granite block ruins found at Great Zimbabwe on the southern edge of the Zimbabwe plateau. Although Great Zimbabwe was the center of a flourishing civilization during the thirteenth century, it was mysteriously abandoned by the late fifteenth century. Following the European partition of Africa, the British colonialists led by Cecil Rhodes refused to believe that the monumental ruins of Great Zimbabwe had been built by sub-Saharan Africans (Huffman 1976). They instead attempted to attribute the ruins to such ancient Semitic peoples as the Phoenicians, Sabeans, and Egyptians, despite the fact that these civilizations were long dead when Great Zimbabwe was constructed.

While colonialism and Christianity were imposed upon the native population of what was then Southern Rhodesia, commerce was reserved for the colonialists and Asian immigrants. A land act was passed in 1930 that gave the best farming land to whites, and in 1934 a new labor law prohibited Zimbabwean blacks from entering skilled trades and professions. The economic impact of these actions was to force Africans in Zimbabwe into low paid labor on white farms, mines, and factories. Coupled with “hut taxes” that had to be paid in currency, the result was a new form of wage slavery that disrupted the traditional economy fundamentally. Schooling was also restricted with a severe funnel system that allowed only a select few blacks access to higher education. Housing, recreational and sports facilities, and medical care were other areas of consumption to which blacks had limited and restricted access under colonialism. The small percent of the population that was white lived in white suburbs, patronized white clubs, ate at white restaurants, stayed at white hotels, were educated at largely white schools and universities, and enjoyed white sports such as cricket, rugby, golf, tennis, and lawn bowling. Cheap black labor provided them with guards, gardeners, cooks, housekeepers, maids, and drivers. They traveled to exclusive resorts and enjoyed sites that few blacks ever saw, including Victoria Falls, Great Zimbabwe, Lake Kariba, and game parks. The four percent of the nation that was white enjoyed sixty percent of its income. Only a very small number of blacks in privileged positions had sufficient wealth to afford luxuries like televisions and automobiles (Bourdillon 1976; Burke 1996). In 1977 average European wages were more ten times greater than average black wages in the country (Weiss 1994, p. xxi).

All this began to change as whites began to flee Rhodesia during and following the war of independence. The white population of Zimbabwe dropped to one percent, which together with a new constitution provided Africans new opportunities in education, management, government, housing, and independent businesses. Those blacks who were able to take advantage of these opportunities, largely through higher education, have become the new elite on whom this project focuses. They are the *nouveaux riches* of the country and include its new bankers, accountants, lawyers, doctors, politicians, commodity brokers, engineers, upper level bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, tobacco growers, transporters, professors, and others. Weiss (1994) defines the new black social strata as being composed of a ruling elite, an educated business bourgeoisie, a *petit bourgeoisie*, a working class, and peasants. To this might be added urban unemployed and a growing number of street children. The focus here is on the educated business and governmental bourgeoisie. In addition my focus is primarily on those residing in Zimbabwe’s third largest city, Mutare (population 150,000), where I spent 11 months in 1998-1999.

The 1998-1999 period of the study was a time of rapid inflation (50-70%) in Zimbabwe, with currency devaluation occurring several times, resulting in a loss of 50% against the U.S. dollar. Unemployment was estimated at 40 percent and average monthly earnings were US\$42 per month, with 80 percent of the Zimbabwean population earning less than US\$100 per month.

About 40 percent of this income is spent on food (Mhone 1993). Only 3 percent of the population own a refrigerator and 6 percent own a television (Guara 1998). It is estimated that there are 300,000 people leaving school each year and only 20,000 new jobs each year (Barnhill, Mtigwe, and Mtisi 2000). During 1998 Zimbabwe was listed as 130<sup>th</sup> out of 174 countries in the United Nations economic index (Barnhill, Mtigwe, and Mtisi 2000). Zimbabwe leads Africa in HIV/AIDS rates with 800 death per week among a population of 12.4 million people. Diseases including malaria also remain a serious problem. Of this population, more than 45 percent is 15-years-old or younger. There are 1 million homeless, comprised largely of AIDS orphans. Government corruption is estimated to cost US\$482 million per year. Social unrest was high during the study with several work stoppages and student strikes.

At the same time, there is opportunity for some within the desperate Zimbabwean economy. Literacy is close to 85 percent and the nation is rich in minerals, agriculture products, and tourist attractions. More than three fourths of the population have access to safe drinking water. There are 900,000 vehicles registered in the country and 15,000 are Mercedes. Half a million people have fixed line phones and another 200,000 have cell phones. And the economy, while nearly stagnant in terms of growth, is diverse and second only to South Africa in the region in terms of size. As in a number of developing nations, this creates a situation of extremes, with a dramatic gap between haves and have-nots.

