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

van Stapele, N.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)

Download date: 28 Feb 2020
Respectable ‘Illegality’: Gangs, Masculinities and Belonging in a Nairobi Ghetto

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

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom
ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
op vrijdag 24 april 2015, te 10:00 uur
door

Naomi van Stapele
geboren te Rotterdam
Promotiecommissie

Promotor(es): Prof. Dr. P.L. Geschiere, Universiteit van Amsterdam
Copromotor(es): Dr. C.L.A. Willemse, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam
Overige leden: Prof. Dr. A.C.A.E. Moors, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Prof. Dr. M.P.J. van de Port, Universiteit van Amsterdam
Prof. Dr. A.A. van Stipriaan Luijscius, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam
Dr. R. Spronk, Universiteit van Amsterdam
Dr. J.A.W. Nyairo, Retired Scholar, Moi University, Kenya

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION _______________________________________________ 1
  MUNGIKI IN MATHARE _________________________________________ 1
  'DISCOVERING' WORKING GANGS ________________________________ 4
  WORKING GANGS AND VOLATILE LINKS TO 'ETHNICITY' ___________ 6
  STRUGGLES OVER MANHOOD __________________________________ 8
  DOMINANT REPRESENTATIONS OF GANGS IN KENYA _________________ 10
  SOCIAL NAVIGATION: MAKING CHOICES WHILE FACING CONSTANT UNCERTAINTIES _____________ 14
  ANALYSING MY DATA: BIOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES 'AGAINST THE GRAIN' ________________________ 16
  BUILDING TRUST ____________________________________________ 19
  STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK ____________________________________ 23

CHAPTER 1: MAPPING PEOPLE, PLACES AND POWER IN BONDENI, A NEIGHBOURHOOD IN THE NAIROBI GHETTO MATHARE. _____________ 25
  INTRODUCTION _____________________________________________ 25
  ARRIVING IN BONDENI _______________________________________ 26
  GOING DOWN ________________________________________________ 27
  WALKING TO THE BRIDGE ____________________________________ 31
  A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME ______________________________________ 33
  EMERGING CLASS DIVISIONS BETWEEN UPPER AND LOWER BONDENI ______ 36
  LANDOWNERS AND AUTHORITY STRUCTURES IN BONDENI ____________ 40
  ALCOHOL, MONEY AND POWER __________________________________ 43
  KIKUYU VERSUS LIO GHETTO VILLAGES? __________________________ 46
  ON IMAGINING RICH KIKUYU AND POOR LIO ________________________ 50
  THE RISE OF ETHNIC-BASED GANGS IN MATHARE _________________ 53
  CONCLUSION ______________________________________________ 56

CHAPTER 2: JOINING A WORKING GANG: ON LOCALITY, MEMBERSHIP AND WORK. _____________ 57
  INTRODUCTION ______________________________________________ 57
  RESPECTABLE 'ILLEGALITY' _____________________________________ 57
  THE IMPACT OF THE LEGALISATION OF CHANG'AA _________________ 59
  GROWING UP WITH CHANG'AA __________________________________ 62
  GOING BACK TO CHANG’AA ____________________________________ 63
  THE FIRST ALCOHOL GANG: INDEPENDENCE AND INNOVATION ________ 64
  BETWEEN OPTIONS AND RISKS __________________________________ 66
  BELONGING TO A BAZE AND GANG MEMBERSHIP _________________ 68
  LOCALITY, FAMILY AND FORMATION PROCESSES OF WORKING GANG __ 69
  BROTHERHOOD AND BUSINESS __________________________________ 71
  OTHER PATHWAYS TO GANG MEMBERSHIP __________________________ 72
  NON-MEMBERSHIP: OLDER MEN AND WOMEN ________________________ 74
  GANGS AS AGE-SETS _________________________________________ 76
  FROM CRIMINAL TO RESPECTED GANG MEMBER ____________________ 77
  CIRCUMCISION AND PEER PRESSURE AMONG GANG MEMBERS __________ 79
  CONCLUSION ______________________________________________ 83

