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Not marrying in South Africa: consumption, aspiration and the new middle class

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This article explores how marriage, or its absence, features in relation to the aspirations and obligations of members of South Africa's new black middle class. In a context where the state and credit have played key roles in the newly financialised arrangements of neoliberalism, it considers how ties that are both conflictual and intimate — bonds that simultaneously distance people from, while creating increasingly intimate connections to, both kinsmen and (prospective) affines — operate within this novel space. “Middle classers” are set apart from their less fortunate relatives, even as they continue to have to support and remain intimate with them; divided from partners who expect them to conform to conservative female roles, while they continue to hold positive views about marital exchanges (and payments) more generally.

Keywords: competition; democratic transition; marriage; middle class; status

South Africa's democratic transition was much celebrated worldwide for liberating the previously disenfranchised. It brought both the promise and to some degree the actuality of vastly improved circumstances and status. But as the black middle class expanded rapidly, it began to appear that the freedom to exercise political choice was being outstripped by the freedom to engage in conspicuous consumption. The allegedly shallow values of the newly upwardly mobile, labelled as “black diamonds” or “coconuts,” have been much criticised: the superficiality of consumerism seems out of kilter with the seriousness of the egalitarian aspirations that originally motivated the transition. But accounts of frivolous expenditure do not tell the whole story.

One line of argument has it that black people were newly subjected, at the moment of democracy, to pressures to consume luxury goods and that, if only these could be curbed, frugality would prevail and people would start to live within their means. This approach fails to recognise how the most important kinds of expenditure for the middle class — whether new or longer-established — are not frivolous but rather encompass investments now regarded as mandatory. Some of these investments, such as providing one's children with higher education, seem to be of obvious long-term benefit for future generations. Another, far more contested and hotly debated, is marriage: something which entails both the longer-term obligations of bridewealth and the shorter-term ones of the wedding ceremony itself. No-one denied that the costly investment in higher education had been essential to their own success, but there was increasing evidence of a readiness to stay single in order to escape the expenses and dependencies associated with getting married. Marriage, then, retains the position of key importance which it occupied in the cultural Southern African logic of “wives for cattle” (Kuper 1982), yet the chain of entrustments, payments and obligations it involves, especially in settings of social mobility, have needed to be re-evaluated.

This paper explores how marriage — or its absence — features in relation to the aspirations and obligations of members of South Africa's new middle class. This term — middle class — may sound like an inaccurate characterisation of what is in any case an indeterminate social category, but its broadening use reflects local conceptualisations: in Soweto, for example, residents use “middling” to denote their positioning in an upwardly mobile direction (Phadi and Ceruti 2011).¹ Similar upward identifications of class are in evidence worldwide (Edwards, Evans, and Smith

2012; Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). Terms such as “middle classization” (MacDonald 1986; Clark 2003) and, in South Africa, “middle classing” (Chipkin 2013) describe the emergent characteristics of such groups: they suggest efforts being made and a journey undertaken rather than an arrival point or a concrete category. These performative terms make it possible to encompass in the discussion both those aspiring to climb the status ladder and those who are well on their way up it.² For these middle classing people, ties that are both “tense and tender” (Stoler 2001) simultaneously distance them from, while creating increasingly intimate connections to, kinsmen and (prospective) affines.

The prevalence of female informants in the paper might seem to call for a detailed discussion of “gender” issues (see Manicom 1992). But the topic of the paper might more accurately be seen as that of contestation and negotiation at the level of the family and household — perhaps a new iteration of what Bozzoli (1983) called “domestic struggle” (see also Phillips and James 2014).³ On the one hand, the aspirations, intimacies, forms of consumption and care it describes appear to be specific to women. And this might seem to suggest that only by disentangling themselves from the bridewealth system (which some see as having taken women as its object) and by focusing attention and care on their children (conceptualised as theirs and their mothers’ rather than as affiliated to their husband’s lineage or subject to his dictates) are my informants really free to pursue more individualised aspirations. These points are true to some degree, and it should also be noted that these new freedoms have been facilitated by a combination of efforts made by previous generations and the democratisation process which offered some young black women unprecedented career opportunities. On the other hand, it is not only women who find themselves in this situation. Men are just as much “victims” of the bridewealth system in present-day circumstances, and young salaried men enjoying the advantages of state employment are just as caught up as women are in contestations between the aspirations of in-laws, the demands of their blood relatives and their own career trajectories.

My research involved both interviews and participant observation, and was conducted between 2007 and 2009. Given that the ranks of those who aspire to join the new middle class far outnumber those included on the grounds of income and achievement, and are to be found in both rural and urban settings, my informants included medium- to well-paid employees of the government in Pretoria as well low- to middle-income earners in a neighbourhood of Soweto (Gauteng province) and in Impalahoek village in Mpumalanga province.⁴ Names of neighbourhoods and some people have been changed.

