

“My life has been a roller coaster.” The ups and downs, back-and-forths of the Kenyan middle classes: Social mobility and the fear of falling

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cdy**Lena L. Kroeker¹****Abstract**

This article shows the dynamics of social class mobilities and the middle classes' strategic investments in social networks in Kenya. Taking a biographical view, I observe long-term dynamics on household, community, and regional levels, and argue that not only upward social mobility, but also continuance requires everyday practices of watchfulness. I argue that those who have accumulated decent financial, social, and cultural capital can navigate everyday life but must work hard to maintain these resources. Mistrusting the reliability of state security structures, Kenyans rely primarily on “traditional” community-organised security networks. For the middle classes, these networks are both a curse and a blessing: they must juggle opportunities as well as securities and solidarities; social networks are essential. Participating in privately organized circulations of resources thus remains the pivotal security system. However, as providers, individuals face a high risk of being overwhelmed by the demands from within these networks; as receivers, they face the risk of not gaining sufficient entitlements to resources for immediate or future needs.

Keywords

mobility, social classes, networks, social security, care networks, informal economy, uncertainty, Kenya

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Introduction

As I admired Gloria's¹ elegant house with its glittering holographic ceilings, the maid puréed fruit in the kitchen and brought fresh juice to us at the coffee table. Gloria was 41 years old, married with two younger children attending an international school and two older daughters at university. She was quiet and soft-spoken and when I enquired whether her current life was like her childhood, she considered my question, and answered, "Yes and no." She subjectively categorized her childhood as upper middle class, just like her current social standing. On one hand, she found the situations comparable, as she never belonged to either the rich or the poor; on the other, life utterly differed four decades ago and 500 km away. Gloria was born in rural Samburu into a semi-nomadic pastoral community in north-eastern Kenya.

Her social ups-and-downs were akin to a rollercoaster ride, with slow and arduous phases of ascent, followed by rapid descents: life quickly deteriorated after Gloria's mother, a nurse, died of malaria when Gloria was 18 years old; only 2 years later, her father, a civil servant with the wildlife services, also passed away. Most households in the region, including those of her aunts and uncles, were poor, small-scale pastoralists and subsistence farmers without significant resources. Her aunts and uncles could not support their five orphan nephews and nieces, and Gloria, as the second oldest child—having just completed secondary school—took on that responsibility. In the absence of tangible governmental support or caring networks, and without any inheritable resources, such as a house or livestock, Gloria was constantly on the lookout for opportunities to support her network of siblings.

Self-reflective and goal-setting, Gloria weighed the potential risks and chances. The lack of any convertible social, cultural, or financial capital forced Gloria to move to the slums of Nairobi:

It was a shock because we were used to that middle class. We were going to good schools; food was there, clothing was there, so the basic needs were there. But now, after the death of my father and mother, [things] had just gone down and now [we had to] start from [the bottom] (Gloria 10/8/2015).

Gloria assumed the role of a parent, watching over and guiding her siblings' decisions. She took all kinds of opportunities, like selling Colgate toothpaste door-to-door, braiding hair, and selling hairpieces and cosmetics. Later, she and her siblings found small-scale outreach work for companies to support themselves, which helped them connect with future employers. The four siblings took turns working to pay for each other's education, and one brother was even lucky enough to find a sponsor and receive a scholarship from the church for the rest of his schooling.

Gloria's connections in sales brought her to the shores of Lake Victoria and later to the city of Kisumu, where she worked in a shop and subsequently opened her own business. In Kisumu, she joined a Pentecostal church, often the first meeting place for newly arrived migrants in town (Meyer, 1998; Rohregger, 2009). Besides making friends, Gloria was introduced to her future husband, a widower with two children. He had just returned home from abroad after his business had failed and he found himself at the lowest point of his

career. By looking out for one another, her church community serves as another facility uniting people with “long arms” (Birzle, 2017: 58; cf. Shani, 2022: 45) to reach out for opportunities and hand them down. Finding solidarity and love comforted Gloria, but her business suffered from another unforeseen event.

The area is known to be politically contested—a hotspot for rallies of the opposition—though she had not expected that she would be affected by these. However, in the aftermath of the contested 2007 presidential election, a wave of violence targeted specific ethnic groups across two provinces, leaving about 1,000 killed and more than half a million displaced. Gloria’s shop was destroyed during the riots, and all her efforts turned to ashes. Businesspeople left the town in huge numbers, and for decades thereafter, Kisumu retained an image of an unfriendly climate for investors. Due to fears that events might repeat themselves, the economy came to a standstill 6 months before and 6 weeks after following general elections—a period that small and medium entrepreneurs alike had to endure.

Supporting each other over time, the couple managed to acquire a site—a bushy parcel of land outside town. Teaming up with other aspirational middle-class people, they transformed the bushland into a green settlement with detached houses. Gloria also keeps her neighbourhood network for security reasons, as the neighbourhood committee discusses ways to reduce crime in the area, plans construction projects, and provides financial support to neighbours in difficult times, such as during bereavement or when burdened with high hospital bills. As an active member, she provides and receives information and material at the same time.

