‘Growing up’ and ‘moving up’: Metaphors that legitimise upward social mobility in Soweto

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A growing body of research on the middle classes in South Africa is concerned with patterns of consumption while fewer scholars engage with the inequality that accompanies greater social differentiation. Little existing research addresses the ways in which new members of the black middle class legitimise newfound wealth and social mobility. Taking inspiration from anthropologists who have documented societal responses to changing configurations of wealth and inequality elsewhere in Africa, I employ the life-history method to ask how one Sowetan man, who self-identifies as being black and middle class, frames his own social mobility. I find that spatial metaphors play an important role in legitimising social mobility. I also find that one response to accusations of materialism and conspicuous consumption levelled against the urban black middle class is a renewal of certain cultural practices in which private wealth can legitimately be converted into social wealth.

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