

## Mary's room

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### A case study on becoming a consumer in Francistown, Botswana

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This paper seeks to make a contribution to the growing field of the ethnography of consumption and consumerism in countries of the 'South' (cf. Appadurai 1986; Baudrillard 1968, 1970; Burke 1990; Friedman 1994; Miller 1987, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c). My strategy is not to focus on a localized set of people, their practices, objects and meanings, but to present in the form of a narrative the emergent patterns of consumerism in one southern African town, Francistown, arranged around the personal experiences of a young woman, Mary, whom we shall follow on her path from village girl to incipient urban consumer. Mary is an entirely historical person; her life, as I describe it, is based on first-hand participant observation and interviews that extended over more than five years. In other words, the time-honoured extended case method has provided my main methodological inspiration.

As my argument develops, I shall touch on the aesthetics of manufactured objects in consumerism, although I have little to say about the equally important topic of the *desire* they may inspire in the would-be consumer. I shall gloss over the macro-economics which set the stage for Francistown around 1990. Focusing merely on one person's experiences, I can hardly dwell on the proliferation of distinctions and tastes, the association of particular configurations of these traits with emerging social groupings, etc., except to the extent to which our protagonist herself progresses through a very limited number of identities and reference groups in the course of the few years that my argument spans. Instead, my ethnography has a fairly conservative social anthropological slant, stressing social relational factors over symbolism and aesthetics. No doubt this is one of its shortcomings, although my ethnographic intuition tells me it is only when we manage to situate emerging consumers in their total social situation that can we hope to capture, at the subjective and anecdotal level, the factors which make them into consumers. And I hasten to admit that, given the great extent to which the making of consumers is an expression of global movements which are largely independent

of the consciousness of actors in the periphery, like Mary, such an ethnographic approach needs to be complemented by more structural, global analysis in terms of globalization, macro-economics, and the aesthetics of the manufactured object.

Whatever the considerable shortcomings of my case study of Mary, it is clear that one can get this amount of biographical and personal detail only for a handful of people. The extended case is not meant to present an exemplary case, for at this level of specificity every person in a society is unique. Its purpose<sup>1</sup> is not even to present a typical case, but to bring out the structure, dynamics, contradictions and conflicts inherent in the social process which constitutes society, in much the same way as the structure of a landscape can be brought out (if only partially) by any itinerary in that landscape, regardless of the personality of the traveller and even of the unusual nature of the itinerary.

In fact, beyond Mary's case I have collected a wealth of quantitative material on the topic, through participant observation in people's homes as well as through an intensive sample survey conducted among 200 adult Francistonians. However, before we can interpret this more comprehensive material convincingly, we need an appreciation of the social and symbolic processes involved, and of the actors' dilemmas and choices, down which path the following argument is a step.

## FRANCISTOWN

Founded more than a hundred years ago, Francistown (cf. Kerven 1976; Schapera 1971; Tapela 1976) – named after one of the region's first gold concessionaires – is among the older inland towns in southern Africa north of the Limpopo river. Until Botswana's independence (1966) it could pretend to have largely remained a white company town, dominated by the Tati Company which had quickly expanded its original gold mining activities into cattle ranging (turning most of the African inhabitants of the Tati, later North-East, district into tenants or squatters on Tati Company land), and wholesale and retail trade. For the latter activities, Francistown was the obvious centre, as a railhead situated on the north-bound railroad which connects South Africa with Zimbabwe, Zambia and Congo.

This strategic geographical position also made Francistown the focal point in the movement of migrant mining labour between the countries in the north, and the South African Witwatersrand. The district's male population tended to keep itself aloof from the town, and the Ikalanga language of the surrounding countryside never became the town's lingua franca; the national Setswana is used instead. However, catering to the needs (food, beer, company – with varying degrees of permanency and propriety) especially of returning, relatively affluent migrants became a standard (although far from universal) episode in the careers of the district's women (cf. Cooper n.d.; Kerven 1979; Larsson 1989; Procek 1993; Tsimako 1980). Many returning migrants actually settled in the town and its peri-urban villages, never to see their northern homes again.

As a result, rather like Lobatse (but unlike most other Botswana settlements of comparable size which until very recently have mainly been tribal<sup>2</sup> capitals), Francistown emphatically displayed distinct traits of southern African urbanism early in its history. Let us list some of these traits:

- By contrast to a relatively weak informal sector (whose products, incidentally, often fail to meet the standards of urban taste) the formal employment sector is well developed; here, the South African and Tati Company's racial, authoritarian and monopolist models, by which contemporary management styles have been informed, ensure that labour-management relations are tense, workers' identification with employers' interests limited, and litigation through the state's Labour Office frequent.
- The same sense of under-communication and unease has spilled over into other domains of Francistown society wherever African individuals face formal organizations, for instance: education, the interaction between clients and civil servants at bureaucratic counters, and especially African buyers in white- and Indian-owned retail shops.
- The retail trade is all the more important because, with the relative discontinuity – not absence – characteristic of social and economic ties between Francistown and the surrounding rural areas, and the virtual absence of urban horticulture, most of the food consumed by African Francistonians does not come from rural subsistence production but is purchased in the town's formal sector; of course, this is a common situation both in urban southern Africa and, increasingly so, throughout urban Africa.
- There is considerable ethnic animosity between Ikalanga-speaking Kalanga and Tswana-speaking Khurutshe (the town's two 'host' groups), on the one hand, and many other Tswana and Ndebele-speaking groups from more distant parts, on the other (cf. van Binsbergen 1994, 1995).
- There exist a multitude of formal bars and informal shebeens,<sup>3</sup> a mushrooming of independent churches and political parties, and an emergent multiplicity of lifestyles along class lines.
- Fashionable codes of self-display through dress, hairstyle and make-up, extend further into the expressive domain through consumption of mechanic and electronic 'modern' music (mostly from an African urban context in South Africa).

The public African culture of Francistown has always been a migrants' and 'modern' culture, in which rural and historic elements – far from being totally absent – are mainly admitted in a fragmented and decontextualized manner, in secluded, intimate contexts away from the public gaze and from the town centre. Thus, accomplished historic housing embellished with verandas/kitchens (Tswana *lolwapa*, Ikalanga *nsha*) half secluded by a low mud fence, and with pictorial decorations on the walls, can be found only in Francistown's peripheral squattments, and today are even explicitly prohibited from formal residential areas; standardized inter-ethnic joking and historic songs can be heard only in private shebeens, when the hour is late and alcohol consumption has greatly lowered thresholds of inhibition; the Kalanga people's involvement, in town as in the village, in the Mwali cult is a public secret that cannot be discussed with non-cult members; the town's rich cultic and therapeutic services catering for individual needs beyond Christianity are likewise completely unmarked in the public space, and may go

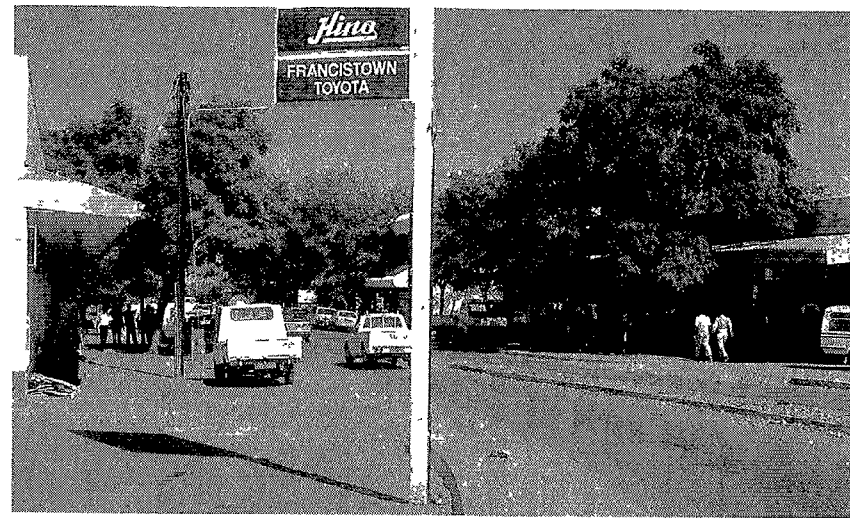


Figure 10.1 Entering Francistown from the northbound main road to Zimbabwe: Blue Jacket Street, 1988, with recently constructed retail trade buildings

unnoticed from the town centre, although in the lower-class townships they occasionally manifest themselves in nocturnal drumming and furtive uniformed processions.

