CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION IN AFRICA

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Published in South Africa by:
Wits University Press
1 Jan Smuts Avenue
Johannesburg 2001

www.witspress.co.za

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Chapters © Individual contributors 2019
Published edition © Wits University Press 2019
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First published 2019

http://dx.doi.org.10.18772/22019053641

978-1-77614-364-1 (Paperback)
978-1-77614-365-8 (Web PDF)
978-1-77614-366-5 (EPUB)
978-1-77614-367-2 (Mobi)

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Project manager: Alison Paulin
Copyeditor: Alex Dodd
Proofreader: Alison Paulin
Indexer: Margaret Ramsay
Cover design: Hybrid Creative
Typesetter: MPS
Typeset in 10 point Garamond Pro

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5 RECYCLING CONSUMPTION: POLITICAL POWER AND ELITE WEALTH IN ANGOLA

CLAUDIA GASTROW

In 2015, Angolans were shocked by the airing of an episode of the American reality television show *Say Yes to the Dress*.[1] The show generally follows a set script where an enthusiastic, but nervous, bride, accompanied by close friends and relatives, frequents an upscale bridal store in order to find her dream dress. The ultimate aim, of course, is to 'say yes to the dress', a moment that is usually accompanied by gasps, tears and smiles from the bride and her party as they see her in 'the dress' for the first time and imagine her perfect wedding and happy future. Everything seemed to be going perfectly to script when *Say Yes to the Dress* followed the wedding party of Naulila Diogo, daughter of the then Angolan Minister of Territorial Administration, Bornito de Sousa,[2] as she arrived at the exclusive New York City-based bridal boutique Kleinfeld, accompanied by her mother and bridal party to purchase nine Pnina Tornai dresses. Two were for her, each decorated with hand-stitched Swarovski crystal details and additional luxuries, such as French lace and a tulle skirt that took 300 hours to make. Her mother had a hand-dyed pink dress, also with hand-stitched crystal details. The episode described Diogo as 'Angolan royalty' and gushingly explained that the over-US$200 000 bill that she had footed for the dresses was the most anyone had ever spent on the show. Diogo explained that she wanted her wedding of 800 people to be 'bigger and better' than any of the other weddings she had attended. Between the crystals, attendants and multiple dresses, it was a veritable orgy of conspicuous consumption, tied up in reality-television

packaging as a model to be admired and emulated. The problem, however, was that the audience was not confined to the United States.

Dismayed Angolans eventually viewed the episode when it began to circulate online, and raised objections. The show had aired during the first year of the country's economic bust, following the fall of the international oil price near the end of 2014. Angolans wanted to know exactly how the daughter of a government minister could afford to spend US$200 000 on dresses. Discussion in response to the show was a means of pointing to the excesses of the Angolan political elite – a means of throwing the conspicuous consumption of a minority back in their faces as a critique of the extremely unequal conditions of life that characterise Angola.

The response of De Sousa, however, was not one of humility or shame. Instead, he accused Club-K[3], the website that had 'broken' the story, of being engaged in 'dirty' journalism. He pushed back against the negative framing of the story, stating that Angolans should look at the 'positive side' of his daughter's purchase of the dresses. Tornai had decided to open up her first bridal store in Africa in Luanda. This development 'put Angola on the international fashion circle, putting at the disposal of Angolan brides (and taking away the arguments of their fiancés) high quality options, without them having to spend money on overseas trips' (*RedeAngola* 2015). De Sousa's response appeared out of touch in suggesting that trips overseas were a cost with which the majority of Angolans should concern themselves. More significantly, his words echoed an increasing number of similar claims being made by Angolan elites over the years in defence of conspicuous consumption. While De Sousa focused on a reinterpretation of his daughter's purchases as promoting Angola's international image, others defended their actions by dismissing the often pathologised and racialised representations of African consumption.

Angolans are openly critical of their elite's conspicuous consumption. Thorstein Veblen (1994 [1899]) argued that conspicuous consumption, which was often a form of 'wasteful consumption' in that the goods consumed were not required for basic survival, was a mark of economic power and therefore 'repute'. However, he also noted that consumption was not the only means through which repute was accumulated. The contemporary world he described was also characterised by a counteracting orientation, which he referred to as the 'instinct of workmanship' (57). This instinct favoured activities and forms of accumulation that were identified as 'productive' and 'efficient'. Consumption should therefore not be entirely wasteful, but rather needed to show its use and purpose. What counted as 'waste', as Veblen (60–61) pointed out, however, was ultimately extremely subjective, rather than easily identifiable. So the question of what constitutes wasteful consumption lies at the heart of struggles over legitimate consumption, and it is in this respect that elite consumption in Angola becomes politicised and controversial.

