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

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CHAPTER 1: Mapping People, Places and Power in Bondeni, a Neighbourhood in the Nairobi Ghetto Mathare.

Introduction

I start this chapter by describing a walk through Bondeni, which is a neighbourhood in Mathare. During my fieldwork, I walked this route almost every day, whether alone or with young (ex-) gang members, their friends, their wives and sometimes their older relatives. Retracing this walk enables me to introduce key research participants and localities. My walk starts at the roadside restaurant owned by Kingi and his wife (Kingi was one of my main research participants and I have already mentioned him in the Introduction), which is situated near the main road where the Number 46 minibus (*matatu* in Kiswahili) stops. I would then walk down to the valley where I mostly met with my other research participants. As I retrace this walk, I will describe crucial locations in Bondeni,¹ such as: the cliff that separated Upper Bondeni from Lower Bondeni; the One Touch distillation site near the river where I conducted research with alcohol gang members; the Manoki toilet that will play a central role in Chapter 5; and the bridge that connects Bondeni with another ghetto village called 4B. These places have been the sites of violent confrontations between gangs, and between gangs and community development organisations, over the past 10 years. They will therefore be analysed in the chapters below. Accordingly, this walk sets the stage for delving into both the history of Bondeni and the backgrounds of the gangs in Mathare. It also enables me to map current power relations and putative class differences, and helps to further contextualise my key questions by providing the historical backgrounds of the gangs in the area.

The type of “tour” (De Certeau 1988:118) described in this chapter was crucial to the methodology of my research, and formed an important part of my approach to “analysing biographic narratives against the grain” (Willemsse 2007 – see Introduction). Indeed, walking through the ghetto with my research participants on a daily basis enabled me to grasp the meanings they attached to places, and how these shaped context-bound, temporal and intersecting enactments of the self. Their perceptions of places transformed these into spaces, by which I mean De Certeau’s “practiced places” (1988:117). With respect to space and place, De Certeau differentiates between a tour and a map (De Certeau 1988:118-122). The former is different from the latter, because it entails action and is related to space, whereas a map is informative of place. In the process of narrating a tour, a map is a point of reference and is simultaneously produced. In this multiple, fluid and shifting sense, a map is the context in which a tour has meaning, whereas a tour spatialises a map (Willemsse 2007:144). Using the concept of mapping enabled me to analyse how my

¹ As noted in the Introduction Mathare is comprised of 13 ghetto villages. A ghetto village is a local term that refers to specific neighbourhood areas that are represented in the local administration through the Council of Elders. Bondeni is one of the two ghetto villages where I conducted my research. Kosovo is the other one.

research participants reflected on boundaries and imagined and enacted spaces within the contexts of restricting places (Willemse et al 2009). Strikingly, the administrative maps – or any other kinds of map - of Mathare Valley (*e.g.* Lundine et al. 2012) do not name Bondeni. Likewise, they do not identify the various neighbourhood areas and ever-shifting boundaries that constitute Bondeni and which shape, and are shaped by, everyday social interactions and identifications; instead, they merely refer to 3A, 3B, 3C, 4A and 4B and so on, which are areas demarcated in straight lines to serve administrative purposes, and do not provide insight into the orientations to place produced by people on the ground. Walking with young gang members has given me insight into the multiple and shifting spaces they imagined, and how these, for instance, sparked temporal gender and ethnic identifications and enactments. Some of these spaces, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, became possible sites of resistance to dominant subject positions (such as the label ghetto boy). However, to provide some background to the importance of locality in processes of context bound and intersecting identifications among my research participants, I will now start my own tour.

Arriving in Bondeni

Several public minibuses from Route 46 stood in a line on a crowded corner on Ronald Ngala Street in the centre of Nairobi. Even though the Mathare ghetto is located roughly three kilometres from the city centre, its ghetto space starts where Route 46 begins. Young *kamjesh*, who are youths helping to lure passengers in to the *matatu* front in line, shouted the price and the final destination of the minibus: "*Mbao* (20 Kenyan Shillings in Sheng – approx. 0,20 Euro), *mbao, mbao*, Huruma (a low middle income neighbourhood next to Mathare), Huruma, Huruma." Their voices were intermingled with the loud purr of running engines and the reggae music coming from well-worn speakers inside the dented minivans. The exhaust fumes had coloured the pavement black. I sneaked onto the *matatu* at the front, bending down low enough to avoid the low roof. The seats in front of me were loose and banged against my knees every time the driver hit the brakes or took off abruptly, which he did repeatedly as he pushed his way through a growing traffic jam near Race Course Roundabout. It was difficult for me to avoid bruising to my head, hips, knees and even my back during *matatu* rides, and I often thought about how hard it must be for the elderly and pregnant women or those with physical disabilities. I have always travelled by *matatu* in Kenya, and love the energy, humour and creativity of the *matatu* staff and passengers. I especially enjoy observing the interactions between them. Above all, though, I love the constant exposure to reggae and dance-hall music. Nevertheless, it also is a means of transport that requires its users to be both vigilant, because of pickpockets who operate both in and outside the vans and who do not hesitate to break windows and use other forms of violence, and have a strong and flexible body and mind. This time, again, the tout (*conda* in Sheng) was making sexually-tinged jokes about me in Sheng to another passenger, unaware that I

understood what he was saying. Later, when I asked him in Sheng to drop me off at the petrol station near Bondeni, he laughed uncomfortably. Moreover, I had to jump out of the crowded minibus because the driver was in too much of a hurry to stop and let me out. Two women selling herbal medicines near the bus stop shouted abuse at the tout and told him to stop properly next time. According to them, not stopping was not the way to treat a lady. I made a joke about me being 'a lady' and thanked them.

It was nine in the morning on a Friday in February 2013, and the heat was already building up underneath the tin roof of the roadside restaurant managed by Mama J. I had just arrived back in Kenya for a brief period of fieldwork to both discuss my analyses with my research participants and observe the run-up to the 4th of March general elections in Mathare. Mama J, who was a long-term research participant, was 31, a mother of three, and had been born and raised in Bondeni. She was married to Kingi, a 36-year-old former alcohol gang leader and current social worker. He was also one of my long-term research participants. I met Kingi in 1991, when I was 16 years old and travelling on my own to work in Kenya for a second time as a youth volunteer at a youth group. This group was part of a Kenyan NGO called Safi, which worked with women and youths in Mathare. Kingi was 14 years old at the time, and we were jointly responsible for a group of 24 under-12s during a summer camp in Mombasa. Neither of us spoke much English, and had never managed a youth camp before. The director of Safi, Dr. Karanja, was with us and supervised the older youth members. She apparently had enough faith in us to put us in charge of young children who had never before travelled outside Mathare (this also applied to Kingi), let alone journeyed by train or swum in an ocean. In facing all of these new challenges, Kingi and I had become close friends. He later became one of my main research participants, and over the 20 odd years we have known each other has helped me to connect to his One Touch gang, as well as to other gangs in Bondeni.

Going down

Mama J looked at me with her beautiful, round face while she was tying her long dreadlocks into a stylish bun at the nape of her neck. In Sheng, she asked me "Are you going down, now?" She knew I was going to meet some of the alcohol gang members at the riverside. Indeed, I went there almost every day, and she always tried to stall me with a cup of tea. Given that I had just arrived back in Kenya, she knew I was more eager than usual to make my way to the riverside and see how the alcohol gang members were doing. She laughed at me. "You love going down, ha ha ha!"

Bondeni is built on a slope, and is divided into two parts: Upper Bondeni and Lower Bondeni. Mama J's restaurant was in the former, while the distillation site on the riverbank, about half a kilometre from the main road, was in Lower Bondeni. Many residents regarded Bondeni as the oldest village in Mathare, but records are unclear on which part of Mathare was inhabited first (*e.g.* Etherton 1971; White 1990; Ross 1973). However, the fact that most Mathare residents, including those living in and outside Bondeni, took it to be the oldest village is significant, and is

probably due to its crucial role in the informal economy and social life of Mathare for many decades. During the colonial era, the area that eventually became known as Mathare was an Indian-owned quarry, and people settled there as squatters in its abandoned parts as early as the 1920s (Huchzermeyer 2007: 720; Etherton 1971; MuST 2012). Most of the houses were illegally erected from waste material, such as cartons, plastic, scrap metal, old timber and mud (White 1990:152; Nelson 2002; Ross 1973). During the early 1990s, I had met a few people who still lived in these endlessly re-patched houses, jokingly referred to as igloos because of their conical shape. According to some of my older research participants, it was not until the late 1960s that corrugated iron sheets became more widely available, and it sometimes took many years for structure owners, landlords or tenants to save enough money to renovate the older houses. Surprisingly, iron sheets are now almost as expensive as stone in Eastlands, Nairobi, yet people still often prefer the former, which are easily-movable, because of their insecure tenures (*see also* Hoek-Smit 1981).

Demographic records and academic estimates vary greatly (MuST 2012), but it is safe to say that the population in Mathare rose from a few thousand during the colonial era to many tens of thousands between the 1960s and 1980s (Kabagambe & Moughtin 1983; Ross 1973; Stren 1972). The trend of rapid urbanisation, especially in informal settlements (Macharia 2003, 1992), that took off after independence in 1963 accelerated during the 1990s (Muganzi 1996; Syagga et al. 2001; Ominde 1968). Population growth in Mathare only declined slightly during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when even more ghetto areas rose up to absorb the bulk of rural-urban migrants. In 2012, Bondeni had approximately 10,000 residents (*see also* MuST 2012) living in both legal and illegal housing in an area that covers much less than a square kilometre. I thus take Bondeni to include parts of Kambi and as bordering Shantit. Nevertheless, precisely which neighbourhood areas make up Bondeni is constantly contested, as shifting boundaries reflect changing relations between the social groups on the ground.

After chatting and drinking tea with Mama J on that Friday morning in February 2013, I left my bag at the *hotelli* near Juja Road and walked along the dirt path to the Manoki cliff, about 400 metres into the ghetto. The cliff was covered by huge piles of garbage, as most residents use this spot as a dumping ground. Black smoke rose up from the heaps and clouded the air. Many years ago, people had dug steps inside the wall of the cliff for easy access, but before going down them I stopped to look at the view. This is the spot where stone flats give way to thousands of tin-roofed houses with walls made of mouldy plywood, mud, iron sheets and plastic waste. Standing on the edge of Upper Bondeni, I overlooked Lower Bondeni. I saw the river where illegal alcohol was distilled day and night, and the other side of the river where the ghetto village 4B is located. Approximately 200,000 people live in the 13 ghetto villages that comprise Mathare, which is an area of about 4 x 2 kilometres (MuST 2012), although the statistics are notoriously inaccurate. Walking down the steps, I jumped from side to side to avoid the effluent from the overflowing sewer

that snaked through a dark and narrow alley all the way to the Manoki public toilet. I greeted the women who were washing clothes at the toilet, before making my way to Mau Mau Avenue, which is a wider dirt road where most vegetable and barbecue stalls, firewood shops, bars and *hotellis* are located in Lower Bondeni.