## **Methods**

Methods consisted of participant observation and depth interviews with 28 informants, including projective responses to visual images of rich and poor consumption lifestyles in Zimbabwe obtained from some of these informants. The participant observation was conducted at parties, homes, weddings, a funeral, shopping areas, museums, a university graduation, businesses, a local Rotary club, farms, and various restaurants, clubs, hotels, bars, and vacation sites. Some of the observations included videotaping the new elites at these sites. I conducted 12 of the depth interviews and 16 MBA students whom I had trained in qualitative research methods each conducted one interview. Most interviews lasted one to two hours and several involved multiple visits. Most interviews were conducted at the informant's residence, although some were conducted (at least partly) at the person's place of business and in two cases in my apartment. Twenty-two of these interviews were videotaped and the remainder were audiotaped. All informants lived in urban settings with the exception of a timber plantation owner. All but four were in or near the city of Mutare.

Those interviewed included entrepreneurs, bankers, medical doctors, a lawyer, marketing managers, an educator, a university lecturer, government officials, a member of parliament, a commodity broker, a contractor, and a timber plantation owner. As in Cameroon (Rowlands 1994), many had multiple business ventures, but for convenience I note only their primary activities below. For contrast, as well to understand how these new elites were viewed by others in society, four interviews were conducted with lower class informants, including a maid, a factory worker, a bank clerk, and a labor relations clerk. Four informants were female and the remainder were male. The majority of informants were in their thirties and forties, with an age range from 23 to 58. Interviews were primarily conducted in English, which all informants speak fluently. Some of the interviews conducted by the MBA students were a mixture of Shona and English and were later translated into English.

## **Findings: Consumption Patterns of the New Elite**

### **Their Backgrounds**

All informants were substantially better off economically than their parents, due in part to restrictions in education, occupation, residence, and other opportunities. That is, they are *nouveau riches*. Nevertheless, within the constraints of colonialism, many of their parents occupied the higher social tiers then available to them, including being teachers, nurses, and local chiefs. This relative wealth provided them with better educational opportunities as well as parental encouragement, especially for males. For others whose parents were rural and impoverished, it was mission schools that provided them with their early educational opportunities. And for several of the informants, government programs following independence provided them with opportunities to study abroad in England, Senegal, or South Africa. Each informant credited their education with providing them with “opportunities” that led to their success -- by which they mean knowledge, credentials, job opportunities, and social networks involving connections to important others. Although one law partner with stock in several law firms aspires to be a member, none of those interviewed were members of the truly elite group known as the Pajero Club (after the Mitsubishi Pajero sport utility vehicle). This club is known for its partying, womanizing, and connections to top government officials. With the exception of one Member of Parliament, those studied formed part of the business elite rather than the ruling elite (Dashwood 1996). Almost everyone, including the medical doctors in the study, began in a lower corporate or governmental position before, in most cases, starting businesses of their own or moving on to upper managerial positions. This allowed them to accumulate experience, connections, and capital.

Thus those studied have come a considerable distance from their beginnings under colonialism. Nevertheless, all have aspirations to achieve more. Their goals are both in the arenas of production (e.g., to start a bank), and consumption (e.g., to own a Mercedes and a second home). They also have goals for their children to be university educated and to achieve as they themselves have. Toward this end they enroll their children in elite private schools. However, unlike the conspicuous consumption discussed below, this is primarily out of a concern for their children rather than out of a concern to display their own status.

### **Homes and furnishings**

For the most part these members of the new elite in Zimbabwe have purchased houses of the former colonialists in exclusive “low density” suburbs once forbidden to blacks who lived in the townships now known as “high density” suburbs. Two had homes built for them and another was in the process of constructing a new home. Two had also built homes for their parents. Three also had second homes, although two of these three rented out their second homes. A typical house had three to six bedrooms, two or more living rooms, two or more bathrooms, servants’ quarters, spacious yards, high walls, and electric gates. Four had swimming pools and one had a tennis court as well. The homes they took over from colonialists also had ornamental gardens that many of the new elite had grown to like. Several had hired gardeners to tend their gardens. Others retained vestiges of their former rural backgrounds by growing vegetables in these gardens as well. One man with a rural background aspired to own a farm and saw a return to self-sufficient agriculture as an appealing retirement scenario. His two successful older

brothers had already done so. All of the new elite studied had at least one domestic worker and some had as many as four or five. Most, but not all of these workers lived in servants quarters on the property or in the house. Besides maids and gardeners, household help included guards and cooks. Although it is not unheard of, none of those studied employed drivers. Their homes ranged in current value from approximately US\$50,000 to more than US\$200,000. These amounts buy far more than they would in the U.S. however. For one 35-year-old childless businessman, for slightly under US\$100,000 he recently bought the former colonialist home that his wife had admired when they first came to the town of Mutare. Sitting on his veranda, he described the property:

We've got – how many bedrooms? – we've got five bedrooms, we've got two living rooms, I've got a dining room, a big kitchen, we've got a study...we've got a cottage with a swimming pool, we've got – how many servants' quarters? – I think six servants' quarters, we own fourteen and a half acres. So it's pretty big.