Before 1966, the African population of Francistown consisted mainly of tens of thousands of squatters, without title to the land on which their (typically neo-traditional, thatched) houses stood. Very few had access to the town's many large plots with European-style houses, occupied by white and Indian company employees and civil servants. Independence put an end to residential segregation along racial lines (although *de facto* segregation along class lines continues). What few obstacles to African squatting had existed, were removed, resulting in a further influx of urban migrants. Around 1980, however, the Ministry of Lands and Local Government obtained World Bank funds for the complete rationalization of the town's housing situation, by thinning the existing squatments and by greatly expanding the town's residential space under the Self-Help Housing Agency (SHHA pronounced *sha*) project (Republic of Botswana 1983b). This enabled many thousands of Francistown's low-income families to build their own houses (with a minimum of two rooms) according to strictly enforced government specifications, on the basis of an interest-free loan, and on a 20 by 20 metre plot to which a 99-year lease was obtained, provided it was developed as stipulated, and the monthly levy of P8.25 (by 1990: US\$5) was paid regularly. However, recognizing that SHHA plots meant wealth on a big scale, the allocation of such plots was to a minor extent diverted towards the middle and higher income strata; additionally, many of the intended beneficiaries of the scheme used the opportunity to acquire more than one plot per nuclear family, and exploited the spare plot as a means of entry into the extremely lucrative urban markets both for rented accommodation and, even, (since with a minor additional investment freehold title to a SHHA plot can be obtained) for the sale of real estate.

Francistown went through an economic boom after Independence. It became a wholesale market for Zimbabwe and Zambia, up to 1980 benefited from the nearby Zimbabwe war of liberation and, until around 1990, was a centre of the sanctions-dodging industry within the South Africa–Botswana–Swaziland customs union. The town attracted major industrial projects, like the Francistown abattoir and the Sowa Pan soda ash plant, which were the basis for all sorts of multiplier effects, and it saw a dramatic expansion of its governmental, medical, educational, banking and retail sectors. Such expansion was in line with Botswana's exceptional performance as a viable African growth economy, based on diamond and meat exports, and sustained by 'good governance', including an uninterrupted multi-party democracy from the time of independence, an impeccable human rights record, and a steady trickle-down of national income to benefit – and co-opt the electoral support of – the masses in terms of medical and educational facilities. Francistown's formal sector labour market grew considerably. Owing to the local work force's propensity to labour conflicts, local managements have tended to favour female labour, even for jobs such as bricklaying and digging trenches. Partly because of the town's history of migrant labour,<sup>4</sup> Francistown women are often heads of single-parent households, sole providers for their children, and highly proletarianized (lacking effective and viable rural economic ties), which situation renders these women relatively reliable and submissive in urban employment.

Under these circumstances, Francistown was largely able to absorb the massive recent influx of migrants from rural Botswana, especially those from the agricultural (as distinct from pastoral) region within a radius of roughly 100 kilometres: people expelled from their villages by the collapse of their agricultural system which had resulted from shifts in both climatic and market conditions.

Because of both this recent influx and the insecurity of African residence during the colonial period, the African population of Francistown today comprises far fewer born urbanites than one might expect in such a relatively old town. Among adults, the median period of urban residence is slightly more than ten years. A majority of adults were born and grew up in a village, coming to town only in late adolescence or even later. Thus Francistown presents the paradox of an established, fully-fledged structure of urbanism, to which its many recently immigrated inhabitants are yet adjusting as a new thing.

### SHHA HOUSING AS A FOCUS OF CONSUMPTION

Francistown's boom was not to last, although the kind of individual and collective misery habitual in most other African countries so far remains a distant prospect, which one hopes will never be reached. Around 1990, several new shopping malls, with large supermarkets and smaller shops and boutiques surplus to any requirement, had emerged in order to compete with and replace the colonial-looking white and Indian retail emporia along the town centre's two main streets. By the mid-1990s, these new malls already had empty premises and showed signs of dilapidation. No further SHHA plots were given out after the early 1990s.

However, the SHHA heritage has completely altered the atmosphere of the town. The teeming cosy and shady squatments have largely given way to

sprawling new residential areas of fairly uniform, but healthy and solid houses. Their, usually unplastered, walls of grey concrete bricks, ragged cemented joints between the brick courses, and regulation metal window frames, with ironical rows of small brick toilet buildings at the back, inspire a sense, if not of beauty, nonetheless of accomplishment and pride on the part of their occupants or owner-occupants.

The SHHA house (see Figure 10.2) is the main, eminently tangible, symbol of the low-income Francistonian<sup>5</sup> proudly turned into a modern consumer. Its minimalist aesthetic (the enforced product of the construction material market and governmental building regulations, rationalized under the tyrannies of arithmetic and geometry), seldom invites further architectural embellishment on the part of its obedient and submissive owner-builder, who knows that his SHHA certificate (proudly framed and displayed in many SHHA houses) depends on unhesitating compliance with municipal rules.

Under these circumstances, the owners' pride is mixed with a measure of estrangement at being forced, by the (ideally) blind bureaucratic logic of SHHA, to accept ethnic strangers and enemies as their nearest neighbours, and submit, in their sanitary habits, to embarrassing levels of conspicuousness. Under the gaze of

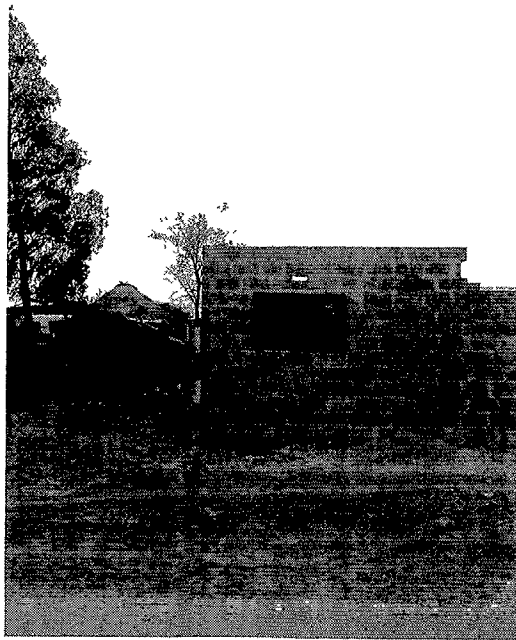


Figure 10.2 A SHHA house under construction: the vertical measuring rod makes visible the tyrannies of arithmetic and geometry; the 'traditional', or temporary structure in the back is tolerated by the municipality only for as long as the SHHA house awaits completion

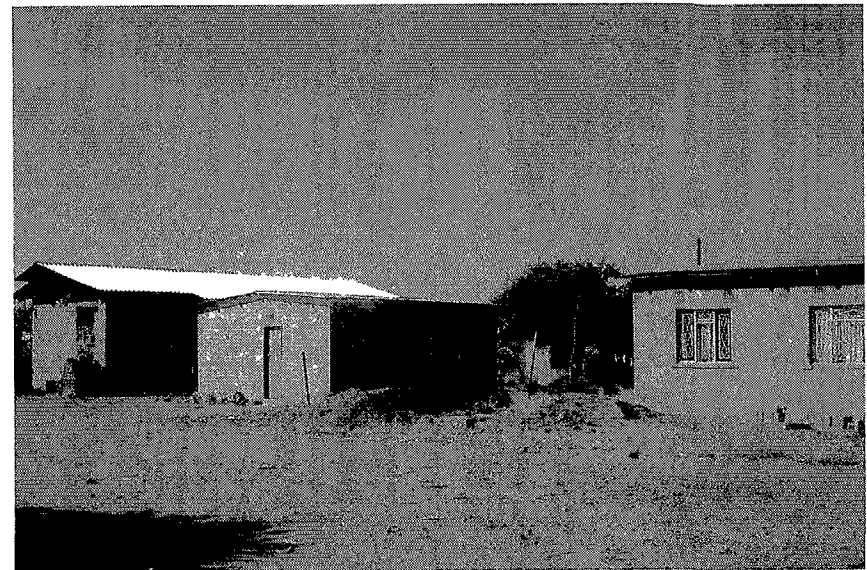


Figure 10.3 SHHA housing, Francistown

strangers it is necessary to leave the house, cross the backyard and open the noisy toilet door made of corrugated iron, all the while carrying toilet paper – one of the principal items of consumption in Francistown – or shreds of newspaper which cannot be left in the toilet for fear of theft. While this is a common enough urban routine throughout south-central and southern Africa, it is totally at variance with habits in, for instance, Kalanga villages. However, even in the villages, residential plots have now been demarcated into neat 40 by 40 metre units, albeit village neighbours are usually kinsmen; here, toilets are considered alien and unnecessary, although the alternative, the bush, is receding and thinning at an increasing rate. And how does one cook on a wood fire, if custom frowns on lighting one inside a permanent, closed house, but SHHA regulations simultaneously forbid the construction of a 'traditional' kitchen, or any other 'traditional structure', on the plot? Our nearest neighbours in the Somerset East Extension SHHA residential area – whose yard was largely occupied by the wonderfully preserved corpse of a fairly new Mercedes lorry driven without proper lubrication and who, judging by this, were no paupers by any standard – did not know how to negotiate this problem and, in the rainy season, could often be seen desperately braving the wind and the rain, cooking out in the open.

