

## LUXURY PRODUCT CONSUMPTION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CAPE COLONY HOUSEHOLDS\*

**Abstract** — *What we know about the material culture of eighteenth century Cape Colony settlers is mostly limited to qualitative evidence found in official documents, letters, travel accounts and other correspondence. This paper uses a new quantitative source – the MOC probate inventories – to ascertain the nature, growth and distribution of luxury good ownership in the Cape Colony. The survey reveals a marginal increase over the course of the eighteenth century in household ownership, although the trend masks greater movements within different wealth groups, which supports the notion of high inequality within the European society at the Cape. The evidence presented here suggests that even the poorest had access to the most basic luxuries. In fact, comparisons with European and North American regions suggest that the Cape settlers were often more affluent, refuting the notion that the Cape Colony was an ‘economic and social backwater’, and confirming that it was at least partially integrated into the ‘consumer revolution’ of Western Europe.*

Probate inventories have become a popular source for investigating the social and economic aspects of the early modern era. Inventories contain unique and detailed information regarding the everyday lives of individuals and their households. The descriptive entries are inherently quantitative, providing valuable information about economic activities.<sup>1</sup> Such information can be used to quantify the production of agricultural goods, study debt and credit patterns, construct and analyse price series as well as determine the number and variety of an individual's household possessions.

Probate authorities administered the estates of deceased individuals in the Cape Colony from as early as 1673. A considerably large number of probate inventory records remain from the late seventeenth century Cape until

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1. For a detailed overview of probate inventories, see M. Overton, J. Whittle, D. Dean and A. Hann, *Production and consumption in English households, 1600-1750* (London 2004).

1834. A number of studies have focussed on agricultural production in the Colony using the *opgaafrolle*, a series of annual tax returns that primarily provide information on agricultural output.<sup>2</sup> Yet the consumption behaviour of Cape inhabitants remains less understood. This study uses data from digitised probate records to determine the growth and distribution of nine luxury items – paintings, pocket watches, other timepieces, gold rings, small mirrors, large mirrors, gloves, snuffboxes and wigs – in the Cape Colony for the period 1696 to 1805. Data of the nine luxury items was collected from 2,378 inventories and was used to construct a luxury ownership index. Mean index scores as well as the ownership per inventory of separate items give valuable insights pertaining to the consumption behaviour of the Cape population and to changes in wealth during the period. In that sense, this study takes an ‘extensive’ approach, rather than an ‘intensive’ one, since it is concerned with distinguishing common properties and general trends on a colony-wide basis.<sup>3</sup>

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw an increasing awareness of luxury and display with regard to the acquisition of household items. This was a global phenomenon, as mostly Western Europeans (in Europe but also as settler communities elsewhere) started producing and consuming larger varieties of amenity items and improving their respective living standards. Probate records can reveal if a similar trend is observed for the Cape Colony during the eighteenth century and how the consumption behaviour of Cape households compares with those of other regions.

### The cape economy of the 18th century

The origin of the Cape Colony can be traced back to the first stage of expansion in overseas European involvement. The Cape of Good Hope was originally intended to be used only as a refreshment station for the trading ships of the Dutch East India Company (voc). The voc ships needed to restock supplies before continuing on their journey towards trading partners in the Indies, and on their way back to Holland. The Company had no initial intention of reaping direct economic reward from the Cape, and the Colony was eventually run at a substantial loss during its 143 years under voc rule.<sup>4</sup> In

2. P. Van Duin and R. Ross, *The economy of the Cape Colony in the eighteenth century*. Intercontinenta 7, Centre for the History of European Expansion (Leiden 1987); L. Guelke and R. Shell, ‘An Early Colonial Landed Gentry: Land and Wealth in the Cape Colony: 1682-1731’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 9:3 (1983) 265-286; J. Fourie and D. Von Fintel, ‘The dynamics of inequality in a newly settled, pre-industrial society: Evidence from Cape Colony tax records’, *Cliometrica* 4:3 (2010) 229-267.

3. M. Overton c.s., *Production and consumption*.

4. R. Ross, ‘Die Kaapse Ekonomie’, in: R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds.), *’n samelewing in wording, 1652-1840* (Cape Town 1990) 249.

1657, five years after their arrival, a number of Company employees were encouraged to resign from their official duties in order to pursue farming activities as free burghers in areas near Cape Town. By then it had become clear that existing voc production as well as trade with the local Khoikhoi were not sufficient in providing supplies. This period also saw the immigration of men and a few women to the Cape in the pursuit of employment opportunities other than farming.<sup>5</sup> The voc continued to expand its activities as well as its employee list, and Cape Town soon became a bustling small town. By the start of the eighteenth century, the economic roots of the Colony had been formed, ensuring its future existence and growth.

Agricultural endeavours dominated economic activity, with farmers producing various grains, planting vines and investing in livestock. The voc acquired all production supplies, and a broad system of monopoly contracts dictated economic activity.<sup>6</sup> Cape farmers have traditionally been described as having been inefficient and debt-ridden, with a tendency to overproduce.<sup>7</sup> It is thought that most producers struggled to make ends meet, as the agricultural output of Company officials, who themselves farmed, saturated the small markets for fresh produce.<sup>8</sup>

While pockets of wealth occurred,<sup>9</sup> most farmers – especially those on the frontier – lived a life of poverty and material adversity.<sup>10</sup> A picture thus emerges of a stagnant Cape economy, restricted by many regulations and severe prohibitions, and few opportunities for settlers to improve their economic wellbeing; in short, the Cape was an ‘economic and social backwater’.<sup>11</sup>

This view has recently come under some scrutiny.<sup>12</sup> The *opgaafrolle* – annual censuses used for tax purposes – reveal that the production of grains

5. R. Ross, ‘Die Kaapse Ekonomie’, 250.

6. G. Groenewald, ‘Een dienstig inwoonder: entrepreneurs, social capital and identity in Cape Town, c. 1720-1750’, *South African Historical Journal* 59:1 (2007) 126-152.

7. M.H. De Kock, *Economic history of South Africa* (Cape Town 1924); C.W. De Kiewiet, *A history of South Africa: social and economic* (Oxford 1941).

8. Guelke and Shell, ‘An early colonial landed gentry’; H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners* (Cape Town 2003).

9. Guelke and Shell, ‘An early colonial landed gentry’.

10. P.J. Van der Merwe, *Die Trekboer in die Geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie* (Cape Town 1938). Two recent papers attempt to quantify the degree of this inequality. Fourie and Von Fintel (2010) use the *opgaafrolle* to calculate a measure of wealth inequality, while Fourie and Von Fintel (2011) use both the *opgaafrolle* and historical price series to construct income inequality.

11. S. Trapido, ‘From Paternalism to Liberalism: The Cape Colony, 1800-1834’, *The International History Review* 12:1 (1990) 76-104.

12. See among others: Van Duin and Ross ‘The economy of the Cape Colony’; L. Brunt, ‘Property rights and economic growth: Evidence from a natural experiment’ CEPR Discussion Papers No. 6404 (London, Centre for Economic Policy Research 2008); P. De Zwart, ‘Real wages at the Cape of Good Hope: a long-term perspective, 1652-1912’ (Stellenbosch:

and wine consistently increased from 1720 until the late eighteenth century, although not always at a per capita level. Van Duin and Ross<sup>13</sup> also account for significant undercounting in the *opgaafrolle*, as does Brunt,<sup>14</sup> who adjusts output towards the end of the century to even higher levels. These authors use the quantitative results to argue in favour of a 'more dynamic economy', with an aggregate improvement in the lives of farmers across the income spectrum. De Zwart<sup>15</sup> and Du Plessis and Du Plessis<sup>16</sup> use eighteenth century prices and wages to show that Cape labourers earned high and increasing real wages, in contrast with the declining real wages of Western Europe. Given that the Cape was a settler and slave economy with few wage labourers, it is unclear to what extent these high wage rates reflect average prosperity. Fourie<sup>17</sup> is the first to use probate inventories to show that the average Cape settler owned large numbers of products, particularly cattle and sheep but also some manufactured goods, compared with his or her Dutch or English counterpart.

Changes in the physical structure of farms during this time further support the argument of increased prosperity of especially land owners.<sup>18</sup> Farmers were financially able to invest in expensive alterations to existing buildings or to build new farmsteads at a considerable expense. Free men who did not own or lease land found employment as fishermen, artisans, transport riders or supervisors and tenants on other landowners' properties. The maintenance and service industries in the Colony's urban centre greatly expanded in order to cater for the flow of ships and accompanying sailors who arrived and spent a considerable length of time in Cape Town.<sup>19</sup> This included the establishment of numerous taverns, stores and lodgings as well as individuals working as carpenters, builders, bakers and other suppliers of needed goods or services. Randle<sup>20</sup> notes that men often diversified their economic undertakings

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*Economic society of South Africa conference*, 2011); S. Du Plessis and S. Du Plessis, *Happy in the service of the company: The purchasing power of VOC salaries at The Cape in the 18th Century*. (Department of Economics, University of Stellenbosch 2009). J. Fourie, 'The wealth of the Dutch Cape Colony: measurements from probate inventories', Economic Research South Africa Working Paper series 268 (2012).