Contesting marriage payments and household responsibilities

“Middle classing” can entail considerable ambivalence, especially in relation to the obligations, relationalities and dependencies involved in marrying and making marriage payments. Appearing further down the line once the nuptial knot has been tied, the complex negotiation of roles within the household provokes similar contestation. While the latter might sound typically modern, to speak of the former — bridewealth — might seem anachronistic in a context where monetised relationships have begun to predominate (see Brandel 1958; de Haas 1987). In South Africa, however, there is a real sense in which the quintessentially long-term relationship which indebtedness ought to entail (Parry and Bloch 1989) is considered, at least in ideal terms, to be that between in-laws. The protracted transfer of wealth which occurred in the event of marriage in rural society (Krige and Krige 1943; Kuper 1982) provides an archetype of, and model for, relations of debt in their most long-term form.

“People have been in debt since time immemorial,” Impalahoek village teacher and resident Solomon Mahlaba pointed out to me in 2009 (see James 2015, 52–53):

... when I pay *lobola*,⁵ I don’t pay the whole amount. I am in debt — I owe the family of my wife. They have the right to follow me up, and send people, even to send the chief to collect the debt ... They

might even allow you to have children, and when your first daughter gets married, you are paid *lobola* for your daughter, you will then use these cattle to pay your in-laws ...

“Middle classers” I interviewed made a similar point. Bongile Cengimbo, a post-graduate student and junior lecturer at the University of Johannesburg to whom I spoke in 2010, told me that, in earlier times,

the role of *ilobolo* was to establish relations between two families. There could be a period of time over which it could be paid — and the bride’s family would also make counter-prestations.

These statements reveal the existence of a continuing ideal, but conceal changes which have long since transformed such relationships. They also mask imbalances at the heart of the “wives for cattle” system. As Kuper shows (2016), debts in cattle were often recouped to deal with structural/demographic accidents rather than serving to weave together a Levi-Straussian web of asymmetrical exchange. In part because of the way they were used for multiple purposes rather than as part of a sphere of exchange, the value of cattle was inflated. Amateur anthropologist Junod gave an account of hatred and bitterness between unpaid wife-givers and the unpaying wife-receivers against whom they were bringing civil suits in epidemic numbers in the early twentieth century. This would not necessarily have been a matter of the commodification of bridewealth: much like house-buyers in a mortgage chain, the wife-giving family would have been waiting for cattle to use in respect of its own sons’ marriages. But Junod characterised the resulting arrangements as involving virtual enslavement.

Besides the fact that cattle have been replaced with money and that values have been massively inflated, economic considerations — particularly among the vast majority of South Africa’s unemployed in both rural and urban areas (Hunter 2006; White 2004, 2011), and even those who have jobs, but inadequately paid ones, in urban ones (Krige 2011, 228–237) — have led to the decline of bridewealth payments. These changes do not, however, mean “new kinds of possibilities, even freedoms”: rather they imply “exclusion, inequality and private frustration” (White 2011, 7). Young men in present-day rural KwaZulu Natal, not only unable to pay bridewealth but also, themselves, living evidence of its not being paid in the previous generation, typically live with the families of their mothers rather than those of their fathers and are unable to connect with their paternal ancestors. This causes distress in other areas: although “completed bridewealth payments are a distant dream for most young men ... they nonetheless are trapped in endless accountings of outstanding debts and fines to their partners’ relatives” (White 2011, 7). While this sense of unpayable debts might hang over many men with no hope of a way to redeem the situation, there are also those who, despite minimal earnings, are so committed to these obligations that they take out commercial loans from microlenders, despite a generally agreed-upon consensus that this ought never to be an option (see James 2014; Pauli 2011; van Dijk 2010, 2012; Solway 2016).

These matters, of grave importance for those with low-paid or no employment, are a matter of concern, but in different ways, for those higher up the scale. In South Africa’s intense hothouse of change and mobility, they often excite fierce debate and contestation. For one thing, the exorbitant costs have prompted criticism. These increased sharply since the 1980s but have appeared particularly extreme since the turn of the twenty-first century.

In a novel called *The Tikieline Yuppie* by Mosotho (1998), we learn about the cost of marriage payments in a pre-1994 setting where upward mobility was already a feature. The hero is the Sowetan Tseke, the university-educated son of a lowly domestic worker mother, who has a job as a salesman in a cleaning products corporation. He and his girlfriend have a child out of wedlock, and his prospective in-laws put pressure on him to bring his family to visit in order to negotiate the marriage payments. After a complaint by her father about the interruption of her education, the “cattle” are negotiated at R 3 000, lower than the R 4 000 appropriate had she not yet given birth. Confirming such amounts, research conducted in Natal in the 1980s by de Haas (1987) recorded occasional payments of up to R 3 000. But costs have since increased sharply. I was

told by Bongile Cengimbo that once a man — nowadays usually independently of his family — has raised the money for the marriage payments, he is also obliged to pay for the “white wedding” soon afterwards, rather than waiting another few years. The cost of *ilobolo* in her own case, given her post-graduate education, would be estimated at about R 50 000, and the wedding itself would cost R 250 000. In earlier years, the cost of the former was sometimes reduced in consideration of the latter, which the bride’s parents often covered (Brandel 1958; de Haas 1987). While understanding why her parents would want to demand this payment from any prospective son-in-law, Bongile also felt that the huge debt with which her husband would be saddled, carried forward into the future, would make the arrangement unsustainable. Her sentiments echo those expressed in disputations as long ago as the 1950s in which parents were often viewed as unduly acquisitive (Brandel 1958). It is these conflicting sentiments that underpin Bongani’s resolve to stay unmarried, she told me.⁶