Is it generally true that village-derived models are not allowed to endow urban private space with much historically-anchored meaning? If so, then how do Francistonians make sense of these lasting monuments of the 1980s boom, their SHHA houses? Clearly, part of the answer is by filling them with furniture and other consumer durables, thus transforming their empty concrete space into a space of ideals, models, and personal endeavour and achievement along the lines stipulated by these models. How do they manage to do this when their formal sector income barely caters for food, clothing and payment of the SHHA levy and

loan, or rent if one is not a SHHA plot-owner? These are some of the questions to which Mary's extended case suggests provisional answers.

### MARY'S TRIBULATIONS

Mary, a young Kalanga woman whose Tswana<sup>6</sup> name is Dikeledi, is nearly nineteen years old when, heavily pregnant with her first child, she comes within the scope of our research in early 1989. She rents a room on the plot at the back of the SHHA plot we are renting ourselves. Her sullen face, free of make-up, her ungroomed hair and the big calloused feet which poke out from her cheap sandals, betray the village girl she then still is. Seeking to live up to her imminent motherhood, she has bought a simple black hat and wears it, but since she has not yet decided whether she can afford to keep it, or must sell it at a small profit, she prefers to wear the hat still protected by its original cellophane wrapping. In Francistown at the time such attire is neither unique nor invites ridicule. The packaged hat is emblematic of the liminal stage at which we encounter Mary in her developing attitude towards manufactured objects from the market – in her trajectory of becoming an urban consumer.

Born and raised in one of the villages which make up the rural community of Tutume, a hundred kilometres north-west of Francistown, Mary was barely seventeen when she first came to Francistown. Here she found employment cooking and washing clothes for the bachelor soldiers at the Francistown barracks. Before long she entered into a relationship with one of them, George, and found herself pregnant. The soldier was soon transferred to Gaborone, later to be enlisted in an international SADCC peace-keeping force in Angola. With his permanent, well-paid position he would have made an excellent provider, but the question of marriage scarcely arose, and he is never sued for damages; for even in democratic, human-rights conscious Botswana, people have reason to fear taking soldiers to court. Moreover, Mary claims that she still loves him, although it will be years before she sees him again.

Mary is bright and determined, but she is also a socially wounded girl who is conscious of carrying a considerable burden of kinship-generated personal conflict. At the age of twelve, in the total ignorance of sexuality standard among Kalanga girls of that age, she was raped by a stranger in the outlying fields of Tutume while herding goats; the offender was brought to trial, and the experience apparently has not left a major scar on Mary's psyche. A few years later, when her breasts were fully developed, another stranger squeezed one of them with such sadistic violence as she left a village shop, that it became permanently, if only slightly, deformed, a fact of which Mary is conscious and embarrassed. But her real burden concerns not strangers, but close kinsmen, and not physical rape and assault, but social rejection. Her father TaLawrence, a die-hard traditionalist, lives with a later wife and many small children on a large homestead in Tutume, surrounded by the considerable homesteads of Mary's two oldest half-brothers. Her mother, MaDikeledi, lives one kilometre away, alone and unsupported by her ex-husband, on a plot adjacent to that of her own brothers, who do not support her either. Arthritis of the hip joints has made her a permanent cripple, unfit for agri-

cultural work. Mary is her oldest daughter, followed by a son, Ngalano, who is Mary's junior by three years. Mary did well at primary school, but her father was not prepared to contribute the modest amount education costs in Botswana today, and she had to leave school early. With the continuing drought, their fields barely yield enough to survive on, their handful of goats hardly help, and Mary's going to town is meant to support her mother and brother financially. Her only other urban experience, and single other travelling experience, has been a few day's visit to her mother's brother, Present, who is employed as a car mechanic in Botswana's capital city, Gaborone, 430 kilometres south of Francistown.

Mary's sole initial contact in Francistown is her mother's sister, MaJulia, an enterprising lady who, together with her husband, has managed to acquire and develop a SHHA plot in the Satellite South residential area. When the construction work is finished (TaJulia is a professional bricklayer) the plot boasts a four-roomed house, a small general retail store, and several rooms to let. There is no place for Mary here, and while slaving at the barracks during the day, she has to sleep in a little grass shelter she has built in one of the few surviving squatter areas. The rains are heavy in 1988 and, like most other houses there, the shelter is swept away by the flooding Tati river. For a short while the event appears to be a blessing in disguise since, as a 'victim of flooding', Mary immediately qualifies for allocation of a SHHA plot, for which other people have been on the waiting list for years. Since the SHHA largely (on paper, even exclusively) caters for the lower income groups, women are as prominent among the scheme's beneficiaries as they are in the Francistown labour market, and it is not exceptional for a single girl in her early twenties to build and possess her own SHHA house. But what does peasant girl Mary know, at this stage, of urban economic strategies? Her aunt knows far better, and it is decided that Mary's plot in the new SHHA area called Somerset East Extension will be registered under her aunt's name – the developed plot in Satellite South already being owned by TaJulia. While aunt and uncle lose no time building the two rooms and the toilet that confirm their legal status as SHHA tenants, Mary sits out her pregnancy in a nearby rented room, under the smoke of the new Nyangabgwe hospital where she will deliver her child. With great optimism she names the child Tatayaone, 'Daddy will see you'. Immediately after her discharge from hospital she and the baby move back to her mother's village, taking everything she has managed to buy on her salary: her iron bed frame, a blanket, a few items of clothing, her still-wrapped hat, and a small, informal-sector manufactured dresser (a cupboard with a sliding glass door) to display her two unmatching teacups.

In Botswana, a woman's post-partum period is considered a ritual confinement during which, in her status as *motsetsi*,<sup>7</sup> she is supposed to concentrate entirely on her baby, grow fat, and refrain from productive or sexual activities. In practice, however, Mary uses her confinement to restore the productive pride and competence which had lain fallow during her year and a half in town. Leaving the baby in her mother's care, Mary single-handedly builds a pole-and-dagga thatched house for herself. Next, and with great gusto, she prepares the fields in autumn, and she insists on ploughing them herself with the oxen she borrows from her maternal uncles. Only once does she visit her father's nearby homestead, where

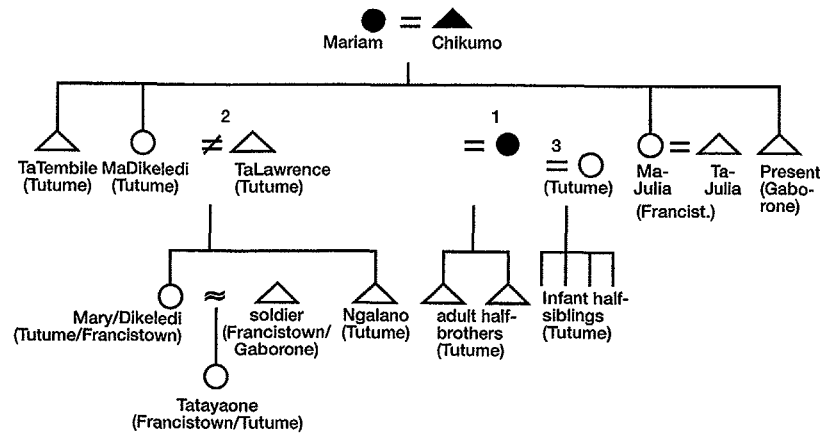


Diagram 10.1 Mary's genealogy

she is made to feel an unwelcome stranger.

However, this relatively idyllic episode comes to an end. Even when used with the greatest possible economy (which then, and for several years to come, means for Mary two meals daily consisting of plain meal porridge, usually without vegetable relish let alone meat), her town-earned money is finally depleted, and she moves back to Francistown so as to earn money for her dependants: her mother, whose arthritis is now being treated, at considerable cost in the way of sacrificial meals, by St John's Apostolic church (a local Independent church); for Tatayaone, whose clothes and nappies use up a lot of costly detergent; and for Ngalano, who is still unemployed.