13. Van Duin and Ross 'The economy of the Cape Colony'.

14. L. Brunt, 'Property rights and economic growth'.

15. P. De Zwart, 'Real wages at the Cape'.

16. Du Plessis and Du Plessis, *Happy in the service of the company*.

17. J. Fourie, 'The wealth of the Dutch Cape Colony'.

18. H. Franssen, and M. Cook, M. *The old buildings of the Cape*. (Cape Town 1980).

19. W.H. Boshoff and J. Fourie, 'The significance of the Cape trade route to economic activity in the Cape Colony: a medium-term business cycle analysis', *European Review of Economic History* 14:3 (2010) 469-503; Du Plessis and Du Plessis, *Happy in the service of the company*.

20. T. Randle, 'Patterns of consumption at auctions: A case study of three estates', in: N. Worden (ed.), *Contingent lives: Social identity and material culture in the VOC World* (Cape Town 2007) 57.

by simultaneously carrying the title of fisherman, butcher, wine lessee and lodger. Company officials and settlers were not authorised to openly operate merchandise shops or warehouses, as the VOC had monopoly control of all public trade in the colony. Private trade was, however, conducted somewhat stealthily from private homes during the eighteenth century, with the amount and variety of goods fluctuating during different times.<sup>21</sup> Private traders obtained merchandise from the officers of passing ships, local auctions and even through direct ordering from suppliers in the Netherlands. Coffee and tea, spices, silk, linen, mirrors, crockery and various eating utensils could all be purchased from these private shops. Any number of merchandise articles could be obtained by the Cape inhabitants, but at different times, at different locations and also often at varying prices.

While the early Cape historians would argue that these luxuries were restricted to a wealthy few at the Cape, the recent evidence on average levels of income suggests that luxuries were more widespread than previously thought. This paper searches for quantitative proof that the Cape was indeed part of a 'consumer revolution', reflected in the material culture of the average settler.

### Material culture and the consumer revolution

Investigations into the consumer behaviour of early modern Western Europeans have led to two propositions. Firstly, European growth before industrialisation might be attributed to the 'consumer revolution', a marked increase in market-related consumption that allowed the middle classes and the poor access to inexpensive goods previously reserved for the elite. Secondly, greater demand for cheap commodities resulted in what De Vries<sup>22</sup> calls an 'industrious revolution', the movement of labour – mostly women and children – from leisure and household activities to income-earning jobs.

A more nuanced interpretation of the 'consumer revolution',<sup>23</sup> as follows, is evident in the recent literature: a greater range of nonessential products that were acquired not only by the elite but also by the middle classes, probably

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21. O.F. Mentzel, *A geographical and topographical description of the Cape of Good Hope, 1787*. Translated by G.V. Marais and J. Hoge, ed. H.J. Mandelbrote (Cape Town 1925) 79.

22. J. De Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution', *Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994) 249-270; J. De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution* (Cambridge 2008) 132-175.

23. A. McCants, 'Exotic goods, popular consumption and the standard of living: Thinking about globalization in the early modern world', *Journal of World History* 18:4 (2007) 433-462; S. Ogilvie, 'Consumption, social capital, and the 'Industrious Revolution' in early modern Germany', *Journal of Economic History* 70 (2010) 287-325.

from the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>24</sup> Western European societies were undergoing a transition from the traditional economies of minimalism and morality to economies of relative abundance, happiness and utility.<sup>25</sup> New moral philosophies advocated that the pursuit of material advancement was natural and that the human desire for riches is unrelenting. Urbanisation led to the concentration of markets and further stimulated the imitation of status-based consumption patterns. Luxuries became more accessible to various types of individuals and previous restrictions based on certain social criteria were no longer applicable. The expansion of labour opportunities in the cities, especially for women, resulted in increased disposable income, which allowed them to purchase the newly available goods. In pursuit of luxuries, individuals undertook more productive enterprises, further boosting supply.<sup>26</sup> As Pomeranz<sup>27</sup> explains, the proliferation of objects in houses – ‘mirrors, clocks, furniture, framed pictures, china, silverware, linen, books, jewellery, and silk clothing, to name just a few items – all became increasingly ‘necessary’ signs of status for well-off Western Europeans.’ It was not only the accumulation of these assets that mattered, though. According to Pomeranz,<sup>28</sup> it became ‘increasingly important that these goods be “fashionable”, depreciating ‘culturally much faster than they decayed physically’.

This trend was closely associated with De Vries’s ‘industrious revolution’: the middle classes, with their greater desire to acquire the new nonessentials, shifted their labour supply to the market, working longer hours to afford the new fashions. This altered consumption patterns, with an out-of-home labour pool requiring on-the-job calories (and stimulants) and thus creating a larger market for the ‘popular luxuries’ of sugar, tea, coffee and tobacco.

The ‘consumer revolution’ was especially true of Holland<sup>29</sup> and England<sup>30</sup> in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but was not unique to them. Pomeranz<sup>31</sup> notes the well-documented evidence of similar ‘revolutions’

24. N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The birth of consumer society: The commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (London 1982).

25. P. Slack, ‘Material progress and the challenge of affluence in seventeenth-century England’, *Economic History Review* 62:3 (2009) 577.

26. M. Kwass, ‘Ordering the world of goods: Consumer revolution and the classification of objects in eighteenth-century France’, *Representations* 82 (2003) 87–116.

27. K. Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton 2001) 130.

28. Pomeranz, *The great divergence*, 130.

29. A. McCants, ‘After-Death Inventories as a Source for the study of material culture, economic well-being, and household formation among the poor of eighteenth-century Amsterdam’, *Historical Methods* 39 (2006) 10–23; De Vries, ‘The Industrial Revolution’; A. Schuurman, *Aards geluk: de Nederlanders en hun spullen van 1550 tot 1850* (Amsterdam 1997).

30. Weatherill, L. *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (Oxford 1996).

31. Pomeranz, *The great divergence*.



*Ill. 1 The entrance to the Blettermanhuis, now part of the Stellenbosch Museum. It has been restored and furnished to illustrate a wealthy Stellenbosch home from around the period of 1750-1790. Blettermanhuis was built in 1789 by Hendrik Lodewyk Bletterman, who was the last landdrost (magistrate) of Stellenbosch to be appointed by the Dutch East India Company. The house is built in the typical 18th century Cape style, with 6 gables in an H-shaped ground plan.*

before the seventeenth century, notably in the urban centres of Renaissance Italy and the Spanish Golden Age. And even though few Chinese inventory records exist, Clunas<sup>32</sup> shows that elite families in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) increasingly acquired nonessential goods as status symbols, even well before Europeans did so. Conversely, Ogilvie<sup>33</sup> shows that other European regions, notably Germany during the eighteenth century, were much slower in taking up such practices, reined in by the persistence of non-market institutions sanctioned by guilds, communities and state authorities. She argues that these non-market institutions may explain why many parts of central, Scandinavian, eastern and southern Europe experienced little growth during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while the societies of the north Atlantic seaboard developed rapidly. Ogilvie<sup>34</sup> argues that if the slow-growing societies also experienced an 'industrious revolution', then it would cast doubt on the connection between the industrious and industrial revolutions as suggested by De Vries.<sup>35</sup> However, if and where slow-growing economies did not experience an 'industrious revolution', the lack of growth in consumption must at least partially explain the underdevelopment vis-à-vis the early industrialisers (i.e. Holland and especially England).

The search for a consumer revolution has continued across the Atlantic, notably in the North American colonies, where the availability of detailed inventory records stimulated empirical research on the growth of consumption and wealth during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>36</sup> While these records suggest that the roots of American prosperity lay in its colonial foundations, understanding the comparative experiences of the Northern and Southern territories, for example, is one method to identify the causal mechanisms that link colonial prosperity to twentieth century affluence. These material histories of today's developed world have more recently been augmented by studies – most often also using probate inventories – of modern-

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32. Clunas, *Superfluous things: Material culture and social status in early modern China* (Cambridge, 1991).

33. Ogilvie, 'Consumption, social capital'.

34. Ogilvie, 'Consumption, social capital'.

35. De Vries, 'The Industrious Revolution'; De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*.

36. L.G. Carr and L.S. Walsh, 'Urban amenities and rural sufficiency: living standards and consumer behaviour in the colonial Chesapeake', *The Journal of Economic History* 43:1 (1983) 109-117; L.G. Carr and L.S. Walsh, 'The standard of living the colonial Chesapeake', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45:1 (1988) 135-159; G.L. Main, 'Personal wealth in colonial America: Explorations in the use of probate records from Maryland and Massachusetts, 1650 to 1720', *Journal of Economic History* 34 (1974) 289-294; J.T. Main, 'Standards of living and the life cycle in colonial Connecticut', *Journal of Economic History* 43:1 (1983) 159-165; A. Kulikoff, 'Economic growth of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake Colonies', *Journal of Economic History* 39 (1979) 275-288; A.H. Jones, 'Estimating the wealth of the living from a probate sample', *Journal of the Interdisciplinary History* 13:2 (1982) 273-300.