This man had come from a rural background where he shared a room with two brothers. They moved to this house just outside of town in the mountains from another large home in the city. Another 37-year-old businessman had two years previously moved to a large estate outside of town with a tennis court and swimming pool, after having lived in a wealthy low density suburb in town for ten years. He described the impetus for the move:

We used to stay in Murambi suburb.... We lived there for ten years. At first it was a real good place to stay – very quiet and peaceful – but later things changed and we decided to move. [What do you mean, “things changed and you decided to move”?] You know, the place has been invaded by people who do not qualify to be there. I mean people who do not afford to buy or rent properties there. [How do they find their way into such an expensive and exclusive suburb?] A number of companies are buying houses in suburbs like Murambi for their employees who transfer to Mutare. Hence a number of middle class and low class who would normally not afford to stay in these suburbs will find their way into these suburbs using a company ticket... A number of houses along this avenue [where they formerly lived] were bought by a Harare company to accommodate their staff. Because these people could not afford to stay there, they ended up subletting some of the rooms, resulting in overcrowdedness and a noisy environment. This is the main reason why we moved to this place and we think they are not going to follow us here, as this place is a bit out of town.

In furnishing these homes, many of those studied find the local market too limited and go to the capital of Harare for furniture, have it custom-built, or even import it from abroad in the case of those with more global connections. One marketing manager for a large timber company had recently made an impulse purchase in Harare of a living room suite for approximately US\$750. He and his wife were in the process of having the kitchen remodeled and were also trying to find a place for the new furniture so they could decide on complimentary carpets and curtains. He too had come from a rural background. He is somewhat unusual in that household furnishing decisions were more often left to the female adult in the household (none of the families studied included multiple wives, although many of them came from families with more than one wife). By Zimbabwean traditional standards, allowing one's wife to make major purchase decisions is seen as emasculating and abhorrent. The businessman with the pool and tennis court described his wife's penchant for redecorating:

I am not very particular about fashion as long as a piece of furniture or gadget can still serve its purpose. I will not bother changing for the sake of fashion. This is not the case

with my wife; she is very particular about fashion. For instance the lounge suite you have seen in the main lounge was purchased last month to replace a very good piece we acquired just two years ago and most of the household appliances you have seen have recently been replaced. At times I have found the changes not necessary, but home goods are not my area of jurisdiction; the decision to buy and choose is always hers, and she always argues that we must maintain our social status by acquiring the latest home goods on the market.

Home goods, often referred to as gadgets, included televisions, VCRs, stereo systems, microwave ovens, computers, videogames, and other entertainment products and kitchen appliances.

While the referents in the preceding quote are local, for many of the informants their relevant social comparisons are from other parts of the world. As the first informant above who had recently bought the house his wife had seen when she first moved to Mutare suggested:

I tend to look at things in U.S. dollar terms, all right? My turnover in U.S. dollar terms, it's really nothing. It's nothing if you convert it into U.S. dollars. Alright? I bought this house for Z\$3 million, which would convert to what, to about \$100,000 U.S., slightly under \$100,000 U.S.. So it's not really anything. You read in the paper every day that, you know, who is it – Bill Gates – is putting up a \$50 million house. Against \$3 million Zim, a hundred thousand U.S.. So it's really nothing.

Although he had not yet achieved all his ambitions, it is clear that he has the sense of being a big frog in a small pond. Only by achieving relative to world standards will he feel that he has truly succeeded.

## **Vehicles**

Another consumption area where conspicuous consumption is evident is in the vehicles purchased by the new elite of Zimbabwe. Perhaps surprisingly given the statistics quoted earlier on the incidence of Mercedes Benz ownership in Zimbabwe, only two of those studied currently on a "Merc." Two others explicitly plan to buy a Mercedes soon. For most however, their primary work vehicle is a twin-cab 4-wheel drive pickup truck with a cab enclosing the bed. This may be partly due to the study's focus on Mutare which is close to unpaved roads and mountains. It is also due to the fact that Zimbabwe is an agricultural nation and such trucks have been the vehicle of choice for the commercial (white) farmers for some time. Clearly these are showy vehicles that convey status, and the majority of those owned by these informants are air-conditioned and have special driving lights and cattle guard bumpers. Most of those studied also have a second car, with a Mazda 626 being the most common. Several of those studied have four or more vehicles, not necessarily because there are more than two drivers in the family. For example, the businessman who had recently bought his wife her dream house, also bought her a mid-size Mercedes sedan. He drives a 700-series BMW, a Nissan Rodeo twin-cab 4-wheel drive pickup truck, and a 4-wheel drive Kia, even though only he and his wife live in his household. Nevertheless his desire is to one day own an American car:

I love cars. I love beautiful cars.....If I had more money I would buy more cars. [Is there a particular car that you have your eyes on?] Yeah, I would like to buy a big American buggy, you know. I have my eyes set on a Chevy actually....my heart is set on a Chevy.

His other aspiration is to one day own a jet. Although a few of these new elite Zimbabweans can remember a vehicle in their households when they were children, most traveled by buses and

commercial vans in their youth. For most informants driving is a relatively new experience afforded by their wealth.