This article links the debate about the emerging middle classes in Africa to the ongoing discussion surrounding vigilance. I argue that specific uncertainties accompany social rise and make heightened vigilance part of middle-class life. Specifically, I am concerned with the Kenyan middle classes’ ways of being, performing, aspiring and living through uncertainties. I show that members of this middle class are constantly threatened by social decline, revealing how they invest a large part of their daily work in maintaining their resources and navigating shortages within their networks of care. Through these networks, the middle classes both provide and receive resources, thus creating the “long arms” needed to access new opportunities and resources. At the same time, members of these networks face a dilemma: the risk of being overwhelmed by constant demands and the fear of not gaining entitlements to adequate support in return.

The next section embeds the paper within ongoing scholarly debates. Following, I present my methodological approach. Then, a section deals with how neighbourly self-help reinforces class boundaries and facilitates interactions across them. Afterwards, I discuss the ways members of support groups counsel each other. I show that offering support forms part of middle-class self-making, before I examine long-term entitlements to care. Finally, the last section concludes that in a volatile and rapidly changing environment, for many middle-class individuals, maintaining one’s status—or even continuance—can itself be considered a substantial achievement.

Social mobility as perceived by those who rose

In 2011, an African Development Bank publication (Ncube and Lufumpa, 2011) calculated that some 34% of Africans had risen into the middle class. If those just above the poverty line of USD2–4 per day are excluded, a fair share of the population would fall into an economically defined group between the poor and the rich. In Kenya, this translates into 15% of the population. Qualitative studies also confirm such class mobility. While carving out regional differences, these studies generally agree that a burgeoning middle class—situated between the much larger group of the poor and the few rich elites—does exist, and points toward the high social permeability required to rise on the social ladder. To date, little has been said about the other side of the coin: social decline. Anthropologists Nanda and Warms have rightly warned that “the term social mobility generally implies upward mobility, as if downward mobility is deviant or does not occur” (Nanda and Warms, 2004: 281). Similarly, Kalb aptly notes in his *Anthropology of Class* that social position is volatile:

[T]he concept of position implies a stability that often is not justified, for what seems like a clear-cut position at one point in time may in fact be transient, an unstable signifier in a volatile system, and known as such by the person occupying it, whose identity would properly be not “occupant,” but “passer-by” (2015: 15).

In studying the emerging middle classes in Africa, both the economic and the ensuing sociological-anthropological debates have mostly taken spotlight perspectives, examining a subgroup within the diverse middle classes at one place and time. However, these one-time analyses cannot capture a household’s temporal dynamics and thus tend to overlook the processes of social mobility (cf. Kroeker, 2018, 2020; Pijnaker, 2025). The figures cannot clarify whether this group in the middle ascends to further plateaus in a middle-class position or is just “passing by” before descending again. Even when statistics show an almost stable percentage in subsequent years, they could describe a completely different sixth of the Kenyan population that has risen— while an equivalent number of people could have fallen below the poverty line.

This interjection is not unfounded: studies on poverty reduction have observed such significant economic fluidity. A study by USAID suggests that between 2000 and 2010, 15% of rural Kenyan households escaped poverty, while 17% became impoverished (Scott, 2018: 9).² Davis and Baulch describe such pronounced fluctuations as periodic across the life course, following a “saw-tooth pattern” of rise and fall. Adato and colleagues used a mixed-method approach to study the brevity and instability of household incomes in South Africa. This dynamism suggests that heightened alertness is a defining feature of those navigating in the middle.

In 2013 I set out to examine the processes underpinning upward and downward mobility, guided by the question of how those currently belonging to the middle classes navigate the ever-present risk of social decline. Indeed, the experiences shared by my interview partners speak volumes about uncertainty and volatility. Nearly all reported both periods of poverty and those during which opportunities presented themselves. Pointing to mounting personal uncertainty, Gloria, for instance, identified threats to her physical and

social safety, her vigilance, her striving for self-fulfilment, and a persistent fear of falling. She evaluated her situation daily, knowing from experience that resources are finite and social status as middle class can be short-lived. In an email to me, Gloria aptly summarised what many biographical narratives I had collected suggest: “The middle class can be quite confusing; [being in the middle] is usually fragile and fickle” (13 November 2018). I conceptualise Gloria’s watchfulness as a form of premeditated action that promises security, particularly through private institutions and self-help groups. In this sense, vigilance manifests itself as a decentralised mandate for protection—at times operating outside governmental structures. This compares to Emerson who draws on the example of Great Britain, where security forces fall short in addressing the threat of terror without the help of alert citizens. Community volunteers remain constantly vigilant, reading the signs of recurrent crises and acting as auxiliaries to official forces (Emerson, 2019). Brendecke and Molino (2018: 11) describe a “culture of vigilance,” marked by a shift in attention “from institutions and their norms to services rendered by people” who respond directly to security risks. “In very general terms, the phenomenon consists in the successful integration of human attention into tasks set by society, like providing security” (Brendecke and Molino, 2018: 13). In contrast to many European states, where security infrastructures have extended responsibilities from governmental bodies to citizens over recent decades, governments in many African states never provided such security in the first place. Instead, postcolonial states have deliberately placed responsibility for safety and social welfare in the hands of communal and civic organizations.

