



– Institute’s Colloquium –

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Multi-class families, regional disparities and the emergence of middle classes in Africa

Drawing on examples from Africa, this contribution discusses two challenges confronting research on emerging middle classes in the Global South. The first concerns the relationship between class and family. Conventional class theories consider class membership as comprising not only individuals, but entire households and families. In African societies, however, marriage ties and kin relations of upwardly mobile individuals often cut across class boundaries, resulting in ‘multi-class’ households and competing loyalties. How does this affect styles of ‘doing being middle class’ and the emergence of a self-confident middle class? The second challenge concerns the spatial dimensions of middle-class boundary work. In conventional class theories the nation-state is the obvious framework for defining class boundaries, but, as the paper shows, African examples point to the importance of subnational as well as transnational dimensions of class formation. The insights provided by the data from Africa lead us to ask: In what ways do sub-national memberships and loyalties, organised around locality, region, ethnicity, or religion, defy, intersect with, or drive the emergence of national middle classes? How can transnationally attained economic, social and cultural capital affect social hierarchies ‘back home’? These challenges and the questions they raise force us to develop more nuanced understandings of social stratification in complex societies in general.

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4-6 p.m.

Institute of Ethnology

Stuttstraße 21, Raum STU 105 (2.10)

Everybody is welcome!