While the colonialists provided (and ex-colonialists continue to provide) potential role models in their ownership of similar cars, the desire for a Chevrolet revealed in the preceding quotation is a case of a more distant and media-inspired reference group: Americans. Such cars are extremely rare in Zimbabwe, but rarity alone does not account for their appeal. They instead appear to be key emblems of the imagined American consumer lifestyle. Another informant who is now a 45-year-old bank manager returned from England (where he had gone for a university education) with a British car in 1986. He was so anxious to have such a car that although the car itself cost only £100, he paid over £1000 to ship it to Zimbabwe. The concern is not with impressing remaining whites in Zimbabwe however. As one of Weiss's (1994) informants stated:

It's nothing to do with the whites ... we've taken over their homes, but we're not trying to copy them. We like to impress our friends and relatives, not whites. We compare our cars with those of our friends, that's what matters" (p. 143).

Nevertheless, worries of envy provocation as well as his involvement in a shooting led one local owner of a supermarket chain to have his truck modified to be bulletproof.

### **Eating and Drinking Patterns**

If houses and transportation have changed dramatically for the new elite of Zimbabwe, the foods they consume have not. The staple food most characteristic of the Zimbabwean diet is sadza, a white corn mush usually served with greens and sometimes with a meat or kapenta fish relish. Sadza has remained a regular part of the diet of all informants. As a 34-year-old lawyer put it, "I think what has changed is the quantity, not the quality." Meat too has increased in frequency more than in type of meat or preparation. Goat, chicken, and beef are still eaten, but are no longer primarily the holiday delicacy that they were in the childhood of most informants. Although ironic nutritionally, canned foods have replaced fresh foods in part of informants' meals. But the meals themselves have not changed much. There is some use of relatively new foods such as spaghetti, rice, and pasta, but they have not entered diets in any substantial way. Restaurant meals are more common, but since all informants have household help to prepare meals, eating out is not the treat that it might otherwise be. Restaurant meals are more likely to be eaten with business colleagues or clients than with family.

Daytime beverage consumption has remained anchored in hot tea for almost all informants, but a few have changed to coffee and chicory drinks. Both tea and coffee are grown in Zimbabwe, but tea was also the beverage of choice for the former colonialists. Carbonated soft drinks have become more common and have largely replaced less expensive non-carbonated drink concentrates that were mixed with water and served to them when they were growing up. Alcoholic beverages have changed from home brewed mahewu and "opaque beer" to bottled "clear beer" and stronger alcoholic drinks. Opaque beer is a pulpy looking drink served in brown plastic 3 liter "scuds" (named after the scud missile) that are typically passed around to others who share a drink. They are widely regarded as a lower class beverage. Before Zimbabwean liberation in 1980, these were the beverages of blacks, with clear bottled beer being mostly a drink for whites. Graduating to clear beers, liquors, and wines is one clear status-demarkating act, whether at home, a club, a restaurant, parties, and funerals. There is some wine connoisseurship among those studied. The limited range of Zimbabwean wines is considered



acceptable, but imported wines from South Africa are regarded as superior. There are clear gender differences as well, with women almost always preferring wine to beer. Numerous beer halls and bottle shops (which only technically allow no on-premises drinking) are regarded as lower class places to drink, while hotel bars and private clubs are seen as upper class places for alcohol consumption. These too were the places formerly restricted to whites only.

### **Clothing, Grooming, and Possessions**

Wearing western clothing styles is pervasive in urban Zimbabwe and in most of the country's rural areas as well. Clothing is generally conservative with long dresses or skirts for women and long pants for men. Although some women in cities have long tightly braided hair, short hair is more common for married women and men as well. While there has been strong missionary influence on Zimbabwean dress and grooming, there is only a small, mostly Asian, Muslim population and the predominant Christian religion does not dictate covering women's hair or faces. Among the new elite the penchant for neat dressy clothing means suits for men and dresses or suits for women in public, whether or not it is a work day. Casual dress is more likely at home and for sports activities. Brand consciousness is most common for athletic footwear, with the latest available Nike shoes being preferred. Local fashions are influenced by television and other mass media, especially MTV-like music programs from Zimbabwe and South Africa. There is some affinity for buying clothing abroad, as with the British clothing purchases every few years by a 40-year-old woman who heads the regional tax commission. But none of those studied displayed the high fashion concern of *Sapeurs* in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Friedman, 1994).

One pattern of beauty consumption that reveals the impact of white role models is the appeal of skin lighteners in Zimbabwe. As in the Congo (Friedman 1994), being "coloured" (mulatto) rather than black conveys greater social status. Although many of the skin lighteners studied by Burke (1996) were dangerously caustic and are now illegal, a number of "cleansing" cosmetics advertise by showing before and after photos of users who have become lighter skinned. While only one of those in our study, a university lecturer in her early forties, admitted to using skin lighteners occasionally, the cultural ideal of light skin suggests that white role models continue to serve as ideals.