Anthropological debates about vigilance in Africa primarily concern non-state actors taking over functions that the state is unwilling or unable to perform (Förster, 1995). Such accounts often fall squarely within debates on failing or weak governmentality in Africa. This interpretation, however, seems rooted within a Eurocentric perspective. Such outsourcing of government functions has a long-standing history in many African countries and must not inevitably be interpreted as a sign of state weakness. Rather, as Bierschenk and Olivier De Sardan (2014) argue, it can equally be viewed as a sign of strength of caring communities. The authors describe “make-shift solutions” or “informal privatizations” (2014: 6, 26) as intrinsic features of the bricolage bureaucracies in various African countries. In the early postcolonial era, governments deliberately acknowledged diverse ethnic and regional mechanisms of support, protection, and care, reasoning that it would be undesirable to encourage a habit of relying on the state. Instead, the communal spirit of self-help was intended to remain strong and unencumbered by statutory provision (Bossert, 1985: 194; Mbithi and Rasmussen, 1977).

Building on the above discussion, I expand the concept of vigilance by engaging with the research by Dürr et al. (2023) and Ivasiuc et al. (2022). Here, vigilance refers to a form of individual attentiveness that operates within networks and communities, coupled with the foresight required to manage uncertainty. As Ivasiuc writes, “Vigilance is thus an assemblage of moral ideas, belonging, increased attention, and social practice, which is located in certain sociopolitical contexts, concrete spaces, and technologies and is both made possible and shaped by these” (2023: 59). In this context, a vigilant practice requires context-specific everyday action informed by a future-oriented perspective (Dürr et al., 2023: 15) and is marked by good conduct closely observed by others within a network of care.

The pursuit of a better life therefore requires a heightened watchfulness to social, political, economic, and technological change and the capacity to respond swiftly. Cultures of vigilance emphasize building diverse communities dedicated to the provision of care to their members in times of ongoing crises and resisting neoliberal destabilizations (Sotirin, 2020: 2f). Both outward and inward-oriented, vigilant individuals strategize within their networks of care in a bid to minimise risks and build protective mechanisms—an underlying theme throughout this paper.

Biographical rollercoasters

Conducting anthropological research on the sociological topic of social mobility and social class, I drew inspiration from both disciplines. Using qualitative methodologies, such as structured and narrative interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations, I assembled data during 14 months of field research in the Kenyan cities of Nairobi and Kisumu between 2013 and 2024. In total, I worked with around 90 people from 60 households that fell into one or more of my predefined sample clusters that turned out to build the basis of support networks, too: (1) residents of a neighbourhood classified by urban planners as an (upper) middle-class locality, (2) professionals in medicine or academia, (3) cosmopolitan-oriented parents who send their children to international schools, (4) a religiously influenced group that promotes hard work and individual perfectibility. Acknowledging interlocutors' diverse and simultaneously existing lifestyles and perceptions of middle-classness within those four research clusters, I speak throughout this paper of *middle classes* in the plural.

Interlocutors' biographies extend back to the early postcolonial period, with the oldest cohort born between 1960 and 1965 and now preparing for retirement—a particularly uncertain phase of life. The youngest interlocutors, meanwhile, were born around the turn of the millennium and likewise in a biographic phase of life marked by high insecurity. The distribution of biographical life stages corresponds to access to diverse institutions and networks of professional, family, or religious life. Thus, access to resources varied from those who had just completed high school or university to those nearing the end of their urban and economically productive life.³ Yet, given Kenya's current economic and political crisis even those in between these age brackets felt threatened, leaving their imprints on all biographies and career plans, as I learned by means of ethnographic interviews. Over the 10 years in which I accompanied some middle-class interlocutors through their rises and falls, I came to see their biographic trajectories as resembling a rollercoaster ride.

Neighbourly vigilance and networks of care

I first arrived in Kisumu, the third largest city in Kenya, with my family in July 2015. From the aerial photos, our Airbnb house with a garden looked like a good place to live and work among the upwardly mobile middle classes. Since 2007, large, comfortable family homes and lush gardens had replaced bushland on the first privately-owned plots, and by 2015, it had become the leafy, upmarket neighbourhood that I selected to study of Kisumu's emerging upper middle classes. At first glance, it seemed to offer a safe place suitable for

my nine-month-old baby and my father, who would be caring for him. But I worried that the enclosing fences and walls would prevent direct interaction with our neighbours.