Marriage payments, added to the cost of a wedding, are thus considerable. Some informants had a pragmatic attitude to this expense. A middle manager in one of Johannesburg’s parastatals, for example, told me that it might well be appropriate for a couple to take out a loan from a formal financial institution which they would be able to pay off together, much as they might share the costs of a mortgage. But others see it as a crippling expense and unfair to expect men, unaided, men and their immediate families and/or uncles, or even men and their wives to bear.

Some of these matters were discussed with passionate intensity by callers to a 2010 radio phone-in programme, held in English on an English-language service with a predominantly middle-class listenership. One woman complained about the way *ilobolo* can serve to sour relationships between in-laws. A bride’s parents, she said, are typically acquisitive, demanding amounts that are over the odds. Because of their immoderate demands, the future husband often gets into debt. This may impede his ability ever to buy a house for the couple, because his credit record will be impaired. The more numerous, and vociferous contributions to the phone-in programme were from male callers. Maintaining that such payments are part of “culture,” they echoed the idealised view that *ilobolo* serves to establish long-term relations between families. But they also concurred with the female callers’ claims about the crippling effects of such payments in the present day. One argued that the new phenomenon of parents demanding huge amounts because of having educated their daughter was *not* part of culture, but rather “part of capitalism.”⁷ Another man felt that sons-in-law are virtually held hostage by their wives’ families. The practice ought to be “abolished,” he maintained, on the grounds that it is “a form of trade.” The high costs of *ilobolo* are the reason many people do not marry, he said: couples ought rather simply to exchange whatever gifts they might be able to afford. (Such suggestions were prefigured in the 1950s, and later the 1980s, when it was suggested that “tokens” would be preferable to large payments: but this was countered by brides’ parents who argued that this would devalorise the bride and delegitimise the marriage [Brandel 1958; de Haas 1987]). The male callers to the programme experienced feelings of extreme pressure similar to — but seemingly even more intense than — those described in *The Tikieline Yuppie*. For Tseke, it was not the marriage payments alone that imposed impossible constraints, but also the expenses of the ceremony and the demands for expensive clothing by his future wife. For the callers to the phone-in show, both posed an obstacle, with *ilobolo* looming particularly large.

Overall, the picture is one of considerable financial constraint alongside the longer-term moral ties which such payments are aimed at establishing. There is a paradoxical element here, in that such payments are intended to cement long-term bonds and consolidate family solidarity and relationships between affines. But anecdotal evidence suggests that they can have the opposite effect, particularly since, as in Tseke’s case, they can pull people in two different directions. If he had fulfilled the expectations of excessive consumption imposed by his in-laws, this would have lessened his ability to help sustain — through the purchase of consumer items — his own mother’s newly-acquired need to keep up and confirm her expectations of respectable status, as he felt

strongly obliged to do. Relationships of “entrustment” (Shipton 2007) may be more conflicted than they first appear, especially where income discrepancies are growing exponentially. The “tender ties” of affection thus also produce considerable tension.

If the matter of marriage payments is one which largely concerns family members beyond the immediate household, making decisions on forms of household expenditure, once married, might be thought to centre more closely on the needs of the immediate family and on their children — especially for a middle-class (or proto middle-class) couple. And this is indeed the case, to a degree. But even here the requirements of other — non-affinal or “blood” — relatives often need to be attended to, and this redistributive pressure can draw resources away from the marital household (Stauffer 2010, 210). Couples need to agree on how to balance the imperative of earning an adequate living for the family’s day-to-day needs against the need for future expenditure. It is the frequent failure of such negotiations that accounts — in part at least — for the prevalence of single female parents, as in the two cases discussed below. “Support for conventional notions of the importance of the two-parent family in the African middle class,” whether or not because of experiences like these, “is only lukewarm,” states a survey conducted in the mid-2000s (Schlemmer 2005, 7; see also Khunou 2006).

“Middle classers”: frugal or fragile?