There is one television station in Zimbabwe (two in the capital of Harare), so satellite systems which bring in reception of South African programming, European sports, and CNN are pervasive among this new elite. There are local video rental stores and VCRs are common in their homes. Those children of the new elite who are past infancy are also likely to have videogames by Sega or Sony. Their parents are likely to have cellular phones, frequently more than one. This is despite the relatively high cost of cell phones and service at the time in Zimbabwe and limited coverage areas within the country. As was the case as cell phones diffused in other parts of the world, their public use is a sure way of demonstrating affluence. Those studied all owned refrigerators and stoves, and most owned microwave ovens as well. They also owned cameras, clocks, watches, radios, electric fans or portable air conditioners, telephones, stereos, computers, decorative art, and extensive sets of dishes, glasses, and cutlery. Some owned washing machines and two also owned electric dryers. Most likely the availability of household help and the lesser visibility of these luxuries made their adoption relatively less important.

## Recreation and Leisure

The one aspect of leisure and recreation behavior that has not changed much among these new elite consumers is music. There is a strong preference for African and Zimbabwean popular music among all those studied. Only among three informants who had been educated abroad (two in England and one in Senegal) was there a preference for Jazz. This was not simply a question of exposure to different musical styles since Jazz from South Africa could frequently be heard on the radio when those studied were in their teens and twenties. It seems rather that Jazz was seen as a mark of sophistication for these three informants. At the same time, they prided themselves on their eclecticism in their musical tastes and also liked such diverse styles as Angolan rumba, chorale music, and African Christian hymns (typically more spirited than those of the West). Unlike the new elite in South Africa (Dreyer 1989), there was no fondness for classical music in the present study.

While travel outside of Zimbabwe was still prohibitively expensive for many of those studied, some made regular or occasional visits to South Africa, the United States, and Great Britain. Trips to less developed nations in Africa were only for business, not pleasure. The ideal was to visit countries seen as more advanced than Zimbabwe, never less. These trips were also seen as opportunities to shop for products that were either not available locally or that are much more expensive in Zimbabwe, including clothing, electronics, and even furniture. All of those studied also traveled within Zimbabwe for leisure, although some did so more extensively than others. One of those studied, a 36-year-old supermarket owner, has a caravan (i.e., a travel trailer, a rarity locally) that he and his family use for traveling. Tourist attractions such as Victoria Falls, Great Zimbabwe, Nyanga (in the Eastern Highlands), and Lake Kariba are popular destinations. These are also attractions popular with foreign tourists and this validation of their worth as well as the opportunity to visit places where they could mingle with foreigners is regarded to be part of the attraction.

Other leisure activities included participant sports, especially golf. Some of these golfers suggest that golf is a way to do business and meet contacts and customers. As a 33-year-old marketing manager of an international timber company explained:

I've become a very avid golfer and I like my golf. I could put [in my yard] some chipping greens...It's got to do with, when I became marketing manager of the forestry division, I found that most of our export customers play golf and they would come in and talk about golf and so on and so forth. So that's why I took it up. And I took it up and then I became addicted....And then also the biggest thing about golf is that there's lots of business opportunities. Because, you meet [names some prominent local businesspeople]. Golf makes you meet a lot of people.

But other business people among these new elite did not find golf so imperative as a business tool, even if they did play and enjoy the sport. Some were more forthright about finding golf and belonging to a private golf club as being a status marker. A 37-year-old owner of a transportation company observed concerning his membership in a local golf club:

The joining fee and monthly subscriptions are very prohibitive. You have to pay a joining fee of \$10,000 up front and a yearly subscription of \$2500. It seems the members like it that way, because the high tariffs ensure we have the right caliber of members joining the club.

Besides golf, other once exclusively white sports attracting the new elite, both as participants and as fans, include soccer, rugby, cricket, squash, jogging, field hockey, bicycling, swimming, and tennis. Since many of these require either a private court or a membership in a club that has the

requisite facilities, these too are bastions of exclusivity and status, as well as clear emulations of the sports of the white colonialists. Lawn bowling, now restricted largely to elderly whites, is the one sport that has not been embraced by the black nouveaux riches.

Despite taking up the sports and other recreational activities of the former colonialists as well as joining or patronizing clubs and “public” places once restricted to whites, there is not a great deal of integration in these places. As a 35-year-old businessman explained it,

I basically hang out with my friends who are black. All right? I don't go to white clubs.

Okay? Not that I can't go there. I can go there. My fortunes allow me to go wherever I please. [But] there's that divide, you know? You don't want to go where you feel people are accommodating you.

Perhaps this will change in a succeeding generation that is being raised and educated in a more racially integrated environment.

