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

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# Introduction

This book is about gangs in Nairobi's ghettos, in particular why young men feel they have to become a member of a gang, how gang membership becomes crucial in their struggle for survival and why it is so difficult for them to leave a gang, even though many are trying to. My aim is to move away from the current association of gangs with violence and ethnic politics – that is gang members as 'thugs for hire.' One of my main discoveries was that work is at least as important to grasp processes of gang formation, especially if one wants to understand the gangs from the young men's own perspective. This is a viewpoint that is lacking in much of the literature on Nairobi gangs in particular and, indeed, gangs in general. Gangs are vital to many young men from the ghetto, because they offer work and, as such, a chance to realise respectable masculinities in an environment that is increasingly dominated by women. In this sense, gangs can even be instrumental in realising community development. However, there are enormous barriers in the ghetto environment to achieving masculinities and development. This explains why the gangs under consideration here are so fluid in their existence and why membership is always wrought with ambiguities. A brief description of the changing circumstances of my research in a Nairobi ghetto can help to explain how I arrived at this emphasis on work and masculinities.

## **Mungiki in Mathare<sup>1</sup>**

I started conducting research on gangs in 1998, and over the past 16 years have observed the rise and fall of many different groups in Mathare, a Nairobi ghetto.<sup>2</sup> In this period, gangs with a strong Kikuyu profile called Mungiki emerged in Nairobi. Indeed, between 2001 and 2007, Mungiki gangs controlled different neighbourhood areas in Mathare. Among these were the two ghetto villages where I conducted my research: Bondeni and Kosovo (see Map 4). Bondeni was famous for the distillation of illegal alcohol, which is a highly lucrative business, as this book will show, while most of the heroin dealers I worked with lived in Kosovo. However, despite dominant perceptions (*e.g.* Mutahi 2011:14), Mungiki gangs ceased to operate in November 2006 in their former strongholds in Mathare<sup>3</sup> after angry residents ousted them with the help of Taliban gangs from Bondeni (BBC 2006; Gettleman 2006). The Taliban gangs had a strong Luo profile, were loosely affiliated with local politicians, and were named after the Afghan Taliban. These groups actually had no relation to the Afghan Taliban, but allegedly used this geo-political reference to underscore their toughness and position as the 'underdog' (see Chapter 6). In

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<sup>1</sup> Mathare is a word in the Kikuyu language that denotes 'Dracaena trees', and this name probably alluded to the variety of trees that were spotted throughout the valley before it became a ghetto (MuST 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Local residents preferred the term ghetto to slum or informal settlement, because of the derogatory connotations the latter had in their eyes. In this book, I adopt the popular usage of the word ghetto to refer to informal neighbourhoods; these are residential areas that are not state-planned and, thus, lack any government services. These ghettos were subdivided into smaller localities, dubbed 'ghetto villages' in the local language Sheng (see footnote 10).

<sup>3</sup> The lack of strongholds in Mathare did not, however, withstand the powers of the Mungiki gangs in other Nairobi neighbourhoods, such as Kayole, or the presence of individual Mungiki gang members inside Mathare, many of whom still had relatives living there. Yet, these gangs had long been surpassed in this particular locality when I embarked on my fieldwork for this research project in December 2007.

June 2007, the military police expelled the Mungiki gangs from Kosovo, which was their last bastion in Mathare (The New York Times 2007). In this book, I refer to both Mungiki and Taliban gangs as 'ethnic-based gangs', because of their strong ethnic profiles and concomitant political affiliations, however shifting and unexpected these links sometimes were.

In September 2010, one of my main research participants,<sup>4</sup> Kingi from Bondeni, reflected on the persistent standpoint that the Mungiki was still powerful in Mathare. Laughing, he said:

Yah, people say Mungiki is in Mathare, ha ha ha. Mungiki is not here in Mathare, only *moja moja tu* ['individuals' in Kiswahili], *chini ya maji* ('under the surface' in Kiswahili). They come from Kayole, that is where they are now ha ha ha, and they even have to hide to visit their parents ha ha ha [...] Mungiki fought *chang'aa* ('illegally distilled alcohol' in Kiswahili) people, us, they wanted to stop *chang'aa*, ha ha ha our livelihood, that is our work, how? And in 2006, when they wanted to raise the tax we chased them with help from the Taliban. [...] We can't allow them back. [...] There are many groups you think are Mungiki, like in Kiamaiko, in Hurush, not the Borana [an ethnic group in Kenya], but the young guys at the businesses for Kikuyu, they act like Mungiki, ask money at the [public transport] route, and people follow because it put fear in you and people [from outside the ghetto] now don't know who real Mungiki is.<sup>5</sup>

This aptly illustrates the disparity between common views and actual developments on the ground in the ghettos. Sensational media representations of Mungiki gangs have contributed to the myth that they still controlled Mathare long after their demise in 2007. This also shaped the vilification of gangs in general in the dominant discourse in Kenya. Indeed, between 2000 and 2002, different newspaper articles accused the Mungiki movement and its gangs of having shifted from a religious and a more emancipatory focus

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<sup>4</sup> I describe the young men and women who feature in this book as my research participants, because this term best reflects the type of research relationship we developed. They not only shared their life histories with me and allowed me to operate alongside them in their daily lives, but also participated in the analysis process, as explained further below.

<sup>5</sup> Most of the narrative texts in this book are represented in the precise wording that my research participants used when uttering them. I was unable to record the discussions I had with them, because they feared that the recordings might fall into the wrong hands and could be used against them. Accordingly, I combined the method of taking condensed notes and writing down exactly what they said during our interviews. Strikingly, most of the research participants preferred to speak English with me during interviews, even though I speak Sheng fluently. However, during our casual conversations, we always spoke Sheng with each other, but their preference to speak English during life history interviews and discussions perhaps partly emanated from the fact that I also included them in analysing the narrative texts, which were written up in English. The English the participants used was heavily laced with Sheng, and their words were often a direct translation of Sheng. I have not sanitised their words to fit English grammar rules, because I am interested in the way they constructed sentences, as this helped me when it came to analysing their individual positioning. A few research participants did speak Sheng throughout our interviews, and, working alongside them, I translated their narrative texts into English. All of my research participants could read English and have read and have commented on the chapters in this book.

to “barbarism and criminality”, using terms such as “shadowy”, “blood thirsty” and “sects” (e.g. Makokha 2000; Onyango 2002). It soon became commonplace to use similar dramatic terms to describe gangs in general, partly because it was difficult for outsiders to differentiate between Mungiki gangs and other groups. This all bolstered the popular image of young and poor men as “thugs for hire”, “ethnically driven” and “dangerous”, not just in media representations, but also in academic work (e.g. Kagwanja 2009:366; Kagwanja & Southall 2009:271; Anderson & Lochery 2008:334).<sup>6</sup> These, and other scholarly works on Kenya, do not often intentionally frame gangs as thugs for hire. Nevertheless, the use of this term in connection with broader political developments without further contextualisation has affirmed this label in the dominant discourse. This discourse in turn shaped the widespread legitimisation of extra-judicial killings of young and poor men by the police, which have become increasingly systematic from 2002 onwards (see also Oscar Foundation 2008).

The reason why the Mungiki gangs attracted so much media and academic attention (see also Rasmussen 2010; Kagwanja 2003, 2005; Frederiksen 2010) partly lies in the dazzling speed with which these groups took over parts of Nairobi and the transport industry between 1998 and 2001. Many people, including me, were taken by surprise by this, and were instantly fascinated by the power, religious and political activities, and strong ethnic profile of these gangs. What intrigued many was the question of why young ghetto men – who had very little knowledge of their Kikuyu background and did not even speak the Kikuyu language – joined Mungiki gangs in large numbers. Moreover, where had these gangs suddenly come from? The Mungiki movement<sup>7</sup> was allegedly founded during the late 1980s to protect squatter communities with a Kikuyu background during the clashes surrounding the 1992 elections in the Rift Valley Province. These clashes were instigated by the Moi government to oust inhabitants with a Kikuyu background from its strongholds, because it was believed that these groups would vote en-masse for opposition parties (Rutten & Owuor 2009:314; KHRC 2001; Akiwumi Report 1999). This violence brought an influx of refugees to urban ghetto areas such as Mathare, and with them came many Mungiki gang leaders. These leaders built alliances with local gangs, and the local Mungiki gangs that were the result began to establish protection rackets in Mathare from 1998 onwards. Many local young men began to foreground their Kikuyu identification to enable them to benefit from the myriad of jobs on offer by these gangs. Within a few years, the gangs controlled half of Mathare and many other ghetto areas in Nairobi, including the

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<sup>6</sup> See also, Branch & Cheeseman 2009:15 and Mueller 2008.