Mary's aunt's Somerset East Extension plot, formerly Mary's own, now has four separate rooms and, as a great favour, Mary is allowed to rent one of them, two by three metres square, for P40 per month, undercutting the current market price by P10. The other plots are rented to young people who are working or studying in Francistown; they are total strangers to Mary, from different regions and ethnic groups, but she gets on with them and exchanges the small services of minding, borrowing, and fixing usual among co-tenants. A Tutume home-boy, a distant cousin of Mary's in his late twenties, lives next door, where he is operating a branch of her mother's church, which Mary joins. As a sturdy peasant girl, Mary has no difficulty finding employment digging trenches at the Dumela industrial site north of Francistown. Working conditions under the South African white foremen are anachronistically authoritarian, no toilets are provided on the site and, after a few months, she is fired together with her fellow-worker when the two women are found to have distanced themselves in order to urinate. Trembling with rage she appeals to me, her sometime neighbour, and on my recommendation she finds a job with a white lady friend of ours who runs Tswana Weaving, a factory producing ornamental rugs with a workforce consisting entirely of African women. Many of these women have a level of education similar to Mary's, but some completed junior secondary school (Form II) or continued even further.

## THE FRUITS OF SECURITY, OR BECOMING A CONSUMER

The security of this employment position, the relative benevolence of the company's managerial attitudes, the on-the-job training, the emphasis on leisurely bodily care<sup>8</sup> manifest in the hilarious collective shower with which the young women conclude every working day, the day-to-day exposure to subtle strategies of beautifying through make-up, hair-styling, choice of clothing – all these circumstances combine to effect a metamorphosis in Mary, both as a young woman and as a consumer (cf. Pfau 1991). She discovers that it is largely through consumption – along the lines stipulated by her reference group of workmates – that she is able to construct herself as a woman in ways undreamt of in her Tutume girlhood. The management considers her too much of a peasant to become a fully-fledged weaver, with the keen sense of colour nuances and total control over the woof this requires; instead she is given the job of threading the looms, to prepare them for the weavers. She takes great pride in this elementary, but essential, job. She thoroughly enjoys – and makes herself highly dependent on – her all-female shop-floor environment of: gossip, small quarrels, shared food at lunchtimes, competition over smart clothing and correctly pronounced, richly expressed Setswana, the brief improvised sketches in which management is secretly imitated and ridiculed, the sisterly assistance rendered and received in bodily grooming, the shower routine with its great reassurance of other girls' nudity. Her calloused hands and feet soften, she learns to scorn the hard physical work in which she took pride only a year earlier, she learns to use cheap body lotion after every bath, comes to insist on the use of toilet paper and disposable menstrual pads (instead of improvised thick wads of toilet paper grabbed at the factory toilets), becomes expert at the names, prices and directions-for-use of hair-styling products. Impeccably white 'takkies' (sport shoes) replace her sandals. The once cherished hat, with or without wrapping, is now recognized to have been impossibly un-smart. She gradually joins the ranks of women who can negotiate the unpaved town roads without visible signs of mud or dust on their clothing or shoes – the same category (and it appears to be the majority of women in Francistown) who (except at the greatest possible discomfort, none of which is simulated either) cannot make the short crossing, from their homes in the suburbs to the town centre, even on the briefest and most necessary shopping trip, without first going through an hour of head-to-toe grooming: protective magic in the face of a fundamentally inimical urban environment, as I have interpreted this institution elsewhere (van Binsbergen 1993a).

## BUDGETARY ADJUSTMENTS

Mary's budgeting pattern soon undergoes radical changes. She tries to remain true to her original intention of supporting her child, mother and brother with her Francistown-earned money, but this kinship-based, altruistic goal has to compete in an unequal struggle with her other goals, all of which relate to her desire to define herself as a person, as a woman, among her new reference group of urban workmates and, to a lesser degree, fellow urban tenants. She is still bitter about her

aunt's real estate strategies, which she now sees through. Her aunt's unkind words, when Mary complained how little support she received in her parlous situation, keep turning over in her mind, 'You, Dikeledi, you are nothing, and you will never amount to anything'. For the first time, Mary allows herself consciously to resent her father's failure to support her materially or show her any moral commitment; he let her down when he could have chosen to spare her the humiliation and hardship of her first adult years. While she feels compassion for her crippled mother, she realizes that, by taking Tatayaone into her care, her mother has taken hostage Mary's continuing obligation to support her financially; it takes P30 a month simply to feed Tatayaone and her grandmother, and an extra P30 would be needed if the child is 'to learn singing', that is go to the village nursery school. But such an outlay is made virtually impossible by the consistent refusal of Tatayaone's father to pay anything towards her upkeep, and Mary still fears to take him to court for the same reason that she never pressed for damages when he made her pregnant.<sup>9</sup> Mary feels uneasy about the cost of her mother's church rituals. And although for several years Mary has had a Francistown lover, who is himself an established Christian church leader, she feels equally uneasy about her own experiences in the unusually secretive and compelling urban branch of her church: 'If I am not even allowed to speak to my own mother about the things that happen in this church, I feel as if I am being forced, as if I am no longer a person.' Local commentators suggested the unspeakable transactions inside the church may have been of a sexual nature; they may also have bordered on sorcery (on this aspect of Francistown churches, cf. van Binsbergen 1993a). However, having lived near the church for some time and knowing several of its members fairly well, my informed opinion is that the activities were harmless, though mentally oppressive,



Figure 10.4 Licensed vending stalls in the Somerset East Extension residential area, Francistown, 1989

secrecy being imposed by the church leadership merely as a cohesive strategy. Nonetheless, although Mary soon stops going to St John's, she continues to abide by the Independent church's admonitions against alcohol, smoking and discotheques, thus rejecting a large category of potential consumption – to the great benefit of her time and finances.

So while Mary started out with what appeared to be a strong and competent, rural-orientated identity, fully conversant with the productive and reproductive tasks defined for her in a village setting, what propels her to divert much of her income away from her proclaimed rural target, and to become a consuming urbanite, is the conflictive character of her village-orientated ties as these concern both the domain of kinship and, to a lesser extent, organized Christian religion. What happens to her is not so much the result of resocialization, the implantation of a new personality orientation, but, rather more simply, the tentative adoption of a new, socially negotiable identity by means of new aspirations based on the selection of a different reference group (urban workmates and co-tenants); once this happens, learning the roles of the 'modern', 'urban consumer' is apparently neither difficult, nor protracted.

Of course, it is inherent in the structure of the market that the skills and attitudes required to be a recognizable, successful consumer should be picked up overnight. The contemporary market has different niches so as to accommodate consumers of various levels of accomplishment. Mary has continued to be intimidated by shopping in the large supermarkets lest she is discovered to be a mere peasant, misbehaving at the counters or making a fool of herself before the cashiers – as on the day when, shopping for children's shoes, she asked in impeccable Botswana English 'Where is the *friend* of this one', holding up one of a pair of shoes; the smug Form II shop assistant could not help giggling at this, 'Friend?

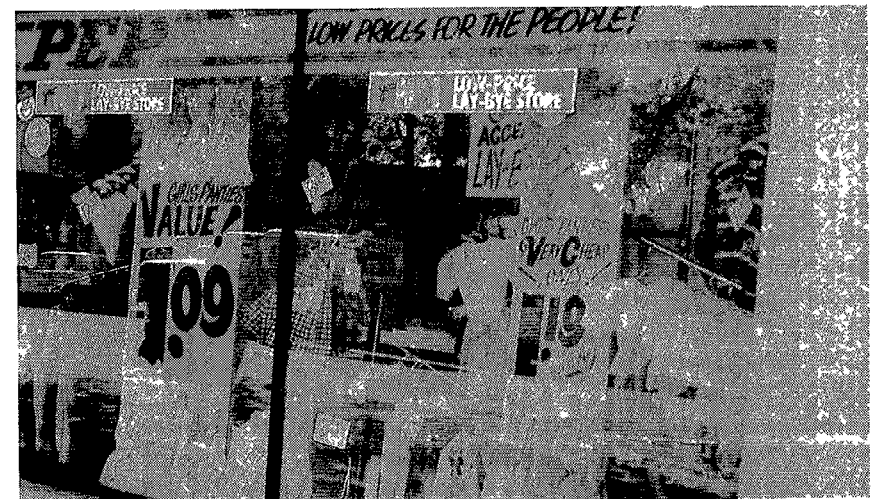


Figure 10.5 A shop window of Pep, a low-threshold garment shop with branches throughout the Southern African Customs Union, catering for the African low-income clientele, Francistown, 1988



Figure 10.6 However, if even Pep breeds insecurity in the would-be consumer, or exceeds her or his means, there are always the outdoor, informal sector vending outlets, represented here by seated Zezuru women and, to the left, by garment vending stalls having nothing to do with Pep

Friend!'. But, usually, Mary can also find the few items of accomplished modern consumption (e.g. shampoos, sanitary pads, toothpaste, body lotion, toilet paper, soap bars – even shoes) that have become indispensable to her, in more familiar and less formal outlets, such as vending stalls within her residential area. Another alternative venue is offered by surviving colonial-style emporia which have catered for African tastes for decades; their names (Haskins and the Tati Company Store) are household words in every Francistown home, and they can afford to be a bit cheaper, thanks to the tight, insultingly blunt and invasive security system to which their all-African non-elite clientele submit, as if their compliance had the nature of self-evident and natural law.

