Respectable 'illegality': Gangs, masculinities and belonging in a Nairobi ghetto

van Stapele, N.

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This picture shows the ‘One Touch’ distillation site. This picture was taken by me, Naomi van Stapele, in May 2012

By Naomi van Stapele
Respectable ‘Illegality':
Gangs, Masculinities and Belonging in a Nairobi Ghetto

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Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
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Different Maps of Nairobi, Mathare and the different ghetto villages¹

Map 1: Nairobi, capital city of Kenya, East Africa.

Map 2: The Nairobi ghetto Mathare is located roughly three kilometres North-East from the city centre.

¹ The maps enclosed are all taken from Google maps, and they are intentionally a bit vague. For safety reasons I have not been able to include maps that show more details on, for instance, the exact location of certain sites, such as distilling spots near the river or hang-outs of gang members. Safety issues also hampered me to draw the route I describe in Chapter 1 on a map for this also may expose the location of certain sites. What’s more, I have done extensive research on processes of boundary-making with different research participants, however, for similar reasons I could also not represent these impressions and, often conflicting, experiences of boundaries (for instance of certain ghetto villages or gang hangouts).
Map 3: The different administrative wards in Mathare, Nairobi. The different neighbourhood areas in Mathare where I conducted research were Bondeni and Kosovo. Bondeni is in Mabatini Ward, and Kosovo is in Hospital Ward.

Map 4: The location of the different ghetto villages in Mathare, Nairobi, at focus in this thesis: Bondeni, Kosovo, Shantit, 4B and 4A.
Map 5: A close-up from Bondeni Village, in Mathare, Nairobi.
Abbreviations

AP – Administrative Police
CBO – Community-Based Organisation
CSO – Civil Society Organisation
GSU – General Service Unit (Military Police)
ICC – International Criminal Court
KADU – Kenya African Democratic Union
KANU – Kenya African National Union
MYSA – Mathare Youth Sports Association
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
NHIF – National Health Insurance Fund
ODM – Orange Democratic Union
PNU – Party of National Unity
List of Sheng, Kiswahili and Kikuyu words used in this Thesis

Ashu – Ten in Sheng
Ball – Pregnancy in Sheng
Bazes – Networks of friends and the locality of their hangout in Sheng
Godfathers – Big men in Sheng
Biko – The first 15 litres of illegally distilled alcohol
Boostah – To get energy or courage in Sheng
Busaa – Fermented maize porridge in Kiswahili
Cham – Illegally distilled alcohol in Sheng
Chang’aa – Illegally distilled alcohol in Kiswahili
Chapati – A type of Indian bread that is very popular in Kenya
Chini ya maji – Under the surface in Kiswahili
Conda – Tout in Sheng
Damu – Blood in Kiswahili
Dawa – Medicine in Kiswahili
Eastlando – Eastlands in Sheng
Fala – A fool in Sheng
Float – A way of saying that someone does not understand something in Sheng
Geri – Gang, groups of men who are engaged in robbery, both in and outside the ghetto in Sheng
Gishage – Ancestral land or family land in the rural area in the Kikuyu language
Grouo – An open field in Sheng
Gunia – A large sack to carry groceries with in Kiswahili
Hard core – Hard ghetto living in Sheng
Hema ya Ngai wi Mwoyo – ‘Tent of the Living God’ in Kikuyu language
Hongo – Bribe in Sheng
Hosi – Hospital in Sheng
Hotelli – A small roadside restaurant in Kiswahili
Ituika – A generational transformation of power
Janjess – Streetsmart
Jazaa numba – Add or fill the number in Sheng
Jiko – A kitchen fire in Kiswahili
Jua kali – Informal, roadside businesses, ‘hot son’, in Kiswahili
Juju – Witchcraft in Sheng
Ka sonko – A small boss in Sheng
Kamjesh – A youth helping to lure passengers into the matatu front in line in Sheng
Kamjeshi – Groups of young men who control and provide security at bus stops and public transport routes for a fee in Sheng.
Kangara or kango – Distillation mixture in Sheng
Kangas – Colourfully printed clothes for women in Kiswahili