<sup>7</sup> The Mungiki movement is a national movement that operates through local cells that I term gangs. It has, often intermittently, been described as a Kikuyu revivalist group, for example by Wamue (2001), and as an urban vigilante group with a strong ethnic profile, for instance by D. Anderson (2002). Strong resemblances with the *Hema ya Ngai wi Mwoyo* ('Tent of the Living God' in the Kikuyu language – cf. Rogoncho & wa Kariuki 1990; Anderson 2002:531) and *Thaay*, or sometimes *Thaayo*, ('peace' in the Kikuyu language), which are both famous Kikuyu religious organisations in Kenya, suggests a connection with them, at least during the movement's emergence. Other myths of origin link the founding of the Mungiki movement to a group of old Mau Mau fighters in the Rift Valley Province, who called upon a group of 'grandsons' – a younger generation of men with Kikuyu backgrounds – to continue to fight for independence because the objectives thereof, such as land, had not yet been achieved. There is probably truth in both of these stories. Many narratives also connect the Mungiki movement to different politicians, but these links probably developed at a later stage.

majority of the public transport routes. They exacted taxes for public transport, the right to distil alcohol, security, electricity, and even access to sanitation. Then, from the 2002 elections onwards, the Mungiki gangs became increasingly and visibly involved in politics<sup>8</sup>, which further shaped the public image of the gang members – and of young and poor men in general – as thugs for hire.

### **'Discovering' working gangs**

The Mungiki gang control in Mathare provoked the proliferation of Taliban gangs, as the former tried to push the latter out of the public transport industry. The Taliban gangs started out as *kamjeshi*. In Sheng<sup>9</sup>, this term denotes groups of young men who control and provide security at bus stops and public transport routes for a fee. The Taliban gangs had had political affiliations ever since their inception, but their political ties and ethnic profile became more pronounced in their confrontation with the Mungiki gangs over the control of transport routes. These rival groups have frequently fought turf-wars with each other from the early 2000s onwards (Anderson 2002).

During the post-election violence of 2007/8 (*see also* Waki 2008), the Taliban gangs attempted to take over former Mungiki strongholds in Mathare, while the Mungiki gangs returned to this ghetto to try and stop them. Yet, the latter groups were – again – chased out by the military police. I was in Kenya and observed the post-election violence in Mathare up close. Media representations considered this conflict – in Mathare and other areas where there were clashes – through the lens of ethnic violence and divisive politics, and pointed to young and poor men as the main perpetrators, as thugs for hire (*e.g.* The Nation Reporter 2008). My analysis is that this violence in Mathare cannot be explained by using the concept of 'political violence' alone, for this notion has strong ethnic connotations in Kenyan political discourse and thus fixes 'ethnicity' as a one-dimensional explanatory model for people to engage in conflict. From a broader historical and a more local perspective, this period of violence can also be taken as another phase in the ongoing turf war between Mungiki and Taliban groups. Moreover, the participants had many different motivations for engaging in this conflict, and were not just driven by political grievances and putative ethnic animosities (Van Stapele 2010), as I will explore in detail in the following chapters. Furthermore, it was not only young and poor men who were involved; women and older men too participated in violence. On the whole, the Taliban groups in Mathare were widely believed by residents to have taken advantage of the power vacuum that was left by the Mungiki gangs. Indeed, between early 2008 and late 2009, I observed

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<sup>8</sup> President Moi ordered a crackdown on the Mungiki movement in 2000, and meetings of its members were sometimes dispersed with violence by the police, while at other times the police seemed curiously reluctant to interfere (Mugo 2000; The Nation correspondent 2000). The relationship between the Moi government and the Mungiki changed in August 2002. The Kenyan public was shocked to see the movement demonstrate on Nairobi's streets in support of Moi's chosen heir, Uhuru Kenyatta (Sunday Nation Team 2002; Kagwanja 2003, 2005). I would like to refer interested (Dutch) readers to an excellent and insightful report on this shift within the Mungiki movement by Karneworff (2004).

<sup>9</sup> Sheng is an abbreviation that stands for **S**wahili and **E**nglish, and this is a very dynamic creole language spoken in most urban centres and among most young people in East Africa (see more in the following Chapters).

how a particular Taliban gang controlled certain sites in the former Mungiki stronghold of Bondeni, where illegal alcohol was distilled.

I arrived back in Mathare in July 2010 for a long period of fieldwork (July 2010-June 2011), and expected to continue my research with this Taliban gang. However, this group had been ousted by residents and local gangs in late 2009, because of the level of violence it had deployed to exert control and establish security, which is one of the main income-generating activities undertaken by many of the gangs in Nairobi ghettos. A young woman, whose house had been burned to the ground during the violence that ousted the Taliban gang from Bondeni Village, narrated the following to me in December 2010:

Another boy was beaten, he was a Luo, but from another clan [than the members of this Taliban gang]. It was late last year, December there. They threw him in the river, made him drink that water, so he died. [...] There was tension. They had burned a boy from Shantit [an area in Bondeni Village], in a mattress. [...] The fight that chased Taliban leaders was started because they killed that boy, he was a thief.

In view of the contacts I had established with this Taliban gang over time, I still expected to be able to conduct research with the Taliban leaders who had retreated to their strongholds in Mathare, namely Area 4B and Mradi or 4A (see Map 4). Yet, when I arrived in July 2010, tensions between the groups in Bondeni Village and Area 4B were still high, and my friends and research participants from the two areas advised me against it. I therefore re-focused on the many other gang members in Bondeni with whom I had already established a working relationship prior to this research project. I thus stumbled upon what was, to me, an interesting discovery.

Surprisingly, I encountered many former Taliban members in July 2010 who still worked in Bondeni distilling illegal alcohol near the riverside. It transpired that only the main leaders of this Taliban gang had left the area after its clashes with residents. This new research circumstance guided me towards considering how the Taliban and, before them, Mungiki leaders came and went, whereas many of the members of such ethnic-based groups re-joined local gangs after their demise. I describe these local gangs as 'working gangs' because their members referred to their income-generating activities as work. I thus realised that these local groups formed the basis upon which ethnic-based gangs came and went, and therefore merited analyses of their own.

As a consequence, the focus in this research is on the everyday practices (De Certeau 1988) of working gang members, and in particular on their decision-making in relation to shifting personal, historical, political and social contexts. This is helpful when it comes to both grasping the incessant processes of joining and leaving working gangs in the context of individual social navigation struggles, and exploring how this is tied to positions of manhood and notions of work. Examining the perspectives, feelings and experiences of these men enables the production of in-depth analyses of their strategies, motivations and legitimisations. This book will show that these factors were intimately linked to processes of identification, and directed at immediate needs and future aspirations. Such a local

viewpoint also helps in problematising the seemingly self-evident correlation between gangs as thugs for hire and political violence in Nairobi ghettos that still prevails in the dominant discourse on political violence and ethnicity in Kenya (e.g. HRW 2008). I will thus demonstrate that starting from the point of view of the everyday role of gangs in local settings enables the reader to acquire a different understanding of their roles in relation to wider political and economic developments in Kenya.

The question that is central in this book is: Why did young men in Bondeni and Kosovo, which are two ghetto villages in Mathare, join and leave working gangs? The main period of research started during the 2007/8 post-election violence, right after the demise of the Mungiki gangs in 2007, and ends with the 2013 general elections. In this period, the positions of the working gangs in Mathare were profoundly in flux; for instance, the Taliban groups tried to gain control of the *chang'aa* industry in 2008-9, but were successfully resisted by local working gangs.

There are three sub-questions that emerge from the central question: How were working gangs tied to processes of becoming men according to local notions of manhood (Willemsse 2009: 218) in Mathare? How did young, male working gang members relate to the relatively strong socio-economic positions of women in Mathare? As this book will show, the majority of the gang bosses<sup>10</sup> were women, and often relatives of the young, male gang members, with many of these women also being members of community development organisations. I therefore explore why gangs both cooperated with and fought against such groups. The final sub-question is: How should we understand the participation of young, male working gang members in wider junctures of violence at the local and national level, as in the 2007/2008 post-election clashes? I attempt to show that such ambiguous and volatile participation in broader struggles can only be understood in relation to the gang members' shifting articulations of belonging and entitlement in the local setting.