Mary's gradual budgetary diversion has taken a number of forms. Most generally, Mary has turned her experiences over the past few years into an explicit career ideal. She will show the world, and especially her aunt (and her father?), that she too can be an independent career woman deserving a fat salary and social esteem – she wants to be a teacher, or better still, a fully qualified State Registered Nurse. Still in her early twenties, and given the low-threshold and subsidized educational policy of Botswana, it is not yet entirely out of the question for her to start a secondary school education. As a first step, she enrolls in evening classes as a Grade Six primary school student; two years later she completes Grade Seven, and she does enter secondary school. School fees amount to P30 per term. Even adult students attending evening classes are required to wear school uniform and, despite the additional expenditure, Mary grabs this opportunity to embody her newly achieved status of primary school student, which she wears with eager pride rather than any embarrassment. Her weekday evenings are fully occupied. When

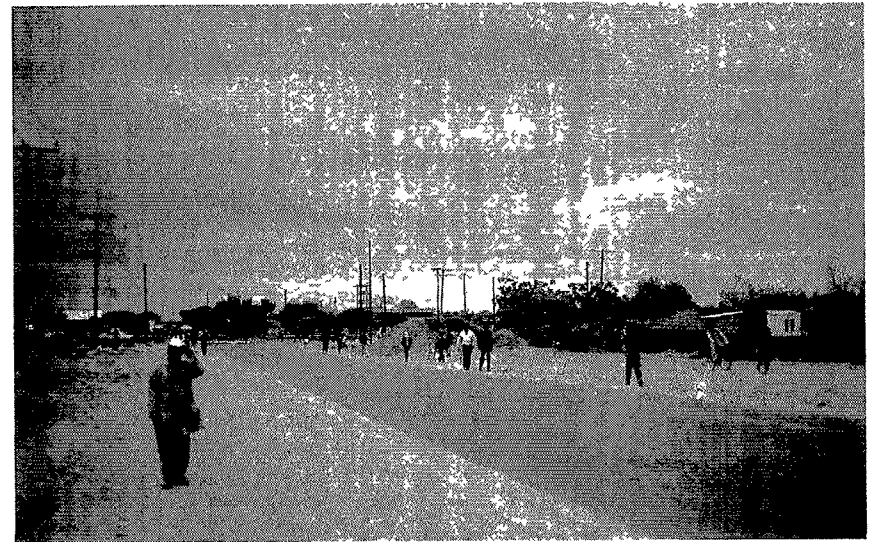


Figure 10.7 Francistown workers return home from work

she returns to her room around half past nine, it is only to sleep. What little social life she has is restricted to weekends, which is also the time when she has to do her laundry and tidy her room. Gradually she begins to resent the long marches between her room, the factory and the school (cf. Figure 10.7 above) and, on this account, as well as for security reasons, she begins to take taxis (at P1 a ride) at least to return home from school in the evenings. There is little time for socializing before and after classes, and her fellow-students do not become a reference group in the way her workmates have.

Besides this definition of a career goal, and the attendant expenditure on education, Mary treads the paths of two budgetary strategies greatly favoured by Francistown's incipient consumers: rotating credit (*motshelo*) and the instalment plan.

### **MOTSHELO: ROTATING RICHES OUT OF POOLED POVERTY**

It is among workmates and former workmates that Mary finds a few young women whom she can trust sufficiently to enter into a *motshelo*, or rotating credit arrangement. As is usual in Francistown, these informal groups involve fewer than a handful of people, and scarcely deserve the name 'association' which is current in the international literature. The *motshelo* arrangement in question initially involved only one woman besides Mary; later there were two. Every month each participant contributes a fixed sum (P50) to a common pool, all of which is taken by one of them; the following month another participant benefits, and so on. The arrangement amounts to the forced saving of sums rather larger than one can easily afford, during most months, in exchange for much larger sums than one could ever command on the basis of monthly income, once in so many months as



the *motshelo* has members. In those months when she has to contribute and not benefit, the *motshelo* is an additional reason for Mary not to allow herself any luxury, and to make do on porridge without relish day after day. But, in her lucky months, the *motshelo* is the basis for the purchase of consumer durables: the school uniform, another dress (not from a shop but from a woman peddling dresses among her workmates – for many Francistown women such peddling is an accepted way of augmenting income), a large basin for bathing and laundry, one large towel, and a single-burner, portable gas stove (which greatly reduces the time she has to spend preparing her meals in the morning and between work and school, and allows her to cook inside her room instead of on the house's central veranda on a slow charcoal stove, which is moreover prone to malfunction when humidity is high). Occasional items of clothing and shoes are still bought for Tatayaone, MaDikeledi and Ngalano, and money is sent to Tutume for their daily consumption, but the intervals between such kinship-orientated expenditures become longer and longer, and the amounts less and less generous.

### MARY'S ROOM

With her newly acquired consumer goods, Mary does far more than merely economize on her time budget and increase her bodily comforts, she engages in something rather unexpected: she uses the goods from the urban world of consumption to transform the concrete box of her two-by-three-metre rented room (symbol of her suffering under village-oriented kinship dynamics – for we know that the entire plot, of which she rents only part, was hers until her kinsmen cheated her of it) into a living space that has been rendered meaningful largely in terms of the village lifeworld in which she grew up. Through manufactured objects, and the practices involving them, Mary strictly and consistently divides her living space into three bounded domains:

the kitchen, furthest from the door, and marked by the gas stove;

the bathroom, nearest to the door, and marked by the basin;

the bedroom, consisting entirely of the bed, along the room's long north-west wall which was not occupied by the kitchen and bathroom functions.

On the face of it – in her observation of apparently self-imposed and arbitrary rules – Mary's dwelling in her room seems like playing at house. But in the absolute boundaries which she imposes on herself by the way she disposes manufactured objects in space – never allowing a bathing towel, food or a plate to touch the bed, never permitting a kitchen towel to cross the invisible boundary into the imaginary bathroom space, never permitting her clothes to roam into the kitchen space, or her school bag to sit on the 'bathroom' floor – she is able, creatively and selectively, to imitate the rural functional space. Using the manufactured items of consumption as markers of function and of meaning, she imposes upon her room the structure of the TaLawrence homestead: with its three main functions of

dwelling/bedroom, kitchen, and unmarked spot for bathing and urinating.

The one missing function, that of the granary, marks the urban room as a place not of production but only of consumption; Mary keeps her monthly bag of mealie meal (her main, and usually her only, item of food consumption) in her 'kitchen' space, just as, in the village, small quantities of meal are kept in the *nsha* once they have been taken out of the granary and pounded.

Perhaps it is a little surprising<sup>10</sup> to witness this bricolage of familiar, old meanings and new objects in the process of learning to be a consumer. Yet, it seems to me, the most striking aspect of the bricolage is that Mary does *not* nostalgically emulate a rural world; instead, she creates a new, no longer conceptually localized, alternative of her own; and this creation came about after she had, first, been rejected by her village environment, and then deliberately left it behind and set herself new goals formulated for a wider and more universalized world. This sense of urban and consumptive innovation, rather than rural nostalgia, was manifested most evidently in the crowning piece of Mary's budgetary reallocation: the purchase, during the second year of her employment at Tswana Weaving, of a modern, costly (P350) wardrobe on the instalment plan.