This worry was ungrounded, and I quickly got to know the neighbourhood. But at night, I slept poorly despite all security installations. Guard dogs barked, and when I got up at night to feed my baby, I could hear shouting, even gunshots and the sound of people being chased around the houses. While warming milk, I would also make tea for our compound guard, hoping that I wouldn't startle him with his machete in his hand. Around noon, I would receive word about which house had been raided the previous night. Typically, the perpetrators came at night and administered drugs like chloroform to sedate the dogs, the guards and the sleeping inhabitants who would later wake with a severe headache to find all their electronic devices stolen. The sharing of these stories marked my introduction to conversations surrounding the insecurities of middle-class life.

Homeowners discussed these incidents during their monthly neighbourhood meetings, which sometimes took place online for security reasons. There was widespread agreement that security is a key concern, best addressed by forming a group, rather than waiting for governmental bodies to intervene and resolve the issue. The neighbourhood then formed a committee that documented criminal activities and neighbours' concerns and then represented their collective interests to governmental and other institutions. For instance, the committee reported incidents to the local police, demanding that a substation be opened nearby. Internally, the committee organized decision-making processes: neighbours agreed to equip their houses with panic buttons connected directly to the police station and to install streetlights at their own expense. While questions of security and infrastructure brought middle-class homeowners together, the homeowners were engaged in a cat-and-mouse game in which criminal groups also strategized and were constantly countered by new security measures. Despite such group-building measures, it is reasonable to say that there is no class consciousness with shared interests in Karl Marx's sense of the term, but rather a shared interest in the vigilant observation of the other, poorer, neighbourhood across the railway tracks.

I, too, noticed the development of the area over the following years. Rocky strips were turned into paved roads, and through-streets were transformed into gated cul-de-sacs. The kinds of break-ins also changed alongside these infrastructural improvements. All these developments had something in common: they were all self-organized. A member of the neighbourhood committee explained to me that if roads, safety, and infrastructure were left to the government, nothing would ever happen, so the middle-class neighbours decided to work in their own best interests to promote cleanliness and safety, building aesthetics, and infrastructure. While I would have assumed these included projects were the municipality's responsibility, the neighbourhood committee did not fundamentally perceive the lack of official urban development as a deficit. Any process involving state structures would be cumbersome, and, ultimately, the interests of the neighbourhood might not be adequately considered. Thanks to the residents' extensive professional network of contacts in companies, in tandem with lawyers, engineers, professors, and other authorities, a project could be implemented easily, quickly, and accurately—or so I was informed. In addition to security and aesthetics, social homogeneity and morals became matters of neighbourly debates I followed—themes that described the middle classes internally.

My neighbour Gloria and her husband Joseph were among the first of the neighbours to explain middle-class life to me. Joseph, a self-identified upper middle-class citizen and senior researcher in a parastatal organisation, summarises the middle-class mindset as follows: “Besides income, they are extremely materialistic in terms of housing and lifestyle, investing in cars, innovative and aggressive in terms of business opportunities” (Joseph, 24 July 2015). He concludes that the middle classes protect what they have achieved, because many envy it. However, his biographical trajectory did not fit this description of individualistic and avaricious orientation—nor did that of most of my middle-class interlocutors. His considered answers and careful phrasing suggested a risk-averse personality. He embodied a work ethic centred on delayed gratification and high moral standards based on modesty—*notwithstanding* the conspicuous consumption (Veblen, [1899] 1963) and hedonistic lifestyle he referenced. Indeed, the media characterizes the middle classes as stereotypically hedonistic, prompting Joseph’s slight disgust with these people. He assumes that such behaviour is mostly displayed by a young and urban segment of the middle class who copy and misinterpret Western norms and values (cf. Spronk, 2012). But his lifestyle and that of many other interlocutors was quite the contrary: Kenyan middle classes are not individualised, selfish, and distanced from the poor; I noted that every middle-class household has many mouths to feed, and should one household fall out of the middle class, dependent households slip into poverty as well. Therefore, the middle classes work not only for themselves, but also to reduce the poverty of their dependents.

“Do you know Harambee?” Joseph asks. Harambee is an active obligation and the motto of the country, recognised in the national coat-of-arms. The term derives from the call of sailors to “pull together.” Nowadays, Harambee embodies the values of a collective effort rather than individual gain and stands for self-organised development within networks of acquaintances (Mbithi and Rasmussen, 1977). This is far from a remnant of the precolonial past; rather, it is an active practice. For instance, the neighbourhood committee informed all residents about the death of one of the neighbours and called for a Harambee fundraising campaign. The donations went to the widow of the deceased to help finance a dignified funeral that his relatives could not have afforded.