Reluctance to marry, or readiness to embrace single parenthood, goes beyond problems with bridewealth (see Golomski 2016). Nor is this reluctance a new phenomenon: it has been widely documented in previous studies of both urban and rural South Africa (see van der Vliet 1991). But there are suggestions that “not marrying” — or divorcing — was increasingly becoming a preferred option for those in a position to embrace the greater freedom that money could buy in post-democracy South Africa, especially given the unwillingness of their partners or husbands to accept changes in gender roles. Many preferred to remain single, even if this required them to bring up their children on their own. Others have recognised the likelihood that serial partnerships are the most likely option.⁸

The case of Abigail Mlate illustrates some of these points. At the time of my fieldwork, she held a senior position in a government department in Pretoria. As with many young black South Africans — particularly women — in similar circumstances, her success in finding this career was partly due to the opportunities that were forthcoming after the country’s apartheid racial order was overturned in 1994. Her upbringing and education, her plans for her daughter’s future and her single status were in some ways emblematic of those who are currently “middle classing.” But, belying any notion of a complete break between the generations, there were also complex threads which tied her story to longer-standing social arrangements. The daughter of a policeman and a schoolteacher, she was raised in a single-parent family by her mother who paid for her education. The shift in class positions evident in her story was thus one which had occurred one generation back. Several of her close family members shared neither her educational qualifications nor her upward trajectory. Her aunts, all domestic servants, were experiencing difficulty in putting their children through school, and she was often asked to provide help (in material and other terms) to these relatives.

In marital terms, Abigail’s experience bore some similarity to her mother’s: both were left as single mothers. Abigail’s partner was a graduate, as she was. One of the moments of disagreement between them came when he objected to her “wasting money” on her own further education rather than saving it for the education of their daughter. Rather than accepting this line of argument, she saw it as a sign of his unwillingness to accept that she, his partner, might become better educated than he. He could not accept that ultimately she might be unwilling to kowtow: “It’s that patriarchal thinking that ‘If she get this Masters, then she will be better off than me. And I’m the man here, so she will have to listen to what I say ...’”

It was clear that Abigail's position was neither as precarious, nor as oriented to the flashy and unsustainable expenditure of money, as some media accounts suggest. She had thought long and hard about the "new black middle class" of which she acknowledged herself to be a member. Recognising the role of state employment, she drew attention to "the political climate currently, and ... issues around broad-based black economic empowerment programmes that government has introduced." But she also emphasised the fact that she had gone to a good school, and to university. In short, she recognised both the dependence of her success on the post-apartheid state which gave her the chance of a high-level job, and the much earlier investments in education which were undertaken through the far-sighted individual efforts of her mother whose attitude was: "If I put my last money on my two daughters, I know hopefully one day they will become better people." Many of my subsequent discussions with people in relatively senior jobs in government or state-owned-enterprises revealed similar characteristics. It was their parents, pre-1994, who made the educational investment necessary for them to take up positions as part of the post-1994 dispensation. Intergenerational mobility over the last few decades has thus been largely determined, and opportunities restricted, by which side of the class divide people were originally positioned (Seekings and Natrass 2005, 337; see also note 1).

Abigail's future plans for her own daughter echoed those which her mother had for her; and put a similar stress on judicious expenditure and investment. She stated matters in a classically middle-class vein, balancing privilege with due consideration and gratification with necessary delay, and stressed the importance of her daughter's individual "free choice" while also emphasising the importance of educating her about the financial constraints which might narrow that choice:

She always knows that when she asks for something she needs to acknowledge the fact that mummy has money, or mummy doesn't have money. And if I do have money, I tell her, "This month I think I can be able to buy you that thing that you want." And through that engagement I have noticed now that she starts to understand that "you don't just get things just like that, you plan things." She must realise that you have to work hard, that you have to have delayed gratification.

Further stressing the importance of taking a measured attitude towards consumption, she pointed out that, as a single mother, she often faced pressures to match the expenditure of those who raise their children in couples: "You want to keep up with your friends who have husbands, to say 'I need to show them ... I am adequate, I can take my daughter, I can have the same life they have even though I am a single parent.'" It was necessary, then, to spend money in the here and now to meet social expectations and challenge negative views of single parenthood. But this was balanced by a stress on the importance of forward planning and investment — in part to counteract the possible disadvantages of this unmarried status.

Stories like Abigail's show how those who have well-paid/salaried positions have intensifying claims on their resources from less well-off relatives, yet are finding new ways to acquire freedom and independence. They may be expected to help educate siblings' children, or provide upkeep for other members of their natal families, and simultaneously seek to escape the obligations, expenses and constraints of marriage. Some have escaped from, or plan to remain permanently outside, the married state.

Such stories also illustrate the particular pressures and contradictions experienced by the large numbers of women responsible for bringing up their children alone: both those in this upwardly mobile group and those beyond it. In the very different setting of Impalahoek, friends Thandi Thobela and Anna Mohlala gave a remarkably similar account when I spoke to them in 2009. Both were single mothers who had lost — or achieved independence from — unreliable male partners. Thandi had three children. Her oldest child, a 14-year-old son, lived with her in-laws in Pretoria where he was being educated. Anna, in turn, had one child, whose father died some years back. A second male partner recently jilted her by sending a text message. Both Thandi and Anna emphasised education (for themselves and their children) as a route to upward mobility, and stressed the need to communicate

openly with their offspring in order — in classic middle-class fashion — to impart the importance to them of elevating one's status while remaining frugal in one's habits (see Lentz 2015, 33).

