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2011-06-21
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Power, identity and agency at work in the popular economies of Soweto and Black Johannesburg

By
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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Faculty of Humanities
School of Social Sciences
Department of Anthropology
University of the Witwatersrand

January, 2011

Thesis Title: Power, identity and agency at work in the popular economies of Soweto and Black Johannesburg

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Department: Anthropology

Abstract: This thesis investigates a number of economic and financial practices, processes, relationships, actors and institutions prevalent in the residential areas that form part of Johannesburg that is known as Soweto, all of which have in common the exchange, hoarding, spending and risking of cash money. It describes actual flows of monies between actors and through popular economic institutions which are embedded in social relations of friendship and kinship, neighbourhood life and socially constructed identities. Building on the anthropological literature that seeks to show how money flows carry meaning as well as having function, it inquires into the meanings such flows of money - between popular institutions and social groups and across social classes - have for a range of differently situated participants in the popular economies. It explores the ways in which institutions and practices within the popular economies are deployed by actors and groups so as to direct flows of monies into certain social networks and relationships while redirecting it away from others, highlighting the agency of actors and groups in relation to their position in the local and larger political economy. Employing elements of practice theory, as well as perspectives from both political economy and cultural economy approaches to everyday life, the thesis offers arguments about power, identity, agency and state sovereignty in the context of the history of Black Johannesburg under apartheid and makes a contribution to our understanding of the material and symbolic structures of everyday life in contemporary Soweto and Johannesburg.

Key Words: Popular economies, finance, saving, money lending, gambling, consumption, everyday life, Soweto, Black Johannesburg, South Africa, power, identity, agency, urban anthropology.