Given my interest in these care networks, I further investigated solidarity beyond kinship and neighbourhood organizations. This opened a new perspective on the adjacent poor quarter of the town and how it was linked to crime. Another member of the neighbourhood committee, George, a professor at one of the local universities and a keen observer of the situation, depicted his urban neighbourhood as a microcosm of society: many poor people were dependent on the much smaller, albeit unstable, middle classes, which themselves remain distant from the elites, who lived separately from both. Pointing at a pile of building materials stored in his garden, he further explained that these materials, purchased for construction in the upper-middle-class neighbourhood, often found their way to the adjacent informal settlement. To the annoyance of the richer homeowners, some materials had been stolen. If a guard was hired to watch over the materials, the leftover materials—as well as the guard’s income—would go to the adjacent lower-class neighbourhood. Shrugging, George explained without apology that the poor and the middle classes work in symbiosis. The neighbourhoods had developed in parallel, and the middle classes contributed to poverty reduction (cf. Kroecker, 2025). Many middle-class

people rose out of such poverty and may experience phases of poverty when they will have to depend on better-off benefactors. George, too, had experienced poverty and expected to live through yet another phase of dependency on his care networks once he retired, despite preparing for such a scenario. He eventually plans to leave the city and is currently building a humble retirement home in the hinterland where he hopes to survive from subsistence farming and fishing. That said, George's definition of class incorporated not only the ideals of communal orientation, sharing economies, and care networks, but also boundary work, as he made efforts to fight criminal activities of the poor in his neighbourhood. In his view, class and belonging are highly dynamic concepts with elastic boundaries.

Middle-class life is a constant process of negotiation to determine how much one must give and how much one can keep. Jealousy is a potential risk, and dependent individuals or groups need to be prevented from resorting to criminal activities that could harm better-off acquaintances. If wealth is not shared, people may take what they think is their share, ultimately undermining the advantageous situation of the wealthier individual (Kroeker, 2018, 2025). While sharing too little is risky, sharing too much can tip the balance. The chronic uncertainty of African living conditions, coupled with the absence or dysfunctionality of state mechanisms to cushion the blows, has ultimately led to two everyday phenomena: first, there is watchful attentiveness to quickly identify risks and seize opportunities. Secondly, community members join forces to take responsibility for their security in the absence of suitable state structures. The neighbourhood committee is invested in security and infrastructural development and has evolved into professionalized and bureaucratized networks. This runs parallel to the changes observed in the Harambee initiatives. Scholars have noted changes in the networks from the 1960s to the 1980s, as they professionalized and bureaucratized with the rise of local middle classes (Ngau, 1987: 534). This applied not only to infrastructure and physical security but also to social security: communities replaced or complemented the inadequate governmental welfare system; meanwhile, traditional welfare mechanisms transformed, institutionalized, bureaucratized, and more recently, digitized. Generally, the Kenyan welfare system is neoliberal and requires citizens to invest in their own safety and security—as they have always—flanked by private, governmental, and commercial providers. That said, by organizing many aspects of life, social networks play an essential role in “doing-being” among the middle classes, not only in Kenya but across sub-Saharan African communities in general (cf. Lentz, 2020).

Your network is your net worth

In search of answers on how the middle classes cope with the high number of dependent relatives, neighbours, friends, and community members, I met Kanisani, the pastor of a Pentecostal church. Kanisani affirmed that the sheer number of obligations, coupled with the difficulties involved in rejecting them, can drive those with more resources into debt. Given that a few middle-income earners had many poorer kin, they “were the ones in greatest need of rescue, they were also sustaining the most intense demands on their salaries—their greater earning power often meant that they were supporting poorer relatives—and thus the most likely to need to borrow” (James, 2015: 90). This shows how

the few with income become resources for the larger number of poorer relatives depending on them, thus becoming the most indebted. Those new to the middle-income bracket and from poor backgrounds are especially confronted with requests for support from their networks. Still, it would be one-sided to view these relations between the poor and the middle classes as merely constraints. Kanisani explained that these relationships remain valuable, and severing ties with poorer relatives could even be risky.

Mega-churches associated with Third Wave Pentecostalism have been gaining ground in Kenya since the 1980s (Anderson, 2014). The Church of Social Ascension,⁴ where Pastor Kanisani preaches, opened its Kisumu branch in 2009 and has since gained followers across all Kenyan towns and cities, especially among the middle and upper classes. While this church sets out to reach all social classes, embracing both poor and rich, Kanisani explains that the poor are less likely to attend because services are conducted entirely in English: “Our audience cuts across all classes, but a large group may be professionals, such as lawyers, medical doctors, lecturers, and professors” (Kanisani, 23 February 2017). In a later conversation, the head of the mission department similarly identified the target audience as those above the poverty line: “This is the church for the schooled, the professionals and the rich” (Rehema, 26 February 2017). The gospel they preach both inspires and justifies self-accomplishment, describing social upward mobility as a divine blessing based on merits and prayer. Nevertheless, the church also fosters sharing economies and care networks within its community.