In this setting, where security was available only through civil service employment, both young women were frustratingly aware of the remoteness of such a prospect. Both had had short-term employment as trainee journalists in a local newspaper run by an NGO, a position often thought of as a route to a job in local government (James 2002; McNeill 2011, 115).

Thandi had earlier worked in the shop of a local microfinance lender, Lohen, while Anna had worked as a volunteer for a state-funded consortium helping to organise home-based care for sufferers of HIV/Aids. She had hoped that this work experience might have given her the edge when applying for employment in the same or some related organisation, but concluded gloomily that “jobs advertised are always given to relatives of the employer,” or that the employer, “if he is a man, will ask you to sleep with him before he will offer you the job.” Both had felt positive when their journalism work started, and found their work there stimulating and inspiring. But the extreme dependence of such projects on the vagaries of funding meant that they often turned out to be as insecure as other local forms of employment. Reliance on, or at least the eventual expectation of, state employment was ubiquitous for young women like these, since it was perhaps the only means to realise the upward mobility to which they aspired. The fact that such jobs materialise only infrequently does not lessen the importance given to them.

Thandi spoke with optimistic cheerfulness about her own family background and her plans for her children. Her parents were both state employees, and her family placed great importance on education. Two of her siblings were educated to tertiary level at the family's expense, with one now working as a nurse while the other was a public prosecutor. She had enrolled as a part-time student with a distance learning university to better herself and enhance her job prospects. She was also optimistic about her son's chances of educational success, and stressed the importance of communicating openly with him in order to enhance that success. Like Abigail with her daughter, Thandi insisted on giving him clear messages about frugality and the importance of not living beyond his means. “If I don't have the money, I don't buy. I say, ‘Sorry, my boy.’”

But in Thandi's case, unlike Abigail's, investment in children's education by the parental generation did not marry neatly with the frugality and self-discipline of a Weberian-style “Protestant ethic” (Weber 1930). Although both of their mothers were teachers, income and expenditure for Abigail's mother were commensurate while they did not match in the case of Thandi's mother. Sending a second child to university, on top of other expenses, proved to be the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back and drove Thandi's mother to borrow from a moneylender, after exhausting all other more formal lines of credit. Judgmental about what she saw as her mother's profligacy, and holding up her own attitude in contrast, Thandi emphasised the need not to live beyond one's means. She planned to warn her own children about the dangers of doing this.

My discussion with Thandi and Anna had an upbeat feel, giving a strong sense of their aspirations.⁹ Aiming for (as in Anna's case) or maintaining (as in Thandi's) a respectable and modern status, and acquiring job security and ensuring a good future for their offspring, were paramount. Overall, the values and aims of both Abigail in her Pretoria office and Thandi and Anna in their more marginal village setting seem very similar to those described by journalist Tim Cohen, writing in *Business Day* in 2005, of women in the new middle class who

are the beneficiaries of economic growth and, to a certain extent, government assistance. They are fixated on the education of their children and will go through enormous personal hardships to ensure that their offspring land feet-first in the middle class. They are the backbone of social development and progress; hard-working, law-abiding and dedicated. (Cohen, cited in Krige 2009)

If their reluctance to marry is neither completely new nor altogether explained by matters of finance, better opportunities and the promise of greater prosperity in post-democracy South Africa have certainly enabled such women to think more boldly about a future as single people.¹⁰

Competition and consumption: care or things?

The increased emphasis on consumption, and the status competition that prompts it, have been seen as having a corrosive effect on marriage and family. Some young “middle classers” of both sexes, while holding positive views about marital exchanges as couched in idealised terms, decry the shallow values involved in buying “things.” While young women find themselves torn between loyalty to parents and to their partners, young men often conclude that the huge costs involved in getting married and the debts which would be incurred by doing so would make the arrangement unsustainable. For both, getting involved in prospective relations to affines also threatens to conflict with other goals, foremost among which is the need to care for one’s own “blood” kin.

“Competition” is condemned by many as a major flaw in contemporary South African life. In encouraging over-spending, it is seen as counterweighing the logic of marriage as a long-term exchange. Informants in the Soweto neighbourhood of Sunrise, just to the north of the more up-market Protea Glen, were critical of the way competition encouraged indebtedness. “People cannot wait and budget, they are in a hurry for everything,” said one. Another observed that the advantage of credit is that “you can immediately get what you need without any delays,” but the disadvantage is that “you are working backwards instead of progressing ... People are just quick to get things without calculating the cost.” As a third put it, “people are pressurised by competition in the township. If someone has something, someone else will want to have, without considering the cost”; while another pointed out that “people want to be equal with other people.” According to someone else, “people are challenged by other people, the pressure comes from society.” These pressures were said to be the reason why people relinquish their view of the longer term, abandon prudence and frugality, and spend money they have not earned and do not possess. Other informants, including those holding well-paid positions in the government, echoed these views. “Some of us are too inclined to worry about what others think, and want to be seen to have the same things as other people,” Geoff Matlatsi told me when we met in 2010, typifying this sense of status anxiety as something specifically “African.”