CHAPTER 3: LEAVING THE GANG: MASCULINITITIES, MIND-SETS AND MARRIAGES. _____________ 85
  INTRODUCTION ______________________________________________ 85
  ASPIRING TO LEAVE _________________________________________ 86
  GROUP TRAJECTORIES TO LEAVE THE GANG ________________________ 87
  POSITIONS OF MANHOOD: ON HUSTLERS AND FOOLS ________________ 89
  TRAPPED IN JUNIOR MANHOOD __________________________________ 92
  EVERYDAY DRINKING AND GIVING UP ______________________________ 95
  SOCIAL HORIZON AND LIVING IN THE NOW __________________________ 99
  EVALUATING THE PROGRAMME __________________________________ 102
  A SUCCESSFUL TRAJECTORY ____________________________________ 103
A GHETTO MARRIAGE: 'COME WE STAY'  
NAVIGATING A 'GHETTO MARRIAGE' DURING CRISES  
WHY KINGI WAS ABLE TO LEAVE THE GANG  
CONCLUSION  

CHAPTER 4: SHOWING SUCCESS: THE CONTINUOUS STRUGGLE TO LEAVE THE GANG.  
INTRODUCTION  
RANKING: A PURPORTED HIERARCHY BETWEEN GANGS  
FROM SELLING DRUGS TO SELLING CRAFT  
'I SCORED TWO GOALS': BECOMING A FATHER ON A FOOTBALL FIELD  
WHO IS THE HEAD OF THE HOUSE?  
ON FAKE AND REAL MANHOOD  
WE ‘AFRICAN’ MEN  
LESBIANS: THE ULTIMATE OTHER?  
TALKING SWAG  
A COOL MASK  
CHANGING TIMES, CHANGING PERSPECTIVES  
DRUGS DEALERS BECOME GHETTO FARMERS  
BETWEEN BUSINESS AND REPUTATION  
CONCLUSION  

CHAPTER 5: 'WE ARE THE COMMUNITY!' GANGS AND OTHER SOCIAL GROUPS AND AUTHORITIES IN MATHARE.  
INTRODUCTION  
WHO OWNS THE TOILET?  
GROUPS AND THE CONTROL OF PUBLIC RESOURCES IN MATHARE  
'WE ARE THE COMMUNITY'  
GENDERED NOTIONS OF CLASS  
THE START OF A MUNGANO WANA VJI IN BONDENI VILLAGE, MATHARE  
A DOUBLE BIND: DEPENDING ON AND FEELING RESPONSIBLE FOR WOMEN  
AN ONGOING CONFLICT  
US AND THE COMMUNITY: AN UNEASY DIVIDE  
GIVING BACK AND TAKING AWAY  
'WE DON'T LET OURSELVES BE USED'  
BETWEEN CERTAIN DEFEAT AND SMALL VICTORIES  
PLAYING 'THUGS FOR HIRE'  
THE MONOPOLISING POWER OF AN INTERNATIONAL NGO  
TRUE GHETTO: FASHIONING ACCESS THROUGH STYLING THE BODY  
CONCLUSION  

CHAPTER 6: 'POLITICAL VIOLENCE' IN MATHARE: ON JEALOUS NEIGHBOURS AND STREET-SMART VISITORS.  
INTRODUCTION  
CHARGED WITH POLITICAL VIOLENCE  
THE JEALOUS NEIGHBOUR  
FIGHTS BETWEEN FRIENDS  
TENSIONS BETWEEN VISITORS  
TALKING ABOUT 'POLITICAL VIOLENCE' AT THE RIVER  
MOTION IN MOTION: SHIFTING SIDES  
A STREET-SMART VISITOR  
THE TALIBAN IN BONDENI  
ETHNIC IDENTIFICATIONS DURING CONFLICT  
CONTINUOUS STRIFE OVER TURF  
CONFLICTS BETWEEN 'NATIVES'  
CONCLUSION  

IV
Different Maps of Nairobi, Mathare and the different ghetto villages

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

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

For safety reasons I cannot individually express my deep gratitude to many of my loved ones in Kenya and in The Netherlands who made this book happen. You know who you are, and without you I would not be me, my profound love for you all is beyond words.