Samii, a 26 year-old One Touch gang member I had worked with since 2009, jumped up from his stool in the shadow of a tin roof when he saw me step around the corner onto the wider road. He hugged me and slapped me on the shoulder. Three other gang members, Odhis (25-years old), Roja (28-years old) and Cosmos (26-years old), had been sitting outside the pool hall and joined us when we passed their spot. Kingi had told them I was coming and, as an excited bunch, we walked to the narrow backstreet near the green bar where *busaa* ('fermented maize porridge' in Kiswahili) was sold. The way down to the riverside was steep, slippery and stony, and I held onto Samii's broad shoulders to stop me from falling. At other times, I just grabbed the wooden beams coming from the mud and iron sheet houses to make my own way down without (too many) injuries. In the past, I had cut myself many times on the rusty iron sheets sticking out from these structures at eye level, learning to clean my scratches with the alcohol produced below. I always marvelled at the fact that these men were able to walk this path carrying up to 50 litres of distillation mixture, which was a balancing act that rivalled those of acrobats in a circus. Down at the distillation site, which was a few dozen metres from the dirt road and hidden from sight by a labyrinth of single room houses, I sat on a piece of firewood on the muddy ground near the gamblers. I then spent the rest of the morning catching up with the 20 alcohol distillers from the One Touch gang who had participated in my research.

As described in the Introduction, my history and long-standing friendships with many of the people in Mathare, such as Kingi and Mama J, enabled me to access the gangs that are central to this research. At the start of my PhD project, I was one of the few outsiders (people who did not come from Mathare, let alone white people from outside Kenya) able to walk freely in most parts of the ghetto and spend time at gang hangouts. Many of the members of alcohol gangs in Bondeni had met me during previous visits, and when I asked them in August 2009 to participate in this research most agreed. They wanted, as Samii voiced it, "people outside the ghetto (both Kenyans and people abroad) to know about their ghetto life." My Sheng improved considerably during my initial fieldwork periods, when I spent days on end down by the riverside. About half of the 20 One Touch gang members I worked with spoke English, even if only to a rudimentary level, and they often preferred to speak that language with me. Others had never finished secondary school, instead spending most of their time distilling and drinking alcohol and playing cards at their hangout near the distillation site. All of the young men I worked with, whether they had completed a secondary education or not, preferred to speak Sheng among themselves. Consequently, speaking Sheng was mandatory if I wanted to be able to communicate with these men and understand and be part of their interactions with each other.

Despite the many hours, days even, I have spent at the One Touch distillation spot since I started my research, I have never ceased to be impressed by the scene. On average, the site played host to 15 young men in various stages of drunkenness, gambling with cards, and a variety of distillers who worked a few metres away with steel drums placed on open wood fires. All of these young men generally looked rough, with soot on their clothes, big cuts caked with old blood on their hands and feet, and the smell of alcohol on their breath. They also acted rough, frequently shouting out harsh jokes and abuse and punching each other hard. Often, one of them would grab me by the arm and, dazed by alcohol, squeeze a little bit harder than he may have intended. On one occasion, a young man suddenly pulled me down to sit next to him, but did so with such force that I fell over straight into the open sewer that ran into the river next to drums. It was always hectic, the men were always loud and excited (as much induced by alcohol as the presence of peers), and I always had to be alert when I was down there. This was not because I was afraid, as I knew the men would never harm me, but because I had to maintain a safe distance from the drums, as explosions were not uncommon, and stay out of the sewer and out of the way of the men who sometimes fought over money that was lost through gambling.

The other reason the distillation site always captivated me concerned the way some of the young men I worked with regarded me. In the course of my fieldwork, I turned into a kind of (white) big sister or auntie to some of them. Indeed, they often referred to me as 'siz', and told me that they saw me as 'neutral' (their word), by which they meant I was in a more or less neutral position with regard to their wives and fellow gang members. At the same time, they knew I was connected to several NGOs and CBOs in Kenya, and they also thought I was rich because of my skin colour and overseas origin. All of this led them to regularly take me aside when I was at the distillation site to share with me their problems and fears. Indeed, even if I spent four days in a row down by the riverside, they would still want to talk to me in private. This, to some extent, highlights the magnitude of their problems and fears, and also reflects the fact that they did not feel they had a lot of people to talk to. At the same time, many also hoped to access opportunities by convincing me how much they needed aid, whether from me or from the organisations I was affiliated with. I always felt overwhelmed by the multiple burdens and concomitant problems that these young men had to deal with, and often felt utterly powerless in face of dying children, burned out houses and hunger. I provided assistance by setting up a project (see Chapter 3) that enabled them to address their problems better, and improve their access to social and economic opportunities collectively. Developing a project together proved to be a fruitful endeavour on many levels. First of all, it helped my research participants to gain access to opportunities previously out of reach to them. It also created a framework within which I could conduct my research. Group discussions and my interviews likewise enabled these men to conceptualise their own experiences and learn more about their individual and collective coping strategies and perspectives (*see also* Schrijvers 1995). Additionally, it helped me to face my own

powerlessness, even if only to a very small degree; certainly, the level of deprivation people face in ghettos like Mathare is beyond the reach of such limited initiatives.

When I finished chatting with my research participants on that Friday morning, I climbed back up to the wider dirt road – Mau Mau Avenue – where I bought a bottle of chilled water at a kiosk, as well as a small cob of roasted maize with salt, lemon and chilli, and a packet of roasted groundnuts to tide me over until lunch. After a few hours at the distillation site down by the river, I was tired and covered in dust and particles from the *bombs* – 'hot debris' in Sheng - that were released by each drum 45 minutes after completion of the distillation process. The sun was hot, I was hungry and thirsty, and I needed to go to the bathroom badly, again realising the impact of the heat, dust and dirt of the ghetto on one's body. I therefore paid five Kenyan Shillings (approx. 0.05 Euros) to use the Manoki toilet to freshen myself up. A young man was managing the toilet for Muungano Wanavijiji – a community-led organisation fighting for housing and other rights of the urban poor (Bradlow 2011; Thieme 2013; Schilderman & Ruskulis 2006). He joked that I should take a rock inside with me. I laughed and understood straightaway what he was referring to: prior to Muungano Wanavijiji renovating the toilet in late 2007, it had been managed by a variety of different gangs. Due to a lack of funds, it had been in a dismal state, and in those days, you had to carry a large rock to throw near the pit latrine and jump on to avoid stepping on piles of human faeces. It was also necessary to avoid touching the walls, as these too were covered in excrement. Today, however, the toilet is divided into cubicles with squat toilets and separate bathrooms, and the white walls are neatly tiled. The price had gone up when the toilet was renovated from two to five Kenyan Shillings, and I often wondered how people felt about using a facility that was in much better shape than the dilapidated tin-roofed houses they lived in – that is if they could afford to go to the public toilet at all.

Walking to the bridge

I stood outside the Manoki public toilet, trying to decide which route to take. I had an appointment in Kosovo, a little less than two kilometres from where I was in Bondeni, but also had to pass through 4B to meet another One Touch gang member, Motion, who had been a key participant in my research. If I walked straight from the Manoki toilet to Kosovo, I could follow Mau Mau Avenue, pass Kambi, say hi to Brayo (a 29-year-old One Touch gang leader) at his bar, and cross the bridge to Kosovo by taking a right turn after Jobless Corner in Village 2. This was the shortest possible route, but I wanted to see Motion in 4B and so took a right instead of a left. Near the blue kiosk, I met Mama Buda, an older lady who was one of the bar owners who worked with the One Touch gang. Her son Buda had been my research participant during the fieldwork for my Master's research project, and I had interviewed him again on several occasions for my PhD. She kissed me loudly on the cheeks and told me to buy her a bag of maize flour. I obliged willingly, even though I knew that, despite her tattered appearance, she and her family were influential stakeholders in the lucrative

chang'aa (illegal alcohol) industry. As a consequence, she was very able to buy her own maize meal.

Buying groceries or lunch for friends, family members and elders is regarded as a sign of respect, especially when the buyer is considered to be better off, and people were not shy of repeatedly reminding me, a white outsider, of that custom. As a consequence, I often had to carry extra money with me to meet these expectations. Yet, the people living in the ghetto had similar expectations of each other. Indeed, I observed this up close when Kingi left the One Touch gang in 2007 and later became a social worker at Safi; as a result of these changes in his life, his friends and family began to ask more of him, and he shared with me that he only went down to Mau Mau Avenue and the riverside if he could afford to buy lunch for at least a few friends and relatives. He told me that he could not refuse such requests, because it would harm his reputation and social status as a man; he wanted to maintain the image that he was on the way up, and buying family members and friends groceries and lunch was part of this project.

After buying the maize meal and flour for Mama Buda, I bought a few extra bags, because I knew I would pass Shosho Kingi, who was Kingi's very old and ailing grandmother. Shosho ('grandmother' in Sheng) stood in the doorway of her red, rusting iron sheet house that doubled up as a bar. She had lost part of her sight in the past few years, and also had problems with walking and remembering things. Nevertheless, she still sold alcohol in her house-cum-bar day in day out. Behind her, I saw a few older men smoking and drinking in the unlit room. Shosho talked to me in the Kikuyu language while I gave her the groceries, and I told her in Kiswahili – it was generally considered to be rude to speak Sheng to older people – that to my shame I still did not really speak the Kikuyu language well. As always, she answered that I should marry a strong Kikuyu man.

I continued walking along the wider dirt road to the bridge. Here and there, people greeted me from the roadside, where food stalls were set up in the shadow of the houses, away from the scorching sun. I hit a fork in the road near the Mulika Mwizi (meaning 'shine a light on a thief' in Kiswahili), which is a tall light that comes on as soon as the sun goes down to light up a wide area during the dark ghetto nights. At times, people felt that the bright light was interfering with their activities, and so turned it off by shining an equally bright light into its detection device. This enabled them to go about their business without too much police intrusion.

The area near the bridge, which is locally termed Daraja Mbili (meaning 'two bridges' in Kiswahili, as there used to be two bridges), is a notorious crime spot, and I had just heard that the day before a man from 4B was robbed of his belongings and stabbed to death early in the morning. Despite steady economic growth (World Bank 2013), crime had increased considerably in Kenya as a result of soaring food prices after 2010 (*e.g.* Kiberenge 2011; Njagih 2011; Musembi & Scott-Villiers 2014; Anyanzwa & Kamau 2013), and this had disproportionately affected marginalised groups in the country. Many people on their way to or coming back from work have

to pass this bridge on a daily basis, and it is located far enough from the frequent police patrols on Juja Road to make it a hotspot for petty theft and even armed robbery. People were robbed every day at the bridge, and murder had become an almost weekly occurrence. This was the main cause of the more recent tensions between the two ghetto villages of Bondeni and 4B. However, tensions between these two neighbourhoods in Mathare had a long history, to which I will turn below. Most of the thieves operating near the bridge that connected Bondeni and 4B were considered locally to come from an area adjacent to Bondeni, called Shantit, whereas most of the victims were widely taken to be residents of 4B, including by residents from Bondeni and Shantit.