In Angola, significant conspicuous wealth is often associated with corruption. This is perhaps unsurprising given the political connections of many prominent entrepreneurs, who include the children of former President José Eduardo dos Santos, high-ranking generals, and ruling-party stalwarts. Angola is perhaps one of the archetypal examples of the 'privatisation of the state', in which laws and institutions are turned towards private ends for financial accumulation and political power (Messiant 2004; Soares de Oliveira 2015). Importantly, much of the wealth in Angola flows from its offshore oil platforms. The state presents itself officially as the guardian of oil on behalf of the people, through the vehicle of the state oil company Sonangol, and is responsible for ensuring that the promised prosperity of oil is realised. When oil wealth transforms into conspicuous consumption on the part of those with close connections to revenues, commodities become an index of the wasteful usage of public funds. With access to ruling party and state connections being the surest way of accessing the flows of oil revenues, the wealth enjoyed by the elite is then widely viewed as having been siphoned off at the expense of the poor majority. What should have been the benefits of oil accruing to 'the people' instead congeal in designer wedding gowns and first-class flights. Conspicuous consumption, when it lacks the accompanying support of the 'workmanship instinct', leads to ill repute. The accumulation of goods by Angolans associated with the state becomes viewed as wasteful expenditure of the public purse and a product of suspect business practices rather than as an indication of entrepreneurial success.

Accusations of corruption and excess are familiar terrain in disscussions about African wealth. Classic accounts of African politics focus on tropes of eating: the extravagant consumption of women and goods as a means of garnering and performing power (Bayart 1993; Mbembe 2001). In particular, analyses of African elite consumption as being driven by greed and based on illegality rather than legitimate wealth have a long history. Fanon (1963) was one of the earliest critics of an emerging postcolonial elite, which he decried for its parasitism and lack of vision. Describing it as 'mediocre in its winnings, in its achievements and its thinking' he argued that its members engaged in conspicuous consumption in order to 'mask its mediocrity' (120). For him, the consumption practices of the postcolonial elite were a form of crass mimesis which sought to capture the signs of colonial bourgeois power, while lacking the substantive education and drive to build the wealth that underlay it. Subsequent analyses of class on the continent described the wealthy as a '*comprador*' class building their wealth from their ability to act as intermediaries for neocolonial capitalist interests (Sklar 1979). With a recent surge in interest in 'the middle class' in Africa, more complicated accounts have emerged of what constitutes class and wealth in African countries, most focusing on the fraught relationship between consumption and income (Lentz 2015; James 2015; Southall 2016). However, the whiff of illicitness is difficult to dispel for Africa's

hyper-rich, especially those who appear to have obvious links to political power. It is exactly the association of wealth with illegality that Angola's elite is increasingly trying to combat publicly. In so doing, they draw on African critiques of antiblack racism to paint critiques of their consumption – even by fellow Angolans – as politically misled and racially prejudicial.

Battles over legitimisation and critiques of elite conspicuous consumption in Angola unfold across specific controversies about elite spending within the context of contemporary Angolan politics. These contestations about conspicuous consumption get to the heart of local contests over legitimate power, but also internationalised discourses in relation to legitimate consumption, thus constituting a site of political struggle mediated by transnational framings of African consumption. Ultimately, critiques and counter-critiques of conspicuous consumption have become a crucible for the negotiation of race, consumption, and legitimacy in contemporary Angola.

CONSUMPTION AND POWER IN ANGOLA

Historically, consumption in independent Angola has been heavily mediated by personal and political connections. In 1977, two years after the country's independence, the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) declared Angola a one-party Marxist-Leninist state. However, the implementation of a socialist political and economic agenda was accompanied by the emergence of a system of patronage politics focused on access to goods and favours (Messiant 2004). At independence, a large number of companies were nationalised, the currency, the kwanza, was fixed, and price controls introduced (Aguilar 2001). The purchase of consumer goods was now meant to take place in *lojas do povo* (People's Stores), with people using ration cards assigned to them through their workplaces (Tvedten 1997). Not all *lojas de povo* were equal, however. Higher-ranking civil servants and party members had access to stores with more and better goods. Those working in the diamond and oil business had access to foreign currency and shops in which they could purchase goods with forex at subsidised rates (Bhagavan 1986). These discrepancies in access to goods were justified as a means of maintaining the best talent in the country (Wolfers & Bergerol 1983).