### **The Immediate and Extended Family**

It is important to recognize that traditional African family structure is extended rather than just nuclear. For the new elite in Zimbabwe, this is a potential problem. Even when family members live in different places, more successful kin are expected to help less successful kin. This includes monetary support as well as often housing and caring for nephews, cousins, and others for sometimes extended periods of time. Richmond and Gestrin (1998) note that while this system promotes social security (in the true sense of the word), provides refuge for the disabled and mentally ill, and redistributes resources where they are needed, nevertheless,

the extended family also has its drawbacks, say some Africans, for it can serve as a disincentive to capital accumulation and “getting ahead.” When a African gets a job in the city and works in the cash economy, his entire family may regard him as a financial resource for paying the costs of its food, clothing, schooling, and other necessities. City dwellers will wonder why they should save if some day they may have to share their savings with relatives (p. 4).

In a study of Aboriginal consumers in Australia, colleagues and I found that a somewhat similar traditional system of sharing provided an incentive for immediate rapid consumption of cash and other liquid resources (Belk, Groves, and Østergaard, forthcoming). At the same time, it is possible that such sharing can reduce the envy and feelings of ill will that might greet the nouveau riche Zimbabwean consumer. Members of the new elite might well wish to demonstrate that their success has not led them to forget their roots and traditional societal values. What I found with those studied, is both patterns of support and non-support for extended family, with some evidence of a gradual retreat to devoting wealth to the nuclear family only.

The supermarket owner does not allow his extended family free or discounted access to the groceries he sells and says that their expectation of such treatment makes them an unwelcome factor in life. Responding to the question of whether he sometimes shared his wealth with relatives, a 34-year-old lawyer said,

I think a number of them are trying to milk me actually. Sorry to say that. You know the problem with the family members, is that in your family many people if you've got a profession, they think money is all over. And that is not really the case. So some people they would not believe that you can't afford to help them with \$1000 once in a while.

A 48-year-old Member of Parliament who felt that he wasn't doing enough for his extended

family, attributed it to their reluctance to believe that he cared for them, given his high position in society. And a 35-year-old businessman restricted his help to his extended family to helping cover funeral costs and occasionally helping to provide jobs for them. Notably, funeral celebrations are another opportunity for conspicuous expenditure as well as a relatively noticeable way to demonstrate that old ties are not forgotten. Generally it was the older informants who were more likely to provide financial help for their extended families, suggesting that the younger generation is moving farther away from sharing with more distant families.

Another factor that made two younger converts to a Pentecostal denomination (Zimbabwe Assembly of God in Africa, or ZAOGA) unwilling to support their relatives was a church injunction to renounce all relationships with family members who were not members of the church (see Ranger 1986 and Gifford 1998). ZAOGA claims to be the largest denomination in Zimbabwe, although as with the black elite in South Africa (Dreyer 1989) Methodism was the most frequent denomination of those in the present study. The presence of a Methodist mission in Mutare has to some degree skewed religious distribution compared to new elites elsewhere in Zimbabwe.

Not all of these newly wealthy informants are religiously active, but the majority are. This raises the question of whether, paralleling Weber's (1930) thesis that the Protestant Ethic in Europe helped foster a spirit of capitalism, the same may be true in Zimbabwe and other contemporary developing countries where Protestant Christianity is strong. Sherman (1997) finds that a case can be made for such a connection in Guatemala. She also finds a corresponding rise of "excessive individualism" in Protestantism there, that helps to erode extended obligations like the fiesta system in much the same way that support for extended family seems to be declining among the new elite in Zimbabwe. In Africa a part of the success of Pentecostalism can be attributed to its greater embrace of spirits that resonate with more traditional African religions. But a part of Pentecostalism's success also appears to be attributable to the gospel of wealth and prosperity emphasized by these religions (Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose 1996). ZAOGA urges its members to forgo alcohol, tobacco, womanizing, and popular entertainments. Part of the savings that result are to be given to the church which then "cleanses" these monies, starting with having donors place them in washing-up bowls. However, the remainder of the accumulated money is to be used by converts as both as capital for business or trade and for conspicuous consumption:

Smartness and cleanliness are encouraged. Born-again dress up for church. Men flaunt their new suits and expensive wristwatches. Women show off their jewellery and elaborate hairdos (Maxwell 1998, p. 354).

The head of the church, Ezekiel Guti, sets the model with his Armani suits, palatial house, and chauffeured silver Mercedes. Such conspicuous consumption differs substantially from Weber's Calvinists and shows more in common with the prosperity gospel of fundamentalist religions in the United States (O'Guinn and Belk 1989). Where Calvinist leaders condemned greed and materialism, ZAOGA celebrates these traits.

While the new elite in Zimbabwe may increasingly disdain to spend their wealth on their extended families, in terms of their nuclear families and children however, those studied seem happy to spend their newly acquired wealth. As a 31-year-old bank manager expressed it,

At this time I can't say I can give everything to my children. But I'm glad, they are quite confident with me. When I'm there they know I'm the father [and] I can give them what they want.

For those who had children in school, almost all had enrolled them in costly private schools.