Daraja Mbili had also been the battlefield for, allegedly, Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga supporters during the 2007/8 post-election violence. Later, the military police claimed that they had had a difficult time quelling the violence because of the labyrinthine infrastructure of houses and alleyways in this area. In early 2009, the government demolished many of the houses near the bridge to create an open space and construct another wide dirt road parallel to Mau Mau Avenue that led to Mabatini village. According to local residents I interviewed in August 2009, the official reason for this was that this space and the new road were necessary to allow fire engines to access houses further down the valley near the riverside, although this was met with ridicule by most of them. Instead, it was clear to them that the government wanted better access to crime hotspots to improve its control of gang activities and violent clashes. Certainly, no one had ever seen a fire engine inside this part of Mathare, and this did not change after the demolitions. Unfortunately, only a few of the families that resided near the bridge had been given even a day's notice of the government's intentions, whereas those who had lived along the planned road had been rudely awoken at night by bulldozers. Thousands of people were affected by these evictions and demolitions. Four years later, the open space and the new road still looked void of the normal hustle and bustle that marks Mathare street life.

A house is not a home

Before I could turn left to cross the bridge at Daraja Mbili during my walk in February 2013, I heard someone shout my name. Karanch stood in front of his house and approached me with a school exercise book. He was a 24-year-old alcohol distiller from Shantit who identified as Kikuyu. He was also a gang leader and a father of two. He told me that his friend, a 17-year-old thief from Shantit, had been beaten to death by a crowd (a practice that is locally termed 'mob justice') a few days earlier when he had been caught stealing along Juja Road in the evening. Karanch asked me to contribute to the funeral and write my name in the book, along with the amount of my contribution, for future reference by the funeral committee. I asked him if the boy still had family and where he would be buried. Karanch told me that his friend only had a few relatives in Mathare, and that he would be buried at Langata Cemetery. His mother was an unmarried sex worker and did not have land or relatives in the rural

area, and he had not known his father. Langata Cemetery was commonly considered to be the 'poor people's cemetery' on the other side of the city, and many people from Mathare expressed shame over the prospect of being buried there. Indeed, Mathare residents who still owned land in rural areas, or who had parents or grandparents living in the rural area, preferred to be buried near other family graves on that land. The dream of many older people I met in Mathare, regardless of their ethnic background, was to buy their own land in a rural area upon which they wanted to build their own house to retire to and, eventually, be buried there. In an interview I conducted with him in April 2011, Karanch explained to me the reason for this dream. He pointed fervently at his dilapidated house, his eyebrows knitted into a displeasing frown:

Even though this house is here for more than twenty years, it is not a home. Not our home. We come to the city to work and many of us are born here, like me, in this ghetto. But this is not where we can live. Of course I need a land to build my own house but for me it's okay to build my house in Nairobi. What can I do in *ocha* (rural area in Sheng)? There is no business there. You cannot call this... here... a life. What life? To see your children play in *mitaro* (sewers in Kiswahili)? We pay rent but the houses are from *mabati* ('iron sheet' in Kiswahili), ha ha ha, when it rains, it rains inside...we have nothing here. You saw what they did when they widened the road, no notice, and many people had to leave...*mara hiyo hiyo* (instantly in Sheng). Where can you go? This is also what my mother tells me, this is what it always has been, we cannot stay here...we are here to go!

Right from the onset, Mathare has been a locality where people resided as illegal squatters (White 1990; Nelson 2002; Syagga et al. 2001), and in this vein most residents considered the ghetto to be a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs in popular discourse), which is a term that became widely popular in Mathare after the 2007/8 post-election violence (*e.g.* Adeagbo & Iyi 2011). Many of the earlier rural-urban migrants came from other illegal squatter communities in the Rift Valley, where former farm workers had been displaced from European farms during the 1940s as a result of the gradual mechanisation of farm work (Kanogo 1987). In addition, the colonial government detained large sections of what it considered to be the 'Kikuyu' population, in an attempt to defeat the rural and urban support base of the Mau Mau freedom fighters during a State of Emergency (between 1952-56 – Elkins 2005:308; Anderson 2005a:90). Upon their release, many of these ex-detainees could not return to the Native Reserves, as most of these areas were overpopulated, while other places had been confiscated by the different authorities that had collaborated with the colonial government, with local chiefs being an example (Rutten & Owuor 2009; Anderson 2005a). As a consequence, released from

prison, these men and women (but especially women – see below) had no choice but to join illegal squatter communities in either rural or urban areas (*cf.* Nelson 2002: 238).

The shared experiences of being a squatter in Mathare, which involved living in dilapidated and crime-ridden ghetto villages and suffering recurrent and often violent evictions (*cf.* Otiso 2002; Alam et al. 2005; Lamba 2005), have informed a shared sense of displacement among residents. People live in constant fear of losing their small single room house without anywhere else to go. Most people in Mathare, like Karanch, do not own a house in the urban environment or have land in the rural area to retire to. Despite the fact that most do have a (rented) roof over their heads inside the ghetto, they consider themselves to be homeless. Feeling stuck, which was how many of the ghetto residents described their situation to me, deepened this sense of feeling displaced; they felt stuck somewhere halfway between the rural area and the city. Mathare has historically been perceived by its residents as a stepping-stone to the city for rural (and often poor) migrants, i.e. it is seen as a place to settle temporarily and start working to provide for family in the rural area. A popular saying, however, was *Mathare, ni rahisi kuingia na ni ngumu kutoka* (in Kiswahili 'it is easy to enter Mathare and hard to leave'). Interestingly, the same slogan was often used to describe Mombasa. The term captures three popular sentiments with regard to these localities. Firstly, both potentially provide access to (illegal) income-generating opportunities (sex work, drug trade etc.) for newcomers from the rural area. Secondly, it is easy and cheap to access drugs, alcohol and so on, making it accessible for people wanting to have fun, although it is also possible for them to quickly lose the little they earn. Thirdly, social relationships are rife with jealousy and competition. All of my young, male research participants expressed the desire to move out of the ghetto and live on an estate – by which they mean a neighbourhood with stone, permanent houses, indoor plumbing and, often, organised security guards, although only a few succeeded in doing so. Many shared a longing to buy a plot in one of the lower middle-income suburbs and build their own house, as this epitomised to them the achievement of attaining 'senior' manhood. Up to the time of writing this book, and in the course of my research, which spanned over five years, only seven of the 40 young (ex-)gang members I worked with moved away from Mathare, with five of them buying their own plot in Nairobi and being in the process of, or had already finished, constructing their own house there. Others invested in rural areas where relatives still resided, and continued to aspire to move out of the ghetto and live on a Nairobi estate. Yet the money they invested in developing their rural homes² was one of the factors that hampered them in realising their dream to move to such a place. Most of the research participants, however, lack the finances to invest in anything at all, and barely make a living.

² Home, for the young men I conducted research with, can mean a variety of things. It can mean a rural area where parents or other relatives live or were born, or, more generally, where many members of a particular ethnic group live with those with whom they identify.

Karanch regarded himself as a third-generation squatter in the Rift Valley, and a second-generation squatter in Mathare, with most of his relatives still living in the former, which he now considered to be his rural home. In this way, Karanch negotiated the dominant discourse on ethnic homes by positioning himself somewhat differently from the leading ideas on these homes and ethnic belonging in Kenya. Indeed, instead of merely constructing a sense of belonging to a specific rural area that was generally associated with his ethnic background, Karanch aspired to revoke his squatter status by building his own house on his own land in the capital city Nairobi. Unlike many of the older people in Mathare, he and countless of his peers did not envisage going back to the rural area to live with family. However, in conjunction with these older residents, they also did not regard Mathare as a place to stay. Remarkably, Karanch still wanted to be buried in the rural area. Indeed, he expressed great frustration over the fact that he only had distant relatives living in the rural area, and as such faced the prospect of having to be buried at the Langata Cemetery in Nairobi city. This was not uncommon among the young men who participated in my research; many of them, with multiple ethnic backgrounds, did not imagine a strong sense of belonging to the rural area, but they nevertheless still expressed anxieties over the prospect of being buried in the city. They even told me that they feared being forgotten, forever lost in the anonymity of this cemetery. In the following chapters, I will delve further into the shared sense of feeling stuck and in-between, as many gang members felt multiply displaced and were guided by a fear of being redundant and, as a consequence, easy to forget; they longed to be connected to family, to land, to social groups and to the community in which they lived, and this longing shaped the varied processes of gang formation among them.

Emerging class divisions between Upper and Lower Bondeni

That Friday morning in 2013, standing near the bridge and talking to Karanch, I looked up at the tenement buildings³ high up on the cliffs behind the Manoki toilet. Residents in these flats enjoyed security of tenure as long as they could adhere to the often stringent rules stipulated by the landlords, who were largely unregulated by state authorities (Huchzermeyer 2007). These high-rises, however, were built on private land, and their presence in Mathare – an informal settlement mostly built on government land – epitomised the complicated power structures in this particular part of the ghetto. Despite the fact that the Mathare ghetto is an informal settlement where most people reside illegally, assets such as (non-permanent) structures and land constituted the foundation of local power relations. Bondeni is a prime example of how formal and informal assets were created in unplanned settlements, and how this led to intricate and often violent power struggles between different social groups and individuals.

³ The term tenement is used by Huchzermeyer (2007) to describe multi-storey stone buildings in Mathare and other Nairobi ghetto neighbourhoods that have one and two-room apartments that are generally rented by lower income families and are privately owned.