*Ill. 2 A furnished room in the Blettermanhuis. A writing desk and chair, and a cabinet are shown, together with a schilderij (painting), one of the luxury items measured in our sample.*

day developing regions.<sup>37</sup> In this context, the Dutch Cape Colony, situated on the trade route between Western Europe and the East, offers a promising research environment.

European immigrants settled in the Cape Colony during the second half of the seventeenth century. The Cape of Good Hope offered a new beginning to newly arrived settlers in search of better opportunities for prosperity. Arguably, European fashion trends and the growing interest in owning luxury goods would also be reflected in the consumption patterns of the Cape population. Ross<sup>38</sup> has argued that social status and gentility were already signalled by material items such as the clothing worn by eighteenth century Cape inhabitants. Ross substantiates his findings based largely on anecdotal archival accounts, which may not reflect the experience of all societal groups, especially the poor.

37. E. Karababa, 'Investigating early modern Ottoman consumer culture in the light of Bursa probate inventories', *Economic History Review* 65:1 (2012) 194-219.

38. R. Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony 1750-1870* (Cambridge 1999).

Fortunately, the digitisation and online dissemination of the Cape probate inventories and auction rolls have allowed a deeper investigation into the material culture of Cape settlers. Randle<sup>39</sup> is one of the first to investigate the Cape's material culture using a compilation of digitised probate records. Analysing the auctions of three elite, female-headed households in 1727, 1729 and 1734, Randle<sup>40</sup> examines the 'apparent connection between group identities and the material goods they publicly purchased'. She questions whether, given the prohibitions on foreign trade and domestic manufacturing, the Cape was any less a 'modern society' compared with England, finding that modernity might 'not have been defined so much by the use of 'new' consumables but rather by access to the wealth needed to purchase the most luxurious of second-hand goods.' Randle<sup>41</sup> therefore, argues that auctions presented opportunities for those at all levels of society to enhance their status by acquiring luxury goods, even those at 'the lowest levels of society'. The emphasis in Randle's work, though, is on the settlers' quest to improve their social status and identity, with little focus on the *extent* and *diversity* of household items or the *ability* of buyers to afford them. While improving their social status may have been of concern to even the poorest members of society, their *ability to acquire such a wide and increasing variety of goods* is of greater interest, as it may reflect a society in the midst of a consumer revolution and one that achieved, in comparison with other regions, a remarkably high standard of living.

## Probate inventories

### *Introduction to probate inventories*

Probate records and wills document the legal process through which individuals' assets are administrated after their death. Records have been compiled under the supervision of legal authorities and therefore offer consistent, specific and monitored reports of individual wealth for extended periods.<sup>42</sup> Probate inventories give detailed accounts of the number of goods persons possessed at the time of their death. Inventories were often accompanied by a valuation, giving the approximate worth of the estate at the time. Scholars in various fields of study have used such records to shed light on questions pertaining to genealogy, colonial economies and cultural differences.

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39. Randle, 'Patterns of consumption at auctions', 57.

40. *Ibidem*, 57.

41. *Ibidem*, 57.

42. M.P. Shanahan, 'Personal wealth in South Australia', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (2001) 59.

*Probate inventories at the Cape*

While a significant number of probate studies have accumulated over the past four decades, the Cape Colony probate records have attracted considerably less attention, owing most likely to the level of resources required to turn the original documents available in the Cape Town Archives Repository into electronic format. Fortunately, as part of the Transcription of Estate Papers at the Cape of Good Hope (TEPC) project, which ran from October 2004 to December 2006, and was funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Pretoria, a team of seven researchers transcribed and digitised the complete set of Master of the Orphan Chamber (MOOC)-8 inventory series (consisting of 75 volumes). The transcription team, consisting of three editors and four transcribers, converted the hand-written Dutch records into a digital database of XML-code.<sup>43</sup> This noble project has allowed economic historians – for the first time – to explore the material culture of Cape colonial society.

This study utilises 2,254 probate inventory records from the archives of the Master of the Orphan Chamber (MOOC) as its main source of data. The MOOC records have also been supplemented with 124 estate inventories of the Stellenbosch area. The Orphan Chamber (*Weeskamer*) had operated from soon after the VOC's arrival at the Cape until well into the second British occupation. With the relinquishment of power by the VOC in 1795, a lack of sufficient resources resulted in the continued use of existing legal and bureaucratic systems. The Orphan Chamber continued to take inventories and organise auctions until 1834, when its duties were taken over by private companies.

The Chamber of Orphans was charged with the responsibility of collecting and administering the property and estates of individuals who died intestate in the Cape and who left behind children under the age of 25 years.<sup>44</sup> The Chamber also functioned as executor under certain other conditions, for example, when individuals died without a valid testament or if they had heirs who were abroad at the time. Where the assets of liquidated estates were auctioned off, the Chamber would oversee the forced sales in order to protect the interests of minor children. The original written records of the Orphan Chamber are currently located at the Cape Town Archives Repository in Roeland Street, Cape Town. The records are the result of the documentation of 161 years of continued execution of administration duties by the Chamber.

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43. XML-code is the most basic form of digital coding available and is now an international standard for all archived digital data. A brief synopsis of this process is available in H. Liebenberg, F. Clayton, K. Faasen, E. Van As, J. Van der Merwe, M. Rall and I. Meyer, 'The Inventories of the orphan chamber of the Cape of Good Hope', in: Worden, *Contingent lives*.

44. TANAP. 'Context: History of the orphan chamber of the Cape of Good Hope. Inventories of the orphan chamber of the Cape of Good Hope', in: Worden, *Contingent lives*.

The Cape probate entries vary in size per year, and inventories were few for the beginning of the period. As the population in the Cape increased, so did the number of inventories recorded. The sample size seems relatively small when compared with the figures for present day household surveys. However, the 2,378 entries can be seen as a substantial number in comparison with the number of records utilised in similar studies for other regions. Approximately 150 entries were not included in the sample as these inventories did not mention the year in which they were recorded. Cape inventories give a comparably detailed representation of what households owned at the time of assessment and evaluation. Bar a few exceptions, appraisals commenced within days of the deceased's passing. A list of fixed properties with names and location, cattle, material possessions and slaves was compiled and given to the Orphan Chamber. Outstanding debits and credits of the deceased were also recorded. A clerk would subsequently record, number and file the inventories in more or less chronological order.

Inventories were generally compiled in a standard format giving details regarding different estates. Inventories of less wealthy individuals were mostly recorded in a straightforward way by listing items from the most valuable to the least valuable, or alternatively, according to the ease of access appraisers had to each item. In the case of larger estates, items were listed under certain headings according to their respective location, including various rooms, attics, and outbuildings. A number of inventories also contain detailed catalogues of book titles and paintings and pictures, with descriptions. Even objects with no material value were listed, such as junk and broken items.

A clear picture of an individual's life in the colony can emerge from a careful study of inventoried lists. Records give clues as to the profession of the deceased in instances where no outright mention of a profession is included. Medical equipment or building tools in inventories would lead one to assume that the deceased was a doctor or builder respectively. Outstanding credits can also be informative, as in the case of MOOC 8/12.54 where, in 1768, money was owed to Adriana Strijdom because a painting of hers had been delivered to a gentleman named Philip Hartog. Painting brushes and half-finished paintings in the inventory further confirm the assumption that Adriana Strijdom was an artist. The inventory mentions that she had been widowed, and lists the names of her five children. Painting commission work presumably provided additional funds to support her family as she had never remarried. The professions of slaves listed in the inventories are also sometimes mentioned in brackets next to the slave's name. Slaves were in general not registered under their respective family name or surname, but rather according to their first name as well as their place/country of origin. A small number of inventories can be found that also provide some insights into the lives of indigenous Khoi who worked and functioned inside the Cape households.

## Issues and limitations with the data

Historians have for long recognised the fact that they run the risk of delivering biased research results when using historical records of any kind. Different sets of probate records can exhibit similar challenges, and several methods exist that can help to resolve the complications identified when conducting probate investigations. A number of concerns can be identified from working with the inventory data of the Cape Colony.

### *Sample issues*

One of the most important questions concerning probate inventories relates to the representativeness of the records. Is it possible to draw conclusions concerning the population as a whole from data collected in the surviving records? In the case of the Cape Colony, inventories were not always collected for every deceased individual. The Orphan Chamber recorded only the inventories of deceased persons under certain conditions. Individuals who died with fully grown children, who did not have relatives overseas, and who did not have outstanding debts would most likely not have been inventoried. Couples who married under British law were also excluded from the Orphan Chamber's jurisdiction after the British occupation, as a different inheritance system applied to them. The Chamber did, however, operate within a wide geographical boundary. The 1800 records therefore include people from throughout the Colony, even nomadic stock farmers (*trekboeren*). These farmers managed to expand the area under European influence by close to tenfold from 1703 to 1770.<sup>45</sup> Districts where the deceased resided as well as nearby rivers are often mentioned in inventories, with the final inventories reaching as far as the Fish River and the Graaff Reinet district.