### **Working gangs and volatile links to 'ethnicity'**

The importance of work in the processes of local gang formation in Mathare emerged as a central theme in my research. In contrast to the dominant view of gangs in Kenya as ethnically and politically motivated (e.g. Wabala 2013) and operating in networks that

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<sup>10</sup> I refer to the women and men who gave the gang members assignments to distil and smuggle illegal alcohol – or sell heroin – as 'bosses.' The gang members refer to these people as *masonko* or *wadosi* (both of which mean 'bosses' in Sheng). These bosses engage in professional relationships with gang members and, by assigning and organising the work, largely determine who becomes a member of a particular gang (see also Chapter 2). The gang itself often had members who took on more informal leadership positions, for instance during conflict with other gangs or when providing security. During the time of my research (2007-2013), a majority of the alcohol and drugs bosses were still women and their dominance emanated from the history of sex work in this ghetto, as explored in Chapter 1. As the numbers of the older generation of women who have controlled the alcohol industry since its onset gradually decline, more and more men (many of whom are descendants or other relatives of these women) are becoming bosses. In both industries (alcohol and heroin), the bulk of the business continues to be controlled by a few families who have both male and female members working as bosses. So, one gang may have a grandmother, a mother and a daughter from the same family as a boss, with sons and uncles starting to join their ranks in more recent times. Previously, male relatives were mostly employed to distil the alcohol, but as some family businesses grew, these men also started to take on positions as bosses.

encompassed different ghettos, most of the gangs in Mathare were in fact highly local and multi-ethnic and based on popular notions of work. These working gangs are primarily organised around income-generating activities such as distilling alcohol and selling stolen goods and drugs, and operated in specific, albeit ever-shifting, turfs within the ghetto. These gangs thus differ from ethnic-based groups like the Mungiki and Taliban gangs in terms of locality and power, as well as with respect to ethnic and political identification (or a lack thereof). Moreover, the working gangs appeared in Mathare years before the Mungiki gangs rose to power, and continue to exist today.

This book takes a close look at two working gangs in Mathare: an alcohol distilling group called the 'One Touch' gang in Bondeni Village; and a group of drugs dealers called the 'Ruff Skwad' gang in Kosovo, which is another neighbourhood in Mathare.<sup>11</sup> For the young men I worked with, it was crucial to distinguish work from crime, although their distinctions followed unexpected lines; these young gang members all referred to their long-term income-generating activities (in their cases distilling alcohol or dealing heroin) as work, and contrasted these notions of work to crime. Worldwide, gang members tend to refer to illegal income-generating activities as work, and to the fluidity that exists between notions of legality and illegality. This research departs from the perspectives of gang members, and so it is important to follow the subdominant notions of licit and illicit acts that are at play in these 'border spaces' (Fagan & Freeman 1999; Hagedorn 2007; Roitman 2006; Nordstrom 2004). Nairobi ghettos can also be regarded as border spaces, as these localities mark the boundaries of the 'space of the nation' and can, as such, be taken as 'othered spaces.' From such a state perspective, ghettos as border spaces are, to a great extent, invisible (Scott 1998), and thus extremely underserved (in terms of housing, sanitation, security and so on), yet their borders are highly policed. This is illustrated by the systematic unlawful killings of young ghetto men by the police (Alston 2009; Probert 2014). In this vein, we can even speak of "bordered" spaces (*see also* Van Houtum & Van Naerssen 2002; Popescu 2012). Alternative notions of respectability often emerge in such bordered spaces. The dominant notions on morality and legality hold little currency in these contexts as a result of the complete failure of the law, especially by local law enforcers. In negotiation of dominant discourses on morality and legality (*see also* Willemse 2007: 373) people in border spaces often imagine alternatives to such dominant notions to meet their local experiences. In this book, I explore the fluidity between these notions in everyday practices and how these shaped the processes of working gang formation in Mathare.

What I describe as working gangs in Kenya has received very little academic attention, although they are powerful entities in Mathare.<sup>12</sup> The focus on Mungiki gangs in

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<sup>11</sup> All of the names of people, gangs and hangouts have been anonymised at the request of my research participants for reasons of safety. I included my participants in the phase of analysing the data, and we edited the book and changed all of the names that they deemed could be dangerous to them together. Only the names of the ghetto (Mathare) and the ghetto villages (such as Bondeni and Kosovo) remain the same. All of the other names are fictional, and I therefore cannot analyse why, for instance, gangs use certain names to refer to places, groups and people.

<sup>12</sup> As has been stated, the partnership between ethnic-based gangs and working gangs helped the former to gain power, while resistance from working gangs also led to their overthrow in Mathare.

media and academic representations has, at times, fostered the perception that these groups entered seemingly virgin territory inside the Nairobi ghettos during the late 1990s, and were highly unique in their operations and services (*e.g.* Henningsen & Jones 2013). This is inaccurate. Indeed, long before the Mungiki gangs emerged, local working gangs provided jobs and acted as security agents; they were later popularly dubbed vigilante groups (Anderson 2002). The Mungiki gangs did have unique features in that they had very specific (albeit constantly changing) religious and political ideologies, and their power and scale of organisation were unrivalled (Wamue 2001, 2002). Accordingly, these gangs were able to provide services to a much wider network of people. Yet these groups did not operate in isolation, but always worked in conjunction, and in competition, with local working gangs.

Following the relatively short-lived presence of ethnic-based gangs in Mathare when compared to the longevity of the working gangs, it is remarkable that they, in particular the Mungiki gangs, have attracted all of the media and academic attention thus far. This book will reveal that working gangs are crucial when it comes to developing a better understanding of all of the gangs in Mathare, including their roles in violent events and, perhaps more importantly, with respect to other social, political and economic dynamics of everyday life. This local perspective also enables analyses of why young ghetto men left their working gang from time to time and joined ethnic-based gangs to participate in violence. That many working gang members joined ethnic-based gangs during violence, despite strong local attachments, came as a great surprise to many local residents. This research explores why this took place, and looks at how this relates to volatile confluences of class, locality and ethnicity that have fuelled consecutive junctures of violence in Mathare since 2002.

### **Struggles over manhood**

Focusing on work in processes of working gang formation highlighted the dependence of young, male gang members on women to access work. Accordingly, this study explores the struggles of these young men to achieve senior manhood, and asks how this is tied to the incessant processes of joining and leaving working gangs. Especially striking was the tension between their relentless ambition to live up to the standards set by the dominant discourse on masculinities in urban Kenya<sup>13</sup> and their fear of becoming increasingly redundant. Such anxieties were a direct consequence of the historical, social and economic processes that put the women of Mathare in a relatively strong socio-economic position. Young men conveyed to me, in all sorts of ways, how much this put them on the spot. For them, the gang space became one of the few spaces left in which they could still enact their

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<sup>13</sup> The dominant discourse on masculinities in urban Kenya deviated slightly from dominant notions of manhood that are prevalent in rural Kenya in that the women in rural farming communities are often viewed as the main providers of daily food items such as vegetables (through subsistence farming). Urban variations of this gender division in terms of providing for the household were also practiced in Nairobi ghettos, for instance when women owned food stalls and used their stock and profits to supply food items for the household. In many cases, as in Mathare, the women in practice provided more to local households than men. Strikingly, the men in urban areas continued to be bestowed with the sole responsibility to provide; the women who contributed to these urban households were, in local discourse, generally conceptualised by both men and women as merely 'helping out' (see more in Chapter 4).

manhood and claim power in a context that was marked by the growing autonomy of women. Women were the head of most households and owned most shops, and most alcohol and drugs bosses were women and women ran most of the bars. Women have historically taken on powerful positions in Mathare, and the preference of NGOs to focus on and include them (Dogra 2011) has further increased the gap between women and young men in more recent times.<sup>14</sup> Many of the older men in Mathare found ways to enact their manhood through local government structures, for instance by becoming village elders and working with the local administration. Young men, however, were mostly left out. This highlights that women (both young and old) had social and economic positions in Bondeni Village that deviated from the normative gender roles in Kenya, which continue to be marked by patriarchal notions (Spronk: 2012).

Gang members carefully built their reputations (Salo 2006) while “social death” (Patterson 1982; Vigh 2006: 240) was always imminent. Consequently, this study analyses gang membership in relation to young men's anxieties over being ‘the provider’, and thus over manhood, brotherhood and fatherhood, especially in terms of how this was related to joining and leaving working gangs. In popular and academic discourses, young men in sub-Saharan Africa continue to be predominantly cast as culprits of violence and threats to the social order and the authority of older generations (Bay 2006:10-11; *e.g.* Were 2008). ). In contrast, scant attention is paid to the predicaments of young and poor men in Nairobi and elsewhere, such as the perpetual extra-judicial killings that occur in Kenya. This study aims to unpack and contextualise pervasive essentialised notions of ‘African masculinity’, with the goal instead being to highlight its multiplicity, fluidity and context bounded-ness. Recently, ever more research is looking at (young and poor) men in sub-Saharan Africa (*e.g.* Shefer et al. 2007; Morrell 2001<sup>15</sup>), and I hope to contribute to this emerging field by exploring how gangs helped structure the processes of becoming men.