During the early colonial period, a majority of the landlords in Mathare were women who lived and worked as sex workers in nearby Pumwani and Eastleigh (*cf.* White 1990:195). They invested their earnings in renting out illegal structures in Mathare. Many of these women had migrated from rural areas – mainly from the Central Provinces, but also from the coast and Western Kenya - for a variety of reasons. Some women had been widowed at a young age or before having children, and could not return to their father's homestead in the rural area due to poverty. Others had travelled to the capital city to provide for the nuclear family in the rural area, and others still had travelled to Nairobi in search of adventure (White 1990:2). From the 1940s onwards, and especially during World War II, more and more women moved from Pumwani and Eastleigh to settle in Mathare to sell sex “from the comfort of their homes” (White 1990). Mathare was located closer to several military and police bases than Pumwani and Eastleigh. Accordingly, the influx of soldiers during the war attracted a growing settlement of single women who engaged in sex work. In the early decades of this work in Mathare, men mostly visited the houses of the sex workers to spend the night, eat, sleep and bathe, thus interacting with the women in a way that resembled popular marriage practices. Indeed, the men were also often referred to as 'husbands for the night.' This form of sex work, termed *malaya* by White (1990), was developed by women in Pumwani and Eastleigh and became the dominant practice among most sex workers in Mathare. Even today, sex work is one of the main sources of income for many women in Mathare, and there are still some who practice the *malaya* form of their profession.⁴

Ever since the onset of illegal settlement in Mathare, the relationships between structure owners, landlords and tenants have been rife with conflict (*e.g.* Huchzermeyer 2007, 2008). An Indian company sold informal permissions to squatters to build illegal structures on exhausted sites of the quarry. These permissions were not recognised by the colonial or, later, the Kenyan government. Accordingly, such transactions allowed a structure owner to illegally build a house on a vacant piece of land in Mathare that she did not own. Such a woman could live in this house or even rent it out to other single women (often fellow sex workers) and become a landlord. However, she could not claim any property rights and was always in danger of eviction. In the early days, many women lived in the structure they had constructed themselves, and gradually built rooms adjacent to these single room homes to let out and enable them to diversify their income strategies (White 1990). Other women lived and worked in Pumwani and Eastleigh, which were neighbourhoods near Mathare, and rented out all of the structures in the latter to supplement their income from sex work. In the latter case, she was considered to be an 'absentee landlord' (*cf.* Kigochie 2001:226) by her tenants. Some of the owners of

⁴ Other sex workers in Mathare today work in bars and brothels (both in the ghetto and its environs and the city centre), while some walk the streets in the city centre, and others invite clients to their houses near the ghetto bars. Most of the women I worked with during my fieldwork worked from their houses and solicited clients from the many *chang'aa* dens in Bondeni for as little as 50 Kenyan Shillings.

the illegal structures who lived and worked in other areas leased them out to a middleman, usually a broker, who would then often be regarded as a substitute landlord by the tenants. These relationships were still relatively clear-cut, as most people knew each other by face in the early days (Ross 1973). Over the course of decades, however, these relationships became increasingly opaque as more brokers came in, increasing the distance between structure owners, absentee landlords and tenants. During my fieldwork, I observed relationships between structure owners and tenants that were mediated by as many as three brokers. Some of these structure owners owned a vast number of single room houses in many different ghetto villages, and yet were far removed from the ghetto, which was why there was a need for different brokers to manage such relationships on the ground.

Even if the majority of structure owners and landlords in Mathare were women during the colonial era (White 1990), men also permanently settled there, with some of them also becoming powerful landlords. Nevertheless, women continued to outnumber men both as household heads and illegal property owners. Like many of the women, most of the men who worked in the city aspired to return to the rural area. However, it was easier for them to do so as they were more likely to inherit land. Many men went to the urban area during the colonial era in search of work (as gardeners, clerks and so on) to enable them to earn a monetary income that was required for them to pay taxes to the colonial government (Kanogo 1987:9). Some of these migrants could not return to the rural area for the lack of land (Kanogo 1987:114), whereas others preferred the opportunities and freedom that the city environment provided. Many of these men married and settled in ghetto areas such as Mathare. A few of them even became powerful structure owners and players in local authorities (such as in Councils of Village Elders – see more below).

Prior to independence in 1963, both male and female landlords bought from Indian owners the informal permissions to build structures in Mathare, although the men organised their houses differently to the women; instead of adding houses in a row-format, as the women did, these men built micro-villages (locally dubbed homesteads) that were shielded from other groups or rows of houses by Napier grass and thickets. These men often lived inside these clusters of houses with family and friends who had also migrated from the same rural village. Kingi's (absent) father had been one of the men who had obtained permission from the Indian owners to live there and build (non-permanent) houses on a piece of land in the quarry, and he constructed a micro-village during the 1960s. Single women, most of whom were sex workers, lived in houses (both as owners and tenants) that were scattered or built in rows amidst these micro-villages. Commercial interests first and foremost propelled the male landlords to construct enclosed grounds to mark off their turfs. Several of the older men and women in Mathare explained to me that the particular set up may have also been derived from a desire to replicate rural village life, and to shut out the putative immoralities of the sex work that was practised in plain view in Mathare.

The power relationships between structure owners, landlords and tenants in Bondeni became ever more complex during the first decade after independence in 1963. As discussed above, this decade was marked by rapid urbanisation (Muganzi 1996; Syagga et al. 2001; Ross 1973), with ghetto areas around Nairobi city centre multiplying and increasingly being regarded by the state as health hazards and surging crime hubs. To address these and other issues, the Kenyatta government initiated several land and settlement schemes (mainly in the Rift Valley and other rural areas, but also in certain urban areas) to encourage squatters (many of whom had Kikuyu backgrounds) to purchase land (*cf.* Huchzermeyer 2007:722; Anderson & Lochery 2008). In the urban areas, the main aim of this initiative was to impede the proliferation of informal settlements by encouraging private real estate development (Etherton 1971). However, only a small part of Mathare (including a part of the area we now know as Bondeni) became available for private ownership, as the city council considered the rest of this informal settlement to be unfit for (permanent) dwellings. It is for this reason that the council has never, or only on a piecemeal basis, provided services such as sanitation, garbage collection, electricity and water (*cf.* MuST 2012).

The strip of land between Mau Mau Avenue and the riverside was designated as a river reserve, and as such remained government land. Nevertheless, up and coming structure owners continued to illegally build rooms to live in or rent out there. This is where Shosho Kingi has added eight rooms adjacent to her own single room house since the late 1960s. During my more recent fieldwork periods (2011-2013), she was renting out each room for 1200 Kenyan Shillings (around 10 Euros) a month to supplement the monthly revenues obtained from her home bar. This area was prone to flooding during the rainy season, and several people have been swept away and killed in the past by suddenly rising water levels. The split between private land (mostly in Upper Bondeni) and government land near the river (that is Lower Bondeni) created a visible division between low- and lowest-income families within this ghetto village. In socio-economic terms, people in Mathare commonly distinguished first between West- and Eastlands in Nairobi, which they described as *masonko* ('rich people or bosses' in Sheng), *vis á vis* *masufferers* ('poor people' in Sheng). Eastlands was further divided between low middle-income households (*wasee wa esto* in Sheng, which denotes people who live in stone houses in formal neighbourhoods), low-income households (*mapunk ya ghetto* in Sheng, which means people who live in ghettos but in stone houses) and lowest income households (*wasee wa down* in Sheng, which means people who live near the river down in Mathare). These distinctions were based on both family income and lifestyle. According to this view, the low middle-income families resided mostly in neighbourhoods such as Eastleigh, Huruma, Kariobangi and Umoja, and during my most recent fieldwork periods these families generally earned between 15,000 and 25,000 Kenyan Shillings a month. Lower-income families, meanwhile, earned between 8,000 and 15,000 Kenyan Shillings per month on average, and low-income families from as little as

2,500 to around 8,000 Kenyan Shillings.⁵ As illustrated by Shosho Kingi's circumstances, not all lower-income households were located in Upper Bondeni. She easily made around 13,000 Kenyan Shillings a month through collecting rent and selling alcohol, but chose to reside in Lower Bondeni near her houses and the sites where the alcohol was distilled and consumed. She was, however, an exception; most of the individuals and families who made more than 8000 Kenyan Shillings moved to Upper Bondeni to take up residence in either an upgraded iron sheet house with concrete (instead of dirt) floors for at least 2000 Kenyan Shillings per month, or a single-room house in a tenement building for as much as 3500 (and sometimes even 4000). Moving up in Bondeni enhanced a person's social status, and only a few individuals chose to stay down and hide their growing economic means. The single-room apartments in the tenement buildings were not much bigger in size than the iron sheet and mud houses in Lower Bondeni, yet they often had better sanitary facilities as the tenants shared a toilet and water tap with only eight to 12 other families. These stone buildings were also safer (harder to break into and no risk of flooding), and were less plagued by pests like cockroaches, rats and snakes than the dilapidated houses near the river.

Landowners and authority structures in Bondeni

At the time when the Kenyatta government launched the land and settlement schemes in the early 1960s, male and female landlords and structure owners organised themselves in land buying cooperatives (Etherton 1971; Syagga et al., 2001). This enabled them to legally purchase land in the area now known as Upper Bondeni. The most influential land-buying cooperative here was Bondeni Cooperatives (*bondeni* means 'valley' or 'low land' in Kiswahili, referring to the gorge-like morphology of Mathare), and as time went by the village became known as Bondeni. A fourth category of landowners was thus added to the already complex mix of (illegal) structure owners, tenants, and (absentee) landlords. Unsurprisingly, however, the members of the cooperative (the new landowners) became the most influential group in Bondeni.

⁵ On 18 December 2013, 01.00 Euro equalled 118,30 Kenyan Shillings, meaning that the lowest income families in Mathare survived on less than 22 Euros a month, whereas the top of the lower income families there earned around 125 Euros. Rent in Lower Bondeni (in the period 2010 to 2012) varied between 500 (for a mere shack made out of waste) and 1200 Kenyan Shillings (for an iron sheet with electricity connections), which was equal to about 4 to 10 Euros). Rent in Upper Bondeni (between 2010 and 2012) varied from 2000 Kenyan Shillings (around 16 Euros) to 4000 Kenyan Shillings (or about 33 Euros). Electricity and water were not included in these rents, each of which could amount to around 400 Kenyan Shillings or 3.5 Euros a month (especially when one was forced to use illegal electricity connections and public toilets). The minimum daily food expenditure for a family of four was up to 200 Kenyan Shillings, which amounted to a total for one month of 6000 Kenyan Shillings (around 50 Euros) for any family living in Mathare. Added to this were school fees, transport costs, hospital bills and so on, enabling one to understand that even the top of the lower income families were struggling to make ends meet. In the rest of this book, I equate 1 Euro to approximately 100 Kenyan Shillings, because exchange rates fluctuated enormously during my research period. However, this rate is an easy to use, but very conservative, average.

