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Do Nations Have Stomachs? Food, Drink and Imagined Community in Africa

Paul Nugent

Abstract: This paper takes a rhetorical question posed by Ernest Gellner and reframes it to ask whether a sense of national identity can be forged through everyday acts of consumption – in particular, that of food and drink. The article finds value in Benedict Anderson’s conception of the nation as an imagined community, but argues that it makes little sense to privilege the printed word over other forms of consumption. The article goes on to suggest that there have been significant convergences at the level of consumption, but that not all of this has led to reflection about what it means to be a member of the nation. Some lessons are drawn from literatures about music and dress, following which the attention turns to alcoholic drinks and everyday foodstuffs. The history of the consumption of beer and wine in South Africa is used as a case study for convergence in a least likely scenario. The discussion on food observes that while cuisine is not a matter of debate in many African countries, in some countries, like Ethiopia and Senegal, it is taken very seriously indeed. In South Africa, there are ongoing efforts to posit food preferences as something distinctively South African. Although the *braai* is often discussed in a lighthearted manner, the promotion of a sense of awareness about what all South Africans share in terms of eating habits also has a more serious side to it.

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Paul Nugent is a professor of Comparative African History and the director of the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, UK.

The following text is an extended version of a keynote lecture to the biennial congress of the Association for African Studies in Germany (Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland, VAD) called “Continuities, Dislocations, and Transformations: Reflections on 50 Years of African Independence”, held 7–10 April 2010 at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany.

The Editors

The sense I have in mind can be shown if we compare the book to other early industrial products, such as textiles, bricks or sugar. For these commodities are measured in *mathematical* amounts (pounds or loads or pieces). A pound of sugar is simply a quantity, a convenient load, not an object in itself. The book, however, [...] is a distinct, self-contained object, exactly reproduced on a large scale. One pound of sugar flows into the next; each book has its eremitic self-sufficiency (Anderson 1983: 38).

As the majority of African countries have marked 50 years of political independence with varying degrees of enthusiasm,¹ some untended corners of the political estate have once more begun to command academic attention. “Nation-building” was already largely *passé* by the end of the 1960s, but half a century later, scholars have begun to rediscover interest in the symbols and repertoires associated with the independence project: from flags, anthems and monuments,² on the one hand, to sport, education, national art, cultural festivals and memoirs on the other.³ Indeed, the anniversaries have both prompted the construction of new heroic monuments, most (in)famously in Senegal, and spawned a range of commemorative memorabilia typically involving commercial sponsorship.⁴ The latter is singularly appropriate because the objective of this article is to underline the importance of consumption in shaping the contours of national belonging.

The emerging consensus appears to be that while the politics of African countries since independence have often been decidedly dysfunctional, a surprising level of salience is attached to the idea of the “nation”, even in cases of the most abject political failure – such as that of the Democratic

1 For the Ghana case, see Lentz and Budniok (2007: 531–41). Most publications on the anniversaries have yet to appear, while of course many Anglophone countries like Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia have yet to reach their anniversaries.

2 For an early marker, see Hess (2001). South Africa has undergone a very similar process to the rest of the continent, with the end of Apartheid representing the equivalent watershed, see Coombs (2004).

3 Once again, publication has still to catch up. See Vidacs (1999); Armstrong and Giulianotti (2004); Cornelissen (2010); Alegi (2010); Bertz (2007); Maddox and Giblin (2005); Harney (2005); and Castaldi (2006).

4 This includes commemorative stamps issued in France in July 2010.

Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Young 2007). Indeed, some of the politicking has led to a process of hyper-nationalism, whose intended effect is to separate out those who belong from those who are deemed beyond the pale. One problem with the earlier “nation-building” literature is that the nation was politically over-determined – that is, it was seen as being constructed from above. More recent writing has struggled to account for the resonance of the symbols and repertoires precisely in the absence of states with the capacity to engage in effective social engineering. Displacing the problem to the realm of “culture” is tempting, but it does not greatly help matters because it begs the question of why culture assumes a national form, quite aside from the problems associated with defining how culture works (Chabal and Daloz 2006). Rather than abandoning the attempt to explain what appears to be paradoxical – namely the crystallization of ideas about the nation in the absence of embedded states – it is arguably more helpful to proceed by breaking things down and then reassembling the pieces. Here, I tackle the problem from the angle of consumption, considered both in the literal sense of ingestion and in participation in a market.

Frederick Cooper has made a compelling case for taking the load off “identity” as a concept and using a more variegated terminology – for example, differentiating identification from identity – which is helpful for our discussion here (Cooper 2005: ch.3). What I wish to argue is, firstly, that while consumption is simultaneously about fundamental material needs (food and clothing), personal subjectivity and global processes – all of which have been written about at great length⁵ – it is also about citizenship, broadly conceived. The importance of consumption, therefore, extends well beyond issues of basic subsistence. It also couples selfhood with collective experiences, at the same time as it localizes the global. Secondly, while citizens of African states have indeed come to share common habits of consumption – what I call relations of national commensality – this convergence cannot of itself be equated with national awareness without the mediation of other factors that may be present to a greater or lesser degree. The creation of markets bound together by road, rail and telecommunications has been fundamental in killing off certain forms of consumption and promoting others in their place, through the combined effects of pricing, advertising and sheer convenience. But it is only where there is a space for

5 A point that is well taken is that many Africans have experienced a restriction of their opportunities for consumption since the 1980s – and immeasurably so in relation to other parts of humanity, see Hahn (2008: 14-15) and Ferguson (1999). On the relationship between personal preferences and social calculations when it comes to dress, see Bauer (2008). On the global processes and the transformations wrought by commodities, see Appadurai (1986).

reflection about what daily habits amount to that one can really talk about the consolidation of a sense of national identity. Although the list of factors that might explain the high rate of conversion from one to the other in Africa is a lengthy one, the following are of particular importance: urbanization, the existence of national and regional media outlets (including FM radio), interconnected religious spaces, and the dynamic role of the diaspora in codifying and disseminating national forms. The crucial point is that each of these creates the possibility for thinking about what it means to belong to one nation rather than another. Crucially, each also invites reflection about gradations of difference within the boundaries of a given country. Hence, national joking relationships typically turn on different preferences and avoidances relating to food. In that sense, national and ethnic modes of identification do not necessarily oppose one another, but often work in tandem. Because commonality and differentiation are intertwined, they together contribute to an understanding of the nuances associated with national identity itself.