Figure 1 compares the number of household inventories per year as a percentage of the total population.<sup>46</sup> The number of double entries<sup>47</sup> as a proportion of total inventories is also shown separately in the graph. The percentage of household inventories in the population fluctuates around the 1 per cent mark until 1740. Reporting rates then decrease to between 0.5 and 0.6 per cent towards the end of the period, which indicates that fewer settlers are included in the probates. While the representivity of the sample is discussed at length elsewhere, it would suffice to say that the sample reflects a large proportion of all deaths in the Cape Colony. If sample bias does arise,

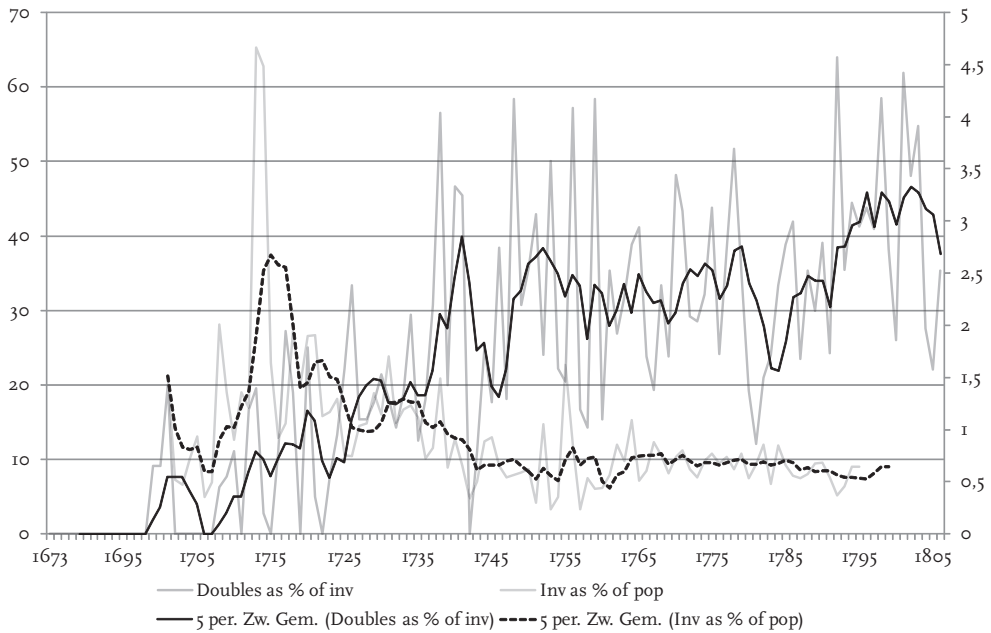
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45. L. Guelke, 'Die blanke setlaars, 1652-1780', in: R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds.), *'n samelewing in wording, 1652-1840* (Cape Town 1982) 67.

46. As reported in Van Duin and Ross, 'The economy of the cape colony'.

47. See discussion in section 6.2.

**FIGURE 1** Household inventories per year



it is probably biased in favour of the poorer segment of society. This can be shown through the inclusion of non-mooc probate inventories, which are now available for Stellenbosch households.<sup>48</sup> The average level of ownership is significantly higher in these inventories compared with the mooc inventories used here.

*Double entries*

A significant number of double entries can be found within the transcribed mooc records. These entries are generally labelled with a ‘1/2’ or an ‘a’, ‘b’, ‘c’, etc. and are frequently copies of the original inventory list.<sup>49</sup> Records stating which possessions have been bequeathed to certain individuals are also often included. In some instances, the supplementary inventories refer to possessions that were inventoried on a later date, for example, when the deceased had more than one farm or living quarter that was not inventoried and listed with the original inventory. In the majority of cases, however, the double entries exist because the original list was drawn up by an acquaintance of the deceased and then subsequently rewritten by one of the clerks in the

48. Fourie, ‘The wealth of the Dutch cape colony’.

49. Most obvious in the double entries is the differences in the formal spelling of the clerk and that of the rural inhabitant who compiled the inventory.

Orphan Chamber office. Both documents would then have been filed. This was specifically done if the deceased was not domiciled near one of the major towns, most notably Cape Town. In such a case the inventory was taken by an acquaintance of the deceased and subsequently sent to the Orphan Chamber. Figure 2 shows the significant increase in the percentage of double entries in the records throughout the eighteenth century. This is as to be expected as more and more people moved away from Cape Town or even further into the interior parts of the country. Double entries are thus identified and ignored in the final analysis.

### *The absence of monetary values*

Inventoried goods were not always appraised, as a considerable number of the inventories do not have monetary values corresponding to each item. The presence or absence of monetary values also does not follow a specific pattern, as some inventories in specific years may have monetary values, while other inventories in the same year do not. The lack of monetary values of items prevents the straightforward calculation of the overall monetary value of estates. This information would be helpful when dividing estates into different wealth categories as well as for calculating the proportion of consumer goods in relation to the total value of each estate. Missing monetary values also make it more difficult to calculate price indices and to observe the rates of change in the values of certain goods.

### *Age and wealth bias*

One critique against the use of probate records stems from the belief that they represent only the older and wealthier societal groups. Wealth rises with age, and older individuals are more likely to die; thus inventories can be biased towards wealthier groups. A similar concern relates to the possibility that certain sets of inventories may only have been compiled for individuals deemed to have had a substantial enough collection of possessions to be accounted for at the time. Biases can therefore arise because of changes in the age structure of the population or because of changes in inventory reporting rates. However, this is not an issue in all circumstances, as a significant number of colonial records still exist with regard to younger and older individuals of various wealth standings.<sup>50</sup>

If the possibility of age biases is a concern, one way of addressing it is to include a lifecycle in the analysis. Cape Colony inventories, however, do not

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50. G.L. Main and J.T. Main, 'Economic growth and the standard of living in southern New England, 1640-1774', *The Journal of Economic History* 48:1 (1988) 27.

include the age of the person who is being inventoried. Inventories generally only include the date the specific inventory was compiled. Information is also lacking regarding the age structure of the Cape population as well as mortality rates per year. It is therefore difficult to determine whether the inventory data substantially over- or underrepresents a certain age group. Adjusting the sample for possible age biases could distort results even further, as it is challenging to accurately establish what kind of biases exist in the sample to begin with. We know for certain that the Orphan Chamber's main duty was to see to the interests of children under the age of 25. In the majority of cases, younger individuals had children of a younger age. It is therefore reasonable to assume that inventories in the sample might largely represent younger and less wealthy individuals, rather than over representing the wealthy. Previous studies have shown that correcting for age biases that favour older individuals usually makes the subsequent correction of wealth biases unnecessary.<sup>51</sup> It is therefore also possible that the Cape inventories are largely self-correcting with regard to biases in the data. The argument that individuals with little or no valuable possessions have been left out of the sample is also not plausible in the case of the Cape inventories. It was the responsibility of the Orphan Chamber to collect precisely those inventories where no heir was apparent, presumably young households without any dependents or single male farmers with no spouse. Moreover, many of the inventoried lists contain only small amounts of trivial articles.

### Method of analysis

Following the example of Carr and Walsh,<sup>52</sup> this study uses abstraction to detect changes in luxury consumption patterns. Items that represent luxury are noted as being either present or absent in each inventory, which allows for the construction of a mean index of luxury good diversity. Abstraction is a useful method of depicting the commencement of the consumption of specific goods. The presence or absence of each of the nine items was recorded.

This method is admittedly somewhat rudimentary, as it does not take account of the specific amount or value of each item. A silver pocket watch is, for example, scored the same as a gold pocket watch. The luxury scores calculated indicate only a consumer's *entry* into the market for specific goods and not to what extent they *participated* in the market. The method is used to provide basic information regarding initial luxury goods ownership and has the benefit of being simple. By counting the number of item varieties present in each inventory, a luxury index score is calculated. The maximum

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51. Main and Main, 'Economic growth'; Carr and Walsh 'The standard of living'.

52. Carr and Walsh 'The standard of living'.



score that can be achieved is thus nine, if each of the nine items is found in a single inventory.

While it is useful to know *whether* a person possessed a particular item, we are also interested to know exactly *how many* of those items they possessed. The total number of each of the nine luxury items found in the inventories has therefore also been identified and counted. To do this, paintings, portraits, and prints are aggregated as pictures. Other timepieces refer to larger standing clocks, hanging clocks and table clocks. Many inventories contained wig boxes or material heads for displaying wigs, but neglected to mention the wigs themselves. In those cases a wig box or material head has been counted as a wig.