The gradual collapse of Angola's economy, in combination with the already-existing link between a state-created hierarchy and formal access to consumer goods, entrenched a system of favours and personal connections for access to goods. Shortages of goods were frequent in the normal *lojas do povo*, due not only to the inefficiencies of the planned economy, but also the devastating effects of civil war, which had broken out even before the declaration of independence in 1975. As the war continued, local agricultural and industrial production steadily collapsed. The destruction of infrastructure made the transportation of goods increasingly difficult. To survive, Angola, and

especially the coastal cities, became ever more reliant on imports funded by the country's oil reserves (Dos Santos 1990). By the 1980s, products such as meat, eggs and fruit became increasingly scarce in official stores, leading to an explosion in the parallel economy, which Angolans referred to as *candonga*, and an increasingly complex system of *esquemas* (schemes) to access basic goods (Dos Santos 1990; Schubert 2000).

Those with access to better and more varied goods in state stores had an advantage in terms of the profits they could reap from *candonga*, and the profits were high. Hodges (1987) states that in 1986, a kilogram of rice cost 25 kwanza in the state stores, but sold for 2 000 kwanza on the parallel market. People who worked in factories, the ports, and other positions where they could access goods, could pilfer and siphon off goods and enjoy the profits (Dos Santos 1990). As public services collapsed, identity documents, medical services, and licences of various kinds all became available through *candonga* (Schubert 2000). Formal employment positions then, while symbolically important (Rodrigues 2006), were economically more significant for the *esquemas* they enabled than for the money earned from them (Schubert 2000). Personal connections became central to consumption, with elites highly dependent on the MPLA for the maintenance of their status, so that, as Messiant (1992: 23) argued, the 'parallel economy, grafted mainly on nomenklaturist[4] privileges and redistribution (or pilfering or theft), is in practice the main mechanism of income distribution'.

The links between political relationships and economic power were exacerbated in the 1990s in the wake of the MPLA's abandonment of socialism. In 1991, the MPLA and Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (Unita) signed the Bicesse Peace Accord, leading to constitutional reforms that introduced a system of multiparty democracy. The MPLA officially abandoned Marxist-Leninism and began a process of privatising state-owned enterprises and property. The privatisation process was extremely opaque, with those with connections to the MPLA generally being favoured for acquisitions (Aguilar 2001). However, while a minority enriched themselves through the introduction of economic reforms, the majority suddenly felt themselves scrambling to survive in an economy in free fall. The return to war in late 1992 led to the ongoing destruction of the formal economy outside of the oil sector and in turn increased reliance on the informal sector. In the cities, the population became ever more dependent on expensive imported goods, even for basic necessities, leading to runaway inflation, which peaked at 12.035 per cent in July 1996 (Hodges 2004). By the early 2000s, surveys revealed the urban population to be significantly more impoverished than it had been a decade before (29). These developments then, showed the limits of a system based on clientelist redistribution. While those with relevant connections might have been satiated, millions of Angolans lived outside of, or with little connection to, the kinds of opportunities that would open up the doors of consumption and comfort.

At the heart of this inequality was the system of patronage and illicit financial spending that had emerged around the oil economy (Hodges 2004; Messiant 2004; Soares de Oliveira 2015). As far back as the 1980s, the Presidency had negotiated oil-backed loans with international creditors to pay for weapons and food through the national oil company, Sonangol (Soares de Oliveira 2015). Millions of dollars therefore bypassed official institutions and were spent in unknown ways (Hodges 2004). Money was siphoned to the top and divested from on-the-ground needs, such as health and education, so that even as state institutions became increasingly incapacitated, those who 'occupied' the state became empowered and wealthy (Messiant 2004). It was exactly this system of oil-loans, personal political connections, enrichment at the top of the state and impoverishment of the majority that set the stage for an explosion of conspicuous consumption on the part of the Angolan elite and the subsequent tensions over it that emerged following the end of Angola's civil war in 2002.