Crucial in my research participants' pursuit of masculinities is the transition of a boy into a mature man, with circumcision playing a key role in this, even for many boys who identified as Luo.<sup>16</sup> This study takes manhood to include localised notions of what it means to be a physically mature man (such as being circumcised). For my research participants, it denoted a desired status that was marked by the transition from ‘boy’ to ‘junior’ and, eventually, to ‘senior’ (*see also* Morrell 2006:16). Masculinity refers to “a cluster of norms, values, and behavioural patterns expressing explicit and implicit expectations of how men should act and represent themselves to others” (Miescher & Lindsay 2003:5). The “hierarchy of masculinities” (Connell 1995) indicates that not all notions of masculinity have equal power and legitimacy in society (Miescher and Lindsay 2003:6). At the same

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<sup>14</sup> The representation of women and men in development discourse has its own problems, aptly discussed by Dorga (2012).

<sup>15</sup> See also: Morrell 2005; Ouzgane & Morell 2005; Richter & Morrell 2006; Lindsay & Miescher 2003; Miescher 2005; Gibson & Hardon 2006; Vigh 2006; Silberschmidt 2001, 2004; Mwangi 2004; Uchendu 2007; and Ako-Nai 2013.

<sup>16</sup> This rite of passage was sometimes also practised by men in Mathare who identified with ethnic groups that are not known to circumcise young men, such as the Luo. This was quite remarkable to observe for people with Luo backgrounds generally regard circumcision as the defining difference between them and those with Kikuyu backgrounds. In political discourse, circumcision has even become a key issue in discussing political leadership – see more on this in Chapter 2.

time, shifting dominant masculinities govern different spaces and are often in competition with each other. For instance, within the confines of the ghetto, my research participants often displayed a stoic toughness as part of performing masculine ideals. However, outside the ghetto, such bodily performances were often associated with gangsters and could attract unwelcome police attention. The ability to navigate these different spaces and shift codes in order to 'pass' for 'non-ghetto men' in the cityscape had a major impact on whether an individual would be able to leave the working gang, which was an aim shared by all of the gang members I spoke to. Accordingly, this research analyses the different ways in which my research participants enacted gender identities. How did they (re)present and position themselves in different contexts, e.g. on their own, with fellow gang members, with women, in the city centre, in the ghetto, and so on?

Deteriorating social and economic conditions in Nairobi's ghettos increasingly had an impact on the ability of young men to live up to masculine ideals, such as being the provider (*see also* Silberschmidt 1999). This study explores why young ghetto men were so engaged in particular kinds of imaginings against all the odds. Masculinity is not a given, but is acquired and enacted, and the young men in Mathare continually struggled to become men according to local conceptions (*see also* Willemsse 2009; *cf.* Silberschmidt 2004:51, 2001). My aim is to approach the masculinities experienced in a Nairobi ghetto that were incurred by trying to live up to unrealistic expectations (*cf.* Spronk 2012). Paramount among the ambitions of these men was a deep desire to become a father; not only to father children, but to also act as a father and the head of their household, thus establishing them as senior men. This urban masculine ideal of the provider stood in stark contrast with the fact that most households in Mathare were actually run by and provided for by women. As a consequence, becoming a man in the ghetto thus involved the relentless pursuit of virtually unattainable ideals. Their relationships with women were fraught with contradictions, confusion, diminishing control and concomitant anxieties. Accordingly, this research looks at the tenacity with which these young men tried to live up to this ideal, and how this influenced decision-making, especially with regard to joining and leaving working gangs.

### **Dominant representations of gangs in Kenya**

As stated above, broader political frameworks have dominated studies of gangs in Kenya up to now. Sensational media representations have often explained the alleged susceptibility of young ghetto men to political manipulation by using the term 'idle.' Qualifying young and poor men in this way, and therefore as dangerous, is an often-heard repertoire in Kenya when it comes to explaining political violence and other social ills that are ostensibly perpetrated by young and poor men (*cf.* Wamucii & Idwasi 2011; Were 2008). Nevertheless, most of the young men I worked with can hardly be described as idle; they woke up early to look for work or hustling opportunities, and would often not return home before nine in the evening, thus spending a total of 18 hours out on the street to make themselves available whenever opportunities arose. Such pervasive stereotypes, however, continue because of a lack of knowledge of the multiple meanings of gangs in the

daily lives of both young ghetto men and community residents at large, and especially the central role of gangs as associations of work.

Ethnographic studies on, and the corresponding theoretical interpretations of, gangs in sub-Saharan African countries, other than South Africa and Nigeria (*e.g.* Kynoch 2005; Harnischfeger 2003), are still rather rare.<sup>17</sup> Gangs in most African cities are, more often than not, excluded from the considerations of such groups within a global framework (*e.g.* Hagedorn 2007, 2008), which is a body of work that is still dominated by studies on gangs in the Americas (Covey 2010).<sup>18</sup> This book aims to contribute to a better conceptual knowledge of gangs in sub-Saharan African ghettos. The term gang does feature in academic texts on Kenya (and other sub-Saharan African countries), but is often mentioned in the same breath, or used intermittently with terms such as resistance movements, militias, rebels, political groups, religious groups and vigilante groups, whereas the significant differences between such groups are not specified (*e.g.* Branch & Cheeseman 2009).<sup>19</sup> The analyses of working gangs in this book aim to improve the understanding of different types of gang in urban Kenya,<sup>20</sup> as well as their roles within the context of larger social, political and economic developments. I hope to demonstrate that this also has implications for conceptions of gangs and violence elsewhere.

However, using the term gang to describe such groups in Mathare is highly problematic. Firstly, the emic use of the term in Mathare poses problems, as the Sheng word for gang, *geri*, mostly denotes groups of men who are engaged in robbery, both in and outside the ghetto. To some extent, this is reflected in the popular binary in Mathare between local notions of work and crime, as mentioned above. The groups of young ghetto men I worked with mostly described themselves as 'companies' and '*bazes*' ('networks of friends and the locality of their hangout' in Sheng – Githinji 2006; Thieme 2013). Like their American counterparts (Hagedorn 2007: 301), they often shunned the term gang in their self-definition given its negative overtones in dominant discourses (*e.g.* Mwakio & Mwachanga 2013; Ombati 2013; Kamau 2013). I recognise these self-definitions. Nevertheless, I also deliberately continue to use the term gang in my analyses to place this research within the popular and academic debates on gangs, not only in Kenya, but also in sub-Saharan Africa and even worldwide. These are debates that still often cast the young men I worked with as 'dangerous gangsters.' I therefore hope to contribute to these debates by providing alternative connotations of what these groups (referred to as gangs in the dominant discourses) signified to ghetto residents – both gang and non-gang members – in the context of their everyday lives.

This leads on to the second problem with the term gang, namely its tendency to invoke the image of a fixed group, whereas central to this research is its variable and

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<sup>17</sup> For more examples of interesting literature on gangs in different African countries, see: Jensen 2008; Salo 2006; Matuzits 2009; Kinnes 2000; Glaser 2000.

<sup>18</sup> With the exception of gangs studies such as the recent book on 'Global Gangs' edited by Hazen and Rodgers (2014).

<sup>19</sup> For more examples of the use of the term gang in academic work on Kenya, see: Anderson 2002a; Mueller 2008; Frederiksen 2010; and Gecaga, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the urban gang *anake a forti* and Mau Mau, see Berman & Lonsdale 1992, and, for an impression on gangs and gang activities in Eastlands, Nairobi during the 1970s, see: Kiriamiti 1990.

contingent 'groupness' (Brubaker 2004). I thus explicitly hope to circumvent the essentialising tendencies of the term, and instead study gangs in Mathare not as bounded wholes, but as fluid and temporary networks of, mainly, young men whose aim is to improve their access to social and economic opportunities (work) in and outside the ghetto. As a consequence, this book aims to show that becoming a gang member is a continuous process, as is the process of leaving. Furthermore, gangs have proliferated in Mathare, and indeed worldwide (*cf.* Hagedorn 2001, 2008), since the early 1990s; the spatial, economic and social changes since then, which were wrought by the intensification of flows of money, goods, people and ideas (often referred to as globalisation – Stiglitz 2003), and the ensuing concomitant wealth disparities (Piketty 2014), have added to feelings of marginalisation and growing insecurity across the globe (Appadurai 1996:46; 1999, 2006; Harvey 1990: 296).<sup>21</sup> The rise of gangs in Kenya and elsewhere can, to some extent, be explained by a growing need for alternative positions, identifications and economic activities in the face of mounting uncertainty. Accordingly, gangs are generally analysed as resistance-based, which is a shared position (be it ethnic, religious, class, etc.) from which social and economic marginalisation within society is experienced (Castells 2011; Hagedorn 2008). Gangs in Kenya are no exception. However, these groups are more than just geared towards alternative political and economic survival strategies (*e.g.* Glaser 2000); they are also an “expression of social cohesion in peripheral communities” (Salo 2006:148-149). This study therefore analyses working gangs in Mathare not only from the perspective of their members, but also from the viewpoints of their families, neighbours, bosses and friends, and within the wider context of socio-economic and political relations and group-making projects both in and outside the ghetto.