Where the convergences are thought through in detail, they may enable a form of national feeling to take shape. But even where this does not happen, inhabitants of the same national space may recognize their shared attributes (and regional quirks). This is likely to count for little at times of divisive conflict, but it can assist in the process of building bridges and it can assume a particular meaning in the diasporic context. To restate my point, I am arguing for a differentiation between national convergence and national identity, whilst accepting the possibility that the conversion from one to the other might take place even in the absence of an integral state. In what follows, I focus mainly on food, drink and, to a lesser extent, adornment, while drawing on what has recently been said about popular music, literature and theatre. I begin with an anecdote.⁶

6 I am grateful for the feedback I received on my original keynote address at the biennial conference of the German Association for African Studies, both at the time and afterwards. I have also benefited from the comments of an external reader. The material on the South African wine industry comes from ongoing research funded in 2009 by a Leverhulme Trust Fellowship. The project is entitled “Race, Taste and Power: The Cape Wine Industry”.

Baguettes, Cassettes and *Kente*: National Commensality in Wide Focus

For some years, I have been exploring the local effects of the international boundary between Ghana and Togo through the prism of a cross-border festival. The Agotime people were divided after the First World War by a boundary line that placed roughly two-thirds of their settlements in French Togoland and the remainder, including the capital of Kpetoe, in British Togoland. This act of partition was confirmed when British Togoland was formally absorbed into what became Ghana in 1956–57 and Togo opted for a separate independence in 1960. A history of tension between the two states meant that while everyday mobility between the two halves of Agotime was possible, no formal recognition of the existence of Agotime was tolerated. It was only with the easing of these tensions in the 1990s that it became possible to celebrate what it meant to be Agotime in the form of a cultural festival.

The Agbamevoza festival usually takes place in the first week of September, and it is intended to celebrate the skill of the Agotime people as designers and their dexterity as weavers of premium-quality *kente* cloth.⁷ Over the course of several days, weaving features as the central motif in the festival: There are weaving competitions, displays of the finest cloth, fashion shows and finally a grand *durbar* when everyone turns up in their best *kente* to hear speeches from local, regional and national dignitaries. In 2005 and 2007, I interviewed some of the people who had initiated the most recent iteration of this festival, an earlier Togolese initiative having folded and been superseded. One recurring lament in Kpetoe was that although the festival was intended to unite Agotimes across an artificial boundary, relatively few Togolese bothered to attend. After carrying out interviews in Togo, it became clear that those Agotime chiefs who had been elevated to the status of *chef de canton* felt uncomfortable about attending an event in Kpetoe, where they might be treated and seated as sub-chiefs in accordance with some notional Agotime constitution. But that only seemed to provide part of the reason for the reticence. In 2007, after attending the closing *durbar* in Kpetoe, I returned to the motel where I was staying. As I was unwinding from the rigours of the day, I was joined by some Togolese participants dressed in their finest *kente*, who were spending the night there before crossing back across the border the next day. After we began talking, I made the observation that very few Togolese appeared to have taken part in what was sup-

7 A top-quality *kente* cloth sells for the equivalent of several hundred euros, and entails weeks of work.

posed to be an Agotime-wide festival. The answer I received was along the lines of: “Ah, but Togolese people don’t wear *kente*. That is a Ghanaian thing.” I probed further and asked what people would wear, say, to go to church, and my informant replied that it would be appropriate to wear a suit, or perhaps a matching shirt and trousers with an African design, but he repeated that few people would think to don a *kente* cloth in Togo. This observation struck me at the time as pointing to something rather profound. On subsequent visits to Togolese Agotime, I was struck by the fact that while there was limited evidence of weaving (often by non-Agotimes), *kente* cloth did indeed seem to be virtually absent. Hence, the international border could be said to mark a sartorial boundary that cuts through partitioned Agotime, much as the passage from Francophone to Anglophone countries in general is marked by the transition from baguettes and coffee to sugar bread and Lipton tea.

This local finding got me thinking about the manner in which boundaries have become internalized in ways that have little or nothing to do with official papers, border posts and other trappings of the nation-state. Some of the richest insights into the cultural underpinnings of national identity in recent years have come from scholars working on theatre and music. In the cases of the two Congos, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Angola, a convincing case has been made for the close relationship between nationalism, politics and musical expression.⁸ Most recently, drawing explicitly on Benedict Anderson’s formulation of “imagined communities”, Marissa Moorman has argued that the nationalist discourses surrounding the exiled Angolan liberation movements obscured the simple fact that it was those who remained inside the country who carved out a distinctively Angolan aesthetic through the process of making, listening to and moving their bodies to home-grown music. Moorman maintains that the MPLA regime purposefully failed to create a space that enabled Congolese music to thrive in the years after independence, seeking instead to instrumentalize its appeal for political ends – thereby killing off the dynamism that had been its lifeblood. Although the argument is certainly well crafted, the formulation also begs some questions. The critique of nationalist historiography is spot on, but the analysis does not really investigate what “being a nation” amounts to – whether that be a warm feeling, a shared mentality or a political project. In effect, we are presented with a “whodunnit”, in which the question is “Who made the Angolan nation?” without closer inspection of what the “it” refers to.