Angola's civil war came to an abrupt end in the first half of 2002, following the killing of Jonas Savimbi[5] by MPLA troops in February of that year. On 4 April 2002, the MPLA and Unita signed the Luena Memorandum of Understanding, which formally brought the war to an end. The end of the conflict coincided with a boom in the international price of oil, Angola's primary export. The country suddenly moved from being heavily indebted to flush with cash, as oil profits rolled in. The rush of petro-dollars fuelled what Schubert (2018: 1) refers to as a 'culture of immediatism: a get-rich-quick ambient and desire for instant material gratification which permeated everyday life in the "turbo-charged economy"'. Elite Angolans' lifestyles were the models of these desires performed through practices of conspicuous consumption. Even as the majority of Angolans continued to struggle with access to basic services and dignified living conditions, the oil platforms pumped millions of barrels which congealed in the Toyota Prados, designer handbags, lavish parties and spacious new apartments of those who enjoyed access to contracts and connections. This was the 'new Angola', an oil party for some, a dream for others, and a country constantly on display. Angolan wealth came to international attention, as Angolans began to purchase significant shares in international businesses – especially in Portuguese banks and media – resulting in the publication of a book with the sensationalist title *Os Donos Angolanos de Portugal* (The Angolan Owners of Portugal) (Costa, Louçã & Teixeira Lopes 2014).

As the world struggled in the midst of the 2008 global financial crisis, Angolan conspicuous consumption, buoyed by the international commodity boom, fed dreams of the 'Africa Rising' narrative, suggesting that the long-dismissed continent was now breaking through into a new era of capitalist success. Angola's wealthy began to become infamous for their purchase of high-end real estate in Portugal and for shopping trips to Dubai, Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro. In 2012, it was estimated that at least 30 per cent of

the market for luxury goods in Portugal was made up of Angolan wealth (Negrao 2012). Angolan investors spread their wings, with investments made in banking, food processing, media and luxuries with then President José Eduardo dos Santos's daughter, Isabel dos Santos, purchasing De Grisogono, the Swiss luxury jewellery company. They thus came to be counted among the 'super-rich' Africans with whom Europe and the United States were increasingly enamoured, fulfilling similar tropes of glamour and wealth in the Lusophone world to those being embodied by Nigerians in English-speaking countries.[6] However, even as some commentators fawned over the investments, describing Portugal as lucky to have them, and even as the stream of visits of world leaders to Angola legitimated the balance of wealth in the country, these elite displays of wealth could not escape the whiff of the illicit. Reports on high-level corruption continued to emerge.[7] Transparency International consistently ranked the country as one of the most corrupt in the world, and a growing number of academic works highlighted the suspect international financial relationships through which the Angolan boom was produced (Burgis 2015; Soares de Oliveira 2015). Most recently, a prominent member of the MPLA, Lopo do Nascimento, described the country's post-conflict national reconstruction as akin to 'opening a window and throwing money out' in reference to the wasted show projects and excessive corruption that characterised it (Onishi 2017). Elites have often responded to such criticism by attempting to reframe the meaning of their consumption. Nowhere has this perhaps been more evident than in disputes over the actions and purchases of those who, for many years, stood at the heart of power – former President José Eduardo dos Santos's children.

THE PRESIDENT'S CHILDREN

'Are you suffering from corruption fatigue?' asked the article published on corruption watchdog *MakaAngola*'s website in May 2017 (Dos Santos 2017). The article covered the latest scandal linked to one of President José Eduardo dos Santos's children, the 25-year-old Eduane Danilo dos Santos, more generally known simply as Danilo. At the 2017 amFAR[8] Gala at Cannes, frequented by, among others, actor Will Smith, model Bella Hadid and musician Nicki Minaj, the president's son had outbid others at the accompanying auction to purchase a watch for €500 000. This was in the middle of Angola's most serious economic crisis in a decade. With the crash of the international oil price in 2015, ordinary Angolans' salaries had steadily depreciated and foreign exchange had become virtually unavailable except at exorbitant prices on the parallel market. The sight of the president's son blowing half a million Euros on a watch infuriated people.

