

Class Switching: Implications of rural-urban mobility for emerging middle classes in Namibia

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Prior to current debates on emerging middle classes, elites were the focus of much anthropological research on stratification and class formation in Africa. An elite is defined as a small group of people with more access to power and resources than the majority of the population. Metaphorically, elites are 'on top' of the stratum. Contrary to this, members of the middle class are characterized by their intermediate position between the upper and the lower classes. These definitions work reasonably well when people, families and households stay in one locale. As the literature on African elites and middle classes indicates this is seldom the case. Rather, in many African countries people are very mobile, going back and forth between rural and urban areas independent of their socioeconomic background. Based on ethnographic work in Namibia I trace these movements and how they affect class membership and shifts between classes. While a so-called weekend farmer is part of the rural elite during the weekend, celebrating his daughter's wedding with grandeur and money in his home village, he turns into a middle-class telecommunication manager in the urban areas of Namibia (i.e. Windhoek) during the regular week days. Such entanglements within different social and spatial spheres have both theoretical and methodological implications for the study of African middle classes. Methodologically, middle class studies need multi-sited, network based research approaches to grasp the movements in and out of urban middle class livelihoods. Theoretically, the emergence of middle class identities and life styles has to be linked to the existing literature on elites and their rural-urban connections.