X
Kikoy shirts – Embroidered and woven cotton shirts for men
Karao – A policeman in Sheng
Kude?...kudedi! – Try or die in Sheng
Kuhustle – Short-term income-generating activity in Sheng
Kukaa rada – To stay alert in Sheng/ Kiswahili
Kumi – Ten in Kiswahili
Kung’ang’ana – to struggle in Kiswahili
Kuraha – To have fun in Sheng
Kurank – To rank in Sheng
Kuruka – Jump in Kiswahili and leave in Sheng
Kuwaonyesha picha poa – To show them a good picture in Sheng
Kuweka chumvi – To put salt, to exaggerate, in Kiswahili
Lala chini – Lie face down on the ground in Kiswahili/Sheng
Leo ni leo, kesho ni baadaye – Today is today and tomorrow is later in Kiswahili
Livest – Prone to enjoy life in Sheng
Mabani – Nasty, mean people/informers in Sheng and Kiswahili
Mabati – Iron sheet in Kiswahili
Mabeshte – Peers or friends in Sheng
Maboyz – Young men from the ghetto in Sheng
Madigaga – Glasses in Sheng
Mafala – ‘fools’ in Sheng and Kiswahili
Magondi – Plural for thief in Sheng
Majanja – Street wise hustlers in Sheng
Majeshi – Armies in Kiswahili
Majuu – The West in Sheng
Matanga – A funeral fund raising meeting in Kiswahili
Matatu – Minibus in Kiswahili
Mathare, ni rahisi kuingia na ni ngumu kutoka – It is easy to enter Mathare and hard to leave in Kiswahili
Mazishi – A funeral in Kiswahili
Mazungumzo mtaani – Neighbourhood conversations in Kiswahili
Mbabi – A youth who live a wealthy and trendy lifestyle in Sheng
Mbao – 20 Kenyan Shillings in Sheng
Mbeshite – A friend in Sheng
Mbuzi – Goat in Kiswahili
Mgeni – Visitor in Kiswahili
Mgondi – Thief in Sheng
Mira – Khat in Kiswahili
Mitataro – Sewers in Kiswahili
Mitush – Second-hand clothes in Sheng
Mjanja – Hustler in Sheng
Mlami – White person in Sheng
Moja moja tu – Individuals in (broken) Kiswahili
Msako – A police raid in Sheng
Mtaa – Ghetto in Sheng
Mwenyeji – A local person in Kiswahili
Mzaliwa – Native in Kiswahili
Ndebe – Metal bucket in Kiswahili
Ngutu – Sugar waste in Kiswahili
Nyahom – Roasted meat in Sheng
Nyumba kumi – Ten Houses in Kiswahili
Ocha – The rural area in Sheng
Pangas – Machetes in Kiswahili
Peremba – Pickpocket in Sheng (Kiswahili word)
Pesa – Money in Kiswahili
Pili pili – Hot peppers in Kiswahili
Punk – Rich and trendy youth in Sheng
Jodo – A shaved head in Sheng
Riika – Age group in the Kikuyu language
Roundi hii – This time in Sheng
Rowe – Near the river in the Kikuyu language
Rungu – A club in Kiswahili
Shamba – Vegetable garden in Kiswahili
Shosho – Grandmother in Sheng
Sonko – Boss in Sheng
Sukuma – A tough kind of kale in Kiswahili (‘push the week’)
Tao – City in Sheng
Thaay, or sometimes Thaayo – Peace in the Kikuyu language (a religious group)
Ufala – Foolishness in Sheng
Ugali – Porridge of maize meal in Kiswahili
Ujanja or ujanjess – Street smartness in Sheng
Uji – Gruel or porridge made with water in Kiswahili
Unga – Maize meal in Kiswahili
Vibarua – Day labour (pl.) in Kiswahili
Wadosi – Wealthy people in Sheng
Wageni – Visitors in Kiswahili
Wagondi – Thieves in Sheng
Walevi – Drunkards in Kiswahili
Wasee wa down – People who live near the river down in Mathare in Sheng
Wasee wa esto – People who live in stone houses in formally planned neighbourhoods in Sheng
Wasee wa ghetto – Young men from the ghetto in Sheng
Wasee wa rowe – Men from the riverside in Sheng
Wazaliwa – Natives in Kiswahili
Wazee – Old men in Kiswahili
Wazee wa kijiji – The Council of Village Elders in Kiswahili
Westi – Westlands in Sheng
Look into my eyes,
Tell me what you see?
Can you feel my pain? Am I your enemy?
Give us a better way, things are really bad,
The only friend I know, is this gun I have.
Listen to my voice, this is not a threat
Now you see the nine, are you worried yet?
You've been talking 'bout you want the war to cease
But when you show us hope, we will show you peace

Look down on my shoes, can you see my toes?
The struggle that we live, nobody really knows
Stop and ask yourself, would you live like that?
And if you had to then, wouldn't you bus gun shot?

Look into my house would you live in there?
Look me in the eyes and tell me that you care,
Well, I've made up my mind to end up in the morgue
Right now I'd rather die, cause man a live like dog

Look into my mind, can you see the wealth?
Can you tell that I want to help myself?
But if it happen that, I stick you for your ring
Don't be mad at me, it's a survival ting.
Look into my heart, I can feel your fear
Take another look, can you hold my stare?
Why are you afraid of my hungry face?
Or is it this thing bulging in my waist?

(Bounty Killer, 1999)

This book is dedicated to the thousands of young men in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos who have died of a police bullet since 2002.
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