The Bondeni landowners, both women and men, had a major hold over the Council of Village Elders (*wazee wa kijiji* in Kiswahili), and accordingly became close partners of the local chief. The Office of the President appointed the chiefs. This institution was part of the provincial administration, and operated as its local representative in wards. Each constituency was comprised of different wards that were presided over by chiefs. Mathare was part of the Starehe constituency until 2013, and was divided into different wards. One of these was Mabatini, which is where Bondeni is located. After the elections in March 2013, this ward became part of the Mathare constituency. This particular government structure was a remnant of the colonial era, and was continued by governments after independence to assert presidential control directly on the ground (Dafe 2009). Chiefs had their own police force (the administration police or AP in short) with a uniform that resembled what soldiers wore. The AP and the Council of Village Elders, locally dubbed 'eyes of the chief', assisted the chiefs in maintaining control of their wards (Dafe 2009; Huchzermeyer & Omenya 2006). In Bondeni, most local residents regarded the village elders as "career informers" who reported on every little thing that happened in the Mabatini ward, and even conjured up events, in return for a substantial fee. Many landowners exerted control over the Council of Elders through bribes and other types of reciprocity. Similar to the local chief, these wealthier landowners also benefitted from knowing the details of what was happening inside the ghetto, given that many of them had ceased to reside in Bondeni. In fact, many of the shareholders of the cooperative bought land and built stone houses in wealthier neighbourhoods in Nairobi, such as Kahawa West, where there is still an area called 'little Mathare' (this is a place where first-generation rural-urban migrants to Mathare and their off-spring live in relative luxury). Many of these wealthy people (*masonko* or *wadosi* in Sheng) still earn money through *chang'aa* and other businesses located in Mathare, and continue to have strong ties with the village elders. Accordingly, the elders looked out for the interests of both the chief and the landowners. Curiously, these interests did not differ all that much, and both groups had a high stake involvement in the illegal alcohol industry, as will become clear below.

It did not take long before the Bondeni Cooperative became untenable as an organisation. In particular, the cooperative set-up became overstretched due to too many members, which considerably muddied decision-making processes. This led to the steep inflation of land prices, which spurred Bondeni Cooperatives on to eventually registering as a company called Bondeni Properties (*cf.* Etherton 1971; Amis 1988). The confusion during the transition period enabled two men, both of whom were highly influential and wealthy shareholders of the old cooperative, to deceive other members with false title deeds and land claims. Wealthier shareholders from outside Mathare joined in with their multiple scams, and this led to a period of intense speculation on land, rent and the construction of tenement buildings in Upper Bondeni. The consequences are still visible in the make-up of Bondeni today, as much of the privately owned land is still underdeveloped and continues to play host to non-

permanent dwellings. This was not how the government had intended the land and settlement schemes to play out. Cooperatives and landowner companies have also come into being in many other areas in Eastlands, Nairobi, where land-buying collectives have been formed by squatters to legally buy land from the government since the 1960s (such as in Mlango Kubwa in Mathare). Questions thus arise as to why Bondeni Properties seems to have been more plagued by scams and internal wrangles than other land-buying collectives, and why this has led to the underdevelopment of private properties.

There are four factors that contributed to the uneven and underdevelopment of Bondeni, and so to its highly complicated and volatile power structures. Several officials from the Pamoja Trust and the Muungano Support Trust, two NGOs working for land rights for the urban poor, shared these reasons with me during numerous fieldwork periods from 2009-2014. Indeed, we had many discussions on the uneven power relations and concomitant social divisions in Mathare and their effects on community development (*see also* MuST 2012). In the view of these officials, the first factor was the problem of shareholders. In particular, the cooperative, and later Bondeni Properties, had a high number of defaulting shareholders who had never finished paying for specific plots. However, the company lacked the finances to buy them out. As a consequence, these shareholders were trapped, as they could not sell the land before they paid off their debts. Many of these shareholders survived and paid off the mounting interest by renting out non-permanent structures on these plots. The second factor, in the view of the NGO officials, concerned the consequences of the said scams. Many shareholders could simply not get a loan from the bank to build permanent houses or flats on their land given that there were multiple title deeds for particular plots. Indeed, to this day, there are still various court cases going on (some of which have already been running for decades) that are trying to establish who the legitimate owners are of many of the underdeveloped plots in Bondeni. The third factor pertains to the multiple junctures of violence (some of which were related to the court cases and scams) in the area that brought a halt to construction projects and turned certain plots into gang turf. Yet, all of these factors are, to some extent, related to the fourth: the emergence of bar owners and alcohol bosses in Bondeni.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Bondeni gradually became the epicentre of the production and distribution in Nairobi of *chang'aa*, an illegally distilled alcohol, and many landowners also became powerful bar owners and alcohol bosses. Soon, this became the most lucrative industry in Mathare to invest in, and many landowners diverted funds meant for construction to boost their own illegal alcohol imperium. Non-permanent housing and mazes of narrow alleyways even benefitted this new and highly illegal industry in unforeseen ways, for example by completely hiding the distillation sites from public view and providing a continuous workforce of poor and young men.

Alcohol, money and power

In Mathare, most people regarded Bondeni as being synonymous with illegal alcohol production, and almost all of the businesses located there were indeed to some extent related to *chang'aa*. During all of my fieldwork periods, there was a major shortage of firewood in adjacent ghetto villages in Mathare, even though every other small business on Mau Mau Avenue in Bondeni sold large quantities of this wood. Both men and women owned these businesses, although the latter were in a slight majority in this sector. These firewood sellers had contacts with construction companies and arranged for frequent early morning deliveries. Old wood from scaffolding at construction sites was transported to the area in trucks so large they could barely enter the ghetto. Every day, these trucks dropped off mountains of firewood intended to fuel the widespread and constant distillation of alcohol at the sites near the river. At the same time, young men in search of work hung around these businesses from sunrise to midday to help offload the bulks of firewood and chop them into smaller pieces in return for a small stipend.

The scale of production and distribution today is, as noted, a surprisingly recent phenomenon. In earlier days, women often combined sex work with distilling and selling *busaa* ('fermented maize porridge' in Kiswahili – Nelson 2002). According to a few wealthy (both male and female) bar owners I talked to, all of whom had started out as alcohol smugglers during the 1980s, the influx of migrants from Western Kenya had boosted the selling of *chang'aa*; according to them, these migrants preferred *chang'aa* to *busaa*. When *busaa* was declared illegal by government decree in 1983 (Nelson 1997 – the decree was aimed at curbing illegal substance production and consumption in ghetto areas), most women turned to combining sex work with distilling and selling *chang'aa* instead. Indeed, it was easier to distil *chang'aa* inside their houses, thus avoiding detection, than was the case with *busaa*. Making *busaa* involved forming yeast and sprout grain kernels, cooking them into a thick cake with large quantities of maize flour while adding a little water, roasting this cake-type mixture on two-metre wide tin trays, and then making the porridge needed for the fermentation process. A large part of the preparation of *busaa*, such as drying the sprouted kernels and baking the dried and fermented cake, happened outside the small houses, whereas *chang'aa* could be distilled using a basin of cool water on a large pot or half a steel drum on a paraffin stove inside the tiny single room houses in which these women lived. Older Mathare residents also explained that the ongoing rural-urban migration had led to higher demand for this particular type of cheap liquor in up and coming ghettos in Nairobi. Above all, these women soon found that the profit margins were much higher, especially in conjunction with a growing customer base.

Sadly, these profit margins have fallen significantly since the 1980s. Right now, bar owners make 1,720 Kenyan Shillings (about 14 Euros) per drum (see more below). It is very difficult to compare this to the profit margins during the 1980s and 1990s, because of steep inflation rates and a lack of proper records. However, many

claim that profits have fallen by at least 50% over the past decade. People often explained this to me by pointing to the convergence of rising food prices (especially sugar) and the need to increasingly pay police bribes since the early 2000s. In the experience of many, the blatant corruption of the Nyayo era (when President Moi was in power between 1978 and 2002) meant that the police and city council officials had ample opportunity to exact bribes from many different sources. The crackdown on corruption in plain view – that is in public spaces in the city centre – led, in their experience, to a direct increase in corrupt transactions inside the ghettos and out of the limelight. Nowadays, at least three different police squads visit the distillation sites on a daily basis to extract bribes, whereas before there were only one or two.

Chang'aa is made of *ngutu*, which is a dark brown waste product from the manufacture of sugar. It resembles molasses, but is more crude and solid. This leftover substance is put in a drum with *busaa* and 180 litres of water. Nowadays, people also put in something they call *dawa* ('medicine' in Kiswahili), which I was told by a few bar owners is a formaldehyde powder that is secretly bought from mortuaries. As it is always packed in brown paper sachets without a label, I have not been able to verify this. I was also told that this powder was used to speed up the distillation process. In the old days, people waited at least seven days for the distillation mixture (*kangara* or *kango* in Sheng) to be ready, but the *dawa* now reduced the wait to less than four days. I was able to see the difference between the drums that contained this powder and those that did not. When the distillers scooped the bubbling distillation mixture out of the drums containing *dawa*, their inner walls were clear of all of the rust that usually coated the sides. Drums without *dawa* remained as rusty as ever. When asked, the distillers assured me that the large amount of rust inside the mixture would not enter the end product, and nor would the *dawa*, at least according to them. I asked the same question about the numerous rats and other pests that were around; the drums were uncovered to improve the fermentation process, and it was common for pests to fall in and drown. Again I was repeatedly assured that the rust, *dawa* and pests would all remain inside the distillation drum, and the only thing that would emerge was a lovely strong 'gin' (one of the numerous names for *chang'aa* in Sheng). I have had a sip of *chang'aa* on three occasions, and it did resemble a strong type of gin with a thick sugary aftertaste. Nevertheless, I remain deeply sceptical about the hygiene of the fermentation and distillation processes.

Table: One 180-litre drum of *Kangara* in January 2011

Items	Kenyan shillings	Euros
<i>Ngutu</i> (sugar waste)	2000	
<i>Kuni</i> (firewood)	500	
<i>Busaa</i> (fermented maize porridge and yeast)	100	
Water	50	
<i>Dawa</i> (formaldehyde)	30	
Bribes to policemen	900 (usually less when shared with other bosses)	
2 gang members to distil	200	
Distillation costs for 1 drum	3,780	Approx.32

A drum of 180 litres produces 60 litres of *chang'aa*. The first 15 litres are called *biko* and these are more expensive than the regular *chang'aa*.

Table: Sales and profits on 60 litres of *chang'aa* (including *biko*) in January 2011

Items	Kenyan Shillings	Euros
45 litres of <i>chang'aa</i>	4,500	
15 litres of <i>biko</i>	1,000	
Profit from sale	5,500	
Distillation costs	-3,780	
Profit	1,720	Approx. 14

Despite the decreasing profit margins, Bondeni and Shantit had approximately 45 to 50 bar owners and wholesalers making between 100 and 400 Euros a day during 2010 (before the legalisation of *chang'aa* in September 2010 – BBC 2010). As well as these wealthy bar owners (many of whom were also landowners, landlords and shareholders in Bondeni Properties), this village had about 200 smaller to small bar owners who made between 20 and 50 Euros a week. In a very careful estimate, it is likely that more than 300,000 Euros⁶ a month circulated in a ghetto village where most families earned no more than 60 Euros a month, which was much less than the earnings of even the smallest bar owner. The concentration of wealth in the hands of just a few people who were living and working in Bondeni, and the enormous gap

⁶ If I consider that during 2010 a minimum of 45 bar owners/wholesalers earned on average 200 Euros per day (between 100 and 400), the total monthly earnings of this group could have amounted to 270,000 Euros a month. In the same period, the larger group of roughly 200 smaller to small bar owners and distributors earned 30 Euros a week on average (between 20 and 50 a week), thus making a total monthly revenue of 28,000 Euros. If I then take into account the fluctuating exchange rates and the fact that I based this careful estimate on relatively low averages, I can tentatively conclude that between 2011 and 2013 the total income of the *chang'aa* industry in Bondeni, Mathare, alone was close to 300,000 Euros per month.

between the monthly earnings of the poorest and richest families there, are good indications of the extreme inequality within local power structures. Ethnicity became increasingly implicated in both people's experiences of this inequality and in the junctures of violence that were sparked as a result.