Sensational media representations of gangs and their involvement in violence are to some extent informed by actualities, because these groups do participate in violence. The problem is that these portrayals predominantly feature groups of angry young men shouting in the street, destroying property and physically harming people (*e.g.* Ombati 2013). Yet, they almost never show the women (*see also* Kihato Forthcoming) and elders who cheer these men on and provide food and weapons, as happened during the 2007/8 post-election violence in Mathare. This book explores a different view of the participation of gangs in violence in this area. Contrary to the “continued existence of folk constructions of Africa” (Bay 2006:3) and African men, violence is not a typically 'African' or 'male' trait, but a universal phenomenon. In the ghetto, acts of violence (such as looting, raping and killing) are remarkably commonplace, and not only involve young men. During my

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<sup>21</sup> Globalisation is identified by the hybridisation of cultures, but has a flip side that is characterised by a search for authenticity (Geschiere 2009:1; Turner & Brownhill 2004) and closure (Willemse 2007: 45). Neo-liberal capitalism on the one hand intensified global flows of money and people, and on the other increased the sense of insecurity among groups who had less or no access to these global flows. Globalisation thus appears to also lead to a stronger articulation of cultural contrasts, brought forth by the desire to belong to a clear cultural whole (Willemse 2007:45) among groups that perceive themselves as economically and culturally marginalised by neo-liberal globalisation forces. The policies forced upon sub-Saharan African countries, including Kenya, in the form of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) were based on the “bypassing the state” and “good governance” paradigms (Santiso 2001; 2002) shaped by the neo-liberal agenda, and were aimed at promoting access to the global market. These policies and conditions have, however, had devastating consequences for vulnerable groups and markedly increased their sense of marginalisation.

fieldwork, I frequently encountered mob justice, i.e. a spontaneous group of men and women killing an alleged thief with stones and fire (so called 'necklaceing' using a car tyre and gasoline). What is more, looting and stealing (often with the use of force) happened on a daily basis at the hands of both men and women. I also heard about several incidents of the rape of women by other women (using a broken soda bottle), and have observed several episodes of domestic violence between husbands and wives that saw the husband hospitalised. These latter incidents were more exceptions than the rule, but they do show that young men did not have a monopoly on violence in this ghetto. This especially comes to the fore when one takes into account the fact that it is young men who were mainly targeted by the shoot-to-kill policy issued by the police (*see also* Star Editor 2013; Mc Gregor 2014). Violence never stands on its own (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004:1; Bourgois 2010), and the skewed representation of moments of violence obscures 'everyday violence', by which I mean the experience of poverty, exclusion and humiliation from which such moments emerge (*see also* Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 1, Chapter 20).

This research looks at underlying social forces, predicaments and possibilities in relation to participation in violent conflict, and not so much at the physical acts of violence themselves (Vigh 2006:11). Violence is not an anomaly, but part and parcel of social processes. Direct acts of violence (*see also* Galtung 1996) that threaten "bodies and the bare life of bodies" (Bay 2006: 3) arise from "routine violence" (Pandey 2006), such as exclusion mechanisms in society. For instance, in and exclusionary aspects of notions of citizenship and belonging in Kenya are based on specific ethnic, age and gender configurations. These shape legitimating discourses of escalating and excessive direct acts of violence. The concept of routine violence allows a focus on the violence of routine political practices – the drawing up of political categories and the writing of national histories – and on the discursive, socio-economic and political conditions that allow and legitimise the 'undisguised' political violence and its 'routinisation' in everyday life (Pandey 2006). Routine violence, as it is described by Pandey, describes the violence "written into the making and continuation of contemporary political arrangements, and into the production of majorities and minorities" (Pandey 2006:1). The conditions that make direct acts of violence possible, and the way that they are shaped by shifting power relations and concomitant exclusion mechanisms, must be part and parcel of any analysis of violence. It is therefore crucial to go beyond direct acts of violence (Pandey 2006:14) as an extraordinary event (Ries 2002). For the situations studied in this book, it is even a moot point as to whether we can actually distinguish everyday violence (Scheper Hughes 1992) from the periodic outbursts of political violence and gang participation therein in Kenya.

More than any other category, routine political practices in the Kenyan context are based on ethnicity. Following Erikson, I take ethnicity to be an aspect of social relationships between agents who regard themselves as culturally distinct from members of other groups (Erikson 2002:11). Ethnic identification is a highly ambiguous construct that is fluid, intersecting and context bound. In this book, I set out to contextualise essentialised notions of ethnicity that still prevail in the popular discourse on citizenship and belonging (*see also* Lonsdale 2008a and 2008b) by showing if, why – and if not, why not – when and how ethnicity moves to the foreground of social and political relationships during periods of

violence in Mathare. Ethnic identification is performative (Butler 1999) and thus imagined by individuals in relation to ever-changing contexts in order to articulate belonging and claim entitlement. The contingencies (*see also* Bhabha 1994) and inconsistencies that hide beneath the apparent self-evidence of ensuing notions of 'us' and 'them' bring forth great uncertainty (Appadurai 1999) and can lead to direct acts of violence. I have adopted from De Vries and Weber the insight that such violence is often practised in the name of self-determination. When notions of belonging define an 'other', it is actually the 'self' that is determined; direct acts of violence legitimised by processes of 'othering' (Said 1978; *see also* Spivak 1988; Morris 2010) are therefore attempts to demarcate the boundaries that separate the self from the other (De Vries & Weber 1997:1-2; Willemse 2007:145). Such moments of violence thus arise from profound uncertainty about entitlement and the belonging of 'selves.' The threat posed by the others is quelled by attacking them in an attempt to chase them away and, in extreme situations, kill them, thus establishing "death certainty" (Appadurai 1999). In the following chapters, my goal is to explore and contextualise the performative power (Marshall-Fratani 2006) of shifting dominant and subdominant discourses on ethnic and local belonging and othering at play during different periods of violence in Mathare from the perspective of the young working gang members involved.

### **Social navigation: making choices while facing constant uncertainties**

At the core of this research project is the issue of why young men in Mathare join and leave working gangs. This requires further reflection on how to analyse the decision-making processes of these young men in terms of their everyday lives. How, for instance, was decision-making among young ghetto men determined by, and potentially resistant to, the multiple and contradictory power configurations in which these men were positioned? The study looks at how processes of choice-making are shaped by these young men's own logics, identifications and individual circumstances within the context of being positioned within discursive frameworks and social relationships. The concept of 'social navigation', which was further developed by Henrik Vigh (*e.g.* 2006; 2009), helps us to study decision-making among these men and analyse their movements (including making decisions and acting on them) within temporal and spatial contexts. This highlights the social and bodily praxis aimed at improving social possibilities by evaluating "the immediate and the imagined" (Vigh 2006:13/136) and taking action (including 'inaction') accordingly. It is particularly appropriate to study the experiential level of social processes within highly unstable contexts, and grasp the reasons why young men join and leave gangs from the vantage point of acquiring and maintaining a higher social status as men.

These men were embedded in multiple social relationships and power configurations (Ortner 2006; Mills 2006). This concept allows explorations of the impact of shifting discourses, social relations and material effects, which in Mathare are marked by certain uncertainty (Vigh 2009; *see also* Whyte 1997), on young men's movements:

The concept, in other words, highlights motion within motion; it is the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled, and when used to

illuminate social life it directs our attention to the fact that we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along. As such, the concept adds a third dimension to our understanding of movement and mobility. Where we normally look either at the way social formations move and change over time, or the way agents move within social formations, navigation allows us to see the intersection – or rather interactivity (cf. Jensen, 1998) – between the two. [Vigh 2009: 420]

Accordingly, social navigation entails constant reorientation in response to evolving contexts and events and shifting power relations, but always within the framework of discursively available pathways. The young men in this study constantly redrew trajectories into the future in relation to current change. These were not intentional, single or linear routes that were obvious in direction and had clearly defined destinations, but unfolding, multiple, ambiguous and diverging imaginings without fixed outcomes. Their movements in, and evaluations of, the immediate were largely informed by their anxieties, anticipations and aspirations with regard to their social status as men. These affects and desires were constantly contemplated, adapted and reconstructed, as were the pathways to realising them. The concomitant concept of 'social horizon' denotes the interface between vistas of future opportunities and constraints and shifting discourses and social circumstances that constitute social environments in the moment (Vigh 2006: 30; 2009). In this book, this notion is seen through the lens of young ghetto men, and is therefore helpful in terms of analysing how these men evaluated the present and anticipated the future in a specific space and at a particular moment of time, which is their temporally and spatially constructed social horizon.