To foster deeper personal connections, larger congregations are divided into smaller cell groups. These meet weekly in private homes, offering spiritual guidance and financial assistance to fellow members in need within a rather homogeneous community, where everyone knows and counsels each other. Cell groups or ministries are organized around neighbourhoods, professions, or life-cycle stages, such as singles, widows, youth, and students. Some offer special activities, such as workshops for entrepreneurs or weekend trips for couples, but all activities focus on fostering caring bonds. As Pastor Kanisani describes it, the church’s structure merely “lubricates” these social interactions and, through their cell groups, permeates all spheres of life (Kanisani, 23 February 2017). When visiting cell group meetings, this space serves as a new way of relating to others of the same faith who also share similar neighbourhoods, professions, marital status or age, and who are facing or have overcome similar challenges. Growing in faith together, cell groups counsel their members on self-optimization when confronted with difficult decisions, while also encouraging socioeconomic upward mobility (cf. Shani, 2022: 109), fulfilling the functions of micro-congregations— “the core of every religious support structure” (Rohregger, 2009: 152). Each member takes turns to host the weekly meetings of their cell group, providing food and preparing a scripture reading.

However, the support that members of these rather socially homogeneous cell groups provide to each other does not address the numerous requests for assistance that middle-class members receive from less privileged individuals outside their church community. After discussing the need to support each other within the church, I returned to the pastor to inquire how individuals should handle the overwhelming requests from other relatives, neighbours and friends in need. Aware of this catch-22, he cautioned:

People also are not happy if you don't help... You can still reject but it gives bad blood among yourselves. [They say,] "So, because he is in a good position, he is not helping people, he is proud!" They would take it like that. So, the thin line—you just help, or maybe, if you don't have money now, you would say you would help later. When you get money soon, you [ap]portion a little bit for that. (Kanisani, 28 February 2017)

The pastor concluded that not every request need be fulfilled, as there were never enough resources to help everyone. He suggested limiting either the amount provided to individuals, or the number of people relying on one's resources, thus ensuring that the cycle of mutual dependency is broken. This approach would entail taking a mentoring role when supporting those in need. Another option was to counsel the needy to become part of the church, where seminars on "doing business in a godly way," financial literacy, and how to make wise decisions were offered.

Within the cell group, such assistance was not always monetary, but still carried financial value: one interlocutor, Christian, had promoted two of his fellow congregants when vacancies arose at his company. He not only trusted them to do good work but also noted that this had relieved the cell of the need to support their unemployed brothers. As a church elder, brother in faith, and potential colleague, he encouraged the congregation to empower the aspiring poor. "We counsel to the aim of empowering people, because the church does not have the means to support those in need sufficiently" (Christian, 29 February 2016). Such "long arms" Christians are needed in many African settings to open doors for others, whether through the church or other supportive networks. Generally, large numbers of university graduates are confronted with a lack of opportunities. Moreover, educational achievements alone are often insufficient for finding a job, as positions are typically filled through networking.⁵ Considering the value of social networks, Bill, another interlocutor and staunch member of the Church of Social Ascent, summarized: "What I believe is that your network is your net worth" (Bill, 27 December 2021).

Supporting the aspiring poor

Mutual dependency should not impoverish middle-class people like my interlocutor Mitch. Over the years, he had budgeted part of his surplus income for disadvantaged relatives like his orphaned cousins. He contributed toward their tuition fees, pointing out that this arrangement was straightforward for him to plan how long these funds would be necessary. After he had seen one cousin through secondary school, another would require school fees, but once that support was complete, he would stop. Afterwards, it would be his turn to further his own career and complete a master's degree before his son began secondary school. This plan was developed in agreement with his parents, both being retired civil servants with a decent pension, while also burdened with paying for the orphans' tuition fees. While I was impressed by this careful schedule, I was surprised at his choice not to support his parents. He pointed out that it was easier to plan his finances if he paid the tuition directly, rather than supplementing his parents' pensions and leaving it to them to care for the orphans. Tuition payments have a limited timeframe, whereas supplementing pensions involves an indefinite financial commitment. Another advantage of paying the cousins' tuition fee was that he hoped to help them become financially

independent, thus preventing them from having to fall back on the family network in the future.

Mitch's support was selectively based on who could be helped successfully, reflecting considerations on the social reproduction of status. He implied that he was helping his orphaned cousins to perform well enough in a competitive system to eventually become providers themselves—recalling an ethnography by Parker Shipton. Mitch mentored and empowered his dependents, a model that perhaps reproduced patron-client relations in a system that Shipton conceptualizes as educational patronage (2007: 116), and that Shani terms “sponsored mobility” (2022: 155). Shipton discusses how the “economically promising poor” are helped by aid organizations set up within their communities (2009: 179). This raises questions of deservingness, potential, and long-term relations. Mitch added that there was another reason for his willingness to help: rejecting such requests and leaving young people to their own devices could be risky, as they might become jealous and threaten those who did not share their wealth. Thus, it was important for Mitch to keep the orphans off the streets.

Mitch: [Uneducated youth] are saying, now he is not helping us. And they start bothering your parents at home. They can become criminals. They can even become a danger to you if you don't empower them. You may find they have broken into your house because they don't have ways of taking care of themselves. So, we empower them. We need to take them to school.