8 For the Congos, see Stewart (2000); White (2008); Askew (2002); Turino (2000); Moorman (2008).

Be that as it may, this and other groundbreaking work on African music introduces three variables that are worth considering in relation to other forms of consumption. These are, first of all, the role of particular technologies in facilitating innovation and disseminating aesthetic values. Both Gary Stewart (for the Congos) and Moorman (for Angola) have underlined the crucial importance of the decision by embattled colonial regimes to establish broadcasting facilities that could cover national space and indeed make their political messages heard much farther afield.⁹ While the underlying objective was one of disseminating propaganda, the key point is that the medium of radio enabled the emergence of new imaginative spaces, uniting artists and audiences across formidable distances. The spread of “national music” coincided with the creation of domestic recording facilities. Mobutu enjoyed some success in creating a national recording industry that enabled Congolese music to find its feet and to win new converts – that is, before it was allowed to fall into disrepair along with everything else. Secondly, this literature also highlights the importance of performance as a reflexive act. Moorman attaches particular importance to clubs in the *musseques* of Luanda that functioned as non-colonized spaces. In the case of Congolese bands, a recent thesis by Tom Salter demonstrates that it was constant touring that created the mystique and ambience popularly associated with Congolese music (Salter 2008). Although the travails of Zaire/Congo ultimately led many of the best musicians to ply their trade elsewhere, the point that Salter makes is that expatriate Congolese bands came to be greatly admired in neighbouring countries, which helped to cement a sense of national pride. Needless to say, in recent times Congolese music made in the diaspora has been lapped up by audiences at home. Thirdly, these writings highlight the critical role played by audiences in receiving and interpreting the messages. Here, the textual content may ultimately be less important than the feeling of participation in a collective “vibe”. When it comes to clothing, the parallel with music is clear – and indeed Moorman herself indicates that dressing up was an integral part of attending clubs (Moorman 2004). It is also not too controversial to suggest that, in general, clothing can make clear statements – which is of course why Mobutu attached such significance to promoting approved forms of dress as well as music.

It is fairly easy to discern the connections between music and national sentiment: They are both performative and they both entail expressive acts (lyrics and musical forms) that can be imbued with a message. Clothing embodies some of these elements as well. Eating and drinking pose more of

9 The intention of the Free French, who were headquartered in Brazzaville, was to bring their political message to an audience in the *metropole*.

a problem. Of course, these can be performative acts – such as feasting in imperial Ethiopia (Orlowska 2007) – but they are also mundane and routinized forms of behaviour rooted in the banality of everyday life. This raises the fundamental question of whether the nation has to be performed – in other words, to involve conscious and expressive acts – or whether it can emerge out of an accretion of so many individual doings. This brings me (all too briefly) to an intriguing set of theoretical questions.

Shortly before his death, Ernest Gellner debated the modernity of nationalism with Anthony Smith and made the following rhetorical observation:

My main case for modernism that I'm trying to highlight in this debate is that on the whole the ethnic, the cultural national community [...] is rather like the navel. Some nations have it and some don't and in any case it's inessential.¹⁰

In other words, nations can be brought into existence despite the lack of distant genealogies. Gellner's formulation of nationalism implies a clear intentionality and a mechanism for dissemination of the national template that many regard as too mechanical. Benedict Anderson's formulation has found greater favour in recent times, despite the fact that it is often frustratingly ambiguous. At an early point in the text, Anderson declares that "nationalism has to be understood by aligning it not with self-consciously held ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it" (Anderson 1983: 19). But the cultural systems he depicts are – as for many who came before him – defined primarily by language. The reason for privileging language is that for Anderson, national awareness comes about through the linkage between new technologies (print capitalism) and emergent patterns of thinking about relatedness (the imagination part). If we grant the centrality of the imagination side of the equation, it is worth asking why the printed word should be attributed such overwhelming importance. For Anderson, print enables the wider dissemination of common perspectives and makes it possible for those who engage in reading to imagine themselves as occupying the same time-spaces. The simultaneity of time is partly real (e.g. reading the daily newspaper), but above all, it resides in the heads of those who participate in the repetitive acts. Clearly, there are many other routines that can function in the same way (and here I refer in particular to modes of consumption – drinking tea during the heat of the day in a country such as Senegal, or imbibing a cold beer after a day's work in South Africa) and have a meaning that goes well beyond the act of putting a glass to one's lips. The

10 See the text of Gellner's observations online at: <<http://www.nationalismproject.org/what/gellner1.htm>> (20 March 2011). See also Gellner (1996).

act of consumption is planned for, eagerly anticipated, reflected upon (“Was the tea too rushed?”, “Was the beer cold enough?”), and it forms part of a regular cycle of sociability that can be replicated across national space.

Although Anderson’s reference to cultural systems does raise the possibility that other forces might have been at play, he does not extend his discussion to consumption. However, the elaboration of new forms of mass consumption in Europe, which were coeval with ideas of the nation and which were arguably as important as print capitalism, surely cannot be left out of the story. In his only reference to consumption, with which this article is prefaced, Anderson makes a throwaway observation that books and sugar are different in their effects. However, precisely because of the properties he outlines, sugar became a quintessential commodity of mass consumption. It played a crucial role not only in binding together the far-flung parts of empire, but also in breaking through regional specificities and creating common dietary standards.¹¹ It may be going too far to claim that Englishness (to take one example) was measured in sugar, but this humble commodity did enable English people to arrive at a common understanding about what constituted luxury and what was a necessity. In general, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto is correct when he states that “no source of influence in cookery – perhaps in the exchange of culture generally – has exceeded imperialism” (Fernandez-Armesto 2001: 159). But food returned the favour by enabling imperial nations to create often very hybridized national cuisines. The complex relationship between Englishness and Britishness has long been expressed in terms of commonality and variance in equal measure: Hence, the Scots acquired the very same taste for sweet things in the eighteenth century, but were less obsessed with the consumption of beef as the definition of eating well and came to load the humble haggis with great national meaning. In France, the development of the concept of cuisine, as embodied in the invention of the restaurant (Spang 2000), involved the incorporation of regional variants into a national form. Despite the centralizing tendencies, regional identities continued to be bound up with the idea that there was something distinctive about local cuisine. Hence, the idea that eating is a mundane and non-reflexive act has been spurned for at least two hundred years by the French. Consumption was not incidental to national identity, therefore, but was partly constitutive of it. It comes as no great surprise, therefore, that some epithets about the French (“the frogs”), English (“*les rosbiefs*”) and the Germans (“the krauts”) are grounded in a conception of culinary difference. But France also provides an excellent example of how internal differences can be reconciled with a discourse of nation. Be-

11 See Mintz (1985: ch.3); for other commodities, see Schivelbusch (1992).

coming French and remaining proudly *provençal* have been reconciled through the deeply loaded concept of *terroir*, in which the grandeur of France is supposedly reflected in the unique qualities of each region.