Kikuyu versus Luo ghetto villages?

In October 2005, one of my research participants, Buda, described Bondeni, with visible pride on his face, as follows: "We are from Bondé (Sheng for Bondeni). Ha ha ha. This side. Our community is Kikuyu because we are Kikuyu. Across the two bridges is Luo territory and this?...This is Kikuyu." Interestingly, Buda has a father with a Luo background, who he is named after, and a mother with a Kikuyu background. Despite his multiple ethnic backgrounds and Luo names, Buda identified mostly, but not always, as Kikuyu. This emanated from the growing conflation between ethnicity and locality and between ethnicity and local notions of class in Mathare over the years. I will explore this further in the following chapters, but in brief the ghetto village 4B was locally considered to have (by residents from both 4B and Bondeni) a majority of residents who came from Western Kenya and who identified as Luo. Bondeni, meanwhile, was widely regarded as a more ethnically mixed village with a slight majority of residents who identified as Kikuyu. Bondeni was also considered to be a wealthier ghetto village.

Although people referred to ghetto villages in certain ethnic terms (*cf.* Dafe 2009), and despite the fact that specific ethnic groups were considered to dominate particular areas, this does not imply actual homogeneity on the ground. All of the ghetto villages in Mathare were, to some extent, characterised by ethnic diversity. Moreover, the Kikuyu-Luo binary that people drew on to describe certain villages eschews the fact that people with a myriad of ethnic backgrounds lived in Mathare, and also glosses over the ghetto villages that were locally considered to be dominated by people with ethnic backgrounds other than Kikuyu or Luo (such as Gisu, Kenyan Somali, Somali and Borana and Oromo).⁷ This begs the question of why people in Mathare mostly drew on the dominant Kikuyu-Luo binary to describe ghetto villages and explain tensions. The answer to this question is twofold. It is first connected to the prominence of Bondeni in the local informal economy due to the thriving illegal alcohol industry there, and is also related to the consecutive junctures of violence between 4B and Bondeni. In fact, these two factors are intertwined, and laid the foundation for this binary to gain strength on the ground, as I will flesh out below.

⁷ This diversity is also reflected in language. Although Sheng was the dominant language in the street in most places in Mathare, older people with the same ethnic background often spoke their vernacular with each other. In a few areas in Mathare that are marked by less diversity, such as Kosovo Mwisho near the hospital, it was not uncommon to also hear young people converse with each other in their vernacular, albeit heavily laced with Sheng. Members of the Ruff Skwad gang, for instance, often talked with each other in the Kikuyu language, and I had to at times remind them to shift to Sheng so I could follow their conversations.

Historically, the alleged dominance of ethnic groups in specific areas in Mathare can be explained through migration patterns, as people often chose to settle near others from the same rural area (and, as such, with those with the same or a similar ethnic background – Dafe 2009). This is reflected in the names of certain neighbourhood areas in Bondeni where people who had migrated to the city from the same rural village lived together. For instance, a distillation site near the bridge was named after a rural village in Murang'a (a region in Central Province) where many residents of Shantit, which is adjacent to Bondeni, originally came from. In the following chapters, I will analyse how the growing conflation between ethnic identifications and localities within local imaginaries also intersected with identifications and categorisations of old and new settlers (*cf.* Nelson 2002). For now, it is enough to say that demographic records are either absent or unreliable, although people did increasingly construct certain villages as either Luo or Kikuyu, and many articulated and explained in these ethnic terms the animosities between particular neighbourhoods and putatively different social and economic groups of residents.

The construction of Kikuyu versus Luo ghetto villages became ever more salient during the 2007/8 post-election violence (*cf.* Okombo & Sana 2010). Current tensions between 4B and Bondeni (and also Shantit) have a long history, and to some extent were perpetuated by the high frequency of robberies and killings at the bridge. As noted, however, crime is just one aspect of the very complicated and tense relationships that exist between these two sides of the river. This is illustrated by the way Tyson, a young alcohol distiller who identified as Luo, legitimised his participation in the post-election violence. In January 2008, he told me that he and other perpetrators aimed to oust residents from Bondeni who they identified as Kikuyu. Tyson had grown up in 4B, and he had supported Raila Odinga during the 2007 general elections. Odinga, the presidential candidate of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and the main opponent of Mwai Kibaki, had a Luo background. Kibaki, meanwhile, had a Kikuyu background, and he was the incumbent presidential candidate of the Party of National Union (PNU – Kagwanja & Southall 2009:259-260). Tyson shared the following with me:

411!...(a slogan pronounced as 'four, one, one!' and which was used by ODM supporters to separate the Kikuyu label from the other ethnic labels and portray the Kikuyu as 'enemies of the state') It is us, 41 [ethnic groups], against one [ethnic group]. They are thieves and they have oppressed us too long. They had Kenyatta, and Kibaki...you see what happened! All the land, good land is theirs. When you look at Goldenberg (a well-known corruption scandal), it is Kikuyu, Anglo Leasing (also a well-known corruption scandal), also Kikuyu, they think it is their country but they can't live with us, the other tribes. We can all live together but not with them. They are tribalists and now they stole the presidency. It's Raila who should be president. *Chungwa Moja*,

Maisha Bora ('One orange makes life cool' in Kiswahili, which was the official campaign slogan for ODM). Now we select people who can enter Gaza (a part of Mahare was renamed 'Gaza' during the violence).

Tyson cast the Kikuyu group as 'enemies of Kenya' by invoking the unofficial, but widely used, 'four-one-one' slogan of the ODM. He and the other men I spoke to during the violence shared with me that they agreed with certain ODM politicians who propounded a drastic solution to what these politicians termed as the Kikuyu problem, namely 'Lesotho' (Waki Report 2008). Lesotho referred to the landlocked country of Lesotho, which is completely enclosed by South Africa. A few of the local ODM politicians who had organised rallies in the run-up to the 2007 elections designated Central Province in Kenya, commonly known as 'Kikuyu land', as a way to create this nation within a nation.

In the way Tyson described the Kikuyu label, he negotiated two intersecting dominant discourses on citizenship and belonging in Kenya⁸, positioning himself squarely with *Luoism*, a sub-dominant discourse on citizenship and belonging in Kenya. Tyson drew on the perceived marginalisation of the Luo group that is central to *Luoism* when he stated: "It is us, 41, against one. They are thieves and they have oppressed us too long. They had Kenyatta, and Kibaki...you see what happened!" The first dominant discourse on citizenship at play here was constructed by the Kenyatta government (1964-1978) and can be termed *Kikuyuisation* (Smith 1991). This discourse legitimised the centralisation of power by President Kenyatta, who had a Kikuyu background, and his elites, among whom a majority also had Kikuyu backgrounds. Simultaneously, it legitimised the attack on and marginalisation of opposition politicians (such as Oginga Odinga, who had a Luo background – Throup & Hornsby 1998). *Kikuyuisation* thus largely shaped the marginalisation experiences of the 'Luo' group, which is central to *Luoism*, and fuelled the salience of the Kikuyu-Luo binary in political discourse.⁹

The second dominant discourse at play in Tyson's words was constructed by the Moi government (1978-2002) and was termed *Majimboism*¹⁰ (Anderson 2005b;

⁸ The names of the political discourses described here (*Luoism*, *Kikuyuisation*, *Kikuyuisation* and *Majimboism*) are all terms that have wide currency in the political and public domains in Kenya.

⁹ The dominance of the Luo and Kikuyu labels in political discourse emanates from a complex history and stiff competition between politicians with these backgrounds from the colonial era onwards (*see also* Throup & Hornsby 1998:17-18). The Moi government stirred up these competitive sentiments to divide opposition forces. Most politicians with other ethnic backgrounds aligned themselves with one or the other side. These alliances were, however, never self-evident and shifted constantly. Furthermore, politicians with, for instance, Kikuyu backgrounds occasionally sided with parties who were widely taken as Luo because of the party leader (Raila Odinga), and vice versa. Nevertheless, the main opposing political blocks in the political arena in Kenya continue to be popularly imagined as Luo versus Kikuyu power bases today.

¹⁰ The term *Majimboism* refers to a political system of ethnic federalism that was developed by Moi and other ethnic minority opposition leaders from the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) during the last few years of the colonial era (Haugerud 1995:213; Ochieng 2001; Anderson 2005b). In the context of *Majimboism*, each ethnic group is entitled to ownership of its 'traditional' land, which is mostly fixed

Kagwanja 2009; Lynch 2011). *Majimboism* was never meant to be fully implemented during this period. However, it legitimised harsh political measures to both weaken powerful elites, mainly with Kikuyu backgrounds, and discredit the opposition of intellectuals, many of whom also had Kikuyu backgrounds, and all of whom objected to the dictatorial tendencies of the Moi government (Wanaina 2004; Wamwere 2003). Moi had a Kalenjin background, and *Majimboism* helped him and his elites to undermine the ethno-centric power structures put in place by the Kenyatta regime and instead build up their own. Moreover, *Majimboism* set in motion a propaganda machine that culminated in the violent eviction, and even the death, of squatters (many of whom had Kikuyu backgrounds) from the Rift Valley regions during the emergence of a multi-party system in the 1990s (Githongo 2002; Akiwumi 1999; Kagwanja & Southall 2009). These squatters in the Rift Valley were described as 'foreigners', and were considered to be opposition voters by the Moi government (Rutten & Owuor 2009:314; KNHRC 2001; Akiwumi Report 1999). Strikingly, the dominant construct of the Kikuyu label transformed in the period 1998-2007 from meaning foreigners in the Rift Valley to being cast as 'non-Kenyans' and even 'enemies of Kenya' (Kagwanja & Southall 2009:262; Chege 2008:133).¹¹ The latter depiction is an extreme interpretation of Moi's discourse on citizenship and belonging, and all of this shows how interwoven ethnicity and politics were in Kenya. Yet, this connection was never linear or self-evident, for politicians shifted sides constantly, regardless of the putative ethnic affiliations of the parties. This did not, however, withstand the popular imaginings of political parties in broad ethnic terms.