### THE INSTALMENT PLAN: BEYOND MOTSHELO

By the late 1980s Francistown boasted two major department stores specializing in the sale of European-style furniture for an African clientele: Furniture Mart and Town Talk. That the goods are specifically intended for the African sector of the

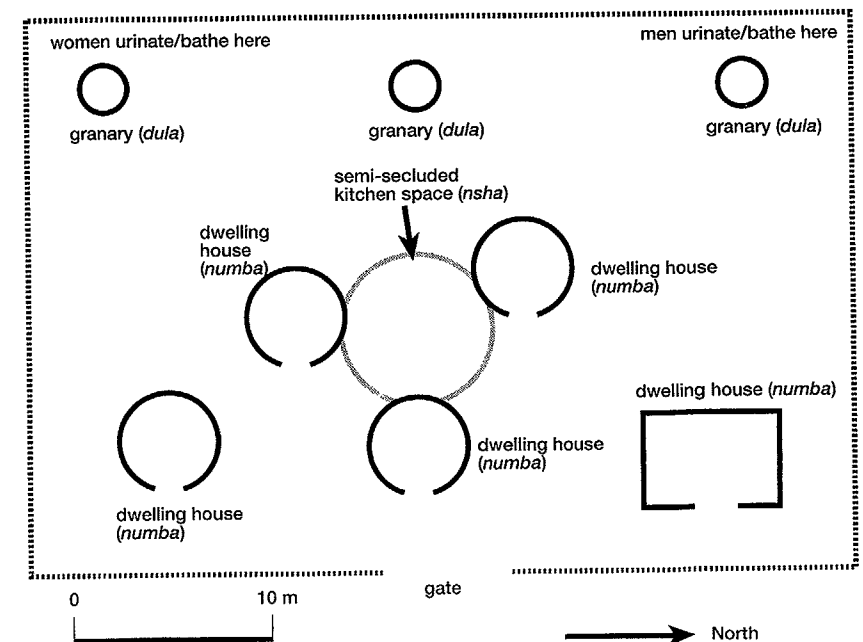


Diagram 10.2 TaLawrence's Kalanga homestead

furniture market is clear from their relatively low net prices (even if these are largely hypothetical, see below), dated designs, the poor quality of raw materials used, and their being sold – either preferably or exclusively – on the instalment plan. The management of these shops does not even bother to display the cash prices of their merchandise, only the instalment terms per month and the number of months required to fulfil them. The fact that the aggregate interest payable under such instalment plans tends to be usurious does not immediately meet the eye. As a combined result of the poor educational facilities and standards in Botswana before independence, the emphasis on quantitative rather than qualitative educational improvement since then, and the introduction of cheap portable calculators in the 1970s, few Batswana today are adept at mental arithmetic, and fewer still penetrate the mysteries of compound interest. The shop assistants strongly discourage any customer who might prefer to pay cash; this not only shows that the assistants' income depends on bonuses when making a sale, but also makes one wonder whether company profits do not derive primarily not from selling goods but from acting as loan-sharks to their customers.<sup>11</sup> Under the terms of the instalment plan, goods can be reclaimed by the company on any occasion that arrears are incurred on the monthly payments, and many have been the cases when goods have been repossessed in the final month after which the instalment plan would have been completed.

I know of only one case, involving my research assistant, Mr Edward Mpoloka, when, on the grounds of trespass, a customer did succeed in having the repossession of his goods declared illegal by the Francistown Magistrate's Court. When he failed to make the single outstanding payment on his instalment plan, Town Talk used intimidation to repossess a lounge suite at Mr Mpoloka's rented council house, while he was away at work. The goods were subsequently restored to the owner, who hastened to borrow money to pay the final instalment. Town Talk's van can be seen day after day travelling the roads of Francistown, and it is detested by the urban population for its notorious practice of collecting, through repossession, almost as much furniture as it delivers.

Like so much in the Botswana modern economy, the instalment system originated in South Africa where, for many decades it has been a routine element of white and Indian exploitation of African consumptive aspirations. Miriam Tlali's novel *Muriel*, based on that author's experience for years as clerk in such a company, offers an illuminating description of the manipulative marketing and financial techniques involved.

The instalment plan offered by these firms might seem like a routinized, depersonalized *motshelo* system: unable to save first and buy later, people commit themselves to a binding, regular obligation to surrender substantial sums of money; in exchange, they enjoy benefits they could never reap outside such a scheme. In both cases, the arrangement protects individuals from intervening claims on their money: hedonistic expenditure on drink and sex, yielding to the competing claims of expenditure within the household budget and, particularly, the demands of close urban and rural relatives, who can be told that the money is genuinely committed, effectively already spent. Both *motshelo* and the instalment plan involve building the individual person (and the nuclear family headed by that

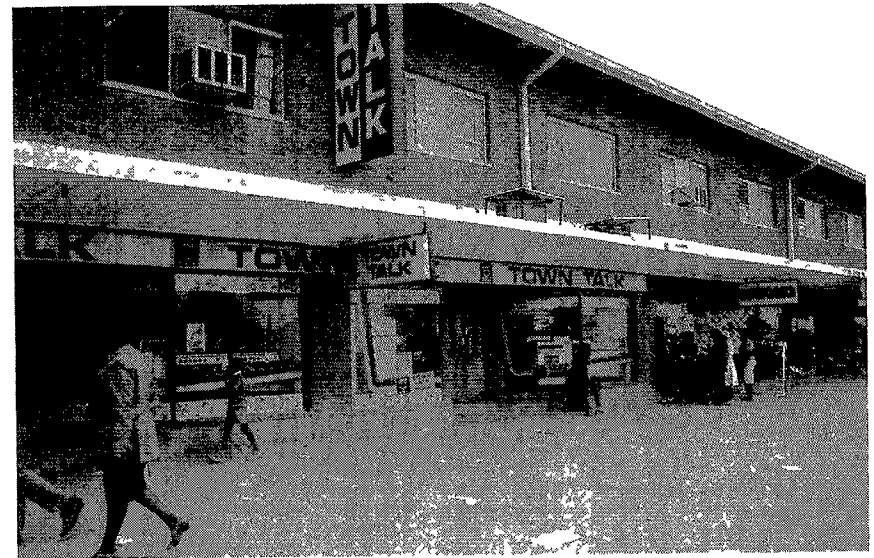


Figure 10.8 Town Talk of Francistown

person) at the expense of both short-term sensuous gratification, and long-term kin obligations. Both also involve a particular transformation of the person's sense of time: a combined sense of deferred gratification and long-term obligation resulting in the repetition, at fixed intervals, of fixed financial sacrifices and leading to a redeeming result – a negative cult which is bound to generate meanings eminently at home in the contexts of capitalism and Calvinism. But here the similarity ends. The two systems are very differently sanctioned: *motshelo* is regulated by threats of social disgrace and the rupture of close relationships of trust, supported by the remote possibility of suing a failing *motshelo* partner before one of Francistown's two Urban Customary Courts; part of the underlying social model resembles the generalized reciprocity that is ideally characteristic of close kin relationships – albeit *motshelo* partners are typically non-kin. In the case of the instalment plan, however, failure to meet the instalments simply results in the repossession of one's goods (often after the payments made on them have exceeded the goods' market value).

Hire-purchase, rather than rotating credit, might more justly have been called *motshelo* (i.e. 'deferment', but also 'lottery'). The chances of goods never being acquired – and of the money invested in them being annihilated through repossession – are far higher than the corresponding risk of *motshelo* partners failing to pay their turn. This despite the fact that monthly contributions to *motshelo* tend to be higher than those made on instalment plans (although this depends, of course, on the value of the item purchased). It is common for people to join *motshelo* schemes which take between a quarter and a half of their monthly income; even usurious furniture companies would refuse the risk involved in financing creditors who would need to devote so high a percentage of their income to repayments. As a final point of contrast, *motshelo* might be portrayed as a middle-of-the-road



Figure 10.9 A self-employed seamstress whose place of work, in front of Francistown's Furniture Mart, is tolerated (incidentally, note the Afrikaans word *breekbaar* ('fragile') on the carton box, indicative of South African economic domination in Botswana)

strategy; the lump sum that members command when their turn comes around may well be used for individual or nuclear family consumption, but it is also potentially available to meet kinship obligations, in the way of funerals, hospital bills, school fees, etc. However, the instalment plan (if brought to a successful conclusion) is invariably and exclusively a means for individuals to accumulate durable material items.

All these budgetary considerations might give the impression that the main reason for buyers taking on instalment plans is their temporary or structural lack of ready cash. However, in ways altogether typical of the cultural dimension of consumerism, more is involved. Significantly, the major furniture outlets prefer not to deal with customers who can afford to pay cash: the instalment plan is not just a financial technique, it is a central institution of southern African consumer culture. In all probability, its centrality derives from the effects I mentioned earlier: of building the person of the consumer, competing with their kinship obligations, and hence weakening kinship ties, and transforming the sense of time. The buyers at these stores are, additionally, the prisoners of a local aesthetics which leaves no alternative but to buy at the formal-sector, usurious furniture outlets. Similar furni-

ture – often both superior in quality and cheaper in price even than that at theoretical net cost in Town Talk and Furniture Mart – is locally made in Francistown in small workshops owned by the socially stigmatized, Shona-speaking Zezuru immigrant community from Zimbabwe. But, for aspiring consumers from the Francistown lower and middle classes, it is simply a disgrace to buy there and, once bought, the items would be impossible to resell even at a great loss. Although they admirably serve the utilitarian purpose of supporting the domestic ergonomics of human bodies (as all well-made furniture does), the informal-sector products are devoid of all positive symbolic value as defined by taste.