The choice of the nine luxury items depended on several factors, including regularity of occurrence, standardised unit of account, narrow quality variance, consistency of use, traceability of data, and comparability with other sources. Regularity of occurrence is important, as a luxury product that appears only infrequently in the data (for example, only in one or two years at the beginning of the period) might either signal that a product was too expensive or that tastes or fashions varied, which would result in two opposite interpretations of the same result. Also, expensive luxury items, like pianos, appear only very infrequently in the data and would yield too few observations to make meaningful inferences. Standardised unit of account refers to the need to aggregate products: wine, for example, could potentially be defined as a luxury product, but is reported in several units, including as a 'legger', 'mompipj', 'stukvat', 'bottle', 'aam', 'kuijpbaliij', 'anker', 'mand' and 'calbas', which makes aggregation problematic. Moreover, because the inventories often leave out non-durable items, 'everyday luxuries' like wine, coffee and tea are often not listed. Narrow quality variance is the most difficult of criteria to adhere to. Pictures, included here, is a prime example of a product with large quality variances. Where possible, we use 'large' and 'small' as identifiers of quality, and thus include large mirrors and small mirrors separately in the analysis. Consistency of use and traceability of data refers to the way products are named in the inventories. While seventeenth century Dutch was most commonly spoken by officials and newly settled European immigrants on arrival, Cape Dutch emerged in the countryside, which differed somewhat from the Dutch spoken in Holland. Regular spelling conventions were not adhered to in most of the inventories compiled in the interior, and one product could be spelled in several ways. Moreover, some goods, such as guns, are recorded as 'snaphaan' at the beginning of the period, but called 'geweer' towards the second half of the century.<sup>53</sup> Again, a possible name change may significantly bias results, and thus products were

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53. Fourie, 'The wealth of the Dutch Cape Colony'.

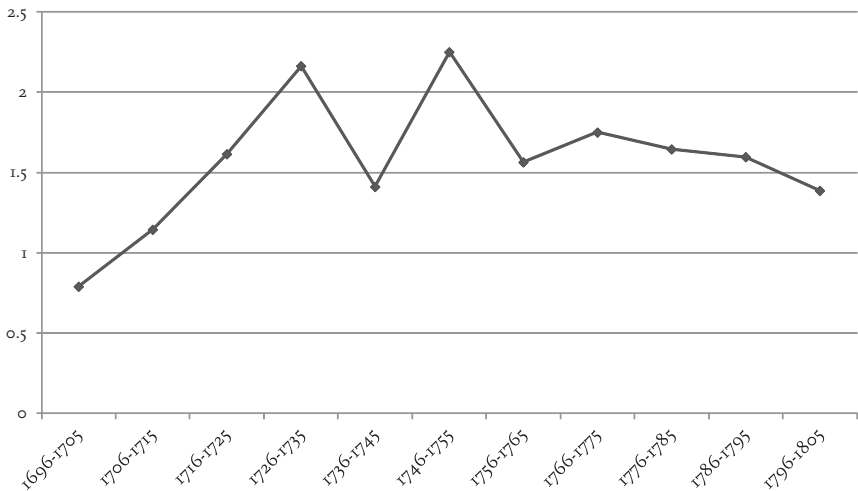
selected which most likely retained their name and spelling throughout the period. Finally, given the aim to compare luxury ownership of Cape goods with those of other regions, products were selected based on what was done in comparable studies.

## Results

### *Aggregate trends*

Figure 2 depicts mean luxury index scores per ten-year period from 1696 to 1805, showing for each year the average number of luxury items owned by households in the inventories. Scores increase initially, reaching a high of slightly above 2 in the middle of the century. Means decrease somewhat after 1755, with the final ten-year period showing a mean score of slightly below 1.5. If the diversity of ownership of luxury items can be used as one measure of wealth, the results suggest that the average individual at death was not worse off – and possibly better off – at the end of the eighteenth century than at its beginning. This already provides some initial support for the thesis that the Cape economy was more dynamic and faster growing than previously suggested.<sup>54</sup>

**FIGURE 2** *Aggregate mean per capita luxury index scores, 1696-1805*



54. L. Brunt, 'Property Rights and Economic Growth'; Van Duin and Ross, 'The Economy of the Cape Colony'.

Figure 2 raises two questions: firstly, what drove the high volatility in luxury product diversity during the four decades from 1726 to 1765?; and, secondly, what explains the decline in luxury product diversity after 1775?

**FIGURE 3** Mean per capita luxury index scores by wealth group, 1696-1805

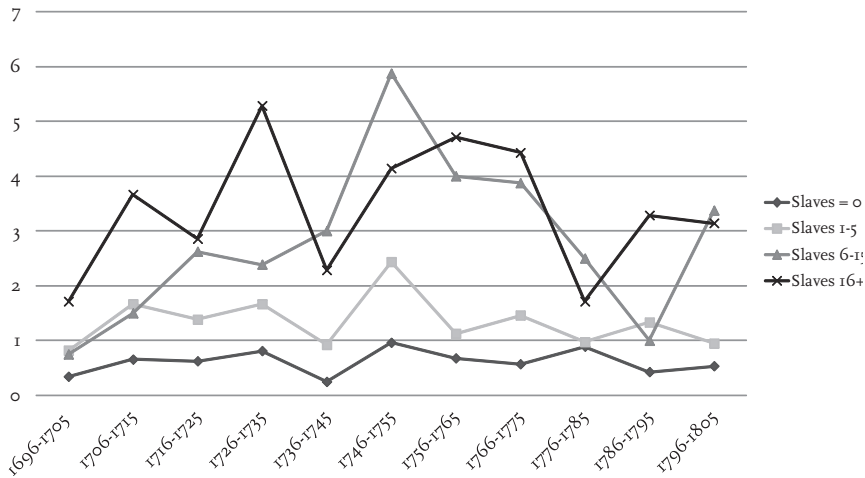


Figure 3 depicts the same mean luxury index scores per ten-year period from 1696 to 1805, but splits the results by wealth group. Following the tradition of earlier work,<sup>55</sup> we classify four groups according to the number of slaves owned: group 1 owned zero slaves, group 2 owned between 1 and 5 slaves, group 3 owned between 6 and 15 slaves, and group 4 owned more than 15 slaves. Calculated averages for the period reveal that the poorest group attained a score of 0.62 for the eighteenth century. The lower- and upper-middle wealth groups averaged 1.32 and 2.24 respectively, while the richest group scored 3.5. In short, mean luxury ownership changed little for the two bottom wealth groups, while the diversity of goods amongst the two wealthiest groups increased towards the middle of the eighteenth century.

While wealthier groups are perhaps overrepresented in the middle of the century (see Table 1), i.e. a larger proportion of wealthy individuals died during these years, the large sample of observations used in the analysis offers support for the claim that this was a prosperous period in the Cape economy.

55. Guelke and Shell, 'An early colonial landed gentry'; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*; Fourie, 'The wealth of the Dutch Cape Colony'.

**TABLE 1** *Percentages of wealth groups in inventories, 1696-1805*

<i>Time period</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>No slaves</i>	<i>1-5 Slaves</i>	<i>6-15 Slaves</i>	<i>16+ Slaves</i>
1696-1705	76	42.11	38.16	10.53	9.21
1706-1715	155	34.84	40	21.94	3.23
1716-1725	146	24.66	43.15	26.03	6.16
1726-1735	145	22.76	44.14	24.14	8.97
1736-1745	131	22.14	38.17	26.72	12.98
1746-1755	148	18.24	40.54	28.38	12.84
1756-1765	184	30.98	45.11	18.48	5.43
1766-1775	248	29.03	46.37	16.13	8.47
1776-1785	310	41.29	31.29	17.42	10
1786-1795	336	28.57	37.5	21.13	12.8
1796-1805	499	44.89	31.86	16.83	6.41

Source: mooc 8. vol 1-75; own calculations.

This is confirmed from qualitative evidence; Neumark<sup>56</sup> reports that the early 1740s ‘marked the turning point from depression to prosperity in the economic life of the colony’. This period coincided with ‘the first meat boom’ at the Cape, owing to the culmination of the 1744-1748 French-English war in India. English warships entered Table Bay eager to buy fresh meat, live animals and other animal products – including butter, tallow and tail fat. Even after peace was concluded at the end of 1748, an English fleet ‘consisting of 26 men-of-war and transports put into Table Bay’, ‘the most powerful fleet that had ever appeared on the Indian Ocean’, further boosting demand.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the institution of Sumptuary Laws in 1755 further illustrates the affluence of the elite.

### *Luxury good diversity*

Table 2 lists the absolute number and percentage of entries per ten-year period that contained a given number of the nine luxury items. From 1696 to 1705, slightly more than 72 per cent of the inventories did not list even one of the specific luxury goods. This figure diminishes towards the middle of the century, reaching a low of approximately 30 per cent during the period from 1746 to 1755, followed by a steady increase towards the end of the eighteenth century. In absolute terms, the number of poorer households possessing zero

56. S. Neumark, *Economic influences on the South African frontier, 1652-1836* (Stanford 1956) 45.

57. Neumark, *Economic influences*, 46.

luxury items increased considerably after 1755. The number of inventories containing one or several luxury items also increased, but proportionately less when compared with those of the poor.