These schools were, for a time, the place where whites sent their children after public schools were racially integrated. Now, however, the black elite send their children to these schools which are also fully integrated. This tendency has been exacerbated by a decline in government support for public schools as economic conditions have worsened. One businessman with two children in a private school recalled that,

They used to attend a government school in town. I transferred them to a private school when standards at the government school started to deteriorate. Although the fees are very high at the private school, it is worth it because the facilities are very modern. And besides mixing with the right social class, the children are given an all around education. Although attending private schools is a status symbol and this father indicates concern that his children's peers are those of upper social class, there is nevertheless a sincere desire to provide his children with greater opportunities in life by sending them to this school. English is the language of all education in Zimbabwe after primary school. In private schools there are also more white teachers for whom English is a first language. English is also the language of Zimbabwe's universities where all informants except those educated abroad were students. Thus the higher the amount of education, and especially with more private and university education, the greater the dominance of English over native languages in the experience of these new elites.

While most informants had achieved their new economic status primarily through one member of the family, many had met their spouses at university and it was common that a partner had a relatively high status position as well. Only one informant was single (a widow). For those who were married, spouses were more likely to work than not. In some cases they helped in the family business or had started other businesses of their own. None of those studied had multiple wives, but two men admitted to having multiple on-going affairs with other women. This is a pattern in Zimbabwean life that appears to transcend social class and may partially be an artifact of the declining frequency of plural marriages. There is a widespread belief that this is the nature of men and that they need more than one sexual partner.

### **Conclusion**

While there is some concern shown by these informants in establishing their status among other new elites whom they know locally, it is clear that for most of them the critical referents are instead 1) the former colonialists (but not remaining whites in Zimbabwe), 2) the more developed world generally, 3) the United Kingdom, and 4) the United States. Except for music and food choices, those making these comparisons emulated non-indigenous consumption patterns in all other consumption areas described. They compare their lifestyles to television and film images of consumption in America. They occupy former colonialist homes and neighborhoods. They obtained their educations and educated their children in former colonialist schools or in some cases in the UK or elsewhere in Africa (especially more developed South Africa). They have taken up and follow British sports with enthusiasm. They dress and speak as the former colonialists did and frequent the hotels, resorts, and holiday destinations of former colonialists and current visitors from abroad. They have abandoned the alcoholic drinks previously consumed by blacks and now relegated to the lower classes. Instead they drink the beers, wines, and liquors once reserved for whites. And they have begun to renounce traditional obligations to support their extended families.

One explanation that has been offered for the Japanese fascination with things Western is the phenomenon of the victim (in World War II) identifying with the aggressor (Kitahara 1983).

I don't think such a psychoanalytic explanation is needed in Zimbabwe however. Janeen Costa and I studied *nouveaux riches* in the United States and found that moving to a dramatically higher social class is much like moving to a foreign country (Costa and Belk 1990). Much learning needs to take place in how to consume, how to live, and how to behave. Although there are some prior patterns of behavior that remain, much of this new learning is based on observation and imitation. It stands to reason that the comparisons will be those who are already enjoying this status level, either at home or abroad. Americans did much the same thing in breaking free from Great Britain, but continuing to emulate upper class British sports, clothing, architecture, art, foods, fashions, and living patterns. In the case of Zimbabwe, the near total absence of upper class blacks before independence in 1980, means that the only comparisons available are to former colonialists, remaining whites, and those in more developed countries. The link to Great Britain remains strong largely due to the strong English bias in the educations this generation has received. The U.S. is a powerful, if distant, referent because of its widespread media image as a consumer paradise. Disdain for the former colonialists does not necessarily translate into disdain for their consumption lifestyles. In South Africa, President Nelson Mandela (1994) recalled that "While I abhorred the notion of British imperialism, I never rejected the trappings of British style and manners" (p. 263).

The rise of global consumption ideals, potentially makes the elite among Third World consumers into cosmopolitans who are more concerned with how they compare to the world's privileged consumers than they are to compare themselves locally (Hannerz 1990, 1996). Those in this study do make local comparisons to their friends and relatives. But they also compare themselves globally, especially with those in the U.S. and the U.K.. While Thompson and Tambyah (1999) found that expatriates living in Singapore inevitably still coveted the goods and familiar places of their home cultures, this is not necessarily the case with the present new elites in Zimbabwe. There are perhaps two reasons for this. One is that the local has little cachet when you live there. In a study comparing Indians from the Bombay area who now live in the U.S. to those still living in Bombay, Raj Mehta and I found that there were many more conspicuously Indian goods in the homes of those in America (Mehta and Belk 1991) than those in India. This suggests that the need to root identity in a home culture only arises when one is absent from this culture. Secondly, unlike the expatriates in Singapore studied by Thompson and Tambyah, the new elite in Zimbabwe lack an earlier generation of black elite role models to emulate. Together with a history of Western missionaries and colonialists demonstrating Western lifestyles and a predominance of Western television, film, and books, looking to consumption patterns of the West seems almost inevitable for newly rich Zimbabweans.