However, from the late 1980s there has been an alternative to the consumerist exploitation of the two main furnishing firms: Rudy's, a new, yet emporium-like, department store established opposite Francistown's New Mall. Its German-born owner prefers cash sales, arranges instalment loans commensurate with current bank rates, and has become the hero of the would-be consumerist classes of the town. His being white, as well as the formal appearance of his store, ensure that his merchandise is not affected by the negative connotations which put the Zezuru's stock beyond the pale. It was through Rudy's that Mary realized her dream of purchasing a modern wardrobe on the instalment plan.

This move can truly be said to have crowned her endeavours on the path to becoming an urban consumer. The wardrobe is the one function that is not foreshadowed in the historic Kalanga village space, and that is the very reason why she has to have one. Nor can she afford to be the laughing-stock of her workmates and co-tenants, and buy mere Zezuru imitations of 'real' furniture. There is no way back to the pole-and-dagga house she proudly built with her own hands only three years before. On her income of barely P200 a month, she has to explore the world and assimilate its global taste. She does so by acquiring a plywood wardrobe answering to the third-hand, imitative aesthetics of the European middle class of the 1950s. Yet 'Mary's room' is not just about taking refuge from the village in the town, and totally embracing urban and global ways. Mary is involved in an intense and highly idiosyncratic process of personal bricolage. At this more personal level, her retreat to town is primarily a retreat into herself. She draws the narrow walls of her room, even if merely rented in the house that was supposed to be her own, nearer and nearer around herself in a search for protection and identity. And this miniature private space is then endowed with meaning, not exclusively by reference to global patterns of signification but by projecting, upon that commodified urban space, time-honoured rural distinctions which define the functionality of dwelling space in terms of the construed, physiological requirements of the human body. As a new consumer in a global world, Mary embellishes her room with selected patterns of signification from her rural home, but she knows that henceforth home is only to be found in the little space she has created herself, from scratch.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have explored some aspects of the transition from African village life – with its characteristically very low levels of commodity consumption – to

urban life with its vastly increased levels of commodity consumption. My method has involved a longitudinal case study, following one young woman for more than five years in present-day Botswana. The basis for the application of this method was established during a year of fieldwork in Francistown (1988–9) and followed by shorter visits, once or twice yearly, that renewed and adapted urban and urban–rural networks of relationships and communication (which included our protagonist but were by no means restricted to her).

However specific, even unique, Mary's story, its general significance suggests a model with wide applicability in Africa today: a model for the transition from village lifestyle to urban patterns of individual commodity consumerism. The principal variables of this model can be made explicit by contrasting two ideal-typical situations in contemporary Africa – the village and the town – and by indicating how Tutume, as a village, and Francistown, as a town, deviate from these ideal types. In many respects, Mary's is simply a story about her relatively successful migration to town, undergoing in the process a detachment from rural productive activities (proletarianization, in other words) and a reorientation towards an urban lifestyle (urbanization, in other words).

The Tutume village Mary hails from is a fairly standard present-day African village environment: it displays a more or less viable kinship system, and serves as a seat of specific local meaning (e.g. kinship support, autonomous productive accomplishments, maternity confinement, signification of space and time). Female identity there is primarily defined by reference to local values (kinship, personal productive and reproductive activities), and not by commodity-based grooming of the female body by reference to cosmopolitan values. Yet, even in the village, cosmopolitan meanings are now being proffered by formal organizations (the school, clinic or church) related to those in more or less distant towns. There is increasing local dependence on monetarized commodity consumption (school, pre-school, clothing, detergent) and, given the paucity of local cash sources, this means that local kinship obligations can no longer be met locally but dispel their providers to town. As a result, village-based meaning faces increasing difficulty in competing effectively with monetarized town-based values; gone forth in order to honour a village-based obligation to support one's kin, the migrant worker may well be drawn into a domain of urban consumption that implicates values incompatible with those of kinship. Meanwhile, kin support – albeit at a distinct price, which may readily be expressed in cash terms – enables the most likely providers to leave their dependants in the care of relatives, thus freeing themselves for full-time urban employment.

To this pattern, familiar from many parts of sub-Saharan Africa today, we have to add features specific to time and place (early 1990s, Tutume village, northeastern Botswana) such as: a declining ecosystem, easy communications with town and, in opposition to Botswana's dominant Tswana ethnic and linguistic identity, strong Kalanga ethnic and linguistic identity. To judge by the details of Mary's story, the Kalanga kinship system has taken a form which is little accommodating to women, especially as (ex-)wives and as daughters. More generally, Tutume belongs to a rural social environment in which the integrity of the female body is frequently assaulted by strangers. In combination with economic push factors,

these features may be leading, especially for women, to more or less permanent urbanization, and to a shedding of ethnic particularism in favour of the national, ethnically unmarked, 'Botswana' culture. All of this may not amount to an explanation of why, in Botswana, urbanizing individuals – especially women – become fully-fledged consumers; but at least it helps us to understand why so little in the way of attachment to the social and cultural life of the village prevents them from doing so.

In many other respects the urban world into which Mary progressively enters is typical of modern African town-life. It displays the familiar interplay between formal and informal sector markets for labour and commodities, a high degree of ethnic and linguistic pluralism, and a relative dominance of formal organizations. The last foster a general awareness of formal-sector career models, which the young urbanites especially seek to emulate. Kinship appears to offer an urban reception structure for recent migrants that patterns urban–rural relations; however, ready alternatives to kinship are offered by urban churches and by the urban workplace, each providing a non-kinship, urban reception structure and reference group which may, however, superficially be cast in the idiom of fictive kinship. Commonly, men and women do not follow the same trajectories in urbanization. The town, while largely destructive of rural-based social placement, is the site of a proliferation of new forms of social placement in class terms, depending on capital formation and on socio-economic distinction. It is, therefore, imperative upon the town-dweller to display a distinctive lifestyle as articulated through commodity consumption and achievement in the urban market of housing and rented accommodation. Such consumption is instigated and facilitated by a highly visible and expanding retail trade, including low-threshold outlets catering for incipient, inexperienced and insolvent consumers. The complex of urban consumerism is sustained by an openness to international and global models of commodity consumption, as they are locally represented through the media (radio, television, glossy magazines) and through other means of communication (mail order catalogues, shop windows). Even for the less affluent urbanite, rotating credit and hire-purchase arrangements make possible substantial capital expenditure, most of which is directed to commodity consumption. These social and economic factors combine to foster a retreat into a model of identity as self-realization, dependent on strictly individual consumption activities and correlated with increasing evasion of kinship obligations.

To these general features, Francistown of the early 1990s added the following specifics: an expanding labour market (it was a veritable boom town), a high capacity to absorb immigrant labour, and conflictual labour relations favouring women employees. This made for a well-established formal sector, promoting individual cash earnings and expenditure, and allowing especially the all-female workplace to emerge as a stable, closely-knit, personal reference group. SHHA (housing from the Self-Help Housing Agency) had become a major venue of capital formation for both individuals and nuclear families; the uneasy relations between Africans and formal organizations, however, made the successful operation of lucrative municipal institutions (such as SHHA) dependent on urban skill and experience. The relative security of the urban labour market produced a

high level of proletarianization. Because established urbanites no longer depended on their rural background, they could afford to use the idiom of kinship, not as a supportive structure redistributing accumulated resources for the benefit of poorer kin, but (by the travesty of an urban reception structure for rural kinsmen) as an exploitative structure for the benefit of already richer kin. Given the gendered historical response to modernity (Kalanga women accommodated male strangers in town, while Kalanga men tended to keep aloof from town) it is understandable that, in Francistown's public situations, Kalanga ethnic and linguistic identity has yielded to Botswana's dominant Tswana ethnic and linguistic identity; this already indicates that, especially for women, falling back on a kin-based urban reception structure is not the most likely option in early urbanization – they would rather explore the alternatives of the church and the workplace. In this gender-specific context, it is no surprise that the consumption of commodities devoted to grooming the female body became a major source and focal point of socially negotiable identity. But Francistown women tended not to stop at that but to continue accumulating commodities beyond the requirements of bodily grooming. They were able to do so by virtue of combining extreme austerity in basic consumption (food and shelter) with relatively secure and abundant formal-sector employment. Indeed, even the accumulation of such commodities as clothing, furniture and kitchen utensils is only part of a more comprehensive project to define personal identity increasingly in terms of available models of modernity and success. Hence the eager utilization of urban educational services which, in Botswana, are affordable and can be combined with full-time, formal-sector employment, making a career in the formal sector a realistic aspiration even for educationally disadvantaged young adults.