The watch quickly became yet another marker of the perceived capture of the state purse by the presidential family, and the callousness with which this money was spent. With

formal avenues of protest largely shut down in the country, Angolans took to social media, sending mocking photographs via WhatsApp of, among other things, oversized watches, a car steering wheel covered with watches and drawings of watches on people's wrists, writing messages underneath, such as 'My watch cost 1 million USD', 'Danilo the people don't have medicine'.[9] Danilo dos Santos subsequently took to Facebook to explain his actions, claiming that the watch had merely accompanied the more significant purchase of a collection of prints by photographer George Hurrell for Dos Santos's association *Espirito de Criança*[10] (*RedeAngola* 2017). This donation would, he claimed, contribute to combating HIV and AIDS at an international level. Nevertheless, criticism of the purchase continued, with Angolans perhaps agreeing with the comment made by Will Smith at the auction itself. Smith asked if Dos Santos was not a bit young to have that amount of money.

Former President José Eduardo dos Santos's children have been increasingly embroiled in controversy. Most of these controversies revolve around the sources of their riches in the context of the ongoing impoverishment of the majority of the Angolan population. Their conspicuous consumption and lucrative business deals have earned them ill repute, even as they indicate their strong links to power and wealth. They thus, in many ways, embody Veblen's understanding of conspicuous consumption. The more they consume and enrich themselves, the more the basis of their wealth is questioned. While Danilo dos Santos's actions at Cannes were his first foray into the critical public eye, José Eduardo dos Santos's other children have been subject to public criticism over a much longer period. His two eldest sons, José Eduardo Paulino dos Santos ('Coréon Dú') and José Filomeno de Sousa dos Santos ('Zenú'), have both been subjects of controversy. Coréon Dú is a musician and television producer, who owns Semba Communicação, a 'branding and communication agency'.[11] In addition to developing a number of television programmes for Angola Public Television (TPA), in 2012 this company was controversially given $40 million by the Presidency to promote Angola's public image (Marques de Morais 2012). This, in essence, meant that President dos Santos had handed over $40 million to his son. Zenú was made head of the country's Sovereign Wealth Fund in 2013. Their sister Welwitschia dos Santos 'Tchizé' is a member of parliament and co-owner of Semba Communicação with her brother. However, the most famous of the Dos Santos siblings is José Eduardo dos Santos's eldest daughter, Isabel dos Santos, currently ranked as Africa's wealthiest woman and former head of Sonangol.[12]

Isabel dos Santos's fortunes became more visible following the end of the civil war. In 2013, *Forbes* identified her as the wealthiest woman in Africa, with her personal wealth estimated at approximately $3 billion (Dolan & Marques de Morais 2013). Among other things, she had significant investments in Angola's diamond industry, a 25 per cent stake in Angola's largest mobile telecommunications company Unitel, and investments in the oil, cement and banking sectors (Dolan & Marques de Morais 2013). Despite her denials,

her wealth is suspected of being a product of her position as the President's daughter and the benefits that have accrued therefrom. Her rejection of these suspicions has involved a growing public relations engagement to promote her as an example of hard work and business acumen. Perhaps the first very public example of this strategy was an interview with the *Financial Times*, in which she claimed to have sold eggs as a child to fund her 'sweet tooth', as 'proof' of her having had an entrepreneurial spirit from a young age (Burgis 2013). Angolans responded by posting pictures on social media of her carrying golden eggs, and generally mocking the idea that the president's daughter would have engaged in such activities. The political and nepotistic underpinnings of her fortune have become even more apparent since her father relinquished power in 2017, as the new incumbent, João Lourenço, has systematically revoked contracts previously awarded to her, in the process highlighting how much of her previous empire hinged off family relationships (Marques de Morais 2018). Nevertheless, Isabel dos Santos has continued to insist on the legitimacy of her fortune, particularly using social-media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, to post photographs of herself at work and attending meetings to attempt to cultivate the image of a hardworking woman. She increasingly accuses those who criticise her as promoting 'fake news'.

The most adept at trying to repackage the image of dubious wealth, however, has been Isabel dos Santos's husband, Sindika Dokolo. Dokolo is the son of deceased Congolese businessman Sanu Dokolo and Hanne Kruse, a Danish employee of the Red Cross who met his father in the 1960s when she worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Dokolo's father was a close friend of then Zairean statesman Mobutu Sese Seko, and during the time of his rule, Sanu Dokolo set up the Bank of Kinshasa from which he earned considerable wealth (Collier 2015). Dokolo met Isabel dos Santos in the late 1990s, and they subsequently married in 2003. Dokolo has earned his name internationally through the Dokolo Foundation, which collects and promotes African art, especially making waves for its active attempts to repatriate African art that was stolen during the colonial period.