Holt (1998) has recently suggested that the notion of defining and establishing social class through consumption has been replaced in America by demonstrating one's non-material cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). However, Holt did not study *nouveau riche* consumers. As Janeen Costa and I found in the U.S. (Costa and Belk 1990), conspicuous consumption is still regarded as the ultimate status marker. The same is true among newly wealthy Zimbabweans. While Holt (1998) found a preference for exotic foods and music among those with high cultural capital in the U.S., these were two areas of consumption where the new elite in Zimbabwe have changed their tastes very little. It may or may not become the case that more subtle and non-material signs of class and status replace material status markers in Zimbabwe. But for the present at least, the status symbol is critical to new elite identities.

Thus, for better or worse, the new elite in Zimbabwe are striving to materially emulate a global peer group, with special attention to the British and Americans. Lacking a preexisting

indigenous elite to emulate, it is possible that succeeding generations may localize their consumption patterns to a greater degree. As a 23-year-old bank clerk reflected:

I can speak to some of the customers who come to the bank [and they] drive nice cars. And you can assume they've got nice houses. And you can even assume they are enjoying their lives.....See, I also wish to be like them.

At the same time, in an increasingly global world, the new elite of Zimbabwe seem to be taking their place among a global cadre who may well have more in common with each other than they do with their poorer countrymen and countrywomen.

## References

- Barnhill, Al, Bruce Mtigwe, and Samson Mtisi (2000), "Zimbabwe: A Macro Balance Sheet Perspective," in Olav Sørensen and Eric Arnould, eds., *Marketing and Development Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Accra, Ghana: International Society for Marketing and Development, 353-372.
- Belk, Russell W., Ronald Groves, and Per Østergaard (forthcoming), "Aboriginal Consumer Culture," in *Research in Consumer Behavior*, Vol. 9, Stamford, CT: JAI Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdillon, M. F. C. (1976), *The Shona People: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona with Special Reference to their Religion*, Gweru, Rhodesia: Mambo Press.
- Brouwer, Steve, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose (1996), *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*, New York: Routledge.
- Burke, Timothy (1996), *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Costa, Janeen Arnold and Russell Belk (1990), "Nouveaux Riches as Quintessential Americans: Case Studies of Consumption in an Extended Family," *Advances in NonProfit Marketing*, Vol. 3, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 83-140.
- Dashwood, Havina S. (1996), "The Relevance of Class to the Evolution of Zimbabwe's Development Strategy, 1980-1991," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22 (March), 27-48.
- Dreyer, Lynette (1989), *The Modern African Elite of South Africa*, New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Friedman, Jonathan (1994), "The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty," in Jonathan Friedman, ed., *Consumption and Identity*, Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1671-187.
- Gifford, Paul (1998), *African Christianity: Its Public Role*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Guara, S. (1998), "Meet Mr/s Zimbabwe Consumer," *Zimtrader Quarterly*, 8 (3), November.
- Hannerz, Ulf (1990), "Cosmopolitans and Locals in a World Culture," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 7 (June), 237-251.
- Hannerz, Ulf (1996), *Transnational Connections*, London: Routledge.
- Holt, Douglas B. (1998), "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25 (June), 1-25.
- Huffman, T. N. (1976), *A Guide to the Great Zimbabwe Ruins*, Salisbury: Trustees of the National Monuments & Museums of Rhodesia.

- Kitahara, Michio (1983), "Popular Culture in Japan: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 17 (Summer), 102-110.
- Mandela, Nelson (1994), *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Boston: Little, Brown.
- Maxwell, David (1998), "'Delivered From the Spirit of Poverty?': Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28 (3), 350-371.
- Mehta, Raj and Russell W. Belk (1991), "Artifacts, Identity, and Transition: Favorite Possessions of Indians and Indian Immigrants to the U.S.," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (March), 398-411.
- Mhone, G. C. Z. (1993), "The Quest for Regional Cooperation in Southern Africa: Problems and Issues," *Sapes Trust*.
- O'Guinn, Thomas and Russell W. Belk (1989), "Heaven on Earth: Consumption at Heritage Village, USA," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15 (September), 227-238.
- Ranger, Terrance O. (1986), "Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa," *African Studies Review*, 29 (2), 1-69.
- Reader, John (1997), *Africa: A Biography of the Continent*, London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Richmond, Yale and Phyllis Gestrin (1998), *Into Africa: Intercultural Insights*, Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press.
- Rowlands, Michael (1994), "The Material Culture of Success: Ideals and Life Cycles in Cameroon," in Jonathan Friedman, ed., *Consumption and Identity*, Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 147-166.
- Saneh, Lamin (1989), *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Sherman, Amy L. (1997), *The Soul of Development: Biblical Christianity and Economic Transformation in Guatemala*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, Craig J. and Siok Kuan Tambyah (1999), "Trying to be Cosmopolitan," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26 (December), 214-241.
- Weber, Max (1930), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Allen & Unwin.
- Weiss, Ruth (1994), *Zimbabwe and the New Elite*, London: British Academic Press.
- Zvobgo, C. J. M. (1996), *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe, 1890-1939*, Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press.