Illustrating the critically self-reflexive manner in which this competitive/consumer complex was viewed, by “middle classers” in particular, Bongile Cengimbo told me about the impression she gained when, as a child, she moved with her parents from a rural village in the Eastern Cape province to settle in the informal settlement of Orange Farm, Gauteng, some 30 kilometres south of Johannesburg. The upward trajectory which took her into a university position occurred — unlike in Abigail’s case — over the span of just one generation. Her family still lived in Orange Farm. “Neighbours compete and feel under pressure to show that they are living in the correct way,” she told me. This generates both competition and — paradoxically — imitation: “If you take three neighbouring houses in Orange Farm, going into one of them is just like going into another: you feel as though you are going into the same house. All the consumer items — DVD players, washing machines — are exactly the same as each other.” While competing for status might be thought to entail a striving for difference, acquiring the same items as one’s neighbours speaks of a rather different modality. It is something more like “keeping up with the Joneses” than striving to surpass them. This paradoxical relationship between a wish to express income discrepancy on the one hand, and the wish to possess identical commodities on the other, is captured by Krige (2011) in his account of a Sowetan beer-drinking club. The fact that these upwardly mobile professionals have chosen to get together to imbibe a “yuppy brand,” Castle Light, speaks of the fact that they are marking the growing disparities between their home-based lives in Soweto and their work-based ones in the up-market area of Sandton. Celebrating inequality in this way counts as positive competition (see for example Lentz 2015; Spronk 2014). But Krige points out that this can easily

degenerate into its negative variant. “Jealous” is the word commonly used to characterise both those who promote competition by showing off, and those who feel slighted by — and desirous to imitate — such status display. Unlike its use in common parlance elsewhere, “jealous” thus applies both to those who fear being envied and by those who do the envying. A variant of what is called the “tall poppy” phenomenon elsewhere, jealousy is associated locally with ambivalent attitudes towards those better off. It is locally known, says Krige, as the “PhD (or ‘pull-him-down’) syndrome” (2011, 292).

These discourses about jealousy and competition throw some light on Geoff’s and Bongile’s remarks above, and others like them. They capture a new spirit of self-critical reflexivity with which “middle classers” reflect on their new circumstances, on those with whom they may be jostling for status, and on those they have left in their wake. Many of them, being employed as journalists, radio presenters, writers and commentators, have drawn attention to the precariousness and lack of economic sustainability which underpins these lifestyles of conspicuous consumption. Journalist Jabu Mabuza wrote in the *Financial Mail* that the over-use of credit, lack of material assets and dependence on civil service positions, rather than self-reliant advancement through business, makes them “nothing more than a glorified consumer group.” Their wealth — such as it is — arises through the state’s affirmative action/black empowerment schemes and is soon squandered by the consumption of “luxury goods acquired through debt.” Disliking the increased media emphasis on this new class, since it is not their work which in reality underpins the economy, Mabuza states that market surveys of this group are used by industry “to instil a false sense of aggrandisement and achievement in the black diamond market segment” (Mabuza, cited in Krige 2009, 23; see also Southall 2004).¹¹

These examples suggest that “competition” involves a very real sense of pressure from friends and acquaintances. But the flip side of this self-reflexive critical discourse enunciated by “middle classers” — against themselves and against others — is their insistence on their own success in practising prudent financial acumen. If they have taken out personal loans, these are often to pay for their own or their children’s education, rather than because they yielded to the pressures of “competition” over possession of sofas or shoes with brand names. “The quest for things,” observes Posel (2010, 162) “can be an expression of care and support for others, as much as a crass self-absorption.” One might add that the quest for ready money may be driven by care and obligation, rather than being driven, simply, by the wish for “things.” If credit, in many cases, has played its part in enabling the upward trajectory of “middle classers,” it has also made it possible for them to fulfil obligations to others.

Geoff Matlatsi, like Abigail a high-up employee in a government office in Pretoria, told me of what he saw as a skewed value system that has led his cousins to spend huge amounts on prestige items like expensive cars while continuing to live crammed together in cramped township houses. (In response, his friends mocked him for failing to spend his money.) Despite his relatively well paid and important position, he preferred a more modest style of living. He chose to invest in the building of a house back in the rural area that he hails from. He also contributed to the education of his niece. His account counterposes a quest for “things” against “care” in a stark dichotomy, disparaging the former (Posel 2010, 162).

In similar vein, lecturer Bongile Cengimbo pointed to the way her neighbours in the informal settlement of Orange Farm bought expensive appliances and branded clothes on credit, although living in shacks. Like Geoff’s friends, they too mocked her for failing to spend her salary on items of opulent display. They asked her, “Now you have a job, when are you going to buy a car, when are you going to buy your own house?” She was ridiculed by her friends at university, too, for preferring simple food, associated with her rural background, like *samp* [maize] and chicken giblets. “But you could eat whatever you like!” they protested. For Bongile, as for Geoff, the priority was helping to pay for relatives’ education. Her insistence on doing so was a sign of far-sighted future orientation. There was little option but to help put her two younger sisters through

college, she said, since they would likely be asking her for money later in any case. Better to help them get educated now, thus enabling them eventually to earn their own living (see Stauffer 2010).