Returning to Gellner – and Africa – the question I wish to pose is not whether the nation has a navel, but whether it has a stomach. The first step is to discern whether there are significant convergences at the level of consumption, and how these relate to local variations. The second step is to consider the extent to which these convergences are invested with greater meaning. The thread that links them is a set of facilitating technologies that overlaps with those commonly associated with the analysis of nationalism (and which is to be found in the pages of Gellner and Anderson alike), albeit with some significant variations. National broadcasting has not merely been crucial to the dissemination of political propaganda and musical forms, but has also served as an important vector for the spread of ideas about beauty, hygiene and leisure – chiefly through the medium of advertising. But, just as importantly, roads have created commercial nodes along which norms have travelled and embedded themselves. While markets have received their fair share of academic treatment,¹² lorry parks have not received nearly enough attention as interactive spaces. The act of travelling involves multiple layers of learned behaviour, including dressing up for the journey, acquiring simple gifts for the people at home (e.g. bread), consuming foods that one would not normally eat while waiting for the vehicle to set off (and then again en route), and possibly purchasing herbal remedies from the hard-sellers who typically make their pitch in the minutes leading up to the departure. It is also at the lorry park that the traveller is likely to be accosted not just by traders, but also by billboards proclaiming the virtues of Maggi cubes or Club Tonic. Aside from the lorry park and the market, there are many other places where expectations about consumption take hold, such as in bars, “chop bars”, hair salons and churches. Weddings, and more particularly funerals, have become amongst the most important theatres of consumption in Africa, in which the participants constitute both the actors and the audience. For people in the countryside as well in town, these are weekly events and comprise arguably the most important focuses of conviviality. It is the constant passage of life-cycle events which has helped to set national standards for formal dress – bringing us back to the Ghanaian obsession with *kente* – and also for food consumption.¹³

12 See Clark (1994); House-Midamba and Ekechi (1995).

13 See de Witte (2001). However, some life-cycle events involve consumption of foodstuffs that have largely disappeared from the daily diet. An example would be brown rice in the Togoland hills of Ghana, which is given pride of place at life-cy-

A second point is that only some of these technologies serve to turn the act of consumption into a potentially reflexive act, whereas others require further mediation. Much as reading (for Anderson) involves a triangular relationship between the reader, the text and an imagined body of fellow citizens, advertising seeks to establish a link between the individual consumer (or consuming family unit), the commodity, and a nation of fellow consumers. Although the images can become so pervasive that people scarcely notice them, the world of advertising is based on the presumption that certain images stick and lead consumers to the line of least resistance when they go shopping. Manufactured condiments, such as the ubiquitous Maggi cube, have also had important knock-on effects on styles and modes of cooking. In the case of commodities that are not manufactured, however, the underlying processes are much more elusive. How certain dishes become dominant has much more to do with the spaces identified above – the market and the lorry park – where a basic range of foods and repertoire of dishes tend to ground themselves in particular settings and then travel towards other nodes. But unlike manufactured commodities, which are aggressively advertised, it is impossible to identify a smoking gun in relation to what are commonly referred to as “foodways”. Here, it is more helpful to think in terms of the capillary effect of the market working through markets and transport nodes. I will now turn to consider food and drink in greater detail.

A Tale of Two Liquids: Beer and Wine in South Africa

The written history of non-alcoholic drinks in Africa relates mostly to stimulants, notably tea and coffee, rather than the soft drinks industry. The former have a complex relationship with the nation, in that while they may be produced within a given country, they also form part of the transnational complexes of consumption. Tea has carved out a broad constituency across predominantly Muslim countries north and south of the Sahara, as well as in the former British colonies where settlers were present in significant numbers. Coffee-drinking tends to be associated with being Muslim – an identity that necessarily crosses national boundaries – but in the case of Ethiopia, coffee has jumped the Christian–Muslim divide and has established itself as the national beverage.¹⁴ In the case of soft drinks, national industries have

cle events and local festivals. In somewhere like Likpe, it symbolizes the integrity of the local, at the same time as much else that is consumed is national.

14 See Grigg (2002), and especially the map of consumption patterns on p. 286.

tended to function as branch plants of global brands, such as Coca-Cola, although there are cases (as in Togo) where local copies have been developed as an adjunct to brewing. Arguably, while global brands may pose a problem for official nationalism, they don't really matter that much at the level of actual consumption. Whether citizens of another country consume the very same products is of less importance than the fact that people within a given country participate in the same routines of consumption.

If we are looking for pronounced convergences in patterns of national consumption, we should probably focus our attention on alcohol, for which there is a rich literature.¹⁵ In many African countries, the one industry that has experienced sustained growth is bottled beer. In some African countries, beer is consumed in substantial quantities. In 2004, it was estimated that the Czechs (the world's largest consumers) drank 157 litres of beer per capita per year, whereas South Africans drank 59 litres (the highest in Africa and 22nd-highest in the world) and the Gabonese 56 litres (28th), with Namibians coming in third at 40 litres per capita.¹⁶ In the decades after independence, the national brewery was sometimes the one parastatal that was successful.¹⁷ In recent years, the multinational giants that have been slugging it out for global dominance, namely SAB Miller and Diageo, have acquired a stake in a number of African breweries. Although they have introduced their global brands into African markets, they have also had the foresight not to try to kill off local brands with which consumers strongly identify. The importance of beer as a marker of national difference cannot be underestimated. Even where the same products have historically been produced in a number of countries – as was the case with Star in Anglophone West Africa and Tusker in East Africa – there has been a firm attachment to the national variant. This is rooted in the perception that the beers are significantly different in taste, as indeed they can be. Despite the material hardships that most Africans have endured since the 1980s, the consumption of bottled beer (and, in some countries, beer sold in cartons) has remained a treasured pursuit amongst ordinary African men. This is not just true of the cities, but also holds for ordinary towns of no great size, wealth or distinction. In a small Cameroonian town such as Lolodorf, for example, the number of bars with regular clientele is quite striking.¹⁸ In the cities and larger towns, the grilling of meat, chicken and guinea fowl – called *brochettes* in the Francophone

15 Akyeampong (1996); van den Bersselaar (2007); Willis (2002); and Bryceson (2002).

16 Kirin Holdings, Per Capita Beer Consumption by Country, 2004, online: <http://www.kirinholdings.co.jp/english/ir/news_release051215_4.html> (20 March 2011).