**TABLE 2** *Percentage of inventories by number of items listed*

Time period	0 Items		1 Item		2-3 Items		4-6 Items		7-9 Items	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1696-1705	55	72.37	5	6.58	9	11.84	7	9.21	0	0
1706-1715	60	38.71	43	27.74	39	25.16	12	7.74	1	0.65
1716-1725	50	34.25	32	21.92	47	32.19	17	11.64	0	0
1726-1735	47	32.41	20	13.79	46	31.72	28	19.31	4	2.76
1736-1745	58	44.27	21	16.03	38	29.01	13	9.92	1	0.76
1746-1755	44	29.73	26	17.57	38	25.68	32	21.62	8	5.41
1756-1765	84	45.65	30	16.3	44	23.91	19	10.33	7	3.8
1766-1775	107	43.15	42	16.94	57	22.98	34	13.71	8	3.23
1776-1785	144	46.45	39	12.58	79	25.48	43	13.87	5	1.61
1786-1795	161	47.92	49	14.58	67	19.94	56	16.67	3	0.89
1796-1805	275	55.11	88	17.64	84	16.83	45	9.02	7	1.4

Source: MOOC 8, vol 1-75; own calculations.

A sizeable number of inventories contained 2 to 3 items across the period. A small portion of entries listed more than 7 items, with 5 out of the 2,378 entries listing all 9 luxury items in their respective inventories. The first 9 score appears in 1755. Table 2 indicates that richer households remained wealthy and that some households were even increasing their wealth, but the effects of these increases on luxury goods possession is dampened by the rise in the number of zero luxury-owning households in the sample.

### *Luxury good priorities*

Table 2 shows only the numbers of items in inventories without revealing which items were most likely to be possessed. To investigate Cape material culture, it would also be meaningful to describe what kinds of patterns of acquisition were present in the Colony from 1696 to 1805. Table 3 therefore depicts luxury consumption priorities for the period, indicating in which order items were most often acquired. Households with only one luxury item generally owned mirrors, with gloves, snuffboxes and wigs being the least likely choices. It is not surprising that mirrors were a popular item, as they varied in size, shape and quality in the inventories. They could therefore presumably be acquired at reasonable prices, depending on their characteris-

tics. As mentioned previously, local industries were prohibited at the Cape under *voc* rule. Inhabitants were thus only able to acquire certain luxuries from the Company or through illicit trade. Mirrors were most likely easier to import than more expensive items such as timepieces. Mirrors also had two unique purposes during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, namely, to enhance artificial lighting and to provide owners with the ability to view themselves within their own homes.<sup>58</sup> Inventories containing mirrors often also listed mounted candle holders, referred to as ‘*spiegelblakers*’. These were hung next to mirrors to ensure that candles would be reflected, providing more light.

Table 3 further shows that pictures, large mirrors and small mirrors were frequently listed in the case where two to three items were present. The large number of households owning pictures is also to be expected: pictures, specifically portraits, formed a distinctive part of Dutch culture, and paintings were regularly among the shipments of goods from the Netherlands for sale in the *voc* Cape.<sup>59</sup> As discussed above, the inventories reveal how artists undertook commissions and sold their work, making the acquisition of such items even more accessible. Wigs, snuffboxes, gloves and gold rings only became more popular in inventories where the acquisition of at least two to three of the other items was listed.

**TABLE 3** *Luxury consumption priorities, 1696-1805 (percentage)*

	<i>With 1 item</i> N=397	<i>With 2-3 items</i> N=550	<i>With 4-6 items</i> N=310	<i>With 7-9 items</i> N=44
Paintings	11.1	82.33	89.61	100
Pocket Watches	10.83	15.64	39.07	86.67
Other Timepieces	2.52	11.1	51.97	77.27
Gold Rings	3.79	12.57	36.56	75
Small Mirrors	31.82	57.92	63.44	77.27
Large Mirrors	49.48	64.64	89.25	100
Gloves	3.03	8.75	27.6	79.55
Snuff-boxes	2.53	11.65	41.58	90.91
Wigs	2.27	8.01	22.22	65.91

*Source:* mooc 8. vol 1-75; own calculations.

<sup>58</sup> Overton c.s., *Production and Consumption*, 112.

<sup>59</sup> J.G. Taylor, ‘Painted Ladies of the *voc*’, in: Worden, *Contingent lives*, 514.

### Wealth inequality

Table 4 reveals the frequency of appearance of luxury goods in the inventories of the four wealth groups. As expected, the percentage of inventories containing one or more of each separate item increases as we move from the poorest wealth group to the wealthiest group. The table reveals that even the poorest of households in the Colony owned certain luxuries during the observed time period. This is in line with the internationally observed trend of 'lesser folk' acquiring some luxuries.<sup>60</sup> More than one in ten household inventories in the poorest wealth group owned at least one mirror at the time of their death. Some inventories of the poorest wealth group even listed more expensive items such as pocket watches. The possession of pictures and mirrors is a frequent occurrence in the case of the middle-lower wealth group. Pocket watches and other time pieces were popular items in the inventories of the two wealthiest groups, while wigs were less often owned by all four groups.

**TABLE 4** *Appearance of luxury items per wealth group, 1696-1805 (percentage)*

	No Slaves N=826	1-5 Slaves N=941	6-15 Slaves N=483	16+ Slaves N=210
Pictures	13.08	28.87	48.03	70.95
Pocket Watches	8.72	10.08	16.56	22.86
Other Timepieces	2.18	6.48	16.77	46.67
Gold Rings	4.36	9.45	13.66	18.1
Small Mirrors	11.38	24.95	37.47	54.76
Large Mirrors	10.53	30.36	56.73	79.52
Gloves	4.72	5.73	10.97	17.62
Snuff Boxes	4.6	8.92	14.7	20.48
Wigs	2.91	5.1	8.28	17.62

Source: MOOC 8, vol 1-75; own calculations.

Guelke and Shell<sup>61</sup> have argued that wealth was unequally distributed in the early Cape colonial society, as economic and political power rested in the hands of a small number of landed gentry. Fourie and Von Fintel<sup>62</sup> use the *opgaafrolle* to calculate wealth inequality, revealing high levels of initial inequality that persisted throughout the eighteenth century. While the results here show that, in contrast with the earlier view of the Cape settler as living

60. McCants, 'Exotic goods, popular consumption'; De Vries; Carr and Walsh, 'The standard of living'; Pomeranz, *The great divergence*.

61. Guelke and Shell, 'An early colonial landed gentry'.

62. Fourie and Von Fintel, 'The dynamics of inequality'.

just above subsistence levels, even the poorest farmers owned some luxury items; it is also true that a small group of farmers at the top of the distribution had access to a wide array of luxury consumption choices.

*From luxury product diversity to mean luxury product ownership*

Although Table 4 shows that wealthier groups owned a larger variety of the nine luxury items, we have yet to investigate the differences in the *number* of luxury goods owned by each individual within the four wealth groups. To do this, each individual’s basket of luxury goods was computed from the inventories. Figure 4 shows the absolute number of timepieces, mirrors and pictures across the total population, by decade. As expected, all three items reveal strong growth over the eighteenth century (pictures are plotted on the right logarithmic axis to ease comparability). This again confirms the notion that the Cape economy was more dynamic than simply ‘an economic ... backwater’ and makes a strong case that the Cape was part of the ‘consumer revolution’ of North-Western Europe.

**FIGURE 4** Absolute number of luxury items, 1696-1805 (logarithmic scale)

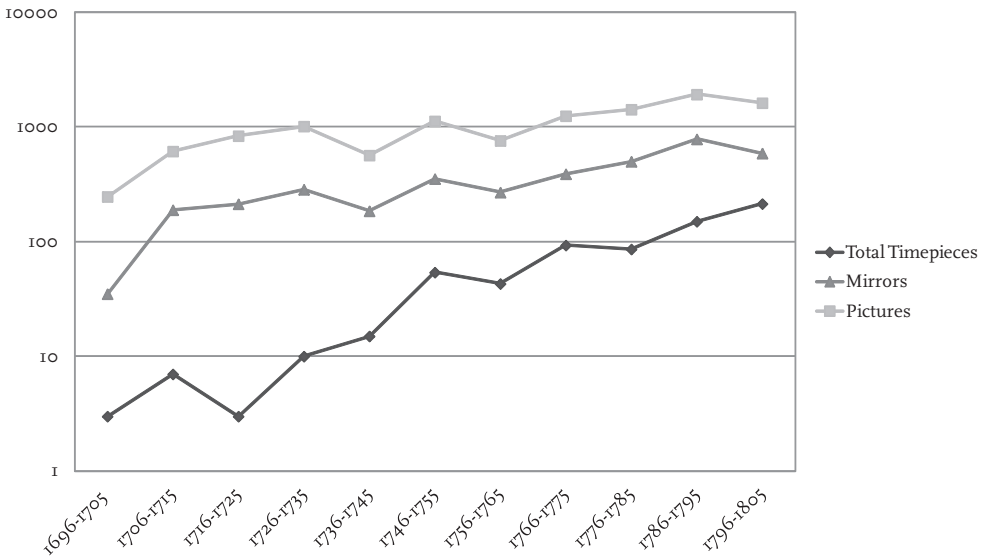


Table 5 provides the mean ownership results per inventory, which controls for the rapid rise in the population. These results reveal little change to those described in section 8.1, suggesting that the luxury consumption of the mean farmer was relatively similar at the beginning and end of the eighteenth century, with a slight increase during the mid-eighteenth century.