General profligacy, then, is acknowledged and condemned, but is disavowed in particular cases. People spoke to me disparagingly of the bad borrowing habits of their peers, and of the pressure brought to bear upon them by such peers, while pointing to their own prudence and ability — or at least intention — to withstand these pressures. But some also admitted to having an inconstant response. The time disconnect evident in the “buy now, pay later” mind-set was evident in a remark made by Abigail:

it depends on my mindset whether I give in ... You find yourself really wanting to ... keep up with the Joneses. So you find yourself going for expensive things, furniture, because, when they visit me, I want them to see these couches ... So you start using your credit card, and at the end of the day it is to your detriment. Because they come and see those couches, and it's only at that point in time they will say 'it's nice' and then forget about it — and you are the one that's left with the debt ... Giving in is just not on.

But “competition,” consciousness of relative status and fear of gossip are not only important because they give insight into the origins of indebtedness, or because they are elements of a critically reflexive commentary offered by “middle classers” on their own mobility and the conundrums they face. Their importance also lies in the fact that they are connected to marriage (and anti-marriage). Showing that these are well-established themes in accounts of social change in South Africa (see Wilson and Mafeje [1963] and Pauw [1963] on the complex tension between individualistic and communitarian values that emerged in 1950s township settings), Mosotho's novel *The Tikieline Yuppie* (1986) illustrates that for the decade before the moment of democracy how marrying “upward” could exacerbate such anxieties. Its protagonist Tseke, about to marry a woman he had met while at university, finds himself under immense pressure. His future in-laws have niceties of behaviour and rules about good manners, alerting him to the fact that they claimed to be of superior status to his own family. This sense of inadequacy makes him vulnerable when he takes his fiancée shopping and she insists on buying expensive shoes and a dress. When he objects, she clinches the argument by saying, “I won't allow you to shame me on my wedding day. I don't want township gossips to cure their boredom with my name.” Experiencing a sense of panic, and against his better judgement, he agrees to the purchases, using both his credit card and his year-end bonus to cover these expenses. Doing so conflicts with his sense of obligation towards his own mother, who possesses few of the attributes of affluence so cherished by his in-laws (see James 2015, 55–56).

The story of Tseke, albeit published in the 1980s, gives insight into the way “tender ties” produce tension for post-democracy “middle classers.” As a person from a poor background with new-found (relative) affluence, he was expected to spend his earnings to honour two discrepant sets of social obligations: one towards his future wife and her parents (who in this case were richer and higher-status than his family), and the other towards his own blood kin (whose status and wealth were increasingly lower than his). Where such countervailing obligations might earlier have been precariously balanced against each other to form a sort of equilibrium, they have become increasingly difficult to reconcile in settings where sharp inequalities prevail.

One force that can exert pressure to spend most intensely, then, is that by prospective marriage partners and/or future in-laws. Beyond the bride price and wedding, the kind of lifestyle to be lived thereafter can impose considerable costs. Such expenditures may detract from one's obligations towards one's own natal kin (see Brandel 1958). It was for this reason that both Geoff and Bongile, mentioned earlier, had more or less resigned themselves, at least in the short term, to steering clear of marriage. As people who have climbed rapidly up the social ladder and will in future need to provide their children with higher education, they were also expected — on loan or as a non-repayable form of “entrustment” (Shipton 2007) — to provide some or most of the money for a nephew or niece to attend university. Resolving to withdraw from the complex obligations

of marriage exchange that tie one to potential affines, then, usually means fulfilling alternative demands from one's blood relatives.

Conclusion

Should we view the entanglements of obligation, reciprocity and entrustment — and specifically those of marriage — as elements of tradition from which the newly upwardly mobile are keen to free themselves? According to one newspaper report, people in this situation embody a paradoxical combination of modern consumerist aspirations with a connection to “traditional roots,” including an inordinate sense of obligation towards family and parents. The same report talks of a commitment to the payment of bridewealth (Bisseker, cited in Krige 2009, 21) and asserts that these upwardly mobile people — unlike unemployed or low-paid men, as recounted by Hunter (2006) and White (2004) — can afford it. This claim must be read with circumspection, as I have shown. Few are able to jettison obligation, or debt, altogether. Instead, it is usually a matter of deciding between one set of obligations and another.