During the post-election violence that followed the 2007 general elections,¹² Tyson and other young men drew on this extreme version of *Majimboism*, informed

by the colonial government, and the resources associated with it (Anderson 2005a:563, 2005b; Kagwanja & Southall 2009:268).

¹¹ It was not very difficult for the Moi government to target squatters with Kikuyu backgrounds in the Rift Valley, as these groups generally lived together in clusters. Moreover, people's names, accents and appearances were generally taken as indicators of their ethnic belonging, and it was not uncommon to find road blocks in conflict zones that people could only pass after identifying themselves by showing their national identification cards and speaking in their vernacular (see also Wa Wamwere 2003; Githongo 2002).

¹² Post-election tensions broke out into widespread violence in several poor rural and urban localities on 30 December 2007, which was the day that President Kibaki was inaugurated during a hurried swearing-in ceremony. In the Rift Valley and Coast Provinces, other ethnic groups such as the Kalenjin and the Kissi were also involved in violent conflicts, but that did not alter the leading perception in Kenya that this was about Luo and Kikuyu. In Mathare and many other ghetto areas in Nairobi (*see also* De Smedt 2009), the Mungiki and Taliban gangs clashed seemingly in support of the opposing political parties. The (mostly) men who took to the streets in Mathare after the inaugural ceremony on that fateful Sunday shouted slogans accusing all 'Kikuyu' of being Mungiki and PNU-supporters and, therefore, thieves. In their eyes, Kibaki had stolen the elections with the backing of the entire 'Kikuyu community'. In the weeks that followed, many inhabitants with Kikuyu backgrounds were violently driven away, their houses occupied, their businesses and shops looted and burnt, and numerous women were raped. Many young rioters spontaneously joined the Taliban gangs, while groups of men with Kikuyu and other ethnic backgrounds retaliated and were accompanied by Mungiki gangs from ghetto villages in the surrounding neighbourhood. The violence quickly spiralled out of control and, within days, Bondeni, the ghetto village in Mathare Valley at issue here, was turned into a ghost town of smouldering ruins. Later reports provided evidence of the organised nature of the violence that took

by the unofficial ODM campaign slogans of four-one-one and Lesotho, to legitimise the violence they committed against Bondeni residents with allegedly Kikuyu backgrounds. *Majimboism* in its extreme version mostly targeted people with a Kikuyu background and as such provided Tyson with the language to grasp his own grievances with regard to his alcohol bosses, many of whom were women with Kikuyu backgrounds. As I will explore further in the following chapters, men like Tyson saw the dominant labels of the Kikuyu group depicting people with Kikuyu backgrounds as thieves and ethno-chauvinists, which was evidenced by the fact that many of their bosses had Kikuyu backgrounds. This is how political discourses gained strength on the ground in Mathare. These men explained the relative wealth of their bosses by referring to a common trope which stated that everyone with a Kikuyu background had benefitted during the Kenyatta era at the cost of the marginalisation of, above other ethnic groups, the Luo. *Luosim* propagated the belief that this marginalisation was perpetuated during the Moi and Kibaki era by the corruption of political elites with mainly Kikuyu backgrounds, as voiced by Tyson above. The focus in the following chapters is on why this trope gained currency among young men like Tyson above all of the other available tropes that would explain the differences in wealth between the different social groups in Mathare and which, for instance, refer to migration histories.

On imagining rich Kikuyu and poor Luo

There is enough historical evidence to suggest that the majority of people who lived in Bondeni during and in the first decades after the colonial era were women with a Kikuyu background (White 1990: 206; Nelson 2002, 1978; Ross 1973), many of whom later became the bosses of the alcohol gangs. Accordingly, these women had a head start in gaining access to resources and accumulating wealth compared to migrants who arrived in Mathare from the 1970s onwards. The mothers and grandmothers of a majority of my research participants in Bondeni were first generation sex workers who had arrived in Mathare right after Kenya's independence in 1963. This included Shosho Kingi and Mama J's grandmother. I visited the latter in the rural area in August 2010. She had moved there when she had become too old to earn a living through sex work. During our interviews, both of the grandmothers confirmed that the Kikuyu language had been the dominant language in Mathare, and especially in Bondeni, until the 1980s (Ross 1973). Moreover, some of these earlier female migrants, like Mama J's grandmother, had been affiliated with the Mau Mau movement (Anderson 2005a; Elkins 2005) during the 1950s (*see also* Nelson 2002; White 1990). Many of them had been detained or had lost husbands and other relatives during the State of Emergency (Elkin 2005:35). Mama J's grandmother did not disclose much about her personal experiences during this time. In general, these often highly traumatised women rarely talked about the atrocities they had

place in these localities (Human Rights Watch 2008). The violence lasted about two months until the main opponents, Raila and Kibaki, signed a coalition-agreement on 28 February 2008 (BBC 2008).

experienced, but many derived a sense of pride by remembering the Mau Mau¹³ struggle and their role in it. Indeed, Mama J's grandmother visibly changed her posture when she uttered the words Mau Mau, jutting her chin forward, with her wrinkled face taking on an even more resolute mien than normal. "Mau Mau was against the white people", Mama J translated, while her grandmother squeezed the skin on my arm with her arthritic fingers. "She has never talked about [the trauma], and she will never talk about it, not even to me", Mama J continued to translate the rapid flow of Kikuyu words.

The interviews with many older women with Kikuyu backgrounds in Mathare told me that they did not adhere to *Kikuyisation*, and negotiated this dominant discourse by constructing a sub-dominant discourse I term *Kikuyuism*.¹⁴ Kenyatta's ethnocentric and elitist approach not only galvanised tensions between the Kikuyu and other ethnic groups in Kenya, but also among different Kikuyu groups (Lonsdale 2008b:310). The main bone of contention between the elites and poor groups with Kikuyu backgrounds was the memory of the Mau Mau movement (Clough 2003:255). The Kenyatta administration systematically ignored the historical and social relevance of the Mau Mau movement, thereby avoiding the moral obligation to return the land that had been taken away from Mau Mau fighters and those who had been detained during the State of Emergency. In doing this, the Kenyatta administration ignored the plight of the poor with Kikuyu (and many other ethnic) backgrounds, many of whom had been affiliated with Mau Mau and wanted public acknowledgement and material restitution (Ogot 2003:34). *Kikuyuism* remembered Mau Mau with pride, and imagined a dichotomy between poor and rich people with Kikuyu backgrounds. It thus became the discursive space that saw the emergence of the Mungiki movement, with a strong Kikuyu profile, during the 1990s, first in Rift Valley and later in Mathare (see below). By constructing this sense of pride, these women in Mathare, many of whom had Kikuyu backgrounds, also aimed to counterbalance subject positions (imposed by the colonial government during the

¹³ In brief, people with a Kikuyu background were among the first and largest groups of Africans to work on European farms in the Rift Valley Province (and also within the government apparatus). This was because of the proximity of the Kikuyu Native Reserves to both the capital Nairobi and the European farms. During the 1930s, many migrant workers lost their jobs to the mechanisation of farm work. They often could not return to their Native Reserves, because these had become overpopulated over time, and thus they ended up as squatters in the Rift Valley and the emerging ghettos of Nairobi, such as Mathare. Protests among these groups eventually led to the Mau Mau insurgence (see also Maloba 1993; Kanogo 1987; Turner & Brownhill 2001; Elkins 2005; Anderson 2005b; Clough 1998; Berman & Lonsdale 1992; and Odhiambo & Lonsdale 2003).

¹⁴ In popular use, the terms *Kikuyisation* and *Kikuyuism* are often used interchangeably without a clear difference between the two concepts. In fact, the term *Kikuyuism* is the most popular usage, and is often deployed to describe what I term *Kikuyisation*. Moreover, in scholarly use, the term *Kikuyuism* frequently appears when describing political thinking and action against the elites with Kikuyu backgrounds, and is thus phrased as anti-*Kikuyuism* (Lynch 2008, 2013; Mueller 2008). I propose to differentiate clearly between a government discourse instigated by the Kenyatta government and the elites who took on this project after Kenyatta's death, which I term *Kikuyisation*, and a subdominant discourse constructed by poor groups with a Kikuyu background to conceptualise their marginalised positions within the contexts of *Kikuyisation*.

State of Emergency and perpetuated by *Majimboism*) that characterised them as sex workers, barbarians, criminals and ethnic chauvinists (Nelson 1987:4). *Kikuyuism*, with its strong reference to the Mau Mau movement, formed a basis for social interaction among these women in Mathare, who faced a new and unfamiliar situation in the urban slums. Shosho Kingi stated:

Many of us came from Kiambu, some from Nyeri¹⁵, but mostly Kiambu and we shared a culture. We all spoke Kikuyu. Not like today... now our youth don't even know Kikuyu and that is bad. This side, our side became strong together and we all know each other. Later Luo came on the other side of the river... but much later and at different times. They are not strong together. We were here first and we are like people from God, we love God... our Christian God and we follow our culture. Mathare Valley is not our *gishage* ('ancestral land' or 'family land in the rural area' in the Kikuyu language) because this is not where we were to live from our God.

Shosho Kingi's words here resonate with the popular discourse on migration in Mathare that regards first-comers as 'natives' (see more in Chapter 6), and this is how she articulated her claim to land in Bondeni and affirmed her status as an old settler. The dominant binary between the Kikuyu and Luo groups, which is central to *Kikuyuisation*, informed how older Bondeni women, in the context of tensions in their immediate environments, interpreted and articulated notions of entitlement. These tensions were first and foremost sparked by the loss of vegetable gardens in 4B to rural-urban migrants (many of whom had a Luo background) who began to settle there during the 1970s and 80s. This shows that *Kikuyuism* in Mathare, as imagined by people who had not benefited at all from the Kenyatta government, resonated with the anti-Luo political discourse of this government. The reason why women in Bondeni constructed 4B as exclusively Luo must largely be sought in the language and discourse available to them during the 1970s and 80s. Women in Bondeni appropriated the anti-Luo narrative in order to comprehend the growing tensions

¹⁵ The intertextual reference to the alleged binary between Kiambu and Nyeri (Clough 1998:161) by Shosho Kingi is directly linked to the dominant narrative of Mau Mau in Kenya. This narrative depicts Nyeri as the 'true' base of the Mau Mau rebellion in the forests, whereas Kiambu became remembered as being a less active region in this fight. Some people even described Kiambu to me as a home to the majority of the 'homeguards', which is a popular name for elites with Kikuyu backgrounds who benefitted from collaborating with the colonial government. It is commonly held in Mathare that the homeguards took over the government after independence. The first president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, as well as the current president (his son Uhuru Kenyatta), both come from Kiambu. Interestingly, many elderly residents in Mathare took enormous pride in their affiliation with Mau Mau, regardless of their rural origins. From this perspective, the binary between Nyeri and Kiambu mentioned by Shosho probably did not refer to the alleged divides between 'Kikuyu' groups, but to migrants who lived together in a new place and who cherished their connections based on shared rural origins. This reading of her words is supported by the fact that most residents in Mathare, be they from Kiambu or Nyeri, were involved in the urban Mau Mau struggle.

between Bondeni and 4B. In return, from the 1980s onwards, residents in 4B drew on anti-Kikuyu narratives, which were central to *Luoism* and *Majimboism*, to give voice to their frustrations with regard to the growing *chang'aa* industry. This industry attracted a lot of police attention to the riverside, and also led to the destruction of the houses opposite the distillation sites in 4B (which was where many residents with Luo backgrounds lived), due to the residues released from the drums with considerable force. Kingi told me: "This grudge is old (between Bondeni and 4B), it raised us, we learn to continue this by our parents. [...] No, it is not ethnic ha ha no, but we make it ethnic. That is how politicians do it, so they can get support in that area or that one."