**TABLE 5** *Mean per capita ownership of luxury items, 1696-1805*

	1696- 1705	1706- 1715	1716- 1725	1726- 1735	1736- 1745	1746- 1755	1756- 1765	1766- 1775	1776- 1785	1786- 1795	1796- 1805
Paintings	3.25	3.96	5.73	6.99	4.32	7.61	4.13	5.03	4.59	5.73	3.25
P/Watches	0	0.04	0	0.03	0.05	0.18	0.13	0.19	0.15	0.18	0.3
O/Timep.	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.06	0.18	0.1	0.19	0.13	0.26	0.13
T/Timep.	0.04	0.05	0.02	0.07	0.11	0.36	0.23	0.38	0.28	0.45	0.43
Gold Rings	0.25	0.37	0.42	0.63	0.39	0.72	0.29	0.21	0.07	0.3	0.2
S/Mirrors	0.28	0.59	0.72	0.86	0.34	0.51	0.6	0.48	0.75	1.17	0.62
L/Mirrors	0.18	0.63	0.74	1.1	1.07	1.88	0.86	1.09	0.87	1.16	0.56
T/Mirrors	0.46	1.22	1.46	1.97	1.41	2.39	1.46	1.57	1.61	2.33	1.18
Gloves	0.12	0.08	0.9	3.51	0.06	4.13	0.79	0.64	0.33	0.44	1.11
Snuff boxes	0	0.09	0.12	0.49	0.34	0.57	2.91	1.88	0.24	0.55	0.21
Wigs	0.05	0.16	0.16	0.27	0.54	0.53	0.3	0.42	0.17	0.04	0.02

Source: MOOC 8, vol 1-75; own calculations.

Even when the results are split by wealth group (not shown), the trends continue: average number of pictures decreases somewhat, while timepieces and mirrors increase. Household levels of luxuries, however, do vary considerably with wealth status, with the Cape elite consistently possessing higher averages of all three items. It seems that over the entire eighteenth century, the inequality between those that owned luxury items and their poorer neighbours was persistent.

### Comparative analysis

Data for the Cape colony shows how the mean ownership of certain luxury items changed during the eighteenth century. The purpose here, however, is to ascertain whether the Cape settlers reflected the changing material culture and consumer behaviour of their origin countries. Results from similar probate studies can be used to ascertain the differences or similarities in the consumption behaviour of households with regard to certain luxury items. Pomeranz<sup>63</sup> notes that an ideal comparison of consumptions patterns would involve comparing whole market baskets instead of individual goods, though this is often not feasible given the available data. While probate inventory comparisons have constraints, there is still great value in observing and comparing the levels of luxury goods in other countries and regions.

63. Pomeranz, *The great divergence*, 116.

The comparative sources used below are all based on probate inventories. Sample selectivity bias is probable in each of the different subsamples, and we cite only authors who acknowledged this in their text, and spell out possible implications. Several other comparisons could potentially be included, but their small sample size often leads to questions regarding the representivity of the region. While comparisons based on samples of varying size, characteristics and quality should be interpreted with caution, the results presented below are robust across the different products and sources used.<sup>64</sup>

### *Holland and England*

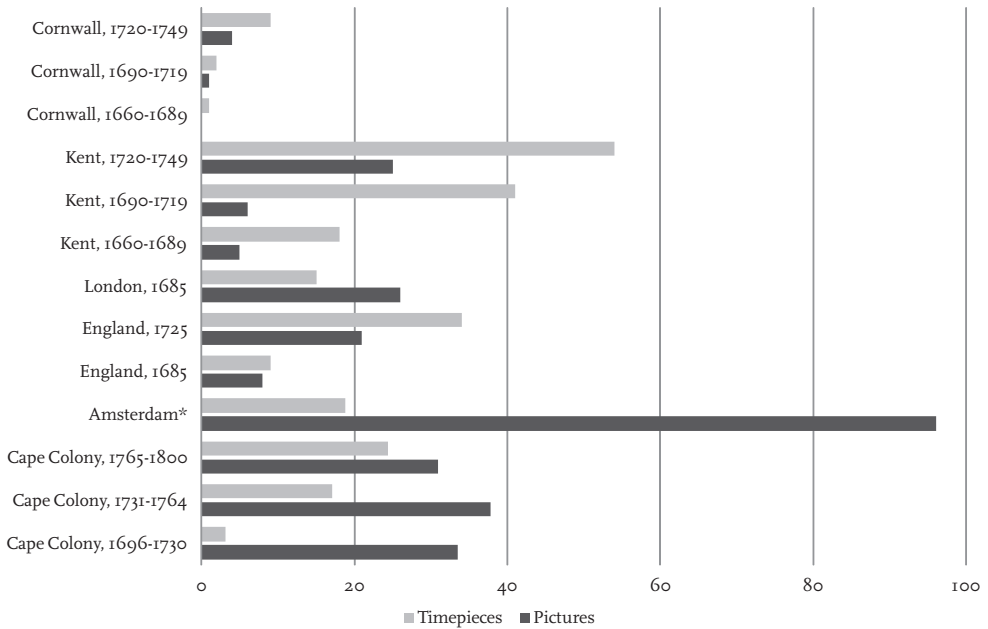
Figure 5 depicts luxury product ownership information regarding the Cape Colony, Amsterdam and various parts of England. Aggregate percentage figures for the Colony are given for three time periods during the eighteenth century. The 1700 to 1710 data for Amsterdam shows that the acquisition of pictures was already extremely popular in the city at the start of the century, even amongst poorer households.<sup>65</sup> Here the sample of inventories was compiled from households within the lowest burial tax bracket in Amsterdam. The Dutch influence in the Cape ensured that paintings, portraits and prints were also obtained by a large number of settlers, appearing more often in inventories of the Colony than in English records during the early to mid-eighteenth century.

The reverse is observed with regard to timepiece acquisition. This is to be expected, as better quality household clocks were produced in various parts of England from as early as the late 1650s.<sup>66</sup> Timepieces were more frequently possessed in the country, although the surprisingly dismal statistics for Cornwall form the exception in this case. A large portion of inventories from Amsterdam's Municipal Orphanage (BHW) as well as the Cape records do, however, list timepieces. The Colony's figures from 1765 to 1800 are somewhat similar to those of the Amsterdam inventories from 1740 to 1784. The Chambers in Amsterdam and the Cape fulfilled similar probate duties, and it is arguable that the two samples are well suited for comparing luxury ownership. The fact that local industry was by law largely inhibited in the Cape makes the considerable percentage of timepiece ownership even more impressive. The broad possession of the above-discussed luxuries indicates that the Cape was comparatively rich during the eighteenth century.

64. Fourie (2012) compares productive and other non-luxury products, and uses a broader array of comparative sources. The results lead to similar conclusions as those reached here.

65. J.A. Faber, 'Inhabitants of Amsterdam and their possessions', in: Ad van der Woude and Anton Schuurman (eds.), *Probate Inventories: A new source for the study of wealth, material culture and agricultural development* (Utrecht 1980) 153.

66. Overton c.s., *Production and consumption*, 111.

**FIGURE 5** Comparisons between Cape Colony luxury consumption and other regions

Sources: Weatherhill (1996), Overton et al. (2004), McCants (2006), own calculations.

### North American counties

Tables 6 to 8 show the frequency of appearance of pictures and timepieces in sample inventories of the Cape Colony, Southern New England and Anne Arundel County. The Cape Colony and both North American areas were all founded in roughly the mid-seventeenth century. Anne Arundel is situated in the State of Maryland and was founded in the early 1650s as a result of the organised migration of inhabitants from Virginia.<sup>67</sup> Connecticut and Massachusetts form the southern part of New England, an area situated in the north-eastern corner of the United States. Migrants settled in these parts until the early 1640s, and population figures increased rapidly even after migration came to a virtual halt.<sup>68</sup>

67. Carr and Walsh, 'The standard of living', 137.

68. Main and Main, 'Economic growth', 27.

**TABLE 6** *Percentage of inventories listing pictures and timepieces in the Cape Colony*

	1696-1730	1731-1764	1765-1800
<i>Pictures</i>			
Slaves = 0	11	16	15
Slaves 1-5	37	34	27
Slaves 6-15	50	54	45
Slaves 16+	74	64	75
<i>Timepieces</i>			
Slaves = 0	1	5	13
Slaves 1-5	2	9	21
Slaves 6-15	3	36	33
Slaves 16+	26	51	64

Source: mooc 8, vol 1-75; own calculations.