The Dokolo Foundation first made international headlines in 2006 when it won the call for the African Pavilion for the 2007 Venice Biennale. However, controversy soon followed. In early 2007, an article for *Artnet Magazine* entitled 'Art and Corruption in Venice' highlighted the suspect sources of Dokolo's wealth (Davis 2007). The article claimed that 'the unsavory political and business activities of the people behind the collection are raising questions that could well prove an embarrassment to the venerable art fest,' going on to explain that Dokolo had been the benefactor of suspected corrupt activity on the part of his father, and more recently had been directly linked not only to the Dos Santos family, long accused of significant corruption, but to diamond companies in Angola that had been exposed for partaking in significant human rights abuses in

the country's diamond-producing areas, including 'murders, tortures and rapes' (Davis 2007). Dokolo's involvement in the Venice Biennial then, rather than being a moment of African pride, threatened to 'drag to light bitter questions about the relation between African elites and the vast majority of Africans' (Davis 2007). Other notable figures in the international world of art also began to step forward. Chika Okeke-Agulu (2007: 1) wrote a scathing article, which described the Dokolo Collection as representing an 'unprecedented connection between art patronage and state depredation', and went on to argue that 'we cannot afford to accept any suggestion, even of the subtlest kind, that the survival of contemporary African art depends on the patronage of robber barons. And that is why the decision to highlight – to celebrate and authorize – the Dokolo Collection at the 52nd Biennale is most unfortunate.' In reaction to these controversies, Cameroonian artist Barthélémy Toguo withdrew from the Pavilion, refusing to have his name associated with Dokolo. The artistic director of the Venice Biennale claimed to be ignorant of the sources of Dokolo's wealth, but tried to suggest that the significance of the collection should be judged separately from the background of its patron (*Artnet News* 2007).

Dokolo, however, hit back. The first move was to send an attorney's letter to *Artnet Magazine* insisting that the blogpost be removed. This did not happen, but the magazine did publish Dokolo's right of reply, which hit at the heart of discomforts in relation to critiques over African wealth. Dokolo accused the author of the article, Ben Davis, of misconstruing the sources of his wealth, unfairly dragging his family into the spotlight, and essentially of being a shoddy journalist (*Artnet News* 2007). However, his significant move came near the end of the letter, where he asked, 'Would this basic journalistic work have been neglected if I had been a European or American collector?' followed in the next paragraph by a more substantive reference to the problematics of the representation of African wealth:

> I would like to conclude by questioning the 'why' of this article. Why not take any time for research or analysis? Why this taste for immediate caricature when it comes to African elites? Like my father before me, I have decided to fight preconceived ideas so that Africans would have a strong point of view on the world that would be their own. My weapon is this collection and the impact it will have on the African public. (*Artnet News* 2007)

In this statement, Dokolo made explicit what the attempts to refashion images of his wife and her family's elite consumption as hard work and philanthropy do more subtly. That is, Dokolo accused those who criticised his wealth as basing their arguments on historically racialised and prejudicial stereotypes of African consumption. While opportunistic, such attacks on critics are powerful exactly because they resonate with a widely acknowledged problem – namely, racist portrayals of life on the African continent, especially consumption.

Although Angolan wealth has been praised and supported by many in Portugal, the racist underpinnings of understandings of African wealth remain ingrained. In 2014, for instance, a major Portuguese comedy show featured a segment in which an actress in blackface played an Angolan woman, accompanied by her sons dressed in gold chains and listening to hip-hop music, tearing through stores stating, 'I'll buy it all' (Ames 2015). The appeal to what Matlon (2016: 1018) has described as racialised 'icons of hyper-capitalist consumerism' – congealed in the hip-hop stardom, the use of blackface, and the reported crude performance of desperate consumption – indicated the extent to which Angolan luxury was discursively constituted as racial excess by a (white) international gaze.