This book would also not have become a reality if Dr. Karin Willemse had not consistently encouraged me to engage in and continue with academic research since my first self-doubting steps during my BA thesis. For over a decade now, she has been my mentor, supervisor and role model. I can only wish to continue to learn from you. Your inspiring guidance was matched with the highly expert, very kind and deeply thorough supervision provided by my main supervisor Prof. Dr. Peter Geschiere. You both enabled me to consistently rise above my own expectations. Your support, insightful comments, patience and advice have not just laid the foundation for this book but also for my further academic career. I count myself lucky to have worked with such an inspiring, wise, caring and encouraging supervision team.

I would also like to thank the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (The AISSR) from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) for accepting me as a Ph.D. candidate; it was a dream come true. More specifically, I would like to thank the program group ‘Globalizing Cultures and the Quest for Belonging: Ethnographies of the Everyday’ for solid advice and inspiring seminars. Among its staff, I would like to especially thank Dr. Rachel Spronk for much needed encouragement, insightful feedback and cherished sharing. I would also like to thank my fellow Ph.D candidates at the AISSR, my unforgettable friends from the Anthropologists Anonymous and all my other Ph.D colleagues with whom I taught, read, wrote and thought. Among these wonderful colleagues I would like to separately name my friend of almost two decades, Paul Mepschen, for making it easy to begin, interesting to continue and mandatory to finish. Thank you for your inspiration and friendship. Lidewyde Berckmoes and Jonna Both too have to be named and thanked, as well as the entire Children and Youth group and Professor Ria Reis: for collective passions, shared theoretical challenges and mutual engagements. I hope we will continue to eat, read and meet together. I also would like to thank Professor Mirjam de Bruijn for creating opportunities and spaces for innovative thinking that will hopefully extend far into the future.

I also would like to thank the entire AISSR secretariat, and especially Janus Oomen, and the secretariat of the Sociology and Anthropology department of the UvA, especially Muriël Kiesel, for amazing institutional support.

Anouk Hupkes and Anick Vollebergh, my two paranymfs, my two best friends, one old, one new. You picked me up when I was in a thousand pieces, traumatized and lost. You gave me the strength to learn with a broken heart, to write and think my way out of despair and make sense of what sometimes felt senseless. Your originality, creativity and sharp minds, both in such different but equally enthusing ways, leave me in awe, and I am intensely grateful for you two in my life.

With you I came into this world, you first, I followed. My twin, when I say these words, my heart fills up; there are no words to describe our bond. Saul van Stapele, I still am proud to follow you, learn from you. This book is partly you because of what we share,
not just our past, present and future, but our whole being in this world.

My parents, Peter van Stapele and Gudy Schilte, raised me to take diversity as the starting point of life and love, to always look further, explore and question so called ‘truths’, and, most importantly, to stand with the oppressed. I can only hope to have honoured that with this book. Lida Dijkema took me and my brother to Kenya when we were 15, and her courage, guidance and sense of what really matters in life made me go back and back and back again for over 25 years now. You gave me strength to believe in myself, to not let my past determine my future and to always, always be honest.

My dear sisters, my other brother Caio and all my other friends, thank you for accepting me for who I am, half in Kenya, half in the Netherlands and always busy with work. Your understanding and encouragement means the world to me.

There are so many more people I have to express my deep gratitude to. Among these I would like to highlight a few more. Tine Davids, thank you so much for also being a role model and an inspirational thinker. Francio Guadeloupe, thank you for your absolute commitment to one-ness, and for showing us how we can think about and with humanity beyond divisions. To my new role models (I know ... I have many), Lorraine Nencel and Ida Sabelis, for believing in me and guiding me into new fields of research, I hope it is the beginning of a long journey together. Mary Tupan, I admire you so much for your wisdom and commitment, and thank you for understanding that I needed to follow my heart.