However, the twin concepts of social navigation and social horizon also raise questions. Most young men in Mathare shared dominant subject positions (*see also* Foucault 1978), such as the label 'ghetto boy', but their choices differed immensely. How can this framework help when it comes to grasping differences in choice-making among similarly positioned men and thus improving a view on their agency within the context of highly oppressive structures? The social navigation framework brings into view the intersections between social formations in motion and moving agents, but does not provide specific tools to analyse this in individual life-trajectories. I want to analyse how, as part of their social navigation trajectories, young ghetto men negotiated pertinent dominant discourses and positioned themselves, and how they concomitantly imagined others. I thus set out to explore how looking at time- and space-bound processes of negotiation may add to the social navigation framework and highlight differences in decision-making among these men. By negotiation I mean how people who, in particular contexts are not part of powerful institutions, relate to, respond to, comply with and contest widely accepted and highly authoritative 'truths' and subject positions. Through the process of negotiation, agents position themselves and imagine others in the context of being discursively positioned, thereby enabling excluded discursive positions to be imagined. These alternative positions may sometimes take the form of open resistance and contestation,

although they may also, more often and less obviously, develop as part of the processes of imagining the self as an individual and part of a group (Willemse 2007: 373).

My aim is to grasp the agency of the young men in Mathare by closely analysing their narrations of the self, for it is the act of narration (*see also* Butler 1997 cited in Davids & Willemse 2014: 3) in its broadest sense that constitutes, and is constituted by, the process of negotiation. Discourse (Mills 2006: 77-102, 2003) offers possible positions for subjects to adopt or not (Willemse 2007:128). As already stated, people are agents of their own positioning, but do not have the same space within discourse to negotiate dominant subject positions, imagine alternative subject positions and enact agency (Willemse 2007: 45/132; Skeggs 2004).<sup>22</sup> I aim to explore how the concepts of social navigation and social horizon can work together with the notion of 'negotiation' to achieve a more nuanced analysis of young men's movements that is based on their perspectives and experiences. This calls for a research method that enables me to analyse the way young ghetto men negotiate dominant discourses, position themselves and imagine notions of 'us' and 'them' in varying contexts as part of their social navigation trajectories.

### **Analysing my data: biographic narratives 'against the grain'**

In this book, I use the method of analysing biographical narratives 'against the grain', as developed by Karin Willemse<sup>23</sup> (2007), because it enables me to explore the individual processes of negotiation of the young male participants, i.e. the way these men positioned themselves in the context of being positioned within pertinent discursive frameworks. This will allow me to analyse their multiple, fluid, context-bound and often ambiguous constructions of the self and, concomitantly, the other, thus enabling me to bring more nuances to my analyses of their individual social navigation struggles.

The use of biographical narratives as a method of research is not uncontested (Bourdieu 2004). In particular, their use in a non-Western research context has been the subject of rigorous scholarly debate (Tonkin 1995; Sommer 1988; Salazar 1991) because of the potentially euro-centric ideas on selfhood and society implied in the term biography. Yet, this method does not have to imply preconceived notions about the self or the structures of the text when the process of narration is largely directed by the narrator. This means, for instance, giving the narrator space to represent him/herself as an individual and/or as belonging to a collectivity. Moreover, many of those who experience themselves as belonging to a collectivity would nonetheless often represent themselves as individuals (Willemse 2007: 27; 2012).

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<sup>22</sup> Agency is enacted through constructions of the self, i.e. the way subjects act, think and speak (narration in its broadest sense) within the dynamics of discursively demarcated spaces and times and allotted subject positions (Van Stapele 2014). Accordingly, this book analyses how the young ghetto men as positioned subjects negotiated restrictive subject positions such as that of the ghetto boy by assuming, appropriating, affirming, tweaking and resisting them, and how this shaped their decisions to join and leave working gangs. As already stated, this research aims to go beyond ostensibly self-evident 'truths', and sets out to look for polyvocality and make room for alternative meanings, positions and experiences. This critical research approach allows me to bring out and explore how certain social processes become visible in the individual lives and experiences of these young men (*cf.* Willemse 2007: 44-46; Mossink 1988: 10).

<sup>23</sup> With additional references to other scholars such as Norman Fairclough (2001), Sara Mills (2006), Julie Kristeva (1986) and Maaike Meijer (1996).

When using biographies in research, one has to take into account the problem of power; the researcher has a project with the research participant and exercises interpretive power (Hernández 1995:160). The current study is based on a concept of epistemology that defines knowledge as embodied, partial and situated. As such, knowledge is a temporal construct that is determined historically, locally and personally (Schrijvers 1993: 156; Haraway 2008; Braidotti 2011). In this vein, knowledge is taken as the result of social relations and interactions. As a consequence, narrated texts can never be taken at face value. The on-going interaction between researcher and research participant sets the stage for the process of intersubjective knowledge production (Willemse 2007).<sup>24</sup> Intersubjectivity between researcher and research participant is, however, often infused with asymmetrical power relations that researchers can attempt to, but never fully abrogate. Researchers can question such power hierarchies, but they cannot discard their role as a researcher and the fact that they listen to and read the narrative as meaningful with respect to the construction of alternative modes of academic narratives (Willemse 2007: 141; Davids & Willemse 2014; Behar 1993<sup>25</sup>).

In an interview I conducted with Kingi's grandmother in 2005, I certainly became acutely aware of the way different power dynamics had an impact on my research relationships and, as a consequence, the knowledge produced. I first met Shosho ('grandmother' in Sheng) Kingi in August 1991 when I was 16 years old, and so wanted to interview her in 2005 about the local Mungiki gang. Kingi and I had visited Shosho's bar on a number of different occasions previously, and I naively expected our interview to naturally flow from the normal chitchat we shared. There we sat, in the bar, with a look of anticipation and determination in our eyes. Both Kingi and I were excited to learn more about Shosho's life story and how she viewed the history of Mathare. However, the first day of our interview dragged on, and we all sat in awkward silence, relieved when a customer walked in to break the tension. Every question I did try to ask was met with a confused expression on Shosho's face, and her answers were generic and brusque, leaving hardly any room for further discussion. She seemed shy, and pampered me as if I were a 'guest of honour' instead of a family friend. As the day progressed, more men came in to drink, and my continuous efforts to ask questions were increasingly overshadowed by both their loud murmurs and by Shosho Kingi herself, who got on with the job of serving them. At the end of the day, I left her bar frustrated. I felt I had bothered Shosho Kingi, but I could not quite grasp what exactly had gone wrong.

After a restless night, I returned the following morning as we had agreed, but I had now decided to approach our interview differently. Kingi and I chatted over a hot cup of tea and Shosho interjected with her usual wit. I began to ask Kingi questions about his childhood and, more generally, Mathare, and Shosho often answered for and made jokes about him. I then realised what had happened the day before. Speaking about herself and opening up about personal aspects of her life history to her grandson and a younger white woman had probably felt very unfamiliar and awkward. Her response to me had thus been

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<sup>24</sup> See also: Davids & Willemse 1999; Langness & Frank 1981; Meijer 1996; Tonkin 1992; Aalten 1991; Mossink 1988; Abu-Lughod 1993; Behar 1993; Salazar 1991.

<sup>25</sup> See also: Willemse & Davids 1999; Schrijvers 1993; Berger Gluck & Patai 1991.

formal and further shaped by what she thought I expected as a researcher and her views of how her story should be told. I discussed this with Kingi, and he confirmed that Shosho Kingi perhaps thought it was strange that I wanted to learn more about her personal story and views when she did not consider that to be 'history.' Moreover, the presence of male customers in her bar during our interviews undoubtedly influenced her narration, as this prevented her from delving into more personal matters with regard to her own life path.