Lena: So, the motivation is, to a certain extent, the fear that they may come after you?

Mitch: Yes, absolutely. Or other people. And we have seen it happening. (Mitch, 15 March 2016).

Mitch pointed to the reproduction of class, stressing that empowerment was needed through connections to supportive people and networks. Deservingness and potential may play a minor role in these negotiations for support through empowerment; rather, recipients' ability to disturb or harm those in a position to provide seems significant. This suggests that rising to the middle classes entails both risks and opportunities within a family network. Those who succeed in joining the middle classes not only watch out for their own interests but also serve the security needs of poorer people.

At the same time, making his support conditional on mentoring, Mitch strengthens his own position as a sponsor and coach; a position that brings a certain respectability. Similarly, Ferguson argues that those who become wealthy and lend it to the poor are honourable. This is part of privately organized community development and poverty relief. Wealthier people are not respected for their wealth per se, but because of the social practice of redistributing that wealth with poorer community members (Ferguson, [1990] 2007: 153). In his book *Give a Man a Fish*, Ferguson elaborates on how such traditional practices of redistribution have been too often interpreted as problematic; however, they must also be considered a solution within the framework of distributive labour (2015: 97). This position brings the provider high esteem and confers decision-making power. For instance, Mitch freely admitted that he strategically demonstrated his generosity and financial capability within his family network to earn respect (cf. Yount-André, 2020). Mitch sought to influence the progress of those he supported. Through his networks, he could not only open doors but also show his disapproval by withholding payments if he saw a misstep or lack of progress by those he was mentoring.

Hence, his material and non-material support came with conditions and placed expectations on the young people. While these conditions might not have been legally binding, socially the material support was more like a loan to be repaid later rather than a one-way gift.

Similarly, Shipton, who studies loans and credits in Western Kenya, argues that lending involves entrusting wealth to the borrower for safekeeping. Lenders are deemed superior to borrowers and frequently boast about helping their neighbours and kin. Shipton writes “The pride, power, and prestige of the lender are important elements of long-term as well as short-term credit.” Helping others increases the lender’s pride and right to patronage in turn. In fact, Shipton notes, it is “this wealth in people” that defines class (2007: 31). Far from being a mere economic transfer, cash serves as a medium of social connectedness and relevance (Shipton, 2007: 208-211). Taking such responsibility for educational needs—whether through Gloria’s care for her siblings after their parents’ untimely deaths, the assistance of brothers and sisters in faith, Georges’ assertion that unequal neighbourhoods develop symbiotically, or Mitch’s empowerment of the aspiring poor—demonstrates trustworthiness, control, and a commitment to a long-term exchange navigated on an everyday basis.

While everyday practices of sharing within social networks are integral to self-making among the middle classes, the ability to detach oneself from overburdening requests is likewise crucial to self-care (cf. Neumark, 2017). In conclusion, both giving and withholding are indispensable for transmitting values of financial autonomy, control, and patronage.

Working toward status continuance

This brings me back to the biography of Gloria in the introductory section. At a young age, she assumed the role of breadwinner for her siblings, a situation that drove her into the dire poverty of slum life. Yet, by helping them, she had gained entitlements to future care as well as high social recognition—immeasurable values that formed a powerful fail-safe system for her.

In 2021, I had planned to revisit Gloria in her elegant townhouse with its glittering ceilings, but I found it empty. On the phone, she explained that she was compelled to reduce her standard of living and move to a smaller house in a rural area. My taxi turned off the paved road and followed a sandy track that led to a small bridge over a muddy stream. The white taxi kept getting stuck in the deep ruts, becoming reddish brown with mud. Eventually, a few houses came into view, and Gloria waved from the open iron gate. The property was still a building site. Compared to their spacious one-storey mansion in the city, this new house was small, with the interior designed to be practical rather than elegant. The garden was already planted; chickens ran around the house while tethered cows were grazing across the pasture.

Joseph and Gloria were well positioned within the middle classes when I first met them in 2015. By 2021, however, they were glad to have some subsistence farming and the safety of being far away from violence while the election campaigns heated up once again. During my most recent visit, Gloria told me that she still wanted to reopen her shop in the city but had changed her plans. Weighing the risks and opportunities, Gloria’s husband Joseph—a careful planner—had convinced Gloria to rent out the mansion in the city to help pay off this smaller house in the hinterland and cover more immediate expenses. Recent years had been financially and emotionally straining. After their eldest daughter died following a long illness, their second-eldest daughter unexpectedly became pregnant with twins. Shortly after, Joseph’s mother, who lived alone in a remote village, needed care

and eventually passed away. All this happened at a time public health workers were on strike, leaving only private health services available. Meanwhile, their third child was doing well at school and had been accepted into the expensive private boarding school his parents had hoped for. This moment should have marked a successful step in the reproduction of their status in the next generation, but the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic added to an already uncertain situation.