17 In Nigeria, state formation led to the creation of breweries at lower levels as well.

18 Along a modest main road, covering about 150 metres, I counted no fewer than eight thriving bars in Lolodorf in June 2010.

countries or kebabs in the Anglophone ones – is typically associated very closely with the on-site consumption of beer. In most countries, there are at least two major brands to choose from, and one of the pleasures consists of endlessly debating the merits of one versus another. Being a Cameroonian or a Zambian consists in part of knowing that you can normally acquire the same beer wherever you are in the country; when a Cameroonian or a Zambian returns to his country after time away, there is nothing more evocative than re-entering the circuit of conviviality: The first beer is not merely the best, but also the most symbolically charged. Very much like the written word, therefore, drinking beer is conceived of as a collective pursuit that creates its own sense of the simultaneity of time. What is distinctive is that this is mediated through advertising and the reach of the market into conceptions of leisure.

Rather than dwell further on West, East or Central Africa, where the case for convergence can be made rather easily, I turn now to South Africa, where the likelihood thereof might seem more remote. At the end of the Second World War, the South African liquor market was extraordinarily segmented by race and region. Africans were banned from drinking “European alcohol”, as they were in a number of British settler colonies (Ambler 1992: 340): The list included wine, spirits and bottled beers. Those Africans living in the countryside were permitted to brew their own beer (despite temperance lobbying), while migrants and urban dwellers were allowed to drink sorghum beer that was specially brewed for consumption in municipal beer halls, thereby providing an important source of local revenue (la Hausse 1992). Coloureds were permitted to drink wine in the Cape, but not in the other provinces. Not surprisingly, whites could drink alcohol in all four provinces, subject to strict licensing laws, but Afrikaners tended to consume little outside of the Western Cape. When they did indulge at all, they tended to consume brandy or fortified wine. Many wine farmers considered it a treat to drink a glass before or after meals while entertaining guests, but this was not considered a part of the everyday routine. In fact, a considerable number of wine farmers were actually teetotalers. English-speaking whites, who tended to be concentrated in the towns, were the ones who drank most of what were categorized as natural wine, bottled beer and spirits. Hence, alcohol consumption was segmented not just by race, but also by ethnicity.

Despite these divisions, which were entrenched by habit and legislation alike, there was an inexorable trend toward a common drinking pattern. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Afrikaners began to drift away from brandy towards sweet white wines, and in the 1970s they finally discovered the pleasures of red wine, whose merits were pushed by the KWV (the Koöperatieve

Wijnbouwers Vereniging van Zuid-Afrika), the organization of wine farmers that regulated the industry on behalf of the state. At the same time, urban blacks began to develop a taste for sweet wines and bottled beers, as was reflected in the proliferation of illegal *sbebeens* – the preferred alternative to the municipal beer halls – which the police were powerless to eradicate. The Malan Commission, which was set up in 1956 to enquire into all aspects of liquor distribution, eventually came down on the side of the need for root-and-branch reform. Most radically, it recommended that all racial groups should enjoy access to the same liquor, subject of course to rigorous licensing laws. It frankly admitted the failure of past legislation and urged the government to recognize the changing landscape of African consumption:

The economic conditions of the natives has [sic] improved to such an extent that they can, *inter alia*, afford the white man's drink. The status and living conditions of many of them in their own community have improved accordingly, so that the refusal to let the natives have the white man's drink has caused so much resistance that infringement of the law – viz. by obtaining drink illegally – gives them a certain amount of pleasure.¹⁹

The second innovation of the Malan Commission lay in advocating a reform of white drinking habits. The commission observed that white South Africa had a much higher level of per capita spirit consumption than Europe – more than double that of West Germany – which it considered decidedly unhealthy. It therefore insisted on the importance of engineering a shift from the consumption of spirits to unfortified wine and beer, both of which were considered benign – especially when they were drunk in conjunction with food. The subsequent public awareness campaigns of the KWV were intended to demonstrate that wine could constitute an integral component of a healthy diet amongst all racial groups.

Collectively, the wine industry believed that the removal of the restrictive legislation would lead to a take-off in black consumption of natural wine if the enabling environment was created. To that end, the large merchant-manufacturing firms embarked on their own marketing campaigns, specifically targeted at a black middle class, in tandem with promotions aimed at the lower and middle reaches of the market that had hitherto been dominated by the coloured consumer. These campaigns in the 1960s do not appear to have been very successful, in that wine consumption increased at a fairly unspectacular rate. Although a succession of particular brands briefly

19 *Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the General Distribution and Selling Prices of Liquor* (unofficial translation supplied by the Western Province Bottle Store Keepers Association, May 1960) [Malan Commission], 17.

achieved popularity, they proved to have little staying power. Beer sales boomed, however, as South African Breweries (SAB) targeted the black consumer in the *sbebeens* with considerable success. In the 1970s, there was an acrimonious liquor war between SAB, which owned the Stellenbosch Farmers' Winery (SFW), and the Oude Meester Group, which was part of the Rembrandt empire of the Afrikaner magnate, Anton Rupert. Beer was the battleground and, following a period of ruinous price-cutting, the two sides came to a settlement. In 1979, SAB effectively divested itself of SFW, which was brought into a new company (Cape Wine) that was partly owned by Oude Meester, KWB and SAB, but was effectively under management control of the first two (Fridjohn and Murray 1986: 183). From the late 1970s on, wine struggled to maintain its market share, whereas the sales of bottled beer sales continued on a steep upward trajectory. The SAB invested considerable resources in marketing beer as a product for exclusive male bonding (Mager 2005: 172), whether in a *sbebeen* or in a whites-only setting, whereas the wine companies enjoyed much less success in selling the image of wine as something that couples could enjoy at a *braai* (barbecue) or a fondue evening (Mager 2010). Castle and Lion were more popular brands with white consumers, whereas Black Label targeted an African clientele – although there were many beer drinkers who crossed this divide in either direction. But they were all part of the same SAB stable, and they were pretty similar products. This did not prevent the consumers from engaging in a constant debate about which brand was better.

By the mid-1980s, both blacks and whites were drinking pretty much the same alcoholic beverages, which was certainly not the case in 1945. Moreover, there had been a convergence of drinking patterns across national space, with the Eastern Cape manifesting a slightly different pattern from the rest of country. The residual difference was that black consumption remained heavily focused on the *sbebeens*, whereas white consumption of beer tended to concentrate on the home and outdoor spaces, in the absence of a real bar culture. It is interesting to observe that white journalists in the late 1970s and 1980s began to write in rather positive terms about *sbebeens*, or at least the “better class of *sbebeen*”. Market research had long insisted that black drinking culture was by its very nature more sociable. The wine industry magazine, *Wynboer*, took up the matter in a special feature on *sbebeens* in 1978 and reported the following:

The Blacks were never, not even to this day, partial to the colonialistic habit of sundowner drinking. Drinking alone in front of the family or even with the wife has never been a happy circumstance among them. Unlike custom in Western civilization, the Black knows no set hours in which it is sociable to consume alcohol. By nature he is a sociable

person and indeed a social drinker. He is inclined to want to drink in large groups sharing his liquor with easy-going gregarious company (*Wynboer*, October 1978).