If this summarizes the formal, static structure which Mary encounters as an adolescent girl, her progress from village girl to urban consumer can be understood in terms of the dynamics of her serial movement back and forth between the specific niches available to her within this structure in the village and the town. But, in alternating between them, Mary simultaneously changes these niches, adapting them to her evolving needs and her evolving self-identity. Far from being a merely oscillatory movement between the apparently fixed and stable positions defined by the juxtaposition of town and village, the historicity of Mary's progress effects subtle but accumulative changes in her successive situations and in her responses to them. Returning to Tutume after her first spell in Francistown, she is no longer the same girl, but a young mother and, much as she re-embraces the value-generating reproductive and productive roles of the village environment, she is soon propelled back to town in order to be a provider. In town, the exploitation to which she is subjected by her kinsmen no longer paralyzes her but – converging with the challenges and promises extended by the new reference group in her all-female workplace – reinforces a role model of success in her, turning her into a highly efficient worker, student and consumer at the same time.

From one point of view, Mary's becoming an urban consumer is an attempt to enchant her exile in an urban lifeworld with patterns of signification largely derived from her rural home; from another perspective, however, Mary's progress amounts to a sustained flight forward from her village childhood and girlhood.

Beyond such facile and partisan juxtapositions, her story is not even merely about her becoming an urban consumer, but about the gradual unfolding of her potential to invest awareness, acceptance and ultimately self-identity in the anatomical and physiological details of her female body, brought to reproduce without love or support, scarred and starved and denied basic comforts throughout most of the period we have followed her, but in the end sheltered by an urban room rendered tolerably comfortable and meaningful by her own efforts – and thus increasingly clad in freedom, dignity and hope.

### Notes

Anthropological fieldwork in Francistown (mainly in and from a SHHA residential area) and surrounding rural areas was conducted between November 1988 and November 1989, and during shorter visits, once or twice a year from 1990 onwards. I am indebted to the Ministry of Lands, Local Government and Housing, Republic of Botswana, and its Applied Research Unit, for accommodating and facilitating my research, and to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for institutional and financial support. My greatest debt is to my wife Patricia, who shared the anxieties of urban fieldwork and welcomed Mary as our adopted daughter. Unavoidably, it may be questioned whether the degree of our own involvement in Mary's life was either methodologically too close, or morally too distant – something which perhaps applies to all genuinely participatory observation (cf. van Binsbergen 1979). It has been my intention to present my portrait of Mary over time in ways that make full use of the available and relevant information, without portraying her other than as a fellow human being; if I have not succeeded in doing so at the first attempt, I sincerely apologize to her and to whoever may identify with her, and promise to do better.

- 1 See van Velsen's classic account (1969).
- 2 The word 'tribal' may be puzzling in a contemporary anthropological context; however, eight constituent 'tribes' of the comprehensive Tswana group have been written into the Botswana constitution (Republic of Botswana 1982, 1983a), and my use of the word 'tribe' reflects its everyday use in the public parlance of that country.
- 3 In southern Africa, the word *shebeen* denotes a bar within a private home or in the yard of a private home. In independent Botswana, such arrangements are entirely legal, and thus devoid of the connotations of criminality and excessive moral licence which the term *shebeen* has in other southern African contexts.
- 4 Obviously more is involved: while Francistown has a unique labour history, it displays the same high incidence of female-headed households that is common in southern and south-central African towns; and, throughout present-day Botswana, a majority of children are born outside wedlock.
- 5 And, by extension, Motswana: the SHHA schema was a national one, by no means restricted to Francistown.
- 6 In Botswana today it is not unusual for Ikalanga-speakers to give their children Setswana instead of Ikalanga names.
- 7 This again is a Setswana word which is equally current among Ikalanga speakers.
- 8 Which, it should be said, lest wrong impressions about southern African hygienic standards be fostered, contrasts only in comfort and sociability with Mary's punctual

two daily baths in cold water taken in her cramped room, for which she first has to fetch several buckets of water, carried on her head and usually through the dark.

- 9 On the practice and pitfalls of suing for maintenance in Botswana, cf. Molokomme 1991.
- 10 This is actually less surprising than it looks. There is fundamental structural affinity between a historic Kalanga homestead, like TaLawrence's (cf. Diagram 10.2), and the house which TaJulia, using a fairly common ground plan that accorded with SHHA stipulations, constructed on Mary's former plot:

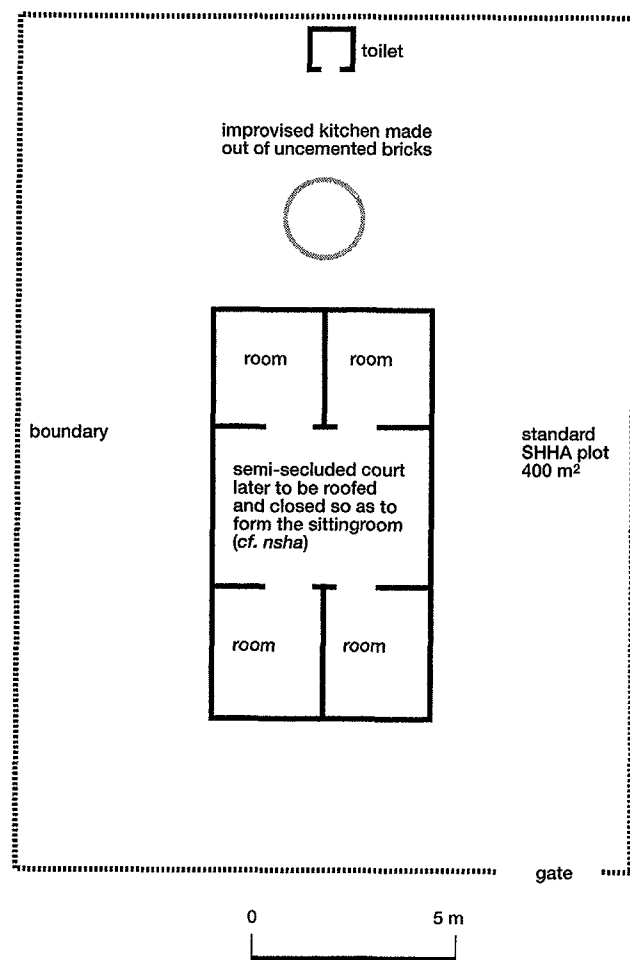


Diagram 10.3 Ground plan of the house TaJulia built on Mary's plot

- 11 As my colleague, the economist Henk Meilink points out, this could be the case only if the interest charged exceeded the rate of inflation which, although dramatically lower than for most African countries in the early 1990s, was still far from negligible in Botswana, 'Domestic inflation steadily increased, averaging 11.6 percent per year in 1988-92; however, unofficial estimates indicate that it is appreciably higher' (Brown 1994: 174). My impression is that the interest rates in question do exceed 10 per cent per annum; however, further research is required on this point.

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## Second-hand clothing encounters in Zambia

### Global discourses, Western commodities and local histories

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Unlike anthropologists who have been taught to be wary of the predictions of modernization theory, few Zambians have qualms about the promises of modernization. Their preoccupations with Western-inspired clothing are an important key to understanding the process of becoming modern in this part of Africa and thus of local experiences of development. Anthropological disdain for the 'craze for foreign'<sup>1</sup> has prevented us from recognizing the arduous work that consumption entails because of the contradictions which the desire for/dependency on imported goods introduces into Third World people's lives. While the recent engagement with the social and cultural lives of commodities has turned our attention toward how and why things are consumed (Appadurai 1986), this approach tends to mask the hidden geographies of production (Harvey 1989) that are embedded within the social relations of consumption.

Thirty-three years of independence from colonial rule in Zambia have not brought modernity in its developmental guise within general reach. With increased awareness of living in an interconnected world, ordinary Zambians today want access, they want progress, if not for themselves, then for their children. There must be belief in the future (Friedman 1994: 242). In their narratives about development, they construe the modern through its objective attributes: education, occupation and wealth. At the very least, they want satisfaction of basic needs such as food, schooling, work, housing, health services and transportation.

Zambians also want well-dressed bodies. Unlike the literature which is having a difficult time with the normative aspect of the relationship between consumption and development (James 1992: vii), people in Zambia keenly express their subjective interpretations and desires. And clothing goes to the heart of widespread local