My approach during our first interview thus encouraged Shosho Kingi to foreground both my white skin and my profession. Power differences and how these influence the intentions of the narrator are an important part of the process of intersubjective knowledge production. Taking into account that power is shifting, relational and productive, the research participant also has power (Ong 1995: 353; Mills 2006: 20) in the production of knowledge, as he/she has his/her own agenda with the researcher and decides what to share, and how to share it, through the use of words, silence and body language (Nencel 2005: 354, 2014; Ghorashi 2008; Ong 1995). I too am positioned within pertinent dominant discourses and thus inscribed with subjectivities, including by my research participants (Willemsse 2007: 24). The research setting I had initiated with my notebook in front of me had, in Shosho Kingi's eyes, prioritised my 'overseas' origin, white skin and profession over my long-term relationship with her and her family. She thus awarded me an authority that she associated with white skin, and so responded in a suspicious, formal and distant manner. Additionally, her unfamiliarity and discomfort when it came to talking about her personal history, and my inability to navigate these challenges, contributed to an awkward first research encounter. However, as soon as I again positioned myself as her grandson's (white) friend, and approached her as his grandmother, she left her formal attitude behind and responded playfully and animatedly, as I had grown accustomed to. The rest of our first series of interviews were conducted in a non-formal atmosphere, and resembled our normal day-to-day chitchat that we usually shared. This nurtured a sense of trust and intimacy, tangibly lessened our distance and increased Shosho's power to narrate her story as she saw fit. This was how I conducted all of my interviews from that point on. In particular, I constantly tried to strike a balance between the way my research participants preferred to narrate their stories and the information I was looking for. This did not, however, ever become easy.

The goal of this study is to empower my research participants by revaluing their perspectives, which are not dominant in the academic world and in the world of politics, by taking intersubjectivity as a starting point not only of narrative production, but also of narrative analyses (Van Stapele 2014). Accordingly, I discussed the entire book with my research participants during the different stages of analysis and writing, which has brought great depth to the analyses presented in the following chapters. However, this too was a difficult process. Firstly, some of my research participants expressed great interest, but also great pain, while reading the chapters about their lives. Indeed, it was not uncommon for them to shed tears while considering and commenting on my analyses. Kingi shared with me: "I keep the doors closed, but reading opens these doors, makes me remember the hard times." Secondly, some feared repercussions from the predominantly female gang bosses, and we therefore together deleted any information that could endanger them.

Thirdly, a few were afraid that other people in Mathare might find out their true identity, even after we anonymised people, groups and places. We thus altered some texts to avoid this as far as possible. In the main, the feedback concerned the analyses presented in this book, and one participant remarked: "This book, it tells the way things are. This book is important to us, because it tells our story to the world. You really know ghetto life, you have told our story." This was the biggest compliment they could have paid me.

This all leads to an important question: How valid are conclusions based on the analyses of biographical narratives? The main bone of contention here concerns the validity of my conclusions, because of their subjective quality. I maintain that conclusions drawn from narratives give insight into shared subject positions and the diverse ways agents negotiate the discursive frameworks in which they are positioned. Their validity is, in my view, proven by the in-depth understanding that narratives provide of an embodied and situated self. Exceptional examples, when studied in great detail, allow probes into the limits of what is possible and imaginable in any given social context. For instance, every gang member wanted to leave the gang, but only a few like Kingi succeeded. Looking closely at and comparing successful and less successful pathways out of the gang through the life stories of individual men teases out what may have contributed to success and failure. The interplay between structural and individual dynamics described in this book also has an impact on similar trajectories of other young gang members living in Mathare. Accordingly, this type of narrative analysis will provide more general insights into processes of subjectivation (*see also* Foucault 1982: 212) and the availability of alternative subject positions for the people living in this ghetto.

### **Building trust**

As stated above, some of my research participants, such as Kingi, have been friends of mine for more than 20 years. I arrived in Kenya for the first time in 1990 at the age of 15 to volunteer for a youth program in Mathare. Between 1990 and 1998, my volunteer work was mostly aimed at helping local youth programs to raise funds and organise educational youth camps. I have always combined academic research with volunteer work, and started the Duara Foundation in 2003. This is a pro bono organisation that assists local stakeholders in Mathare (NGOs, CSOs, CBOs and 'informal' groups such as gangs) to achieve a more gender sensitive, inclusive and effective approach to peace-building, community-led development and educational projects. Between 1998 and now, I have lived and worked in Kenya for more than three months annually on average, although the periods varied from a month to a year. Through these perennial visits, I have slowly been able to build relationships of trust with people such as Kingi. These friends in turn introduced me to a wide network of gangs, youth groups and women's groups that I still work with today.

Although the number of people I know and have worked with in Mathare is vast, there are still only a few Mathare residents who really trust me. As will become clear in this book, many of those in Mathare feel exploited by people from outside the ghetto (be they politicians, the police and government officials, the clergy or – white – NGO workers). As a consequence, I was always extremely mindful of the fact that every step I took, and every word I uttered, could have unforeseen consequences for the people involved in my

research, and I soon learned to regularly reflect on my every move with Kingi and his wife. They trusted me enough to criticise, and this feedback proved to be crucial when it came to further establishing trusting relationships with gang members and their families. It also helped me, at least to the best of my abilities, to not disappoint or offend them, or put them in any danger.

Many family members, friends and colleagues in the Netherlands frequently asked me whether my fieldwork was dangerous, and the simple answer to this question is 'yes.' However, this is not because my work is on gangs and with gang members. On the contrary even, my research participants went to great lengths to keep me (and them) safe. No, the reason my fieldwork was, to some extent, dangerous, is tied to the research context that is marked by extreme everyday violence. As an illustration, I have witnessed several shoot-outs involving the police who were chasing suspects while spraying bullets into crowds where children were playing and where I was hanging-out with friends. People are so used to this that they immediately fell to the ground in a single motion, whereas I continued to stand, too shocked to move. Witnessing and hearing about all kinds of violence on a daily basis affected me badly. Indeed, in the course of this research project (2007-2014), I have lost several very close friends and their children to police and gang killings, mob justice and the lack of proper health care services. Sometimes, my feelings of powerlessness in the face of all of this violence paralysed me. I did, nevertheless, learn from my research participants how to deal with all of this by taking action, even if only on a small scale, which led us to developing a project together that was based on my research findings and geared towards helping gang members to help themselves (see Chapter 3). I also did not sleep in Mathare, because Kingi warned me that my white presence could attract thieves at night and, as such, endanger both the people I was staying with and myself. Accordingly, I slept at the head office of an NGO working in Mathare called Safi. Nevertheless, I arrived early enough in the area every morning to wake up with a research participant and his family, then staying long enough to end the day with another participant and his family. Overall, Mathare is a volatile context for everyone, most of all for the people who live here. Having said this, I never really felt 'in danger', apart from one incident that opened my eyes to the unforeseen consequences of my presence and my research, not only for the people I worked with, but also for me.

During a night at a club near Mathare in May 2012, a female boss warned me indirectly to stop hanging out with one of her employees (I cannot disclose any details other than these for safety reasons). I had only started doing research with this particular gang in 2008, and I did not have the same rapport with the members and bosses that I had with the other working gangs I had been conducting research with since 1998. The gravity of her threat reached me in dribs and drabs via a number of different people in the days that followed this incident. In particular, I learned that this boss thought I was working with the Kenyan government as an intelligence officer, and friends told me to avoid at all costs areas where I might encounter her or her employees. By now, I was really quite scared. Some days later, Kingi called a youth member I had worked with a few years ago to help me out. In recent years, he had become a renowned and widely-trusted middleman between the bosses of this gang and their employees. He handled their money and,

according to Kingi, they trusted his word. Nevertheless, it still took this young man another few days to convince his boss that I was a social scientist and did not work for the Kenyan government. This highlights the reality that I could not have conducted this research without years and years of building relationships of trust with current and ex-gang members, and without having a wide network of people who knew me and who could help me out when I was at risk.