This tied into an older discourse about alcoholism, which portrayed lone drinking amongst whites as a social problem, whereas blacks were thought to better appreciate the social side of drinking – including an appreciation of the integral association between eating and drinking. The bottom line here is that the market power of black consumers was looming ever larger in the eyes of companies like SAB for whom a convergence of consumer preferences could only be construed as a very good thing. The discourse about difference – that is, the *shebeen* versus the home and Castle versus Black Label – should not obscure the fact that South African drinking habits were becoming distinctly similar. This was a process that was certainly not mirrored at the political level, where the divide in the 1970s and 1980s was growing ever deeper.

When the political walls came down after 1994, black and white South Africans slowly came to appreciate that those on the other side were not a different branch of humanity, but were surprisingly similar to each other in terms of their expectations about leisure time. As Anne Mager has demonstrated, SAB was most astute in recognizing that the ending of Apartheid provided the perfect moment to capitalize on burgeoning national pride surrounding international sporting events (Mager 2005: 184-89). The advertising campaign for Castle Lager targeted football, in particular, and presented the brand as the number one supporter of the national team. One advertisement for Castle laid it on thick:

One nation, one soul, one beer, one goal.
 Let the nation pull together
 Let's celebrate our soccer today.
 The beer of the people is with us,
 With us every step of the way.²⁰

While SAB has been careful to protect its virtual monopoly, it is being shaken by the threat on the part of Diageo to take the global liquor wars onto its home turf. But because South Africa now counts for a relatively small proportion of SAB Miller's global profits, a relative decline of its market share would not be catastrophic. Whereas the lengthy love affair with beer by South Africans of all colours seems to have peaked, the wine industry believes that finally its time may have come. The industry is conscious of the fact that per capita consumption and the total volume of domestic wine

20 Quoted in Mager (2005: 185).

sales have been falling,²¹ but believes that the growing black middle class is beginning to appreciate that wine can provide a better marker of wealth and status than beer can. This was nicely captured in a recent outburst by Julius Malema, the head of the ANC Youth League, during an ongoing war of words with other key figures in the ANC–South African Communist Party alliance:

There is a small group of elites in the alliance who present themselves as working-class leaders, while there is very little to show that in everything they do. They spend most of their time drinking red wine.²²

The close association of red wine with whiteness, and hence dubious political credentials, is striking. The Soweto Wine Festival has enjoyed some success in recent years,²³ and there are signs of movement at both the top and bottom ends of the market. While the black *nouveaux riches* are spending more money on top-end wines, the Van Loveren winery has enjoyed an astonishing success with its *Four Cousins* label at the bottom end. In December 2007, the 1.5-litre bottle reputedly outsold the 2-litre bottle of Coca-Cola at the Pick ‘n Pay supermarket in Soweto’s new Maponya Mall, which is an extraordinary feat given the limited advertising that supports the brand (Foxcroft 2009: 41–42). There are already copycat products on the market that are seeking to cash in on this success. The optimists observe that much as Afrikaners progressed from cheap, sweet wines to drier reds, blacks are likely to come to appreciate the pleasures of wine at higher price-points as they learn more. Whether this is just another temporary blip remains to be seen, but recent trends do give reasonable cause to suppose that wine is starting to be regarded less as the preserve of white and coloured consumers, and more as a drink for all South Africans.

The wine industry will never command the advertising resources that would enable nationalism to be effectively milked in the service of consumption, but the message that the industry seeks to project is one of a country that contains an enormous diversity of styles. Blacks from other regions of South Africa are being actively encouraged not just to drink more (and better) wine, but to visit the Cape and to embark on the wine route. If SAB has marketed Castle as the beer of the nation, the wine industry seeks to couple the idea of wine drinking as a personal discovery with the concept

21 Between 1999 and 2008, domestic sales of wine fell from 309.9 to 356.1 million litres.

22 Julius Malema quoted in: Malema raps leaders in race, *Mail & Guardian Online*, 28 August 2009, online: <<http://www.mg.co.za/printformat/single/2009-08-28-malema-raps-anc-leaders-on-race>> (20 March 2011).

23 Festival attendance doubled between 2005 and 2008 (Foxcroft 2009: 43).

of unity in diversity. This is reflected in wine labels that no longer seek to copy European or Australian motifs, but rather draw attention to local fauna and flora – in other words, a distinctively South African range of *terroirs* – that are said to be reflected in the quality of the product itself. In that sense, the campaign to promote wine-drinking plays into a more or less conscious discourse of the nation in South Africa.

Taking the long view, it is striking how much South African understandings about race, class and ethnicity have played themselves out in patterns of alcohol consumption. The Cape coloured community came virtually to be defined by its “destructive” relationship with cheap wine – underpinned by the *dop* system – at the same time as Afrikaner nationalists prided themselves on their habits of abstinence. While beer became a symbol of the increasingly confident black consumer in the 1970s, upward mobility for Afrikaners and more recently for blacks has been associated with the shift to sweet white wine and then toward dry red wine. At every point, the liquor companies have self-consciously appealed to perceived racial preferences and class aspirations, but consumers have been no less aware of the meanings attached to the act of putting a glass to one’s lips.

