

I would have liked to learn more about this boundary between elite and middle class, and its economic and political as well as symbolic dimensions. Can individuals or families cross the line and move upward or downward? What about class endogamy, which Sumich mentions for the middle class, at the top level? If access to wealth is dependent on political connections, someone falling out of political favour would lose his or her standing – or does the amassed wealth allow for continued privilege? To what extent is the rigid boundary between top and middle a fieldwork artefact? Given the socially dominant discourse against corruption and political favouritism, it may be hard to find someone openly admitting membership in the elite. Or is the top group indeed closed so that even the well-connected researcher has no access?

These questions bring me to a final observation regarding the book's structure. The overall narrative is organized along the chronology of political (and economic) history. Throughout, Sumich skilfully interweaves the big story with ethnographic vignettes from his participant observation and excerpts from his many interviews. However, there is a price to be paid for the coherence of the overall argument: the dynamics and vagaries of individual biographies receive less attention. I hope that Sumich will eventually present us with a second book that places the lives and stories of his Mozambican middle-class interlocutors at the centre – a book that will form a fascinating counterpart to this convincing analysis of the larger story of an African post-socialist society.

Carola Lentz

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

[lentz@uni-mainz.de](mailto:lentz@uni-mainz.de)

doi:10.1017/S0001972020000200

## Response by the author

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation to the three reviewers for their generous and stimulating comments concerning *The Middle Class in Mozambique*. Due to strict space constraints, I cannot give each review the attention it deserves, but rather I will discuss what I feel to be a few major issues.

A shared concern among the reviewers was whether my interlocutors are really a 'middle class' or an elite, and what is the nature of both internal (within the middle class) and external stratification. These are intricate questions and I tried to provide a sketch of the social complexity and almost paradoxical nature of the continuous process of boundary-making in my book. In Mozambique, as with other places, systems of stratification can appear as stagnant, as the same families appear again and again over time, and as precarious, as levels of privilege wax and wane. As a different faction seizes power, beneficiaries of the old regime can find themselves muscled aside by newly favoured, hungrier rivals. One can rise, then fall, then rise again. In this shifting terrain it can be very difficult to draw a firm boundary between what could be termed the uppermost reaches of a middle class and the bottom rungs of an elite, or internally between those on the way up and those on the way down. My goal was not to try to map a category of 'middle-classness' as an empirical reality, especially as it is debatable how beneficial the concept of a middle class is as an analytical category. However, it can be very meaningful as a folk concept. My interlocutors generally saw themselves as occupying some sort of middle in their social world. To varying degrees they felt subject to, or hostages of, the whims of a 'they' who occupy the summit of society and the

roiling discontent of a ‘them’ below. Building from this, I understand the concept of a middle class as a discourse among those with significant if differing levels of privilege. It is a claim concerning the nature of reality and one’s role within it. In my view, the middle class does not appear fully formed through consumption and shared pop culture preferences, nor is it utterly reliant on occupying a specific income bracket. Rather, it is a system of signification where global influences combine with pre-existing social logics to form the hierarchies – with their often amorphous middles – that have drawn our attention. It is this, in my opinion, that provides such fertile grounds for comparison.

Nkululeko Mabandla calls attention to the colonial and precolonial periods. Specifically, he is concerned with the precolonial resources and materials that provided a social base for indigenous elites. This is a very valuable line of enquiry, and I do briefly discuss some of these issues in Chapter 2, but as an anthropologist rather than a historian, I am probably not the best equipped to answer it. Instead, I focused on the projects of transformation that were the most salient for my interlocutors – at least due to the fact that they had occurred within living memory. In light of the sporadic nature of Portuguese rule and its lack of centralized control over its claimed territory for much of the colonial period, Mabandla also asks the fascinating question of why local populations decided to collaborate with it at all. Considering the vast social, political and economic complexity that existed under the umbrella term ‘the colonial state’, such a question would almost have to be answered on a case-by-case basis. For the vast majority of the 500 years that Portugal claimed to rule, one would have encountered regionally specific risks and opportunities, social logics and forms of domination, some far better entrenched than others, which could be resisted, collaborated with, and/or twisted in an attempt to suit one’s own ends, sometimes serially, sometimes simultaneously.

In her insightful review, Leela Fernandes points to the changing nature of state power and asks whether this changes a hegemonic representation of the middle class. This is once again a difficult question to answer, especially as it is doubtful that previous iterations of privilege, such as the colonial *assimilado* or the socialist new man, would have been necessarily described as ‘middle class’. In this context, I think that the idea of a middle class is both a novel innovation of the post-reform period while being deeply imbricated with previous projects of social engineering.

Finally, I want to thank Carola Lentz for her kind but penetrating review of my book. It is especially meaningful as I was inspired by her work when writing it. She points out that the overall coherence of the argument comes at a cost, as the dynamics of individual biographies are given less attention. I accept that this is a valid criticism. My goal here was to make a more general argument, to contribute to an ongoing discussion of a middle class beyond an overwhelming focus on consumption, whether celebratory or a condemnation of ‘bling’. As Fernandes mentions in her review, the scholarly goal of the study of middle classes is ‘to grapple with the complexities and contradictions that characterize this social group’. I have tried to do this through an exploration of the middle class as a political project that draws on the past while creating new forms of inclusion and exclusion. Thanks to the work and the astute comments of all three reviewers, I feel I can safely say that the discussion they call for is well under way.

Jason Sumich

University of Essex

[js18415@essex.ac.uk](mailto:js18415@essex.ac.uk)

doi:10.1017/S0001972020000224