These relationships also enabled me to walk in Mathare on my own, because I knew people in almost all of the 13 villages that comprise this ghetto. Indeed, many people regarded me as a *mwenyeji* ('a local person' in Kiswahili), albeit a white one, because they had seen me walking around on my own for more than two decades. This allowed me to be intensively involved in the daily lives of current and ex-gang members and their wives, without them feeling like I was a guest. Accordingly, I went with them to work, the market, school, church, funerals, hospitals, the rural area, meetings and gatherings with family members and bosses, clubs, football matches, and community and festive get-togethers.<sup>26</sup> Most of all, I hung out with them at the distilling spot or other gang spaces. Although I was very familiar with Mathare, it still took me a while to get used to spending a lot of time at the distilling spots near the river; besides the heat and smoke that came from the drums, these places were incredibly filthy, as the contents of the sewers ended up in the river near to where these young men worked and hung out. At the One Touch site where I spent most of my days, the sewer was broken and, instead of ending up in the river, most of its effluent spilled out onto the ground next to where these men played cards and gambled. Moreover, because it was cheaper, the distillers sometimes used old shoes instead of firewood to boost the fires underneath the drums, thus filling the air with black and highly toxic smoke. One gang member told me: "If we don't get killed by the police, we get lung cancer." Furthermore, the young men who did not work often drank the liquor produced at the site, and many were in a permanent state of rowdy drunkenness. They also had to get used to me. Indeed, at the start of my fieldwork, they focused all of their attention on me when I was down at the site. However, after a while, they continued with their daily activities, although they were still mindful of my presence in ways that I only discovered much later. One of them told me: "When you are down, they don't fight, ha ha ha. It is respect, it is good, now we have less fights." Another gang member from Kosovo told me: "It is good you are old. You are like our big siz, ha ha ha, we don't have to seduce you!" On average, I was 10 years older than most of the gang members, apart from Kingi and a few others. This led me

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<sup>26</sup> I have conducted 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kenya for this research, spread out over five years and covering two election cycles (2007-2013 general elections). I combined historical and anthropological (ethnographic) methods, scholarly literature reviews, and newspaper and other written-source analyses with up-close participant observation, focus group discussions and interviews. I held contextual interviews with government officials, aid workers, church officials, NGO workers, teachers and local residents. However, I mostly worked with two gangs (an illegal alcohol-brewing gang and a gang of drug dealers) in two separate parts of Mathare, and conducted multiple interviews with over 40 members. I also organised 19 focus group discussions with around 20 participants (their attendance varied somewhat), and 12 focus group discussions with women who worked as sex workers at the bars frequented by the men I worked with, some of whom were their girlfriends or family members. I have also interviewed the wives, mothers, grandmothers, other relatives, former gang members and current friends of my main research participants.

to realise that I probably would not have been able to conduct this research if I had been younger.

I am still amazed by the extent to which all of the men that feature in this book, and their wives and other family members and friends, not only allowed me to be part of their everyday lives, but also gave me insight into their daily joys and struggles. Having long-term friendships and working relationships with my research participants contributed to my unprecedented access, yet this also posed some dilemmas. Working and living in Kenya, on and off, for the past 24 years had made me something akin to a family member to several families in Mathare. I was also widely considered to be a wealthy white woman with connections to NGOs. As a 'big sister', I thus had certain responsibilities and was expected to, for instance, take part in the funeral arrangements of 'family members', take care of sick family members who were in hospital, or help to pay school fees for 'nephews' and 'nieces', which were duties I performed to the best of my abilities and with a deep love for my 'families.' Yet these responsibilities also wore me down at times, because expectations ran extra high due to my white skin and overseas origins, and the fact that I am not very good at saying 'no'. Furthermore, besides my Mathare families, many other people in the area also had great expectations of me, and thought I could get them aid from, and positions at, different projects and NGOs, despite my limited influence. This made conducting research with them more complicated. Moreover, the expectations people had of me, as well as their disappointment if I could not deliver, had an impact on both the ways they related to me as a researcher and, as a consequence, the narrated text.

I tried to develop a mode of representation in this book that is based on self-reflexivity and represents my multiple and layered relationships with my research participants (*see also* Nencel 2014). I follow Willemse & Davids and understand self-reflexivity as "taking a critical stance that includes ourselves in the analytical plane by which we may be able to take a step towards fulfilling the feminist desire to create more egalitarian research relationships" (2014). I have therefore tried to 'peel off' the way my own positioning impinged on my reading and selection of narrative texts. I have addressed this throughout the process of analysis by using self-reflexivity and self-doubt as analytical tools (Van Stapele 2014) within my discussions with my research participants about my analyses. Discussing my findings with them in this way helped me to avoid reading too much into texts and, as such, achieve a more textured understanding of their meanings and intentions, without abandoning my responsibility to provide my own interpretation of their experiences (*see also* Borland 1991). Accordingly, I was able to both better understand the role of working gangs in terms of processes of becoming senior men, and explore the shifts, contradictions and contingencies involved in their articulations of local and ethnic belonging.

In contrast to much of the academic writing based on methodologies that include self-reflexivity and notions of responsible epistemology and representation (*cf.* Braidotti 2006), I do not analyse these processes at length in this book. I am very present in this work because I describe how people speak to me or what I observe, and I am very much part of the cases analysed. Occasionally, I do elaborate on my relationships with my research participants, my own positioning and the subjectivities that I was inscribed with.

Sticking to the tool of writing against the grain, I also alternate between representing narrative texts, describing contexts and analysing the ways my research participants negotiated dominant discourses. Through the careful wording of the analyses and conclusions offered, I aim to accentuate the possibility of multiple readings of a narrative text. However, presenting the deeper reflective analyses of my own subjectivities and the processes of intersubjective knowledge production that brought forth this book was not possible due to the risks involved for my research participants and myself.

### **Structure of the book**

Chapter 1 starts by describing a walk through Bondeni in Mathare, which is the area that is the main focus of the research. I walked this route almost every day, whether alone, or with young male gang members, their friends, their wives and sometimes their older relatives. This walk introduces key research participants and key localities. These places have been the sites of consecutive violence between gangs, and between gangs and community development organisations, over the past 10 years, which are conflicts that I analyse in the following chapters. Accordingly, this walk sets the stage for delving deeper into the history of Bondeni and provides some background to the gangs in Mathare. It also helps in mapping current power relations and class differences, and thereby provides an important contextualisation of the research questions.

Chapter 2 focuses on the working gang that came to be central in my research, namely the One Touch gang of alcohol distillers. The chapter looks into: why mostly young men chose to join this and other alcohol gangs; who could become members; and at which point in their life trajectories these young men often chose to join a gang. Accordingly, it explores the role of working gangs in structuring the processes of becoming men. This helps the reader to develop an understanding of why young ghetto men considered becoming a working gang member to be a crucial step in pursuing respectable manhood and thus a key phase in their social navigation trajectories.

Chapter 3 looks at why and how most working gang members wanted to leave the gang. In order to become fully recognised and respected as 'senior' men according to popular notions of manhood, they needed to leave the gang and become independent before reaching the age of 30. What kind of strategies and pathways did these young, male gang members construct and navigate to leave the working gang? And why did the majority of these gang members fail to leave, despite their great efforts? This chapter teases out how young men reflected upon changes in their social environments; how this had an impact on their imagined future opportunities and constraints; and how they redrew trajectories, both individually and collectively, to continue pursuing their dream of becoming senior men. This also helps to explore how and why men who were positioned similarly within power configurations negotiated dominant discourses differently and how this had a bearing on different decision-making processes among them.

Chapter 4 offers a comparative analysis of another type of working gang: the Ruff Skwad gang that specialised in drug dealing in Kosovo, Mathare. These gang members made more money than alcohol distillers. However, a striking similarity with their alcohol counterparts was that it was equally hard for them to leave the gang. This chapter explains

that part of the reason for this pertains to the modes in which the Ruff Skwad members negotiated the dominant discourse on masculinities and positioned themselves in relation to women, other gangs in Mathare, wealthy counterparts and, ultimately, each other. The way many enacted the alternative subject position of 'ghetto pride', for instance, denoted the investment of vast resources in performing *swag*. This greatly influenced their decision-making and brought forth great dilemmas with regard to increasingly conflicting social navigation trajectories.

The final two chapters deal with the implications of my focus on working gangs, outlined above, the struggle over masculinity and the ambiguous relationship with ethnic politics of a wider scope. Chapter 5 focuses on how the anxieties of young ghetto men over manhood were tied to several conflicts between gangs and other social groups and authorities in Mathare. These cases show how shared fears of becoming redundant as men in relation to female family members, and the community at large, impinged on the relationships between gangs and different groups and organisations in Mathare. The chapter highlights that these men were not powerless victims, but were incessantly and relentlessly engaged in a negotiation of restrictive power structures. However, in contrast to dominant representations, their group strategies to claim space within the community were not always based on violent confrontations, but also on creatively navigating changing power relations.

Chapter 6 makes the link with ethnic politics and the role of gangs in a broader political context. Cases of shifting alliances help to contextualise the alleged self-evidence of ethnicity during moments of direct violence in Mathare and tease out when, why and how ethnicity temporarily moved to the fore- and background in social and political relations. In this chapter, I set out to explore the experiences, motivations and legitimisations of young ghetto men with regard to violent conflict, and delve into the overarching question of why and how conflicts emerge in Mathare.

On the whole, the aim of this book – and of my research in general – is to get closer to the gang members' experiences. The challenge is to understand what gangs mean in the everyday life of Nairobi ghettos for the members themselves and also for their families and the community as a whole. By starting from their daily struggles, I aim to go beyond current stereotypes that cast these young men as thugs for hire.