The historical coincidence of the earlier urban arrival of many women with a Kikuyu background thus led to an economic divide between the inhabitants of Mathare that became increasingly constructed in ethnic terms. Their head-start in accruing and investing capital led to an economic divide between older settlers in Bondeni and the newer settlers in 4B. This led to a particular division of labour in and between these ghetto villages in Mathare. Many young men from Area 4B (like Tyson) became distillers in Bondeni, whereas wealthier people in Bondeni, many with Kikuyu backgrounds, controlled the process of distillation and selling in this location. These alcohol bosses also constituted the majority of landlords in Bondeni (and in other ghetto villages in Mathare), which led to the dominant perception that rich people in Mathare had Kikuyu backgrounds, while poor people had Luo backgrounds. Despite the presence of many poor residents with Kikuyu backgrounds and numerous wealthy residents (including alcohol bosses) with Luo (and other) backgrounds in Mathare, *Majimboism* acquired meaning to men like Tyson as a result of their own marginalised status as alcohol gang members. I will further explore the position of alcohol gang members and their relationships with bosses (bar owners and wholesalers) in the following chapters.

The rise of ethnic-based gangs in Mathare

The popular imaginings of ethnic ghetto villages and ethnic dimensions of socio-economic fault lines were deepened by the emergence of Mungiki gangs in Mathare (see Introduction). As mentioned above, the forged binary between putative Kikuyu and Luo ghetto villages in Mathare was already present prior to the arrival of Mungiki members. However, Kingi explained to me that the emergence during the late 1990s of local Mungiki gangs, which were local groups that were somehow linked to the national Mungiki movement, "made people more tribal so they take each other, like he is a Kikuyu, he is a Luo...that person he is a Kamba hahaha but he wants to be a Kikuyu hahaha."

During the period of Mungiki control of Bondeni between 2001 and 2006, the gang leaders had often approached Kingi in an attempt to persuade him to become a member. Kingi always refused, and told me: "Yah, they often come and see me, say I am a good Kikuyu, I am really a Mungiki but not yet a member. I am good because I

don't drink ha ha. You know they can even force you. I was afraid, I just avoided them." Kingi feared the Mungiki from the moment the first groups arrived at public transport stations in Nairobi during the late 1990s. Like many of his friends, Kingi was surprised by the speed with which these groups first took control of the *matatu* routes on the main roads near ghetto areas like Mathare, and later of entire ghetto villages inside Mathare. His fear was derived from a deep sense of unease over the mono-ethnic profile and religious discipline (imposing strict rules such as avoiding alcohol and female circumcision) demonstrated by these gangs (*cf.* Wamue 2001, 2002). Kingi related: "Shosho [grandmother] she always tells me to speak Kikuyu. It is from our parents we learn this tribalism, but we grow up in ghetto, and we speak Sheng. We are ghetto, ha ha, ghetto first! It is not in me." Nevertheless, many of Kingi's friends later joined the local Mungiki gang in Bondeni as it provided ample social and economic opportunities, especially for young men who identified as Kikuyu, despite their often multiple ethnic backgrounds. This specific ethnic identification began to determine access to opportunities provided by these gangs, and this triggered growing resentment among young men like Tyson, who felt increasingly excluded.

As described in the Introduction, the Mungiki movement was allegedly founded during the late 1980s to protect the squatter communities (mostly with Kikuyu backgrounds) during clashes in the Rift Valley Province that were instigated by the Moi government. The Mungiki movement allegedly had ties to politicians (mainly with Kikuyu backgrounds – Kagwanja 2005), and earned money through revenues from the many Mungiki gangs operating in Nairobi's ghettos, along certain *matatu* routes, and later also in a few rural areas (*cf.* Henningsen & Jones 2013; Mutongi 2006:558; Wa Mungai & Samper 2006:60). During the early 2000s, both the national media and the Mungiki leadership estimated the membership of all Mungiki gangs to be a combined 1.5 million, which is an unlikely high number (Wamue 2001:454). However, even if exaggerated for reasons of sensationalism (in the case of the press) and propaganda (in the case of the Mungiki leadership), Mungiki gangs were a force to be reckoned with in local and national politics.

Interestingly, the Mungiki gangs were not such a unique phenomenon in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos. Gangs of thieves, con artists and brokers of stolen goods have always been part of economic life in Mathare. Along with these gangs, KANU (the Kenya African National Union) youth wingers also shaped processes of gang formation in Mathare. Since independence in 1963, the dominant political party of KANU has deployed young men and women in ghettos like Mathare (and also in many poor rural areas). Their job in Mathare was to arrest and discipline petty thieves and alcohol distillers, sellers and customers, and to report cases of domestic violence and other neighbourhood disturbances to the local chief (*see also* Throup & Hornsby 1998; Hornsby 2012). Many KANU youth wingers were former gang members, and some continued to be gang members by night, blurring an already thin line between state authority and gangs in Mathare. In an attempt to reassert control over the *matatu* terminuses, which are spaces notorious for high gang activity, the

youth wingers received an additional mandate from the chiefs in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos to discipline this industry (Mutongi 2006). The KANU youth wingers can thus be regarded as the first groups of youths to secure these bus stations, long before the Mungiki arrived (*cf.* Anderson 2002). These groups controlled *matatu* routes and exacted bribes and so-called security taxes from *makanga* (touts in Sheng). In this endeavour, their operations were very similar to those of the Mungiki gangs a decade later, as they also collaborated with both the administrative and council police, who all took a share of the takings (*cf.* Mutongi 2006: 555; Wa Mungai & Samper 2006: 60).

In contrast to the Mungiki gangs, however, the KANU youth wingers had multiple ethnic backgrounds, but there were other groups that arose before the Mungiki gangs that did have ethnic profiles. This was a result of the return of multi-party politics from 1991 onwards (Throup & Hornsby 1998), which opened up a political space that was marked by intense electoral competition. Local political figures from emerging oppositional political parties followed KANU's example and also established youth wings (or armies, *majeshi* in Kiswahili, as they were popularly dubbed) in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos. These armies had names such as *Taliban*, *Baghdad Boys* and *Jeshi la Embakasi* (Anderson 2002), and many, but not all, had members with ethnic backgrounds similar to that of the politician with whom they were affiliated. These groups assisted their *godfathers* ('Big Man' in Sheng) in politics by mobilising crowds at rallies, disrupting the rallies of opponents, and using general intimidation tactics during elections. Accordingly, they established themselves as vigilantes in Nairobi ghetto areas for a fee (Gecaga 2007; Anderson 2002; Wa Mungai & Samper 2006).

I will return to these groups, and the Taliban gangs in particular, in the following chapters. For now, it must suffice to hypothesise that the Mungiki gangs in Mathare can, to some extent, be considered as part of this development; consequently, neither their ethnic profiles nor their vigilante activities were unique. The reason why the Mungiki gangs received a lot of attention from the media and academics alike concerned their ubiquity in Nairobi during the first decade of the new millennium. The Mungiki gang phenomenon in Mathare cannot, however, be considered in isolation from other gang phenomena inside these ghettos. In particular, highly local and multi-ethnic working gangs interacted intensively with Mungiki and other ethnic-based gangs in Mathare. Further insight into the group-making projects of working gangs in the following chapters will not only contribute to a greater understanding of the diversity of the processes of gang formation in Mathare (and in other Kenyan ghettos), but will also enable the reader to better grasp the mounting violence there since the late 1990s, which involved all of these different groups.

Conclusion

This chapter mapped out the key localities in Bondeni, which is my main research area in Mathare, such as the Manoki public toilet, the bridge connecting 4B and Bondeni and the One Touch distillation site. The tour I described spatialised this map, thus setting the stage for the tours narrated by my research participants in the following chapters. It also revealed the visible divide between Upper Bondeni and Lower Bondeni, and explained that this partly stemmed from the distinction between private and public land. Low-income families generally resided illegally on road and river reserves in Lower Bondeni, whereas the slightly wealthier families took up residence in the privately constructed stone flats that were dotted throughout Upper Bondeni. This social and economic divide laid the foundation for complicated power struggles between tenants, structure owners and landlords. These were exacerbated by multiple scams that were played out by several landlords and key shareholders of Bondeni Properties, thus hampering the development envisaged for this area and intensifying the concentration of resources in the hands of a few.

I also teased out the historical background to the matrifocal society that Bondeni became, and explained why the main source of income shifted from sex work and distilling *busaa* (practised until the early 1980s) to distilling *chang'aa* from the early 1980s onwards. The rapid expansion of the *chang'aa* industry (locally dubbed '*chang'aa* breweries') led to a further accentuation of existing social and economic fault lines and tensions between both different ghetto villages and putative social groups. Ethnicity became increasingly implicated in people's imaginings of these divisions during the 1990s and 2000s, even to the extent that these fuelled consecutive junctures of violence. In this period, the popular notions of ethnic ghetto villages and ethnic dimensions with relation to socio-economic divides were further strengthened by the emergence of ethnic-based gangs in Mathare, such as the Mungiki. Contrary to dominant perceptions, these latter groups were not unique, as KANU youth wingers and *majeshi* had provided young ghetto residents with social and economic opportunities prior to Mungiki control, while the *majeshi* groups also often had ethnic profiles, with the Taliban gangs being an example. The Mungiki gangs were, however, somewhat exceptional in that they displayed extraordinary political and economic power and enjoyed extended spaces of influence.

During the first half of the 1990s, before the arrival of Mungiki gangs but amidst the rise of the allegedly mono-ethnic *majeshi*, Kingi founded the first multi-ethnic and highly local working gang in Bondeni. Soon, many of the young men in this ghetto village joined this and other newly-established alcohol gangs. In the next chapter, I delve deeper into the emergence of these particular working gangs and look at how these groups were tied to processes of becoming men.