Caught between images of deprivation and excess, discussing African consumption is inherently a politically loaded issue. The very construction of race in some African countries hinged off the denial of consumption to the black majority, meaning that the making of black deprivation was central to the production of racial differentiation (Posel 2010). Afro-pessimist[13] scholars have equally highlighted how practices of consumption engaged in by black subjects are almost always rendered as pathological (Marriot 2017). In the anti-black historical construction of consumption then, whiteness 'represents ... the limit that separates production from conspicuous consumption' (Marriot 2017), meaning that consumption by black people almost always spills into tropes of greed, excess and luxury. International racialised frameworks are exacerbated in the case of Africa by Afro-pessimist tropes that always already define African leaders as 'corrupt and incompetent compradors' (B'béri & Louw 2011: 338), making the possibility of an open discussion of African consumption difficult. Given these racist framings of African consumption, asserting the legitimacy of and demanding the right to conspicuous consumption can be understood, as Posel (2010) has argued, as a radical political act.

It is against these tropes that Dokolo and other Angolan elites act when they claim to be consuming in the interests of the nation, to be promoting philanthropy, or presenting their incomes as a product of hard work rather than nepotism and corruption. They are claiming that, in Veblen's words, their consumption is evidence of an 'instinct of workmanship' (Veblen 1994 [1899]: 57) rather than simple waste. Critiques of their actions, which suggest otherwise, are, they suggest, steeped in racism and the pathologising of Africans. Their words resonate for many exactly because of the awareness of prejudicial views of African consumption from outside the continent, and the ongoing struggle by Africans of various income strata to claim membership of a global community which structurally excludes them (Ferguson 2006). Dokolo has been the most vocal voice of this recycling of conspicuous consumption into an attempted legitimacy. In a 2015 interview, Dokolo struck directly at what are usually presented as Afro-pessimist tropes – representations of African poverty and the stereotyping of the African elite as corrupt. Apparently dismissing accounts of incredible wealth disparities in Angola, he

was cited as arguing that, 'there is nothing more racist than this idea that African elites are Africa's problem … that there are some nice Africans and then a few other Africans who live off the suffering of most Africans' (Minder 2015).

However, there is an ambiguity about the audience at which Dokolo and others' protests are directed – a product I would argue, of the uncanny ways in which African elite consumption is discursively constituted at the intersection of historical international discourses of race and local political contestations. On the one hand, it seems clear that elite responses to critics are aimed at a (white) international audience that is hypocritically torn between desiring African wealth and pathologising it through racist stereotypes. On the surface then, it would appear to be a radical act of rejecting racialised colonial hierarchies that continue to shape international understandings of acceptable consuming subjects. Nevertheless, elite responses are simultaneously regressive when it becomes clear that the most significant critics are not international observers, but Angolans themselves. It is Angolans who post pictures mocking Danilo dos Santos's watch purchase, circulate cartoons of Isabel dos Santos selling golden eggs, and denounce elites for hoarding wealth. It is Angolans who accuse their leaders of 'waste'. To suggest that their criticisms are products of racialised pathology undermines the political legitimacy that underlies these everyday expressions of anger. As such, I would argue that the cleverness of Dokolo's discourse is also its weakness. In presenting criticisms as stemming from external sources, rather than internal ones, he erases and fails to address the growing frustration with the status quo evident in protests, rumour and comedy in Angola. What appears on the surface then to be a radical decolonial critique of the intertwined structures of race and economics is more fundamentally a tool of repression, wielded not merely to criticise external critics but to ignore or discredit local ones.

While José Eduardo dos Santos may no longer be in power, the new political elite have already become the object of Angola's gossip. In March 2018, the same website that broke the *Say Yes to the Dress* story, reported that Jéssica Lorena Dias Lourenço, the daughter of recently elected President João Lourenço, had spent $200 000 on a chartered flight to the United States in order to give birth to her child (Club-K 2018). With stinging insight, it reminded its readers that this was the same amount of money that Ms Diogo had spent on her wedding party's dresses. It commented that some members of the ruling MPLA were concerned that the current presidential family 'might adopt the habits of José Eduardo dos Santos's daughters, of giving birth to their children outside of the country, to the detriment of the hospitals which the the government, during election campaigns, claims to have constructed' (Club-K 2018). While Lourenço remained silent on the matter, the cycle of conspicuous consumption and critique continues.