**TABLE 7** *Percentage of inventories listing pictures and timepieces in Anne Arundel*

Years	1700-1709	1710-1722	1723-1732	1733-1744	1745-1754	1755-1767	1768-1777
<i>Pictures (Rural)</i>							
£0-49	2	0	3	0	3	0	0
£50-94	4	0	0	0	4	0	0
£95-225	4	5	8	6	3	2	5
£226-490	0	9	7	7	10	10	12
£490+	11	19	38	23	24	15	18
<i>Pictures (Urban)</i>							
£0-49	17	20	10	32	7	0	22
£50-94	0	36	25	50	0	17	40
£95-225	0	33	67	42	67	33	0
£226-490	67	60	43	100	50	50	50
£490+	100	33	67	30	63	69	100
<i>Timepieces (Rural)</i>							
£0-49	2	0	0	2	0	1	3
£50-94	4	0	0	0	0	3	4
£95-225	4	5	4	10	10	4	13
£226-490	0	14	14	13	20	8	10
£490+	44	42	55	61	60	43	39

Years	1700-1709	1710-1722	1723-1732	1733-1744	1745-1754	1755-1767	1768-1777
<i>Timepieces (Urban)</i>							
£0-49	0	7	0	11	7	14	33
£50-94	0	9	25	0	0	0	40
£95-225	0	18	50	67	67	50	50
£226-490	0	46	29	88	75	63	50
£490+	100	18	50	60	63	92	67

Source: Carr and Walsh (1980).

**TABLE 8** *Percentage of inventories listing pictures and timepieces in Southern New England*

	1650-1674	1760-1774
<i>Pictures</i>		
Poorest 3rd	0	4
Middle 3rd	0	4.3
Richest 3rd	0.8	10.4
<i>Timepieces</i>		
Poorest 3rd	2.6	4
Middle 3rd	1.1	3.8
Richest 3rd	3.2	22

Source: Main and Main (1988).

The data for Southern New England is shown according to the poorest third, middle third and richest third of estates inventoried in this area. Main and Main<sup>69</sup> argue that shifts in tastes prompted households in this region to acquire larger varieties of items representing comfort and luxury, including pictures and timepieces. However, it is clear that both pictures and timepieces were not as popular in the homes of Southern New England households as they were in the Cape Colony. Even though the number of households possessing pictures increased from 1650 to 1774, the percentage figures are notably lower than those of Cape inhabitants. One in ten households of the poorest wealth group in the Cape inventories possessed one or more picture during the early 1700s. This figure is the same as for those of the richest third of inventories in Southern New England from 1760 to 1774. Timepiece possession also increased in these parts; yet again, it seems that larger numbers of Cape households owned one or more watches or clocks towards the end of the eighteenth century. Of the gentry inventoried in the Cape, 64 per cent during 1765 to 1800 owned timepieces. This is nearly three times as much

69. Main and Main, 'Economic growth'.

as the percentage figures for the richest third of Southern New England households.

Figures for Anne Arundel County are shown for rural and urban households separately, with estates divided into five wealth groups according to their respective total values. Carr and Walsh<sup>70</sup> argue that the households of Anne Arundel were influenced by European fashion trends and that the consumption behaviour in eighteenth century England was soon mimicked in the households of Anne Arundel. It seems that this was indeed so in the case of timepiece ownership, as the appearance of timepieces was already quite commonplace in Anne Arundel during the early 1700s. Fewer rural households possessed watches and clocks than Cape households towards the end of the period, while urban figures are somewhat higher for all wealth groups. The reverse is observed in the case of pictures, as fewer Anne Arundel households acquired pictures than households in the Cape. Percentages for urban households are somewhat higher during the period, but still generally lower than those of the Cape Colony.

In general, the ownership of observed luxury goods in the Cape compare favourably with the aforementioned North American areas. A relatively larger proportion of the Cape population were able to decorate their homes with pictures, while watches and clocks, with the exception of urban Anne Arundel, were also more widely owned at the Cape. The reasons for this high rate of luxury good adoption at the Cape remain open for debate. De Kock<sup>71</sup> suggests that the pomp and splendour of the rich may have been to impress upon the slaves their position of power. In contrast, Randle<sup>72</sup> suggests that, in the absence of a social hierarchy in the newly formed settler colony, luxury ownership (often of second-hand goods) may have been a way to differentiate social strata within the settler community. Signs of such differentiation are also visible elsewhere. Brink<sup>73</sup> argues that the settlers, most of them from the lower ranks of Dutch society, created a new, gentrified identity at the Cape, symbolised by their land-ownership, architecture and the material goods in their possession. Hall<sup>74</sup> for example, points to the building of Cape Dutch gables as 'the product of a class of peasants-made-good, who were taking old European approaches to gentry architecture and twisting them into a new aesthetic strand'. It seems that Cape settlers, coming from the lower ranks of Dutch society and fortunate enough to survive the long voyage on *voc* ships, used luxury goods ownership not only for consumption or leisure purposes,

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70. Carr and Walsh, 'The standard of living'

71. M.H. De Kock, *Economic history of South Africa* (Cape Town 1924).

72. Randle, 'Patterns of consumption'.

73. Y. Brink, *They came to stay: discovering meaning in the 18th-century cape country dwelling* (Stellenbosch 2008).

74. M. Hall, *Archaeology and the modern world* (London 2000) 107.

but as a tool to improve their social position and ranking in this outpost of Dutch society.

### Implications and conclusions

In her review of *Contingent lives: social identity and material culture in the voc World*, a recent collection of 31 essays edited by Cape historian Nigel Worden, Ulrich<sup>75</sup> refers to several essays within the collection that examines the material culture of Cape citizens. The focus seems to be on micro-histories of the middling and upper classes – ‘a corrective to the fixation of social historians on the disenfranchised and dispossessed’ – and tends to ‘focus on the particularities of the colonial context’. Ross<sup>76</sup> for example, investigates how voc officials used sumptuary laws to maintain supremacy over the increasingly affluent settlers. Yet, his and other micro-histories included in the volume do not provide convincing evidence to identify the average wealth of society; in particular, none of these studies aims to compare the standards of living of the various groups at the Cape with those of other regions. Ulrich,<sup>77</sup> in her critique of the volume, remarks that an ‘examination of commodities used in everyday life may provide a more balanced view’ of Cape standards of living. This paper begins to fill the void.

A large number of digitised probate inventories are now freely available for the Cape Colony of the eighteenth century. These records are used here to analyse the growth and distribution of luxury goods possession from 1696 to 1805. Our constructed luxury ownership index reveals a marginal increase in the possession of various luxury goods during the eighteenth century, although the aggregate trend masks movements within wealth groups. While absolute amounts of luxury items increased, the rapid household growth at the bottom of the distribution explains why the average ownership per inventory stagnated during the second half of the eighteenth century. A consequence of this rapid household growth was certainly higher inequality, but the results here also suggest that even the poorest households were in a position to obtain some luxury items.

Cape settlers, perhaps because of their location as a mid-point between Europe and the East, shared in the consumer revolution of their Dutch counterparts. Luxury goods possession at the Cape compares favourably with other parts of Western Europe as well as North American colonial counties. While

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75. N. Ulrich, ‘Time, space and the political economy of merchant colonialism in the Cape of Good Hope and voc world’, *South African Historical Journal* 62:3 (2010) 571-88.

76. R. Ross, ‘Sumptuary laws in Europe, the Netherlands and the Dutch colonies’, in Worden, *Contingent lives*, 382-391.

77. Ulrich, ‘Time, space and the political economy’, 580.

the focus in studies on material culture is often on the meanings of objects (Overton et al. 2004), an ‘extensive’ analysis like this adds little to this discourse. In fact, the results presented here are an invitation to scholars to investigate the ways in which luxury products were consumed and the meanings behind such consumption.

What this paper does show is that previous depictions of the eighteenth century Cape as an ‘economic and social backwater’<sup>78</sup> or of a material culture that reflects ‘living for the most part in isolated homesteads, [on] a scanty subsistence by the pastoral industry, and hunting’<sup>79</sup> are not supported by the quantitative evidence of luxury products ownership reported in the Cape probate inventories. Instead, our findings support recent evidence by Fourie and Van Zanden<sup>80</sup> that the economic divergence between South Africa and North America was not an eighteenth century phenomenon, but only arose during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### About the authors

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78. S. Trapido, ‘From paternalism to liberalism: The Cape Colony, 1800-1834’, *The International History Review* 12:1 (1990) 76-104.

79. De Kock, *Economic History of South Africa*, 40.

80. J. Fourie and J.L. Van Zanden, ‘GDP in the Dutch Cape Colony: the national accounts of a slave-based society’ *Stellenbosch Working Paper series* (Forthcoming 2012).