During the 2020 lockdown, schools closed for several months. The announcement of a repeat school year meant that double school fees were due, with few opportunities for parents to raise the necessary funds in a shrunken economy. This tense atmosphere not only permeated Joseph and Gloria's household but also affected many other interlocutors in the middle-class study. Like many others, Gloria's goal during a personal crisis—and amid a heating political and economic environment—was no longer to invest in further social advancement, but rather to slow down the inexorable decline. Having relocated just prior to lockdown, the economic downturn affected Gloria less in the countryside than in the city. The family could consume what grew in their garden. She also felt safer there than in the city, where their home had been targeted by criminals. Economically, however, her new rural home was not conducive to investment, so she committed herself to a frugal lifestyle and relied on her resilience.

In 2015, I asked Gloria if her siblings supported her in times of need. She answered: "I think I am content with what I have. So, I have given them space to grow. They would tell me, 'you know you are our mum, you supported us so much, you spent so much, we can at least do one, two, three [for you].' I would tell them, 'It is okay, take care of your families first.' I wouldn't want to disturb them" (Gloria, 10 August 2015). All her siblings were now well-positioned and able to send her money, but she refused any financial help. In 2021, her brother, who lived in the United States, came to visit to see for himself that she was doing well in her new home. In our conversation later that year, she made it clear that she still does not accept her siblings' support, which is unusual given that it reflects their appreciation for her past sacrifices. Nevertheless, she values having an active and caring network she can rely on, should push ever come to shove.

Conclusion

This contribution connects studies on the debate about the rise of the African middle classes with the concept of vigilance. While the debate so far has not shed sufficient light on the risks of downward mobility, the fear of falling is very present for middle-class individuals. The challenges that everyday life brings demand a heightened alertness and an ongoing readiness to mitigate uncertainties.

While the middle classes may be rising, their new class position remains far from permanent. The fear of falling accompanies social ascent, and careful planning to cushion the subsequent fall is a fundamental—if not the central—component of "being-doing" middle class. The social reality of recurring crises that are an essential part of middle-class life makes vigilance key to maintaining acquired social status for as long as possible. Such overlapping crises, like in Gloria's situation, are not unique to Kenya nor to Africa as a whole. Still, anticipating their full extent and interferences remains a complex task.

Part of middle-class self-making involves solidarity and care as a collective. This paper explores community building within neighbourhoods, religious networks, kinship webs, and

professional ties. All these demand constant and active participation in the circulation of material and immaterial resources to claim support from within these networks, which in turn become “net worth.” In the absence of functional governmental institutions, such self-help communities facilitate infrastructural development with “long arms” (Birzle, 2017: 58), provide security, and offer welfare to orphans, the bereaved, retirees, the unemployed, and those experiencing personal losses. Giving is an honourable task enshrined in the national ethos. In my interviews and conversations with middle-class people, I found that providing care is seen as a demonstration of social responsibility. It also grants decision-making powers within a network and works toward both the reduction of poverty and the reproduction of social ascent. The most honourable act was to empower poorer people—either by kickstarting those with high potential to become high achievers, or, by supporting those who would otherwise be likely to hinder the middle classes’ progress. These individuals could be potentially harmful, increasing the middle classes’ risks from criminals who might otherwise take what is “their” share. This meant the middle classes supported both those likely to rise as well as those likely to endanger the circulation of resources within care networks. Concerning support for numerous dependents, middle-class interlocutors felt overburdened, on one hand, but honoured to be able to assist, on the other. Thus, they framed their daily negotiations as a responsibility. Therefore, a vigilant observation of the potentially daily changing situation is key for mitigating uncertainties. This fits the description of Dürr et al.’s conceptualising “Self-making through vigilance” (2023: 7).

During the COVID crisis, community building became the highest risk activity, as social distancing was mandated. The public health message hit right at the heart of communal resilience, cutting holes in the care networks. At the same time, the economic situation added stress and, it seems, pushed mutual support and network building further into the digital sphere, thus challenging the very meaning of community, solidarity, and care. The middle classes lost opportunities for self-making in the midst of the crisis. The final section shows that the middle classes are navigating an unstable equilibrium—dissatisfied with this instability and overburdened with social responsibility. This will undoubtedly lead to downward mobility as the rollercoaster ride comes to an end.

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Notes

1. All names of interlocutors have been changed to preserve anonymity.
2. Criticism of a purely economic definition and of other sociological models of social stratification and class is summarised in Neubert and Stoll (2018).

3. As demonstrated in Kroeker (2020), middle-class individuals in Kenya and other African countries often cannot afford to live in urban areas during old age and therefore plan to retire to rural areas. Securing entitlements to care and material resources must be done and invested in during their economically productive years.
4. The name of the church has been changed to preserve anonymity.
5. Similarly, Behrends and Lentz describe that in Ghana education alone does not suffice to get a job: “You need a pivot somewhere along... Everyone needs somebody who can push you!... I didn’t pass, because I was using my brain only.” (Behrends and Lentz, 2012: 156; cf. Steuer et al., 2017).

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