You Are What You Eat

In view of the fact that I have already discussed food in general terms, I return to this subject more succinctly. The convergence of food consumption patterns is one of the most intriguing stories of postcolonial Africa.²⁴ During the colonial period, it was still possible to talk of distinct food zones: the rice belt of the Upper Guinea Coast, the millet/sorghum belt of the Sahel, the maize belt of Southern Africa and the pastoralist complexes of West and East Africa. But over the past half century, there have been patterns of convergence within national boundaries that reflect a number of influences. Firstly, in countries where Islam has made significant inroads, such as in the Senegambia, the consumption of pork has declined (for obvious reasons), while the consumption of lamb has been invested with positive associations – especially during times of religious celebration. Secondly, the ability of global suppliers to undercut local production on price has been decisive. Hence millet has lost out to cheap maize imports, while brown rice has largely been substituted by imported white rice. Moreover, the great rice-producing zones of the Senegambia have become marginal to national con-

24 There is some overlap between what I am writing about here and what has been written about foodways. The difference is that I am not concerned with issues of diet and nutrition. For a recent volume, see Osseo-Asare (2005).

sumption, as Southeast Asian rice has come to dominate African diets. Thirdly, in Africa's rapidly growing cities, a premium is placed on foods that can be prepared quickly, are cheap and above all fill the stomach. As Bjorn Beckman and Gunilla Andrae observed with respect to Nigeria in the early 1980s, the demand for bread as a street food created a substantial demand for wheat, which Nigeria did not produce (Beckman and Andrae 1985). A third factor is the imperative for ease of food preparation, under conditions when many urban families have limited space for cooking. This partly explains the attraction to powdered cassava and the popularity of the Maggi cube.

Although there has been a convergence of consumption patterns, the importance of food for a sense of national identity varies widely in Africa. As Jim McCann has noted in his recent book, the advance of maize across Central and Southern Africa has culminated in the emergence of very similar dishes in which a maize porridge is eaten with a sauce made up of vegetables, some meat and generally very little spice (McCann 2009). Travelling within a country, one is likely to encounter the same basic fare, but with variations according to availability of local ingredients (e.g. fish). The convergence of diets around maize imparts a level of familiarity to national cooking, and sustains a certain nostalgia for the comforts of home amongst Africans in the diaspora. As Elias Mandala has demonstrated for Malawi, rural communities have also engaged in rather deep reflections about the rules of commensality: that is, who should be invited to the table and what they should rightfully receive (Mandala 2005). But in most of these countries, the content of national food is not invested with very great significance.

Then we have the cases where quite distinct forms of regional cooking survive, and which people within a given country have come to expect as normal. One might say that the concept of "unity in diversity" is reflected in the bowl. Hence in Ghana, there are quite distinct regional cuisines that have survived urbanization – one can meaningfully identify a *kenkey* (fermented maize) zone at the coast, a *fufu* zone (using yams, cassava, cocoyam and plantain) in the forest area, and the grain-based dishes of the Sahel (millet and sorghum). Ghanaians who travel from one zone to the next will expect to encounter these differences, and often take pleasure in the variety that comes with travel – such as the prevalence of *akple* with "Keta school-boys" (tiny silver fish) in southern Eweland or forest snails in Asante, or the difference between Ga and Fante *kenkey*. In the cities, different foods may coexist and, in the manner of joking relationships, the food habits of par-

ticular groups are simultaneously admired and made the objects of fun.²⁵ Hence, no self-respecting consumer would buy a kebab from an Ashanti, least of all in Ashanti: It has to be made by someone from the North who understands meat, and preferably by a Frafra from the Northeast. The same model works equally well for Cameroon, where there are very distinct regional food cultures.

Finally, we come to a few cases where something like a national cuisine has emerged. As McCann observes, there have always been quite distinctive regional cuisines in Ethiopia, but a standardized form of highland food culture crystallized around transport nodes (such as the railhead) and urban centres. What began as street food entered the hotel and was eventually elevated to the status of national cuisine. From beyond the highlands, only *kitfo* (a Gurage dish) made it onto the national list, while Ethiopian fare became a standardized version of highland offerings in which *injera* was eaten with a meat or chicken stew – subject to the cycles associated with fasting (McCann 2009: 89-90). This is the food that predominates in Addis Ababa today, which in turn has set the standard for the country as a whole. Senegal provides an instance where a very similar cuisine has conquered national space from the Casamance to the Mauritanian and Malian borders. Commentators on Senegalese politics have pointed to the Wolofization of the country since independence, but one could make a very similar case for the dominance of slow-cooked rice. *Thiebou dien* (rice with fish) has become a kind of culinary lingua franca consumed by Senegalese across the country, and is especially valued by the Wolof who, interestingly, have never been rice cultivators. In both Ethiopia and Senegal, the dominance of particular dishes goes together with a high value attached to commensality. Although one can eat *doro wat* or *thiebou dien* alone, the pleasure lies in eating with others from the same platter. Naturally, there is an elaborate etiquette involved in which status, gender and age feed into unspoken rules about who eats together and who receives the best pieces of meat, lamb or chicken – or, for Senegalese, fish. In these countries, one can legitimately refer to a process of “imagining” the nation through food. The existence of cookbooks and national restaurants is perhaps the best indicator of a national food consciousness.²⁶ It should come as no surprise that two countries with

25 In Ghana, the Frafra are said to eat dogs, while the Ewes are supposed to have a preference for cat. That does not stop Akans from regarding the Frafra as the best grillers of meat.

26 Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal and Cameroon have all been well covered by the world of cookbooks. The diaspora have played a key role in codifying national cuisine. See, for example, Mesfin (1994); Otoo and Otoo (1997); N'Diaye Haas (2004); Thiam (2008); and Nya Njike (1998).

substantial diasporas have projected national values onto their prized dishes. For Ethiopians, these have supported a restaurant culture in cities in North America and Europe where there are sizeable Ethiopian communities. The Senegalese have been less prominent in the restaurant trade, but communal consumption is integral to a sense of community amongst young Senegalese migrants. The difference is that while the Ethiopians can claim national uniqueness on the basis that *teff* is an exclusively Ethiopian grain – thereby turning *injera* into national patrimony – the Senegalese cook with imported rice. But for them, it is the method of food preparation that is held to be distinctive.

In Ethiopia, one comes closest to the role of food as a national statement. But in South Africa, there has been a very conscious attempt to celebrate a common approach to food. In 2007, Desmond Tutu took it upon himself to champion the *braai* as the one thing that all South Africans could identify with.²⁷ National Braai Day coincides with Heritage Day, which falls on 24 September each year. The organizers of Heritage Day regarded Tutu's intervention as trivializing their efforts to encourage South Africans to embrace their common past, but Tutu surely had a point when he noted that South Africans of all races place a premium on eating large quantities of meat cooked on an open fire. Indeed, the name of the event has since been changed to "Braai4Heritage". The *braai* is also the epitome of a highly gendered sociability that crosses the racial divide. Although the white *braai* embodies elements of its own, *mielie pap* – a side-dish copied from black South Africans – has customarily been eaten as an accompaniment. Needless to say, a *braai* would not be authentic without the drinking of beer and wine, a link that advertisers have not failed to spot. The *braai* has become a source of self-parody for South Africans, especially for those who live abroad, but it is also a form of commensality that is considered unique to the country (South Africans are understandably horrified by the Australian barbecue, which involves cooking on a metal sheet) and that cuts across race. Perhaps the most striking example is the South African Chinese community, which mostly left the country in the 1990s and settled in Toronto in large numbers. Here they keep their distinct South African identity alive, in part through the *braai*.

