

Abstracts

Introduction – Consumption, Identities and Agency in Africa

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The current popularity of the concept of “Cultures of Consumption” is related to the understanding that consumption is not only the fulfilment of needs, but also a means to express social identity. Consumption has up to now mainly been described with regard to achievements and specific problems in industrialized societies. There is an underlying assumption that in the “Less Affluent World” consumer culture is of little relevance, if not inexistent. Consumption in those societies seems merely to be oriented towards the fulfilment of basic needs. Furthermore, the studies on consumption in those countries have been criticized as falling short to explain economic constraints and unequal conditions of life. This introductory chapter retorts the criticism and shows how African contexts of consumption may prove to be particular useful in order to scrutinize simplifying concepts about consumption. Understanding consumption in Africa requires an awareness for historical and contemporary interactions of local, inter-regional and global forces. Consumers in Africa are highly creative in appropriating global goods. Cultural appropriation as a conceptual framework is therefore explained in some detail. A second theme of this introduction is the specificity of quantitatively smaller possessions in many African households. Although there is no “African culture of consumption”, the different modes of consuming and transforming globally circulating consumer goods do reflect a wide range of cultural practices. They indicate the agency of the consumers, which is both an expression of and a driving force for social change.