If patronage, cooption, the manipulation of legislation and threats of violence have historically been the means through which the MPLA state and especially its elites have

maintained their privileged position, the management of representation and discourse is clearly another primary arena. Ultimately, what this brief discussion of attempts to recycle scandals regarding elite conspicuous consumption in Angola shows is how the political ambiguity over African consumption can become a tense site for a simultaneous defence and critique of the political power and corruption of that elite. For while Angolans themselves might criticise José Eduardo dos Santos's family, those who are criticised opportunistically represent those very criticisms as being drawn from Afropessimist tropes which pathologise African consumption, rather than from genuine grievances about corruption and the abuse of power. In doing this, they not only conflate local anger with historical discourses that pathologise African consumption, but they paint themselves as victims of racism, rather than perpetrators of corruption. They are only able to do this because framings of African consumption lie at the intersection of transnational racialised discourses that uncannily intersect with legitimate political grievances voiced by Angolans themselves – because it is impossible to discuss African consumption outside of the histories of colonialism and racism which constantly try to represent black consumption as pathological.

Chimamanda Adichie (2009) has warned against the 'danger of a single story' in which reliance on stereotypes renders representations of people and places incomplete and simplified. Such advice would be well heeded for discussions of conspicuous consumption in Africa. However, it should also be heeded when analysing attacks by African elites on critics of their conspicuous consumption. Subsequent to Dos Santos stepping down, many of the accusations made against his children appear to have been validated, with both Isabel dos Santos and Filomeno dos Santos facing charges for suspect business practices (Marques de Morais 2018, Deutsche Welle 2018). The accusations of nepotism and corruption cannot simply be dismissed. What emerges is a fraught landscape in which African consumption becomes a site for negotiating political and ethical status, as the argument over what constitutes 'waste' becomes subject to multiple interpretations. In a moment in which African elites are increasingly mobilising luxury consumption as a means to consolidate their power and image locally and abroad, contestations over the question of conspicuous consumption in Angola suggest a curious thing: radical critiques of stereotypes can at times be repressive, while true critique of the political context might align with stereotype. The tussle to control the narrative about consumption lies at the heart of contemporary practices of legitimation, critique and dissent in Africa.

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NOTES

1 To see excerpts from the show featuring Ms Diogo see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFioQLLuGY0, viewed 8 August 2017. The full episode appears to have been removed from the internet.

2 Following the August 2017 election, Bornito de Sousa became Vice-President of Angola.

3 Club-K, 2015, Filha do ministro angolano compra vestido de USD 200 mil, viewed 8 August 2017, available from http://club-k.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21...ra-vestido-de-usd-200-mil&catid=8:bastidores&lang=pt&Itemid=1071.

4 Messiant uses this term in an almost identical way to the manner in which it was used when discussing the institutional structure of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The nomenclatura were members of the ruling party who had been appointed to key positions in the administration of the state. In Angola, this resulted in these individuals not only holding immense power, but

enjoying unusual privileges and access to funds that were not available to those who were on the outside of this protected circle of the party-state.

5 Jonas Savimbi was the longtime leader of Unita, the political grouping that fought against the MPLA from independence in 1975 until 2002.

6 For gushing reporting on the new Nigerian elite and their presence in the UK see Jenkins (2014) and Jarvis (2015).

7 Angolan anti-corruption watchdog organisation *MakaAngola* has consistently produced detailed reporting on corrupt dealings linked to the Angolan elite. See makaangola.org for details.

8 The Foundation for Aids Research.

9 Photographs sent to the author via WhatsApp.

10 Spirit of the Child.

11 http://www.semba-c.com/pages/view/35/semba-comunicacao

12 In November 2017, Ms Dos Santos was removed from her position as head of Sonangol following the stepping down of her father in September 2017 after 38 years in power, and the election of João Lourenço as the new president of Angola.

13 There are two related, yet distinct, uses of the term Afro-pessimism in current literature. The one, represented by scholars such as Jared Sexton and Frank B. Wilderson III, generally seeks to theorise the subject position of blackness, most notably through the history of slavery and the position of abjectness. The second, seen in the work of Ebanda de B'béri and Eric Louw (2011) and Achille Mbembe, critiques what they describe as 'Afro-pessimist' discourses, that, similarly to Orientalism, produce a framing of Africa and Africans defined through Western-constituted prisms of meaning. Within these frameworks, Africa and Africans become reduced to tropes of lack, negativity and absence. In B'béri and Louw's (2011: 337) words, 'Afropessimism produces the meaning that something is wrong with Africans. The heart of this discourse derives from the fact that Africans are failing to live up to a set of criteria generated by Westerners who want to develop Africa.'