27 Braai4Heritage, "Our patron, Desmond Tutu", online: <<http://braai4heritage.co.za/our-patron-desmond-tutu/>> (21 March 2011).

Conclusion

Although consumption in Africa is a topic that has commanded considerable attention in recent years, it has tended to be associated with a discourse about Africa's position in a globalizing world – especially with respect to clothing, but increasingly also food markets – and/or a discourse about the local dynamics of poverty and material want (including famine). In this article, I have tried to look at consumption from the rather different perspective of national belonging. I have argued that Benedict Anderson's emphasis on print capitalism pays insufficient attention to mass consumption of products other than the written word. Indeed, everyday forms of consumption reached a far greater number of people and were often every bit as reflexive as the act of reading. Going beyond this comparative observation, I have focused on food and drink in Africa and demonstrated that there have been significant convergences in consumption patterns within national boundaries. Some of these, such as the consumption of bottled beer, have been so closely associated with routinized leisure pursuits that one can fairly speak of the imagined simultaneity of leisure time. Advertising on the airwaves and on roadside hoardings has been of fundamental importance in inserting manufactured commodities into a national "thought-space", but travel and the life-cycle events like funerals have also had a capillary effect in disseminating notions of what is desirable – and indeed of grounding the conception of need itself. At times of scarcity, consumers have gone out of their way to acquire that which is considered to be essential. Hence, the history of smuggling in East and West Africa is very largely a tale of female demand for cosmetics and cloth that have been either scarce or too costly at home.²⁸ In the case of food, striking convergences are also present, but it is only in some countries that one can talk of a nation imagined through food. Ethiopia is the best example of this phenomenon, although some of the same elements are also present in Senegal, Ghana, Cameroon and South Africa.

It is important to underline that – as has been the case in that most constructed of nations, France – ideas about national food and drink tend to coexist with understandings of regional specificity. Imagining the nation

28 On the importance attached to cosmetics, see Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996). My research on smuggling along the Ghana/Togo border in the early 1980s demonstrated that cloth and cosmetics were amongst the most important items of contraband. See also T.L. Maliyamkono and M.S.D. Bagachwa, *The Second Economy in Tanzania* (Oxford: James Currey, 1990), table 3.18, p.159, for comparable evidence relating to the mid-1980s.

through consumption has drawn attention to perceived ethnic, and in some cases, racial variations with the implication that the nation is construed as a complex and multi-layered entity. Indeed, it is the creative tension between the cultural centre and its culinary margins that tends to stimulate the very debates that have the effect of valorizing consumption within national consciousness. In a country like Ghana, there is a certain pride attached to *fufu*, which is perceived as being very different to the fare that goes by the same name in other West African countries. But in Ashanti, “proper” *fufu* is made with pounded yams, whereas in the Volta Region it is common to use a mixture of cassava and plantain, while the soup often contains fish. While Ashantis and Ewe acknowledge there are many possible variants, the preference tends to be for the regional form. Investing value in the products of one’s home region is a form of ethnic pride, but it is one that is internalized as part of the definition of national distinctiveness. The same point could be made in a different way about Cape Malay cuisine, which is both similar (the use of spices) and different (curries are sweet) to Asian cooking. It has helped a section of the Cape coloured community to define its Asian origins, while paradoxically demarcating South African culinary difference.

Finally, African diasporas have played an important role in mediating national forms. Ethiopian and Senegalese restaurants in the United States and Europe have tended to promote “national food”, whereas Ghanaian and Nigerian restaurants often make a virtue of regional variations that themselves represent a form of codification. These have fed back to the countries concerned where the different repertoires are apparent in the menus of restaurants and hotels that are geared toward expatriates and African returnees. The saying “you are what you eat” has implications, therefore, that go well beyond calorific intake.

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Haben Nationen einen Magen? Ess- und Trinkgewohnheiten und *Imagined Community* in Afrika

Zusammenfassung: Ausgangspunkt des Beitrags ist eine abgewandelte rhetorische Frage von Ernest Gellner. Gefragt wird, ob alltägliche Akte des Konsums, insbesondere Ess- und Trinkgewohnheiten, zur Identifikation mit der eigenen Nation beitragen. Der Beitrag hält Benedict Andersons Konzeption der Nation als *Imagined Community* für hilfreich, argumentiert aber, dass es wenig Sinn macht, das gedruckte Wort gegenüber anderen Konsumbereichen besonders hervorzuheben. Der Autor beobachtet im Hinblick auf Konsumgewohnheiten signifikante Konvergenzen, die allerdings nicht immer zur Reflexion über nationale Zusammengehörigkeit führen. Er stellt Beiträge zu Musik und Kleidung vor und wendet sich dann der Bedeutung des Konsums alkoholischer Getränke und alltäglicher Nahrungsmittel zu. Mit einer kursorischen Geschichte des Bier- und Weinkonsums in Südafrika greift er einen auf den ersten Blick besonders unwahrscheinlichen Fall von Konvergenz auf. Die nationale Küche ist in afrikanischen Staaten zumeist kein Gegenstand von Debatten, wird in Ländern wie Äthiopien und Senegal allerdings sehr ernst genommen. Auch in Südafrika gibt es Bemühungen, die Bevorzugung bestimmter Lebensmittel als spezifisch südafrikanisch darzustellen; und auch wenn über die in Südafrika gebräuchliche Variante des Grillens (*braai*) oft eher scherzhaft gesprochen wird, hat doch die Förderung des Bewusstseins, welche Essgewohnheiten alle Südafrikaner miteinander teilen, auch eine ernstere Seite.

Schlagwörter: Afrika, Südafrikanische Republik, Sozio-kultureller Wandel, Nationale Identität, Konsum