The cases discussed here show that the entanglements and reciprocities of marriage (and non-marriage) have complex determinants and effects, ranging from the intimate level of the household all the way to the economy and state policy. “Domestic struggle” (Bozzoli 1983) — or domestic negotiation and contestation — continue to be of crucial importance in understanding society, especially at times of accelerated transformation. Amongst those who aspire to middle-class status, the effects of competition to consume, pressures to invest, the sharply increasing costs of marriage, the intensification of disagreements over income, and intensifying claims by the broader family on household resources are considerable. For those public sector employees like Abigail and Geoff, however dependent their income is on the state (Schlemmer 2005; Southall 2004), such demands may be manageable, but can nevertheless lead to decisive disconnections from, and repudiations of, the claims of a partner or spouse and of in-laws. Those lower down the ladder handle conflicting obligations in other ways.

The concerns of those newly undertaking “middle classing” are linked to the contradictory character of the South African state. Its “neoliberal” dimension allows and encourages free engagement with the market and advocates the freedom to spend, even to become excessively acquisitive of material wealth. But it simultaneously attempts to regulate this in the interests of those unable to participate in this dream of conspicuous consumption, while outsourcing the means whereby such regulation is attempted. Ultimately, the responsibility to practice “self-discipline” is placed on the borrower herself, as the cases presented here reveal, but without taking due cognisance of the complex sets of reciprocities in which she may be embroiled (see James 2015). When individuals do succeed in placing themselves beyond such obligations, this may entail new problems.

The most recent transformation of the bridewealth system — in the context of South Africa's increased financialisation — has further altered the socio-politics of the “debt between households” system (Kuper 2016). Especially in the post-1994 period in South Africa, commodified relations — as against reciprocities — are such as to place burdens for the whole wide-ranging set of social and economic obligations (in a system which has been shaped and facilitated by the state and the polity in its newly liberalised form) squarely upon individuals. Under these new arrangements, it is largely up to those individuals to structure and rearrange for themselves the complex outcomes of these “tense and tender ties.”

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Continuity in Southern African Marriage” conference held in Hamburg, Germany, from June 5–7, 2015 (and Julia Pauli and Rijk van Dijk in particular).

Notes

1. In other African countries, the middle class has been more commonly typified as “elite.” In South Africa, the term “new middle class” has its own historical trajectory. The restrictions imposed by apartheid on their ability to own property, do business and progress in other ways meant that a group of mission-educated teachers, nurses and the like were categorised as the “black middle class” (Lentz 2015, 2; Southall 2004, 2007). The subsequent rapid upward mobility, post-democracy, of a new swathe of people has led to the coining of the term “new black middle class” (James 2015; Southall 2016).
2. For an analysis of debates on the African middle class, and how South Africa’s “old middle class” has been analysed, see Lentz (2015, 2, 18, 29, 34). For an account of the rapid emergence of the “new” middle class, see Krige (2009, 2011). One income-based definition of this class stipulates that only those with a monthly income of over R 6 000 — about 13.7% of the population — would qualify (“How Much Money” 2016).
3. Much analysis of migrant labour, Bozzoli (1983) argued, took the (male) gender of the first migrants for granted, which could not explain that — in Afrikaner societies, for example — women migrated before men. “Domestic struggle” influenced who migrated and how. “In African societies, a particular form of pre-colonial patriarchy governed the homestead. In interacting with white patriarchy — one of the underlying pillars of the colonial system and migrant labour — it was men’s labour power that became available to mining and industry before that of women” (Phillips and James 2014).
4. The research was focused less on marriage itself than on indebtedness and financialisation, but marriage turned out to be one of its important constituent aspects.
5. The term *lobola* has become degrammaticised in its transformation into general slang or township lingo. The strictly correct form in isiZulu would be *ilobolo*.
6. Direct comparisons are difficult due to the fluctuation in the value of the South African Rand and inflation over time. During the period of research, the rand on average was equal to GBP0.07 and US\$0.12. That is, R 10 = 0.70 pence or US\$1.20; R 100 = GBP7 or US\$12.00.
7. Phone-in show on *ilobolo*, SAFM, March 29, 2010, 11 am.
8. These are fieldwork observations rather than being quantitatively proven. But statistics do bear them out. Data published in 2013 showed a steady decline in registered marriages after 2008 (race not specified), and an increase in divorces among black African couples from 2007 to 2013, with women being plaintiffs in 42.9% of the cases (Statistics South Africa 2015).
9. “Today’s ‘go-getter generation’ is more confident” (Rabkin 2008).
10. The result for some former husbands/partners has been disempowering (Khunou 2006). However, some of these women have sustained contact with the fathers of their children, who — in some cases — provide for those children or even have their families do so. Decisions about marriage are, of course, underlain by multiple factors, and marriage — especially in Africa — can take years to complete (see, for example, the other articles on marriage emanating from the Hamburg conference in *Anthropology Southern Africa* (39 [4] of 2016 and 40 [1] of 2017); the essays in Krige and Comaroff [1981]; and Reece [2015]).
11. In 2008, South Africa had a R 1.1 trillion credit market, and nearly half its 17.56 million credit-active consumers had “impaired records” by June 2008. A Consumer Debt Report of 2008 revealed that six million consumers, half of South Africa’s labour force, were unable to pay their debts (James 2015, 14, 150).

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