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

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## CHAPTER 2: Joining a Working Gang: On Locality, Membership and Work.

### Introduction

There is very little research conducted in Kenya on processes of gang formation in relation to notions of work. As already discussed, the predominant focus in the media and academia on ethnic-based gangs and political violence in Kenya reified ethnic identifications as a key motivator for young men to join gangs, along with their allegedly inherent inclination to engage in violence (*see also* Were 2008). In this chapter, I set out to explore the history of a specific type of working gang: the alcohol gang. In particular, I look into why mostly young men choose to join alcohol gangs, who can become a member, and at what point in their life trajectories these young men decide to join such a group.

In an attempt to move beyond the prevalent image of ethnicity as the dominant marker in processes of gang formation in Nairobi ghettos such as Mathare, I discuss popular notions of work and respectability, exploring why and how these ideas deviate from dominant notions of legality and morality. This sets the stage for comprehending why becoming an alcohol gang member was so popular among young men in Mathare during the 1990s. I then describe why and how a small group of young men came to found the first such gang in 1994, before explaining why these groups were such a recent phenomenon compared to other gangs, vigilante groups and *kamjeshi* ('youths who secure bus stations and lure in passengers' in Sheng). Processes of group formation among alcohol gang members were not only based on notions of work, but also hinged on popular ideas of masculinity. The space of the gang played a pivotal role in the processes of becoming men and enacting shifting and context-bound notions of manhood. I thus explore gangs as age-sets, and describe the relationship between the gang and the moments in a man's life that mark the transition from boy to 'junior man' and, eventually, 'senior man.' This will help when it comes to understanding why working gangs are important groups to join, but also to leave, as part of individual social navigation trajectories. This is also a first step in contextualising ethnic identifications among these young men.

### Respectable 'illegality'

Before further exploring the formation processes of working gangs, it is important to first take into account popular distinctions between work and crime. This will shed light on why the young men I worked with referred to their illegal income-generating activities as work.

A few days after Christmas in 2010, I took Brayo, his wife and two children to a small Eritrean restaurant in Eastleigh where I bought them Enjera Zigni, a popular Eritrean dish, before walking back to their house in Kambi, Bondeni, through the hubbub of Juja Road (see Map 5), to enjoy the food. They had just returned from celebrating Christmas in Subukia in the Rift Valley, where Brayo's aunt lived. After we shared this festive lunch together we relaxed in their one-room apartment in a stone tenement building in Bondeni, and our conversation

moved on to rising food prices and the impact this had had on the *chang'aa* business (illegal alcohol). It had been an exceptionally slow season, particularly as December was usually a time when *chang'aa* sellers like Brayo doubled their income. "People are really struggling, ha ha you know how you will know? So many *wagondi* ('thieves' in Sheng) around. Every day you hear so and so was mugged, or someone was stabbed there, at the bridge (see Map 5), killed there and there." Brayo gestured animatedly, a telling sign that he was angry. "Crime is up, young *wagondi*, eeehhh, what they do is bad. He (by which he meant a man in general) worked for that phone, how would you feel? And they carry knives, they just kill you, they don't care!" According to Brayo, stealing, with or without the use of arms, was a crime regardless of why, where and how it took place or who was involved. In contrast, he did not perceive distilling *chang'aa* and selling drugs or stolen goods as criminal activities. Most of the young men I worked with had fewer qualms about stealing outside Mathare than Brayo, but they too vigorously denounced theft inside Mathare, even if they were still involved in such practices. Likewise, they all seemed to follow Brayo's framing of distilling *chang'aa* and selling drugs and stolen goods as 'work.'

Taking alleged criminal activity as work is not uncommon in so-called illegal economies, and participants often evince the same motivations as workers in the so-called legal economy (Sassen 2007:98). Previous research has shown that, upon close scrutiny, purported contrasts between legal and illegal economies are problematic at best (Wacquant 2002, Bourgois 1995; Fagan & Freeman 1999). Contrary to common perception, economic activities that are generally considered to be illegal may in fact make a sizeable contribution to recognised economies (Sassen 2007), and uncoupling one from the other seems to be impossible. Yet such notions of legality and illegality stubbornly prevail in dominant discourses in Kenya and elsewhere. However, the prevailing notions on what is legal in Kenya did not coincide with local perceptions of licit and illicit practices (*see also* Roitman 2006:249) in Mathare. Indeed, as illustrated by Brayo's words, a number of practices that were deemed illegal by the dominant discourse and regulated by law were considered to be rational, reasonable and even respectable behaviour by many in the Mathare ghetto. Licit practices, in this regard, were what people locally took as normal, legitimate and respectable ways to generate income. Accordingly, the popular discourse on respectability maintained a clear dichotomy between work (long-term income-generating activities) and hustling (short-term income-generating activities) on the one hand and crime (stealing inside the ghetto) on the other. Distilling *chang'aa* was widely considered to be a respectable way to earn a living for young men in Bondeni Village, and this was underscored by the way many gang members used the term work to refer to these activities (*cf.* Thieme 2013).

It is telling that Kingi, Brayo and others never referred to legality and the law when reflecting on respectable behaviour and licit activities in the context of Mathare; they instead used words such as 'good' and 'respectable.' In contrast, they did use the term crime to describe the practices that they deemed illicit. The dominant distinction between legal and illegal practices upheld by the law thus lost much of its purchase in the everyday experiences of most people in Mathare as a result of their daily interactions with law enforcers. They emphasised to me that the police not only shot robbery suspects on sight, but also took bribes

from gangs and were therefore heavily involved in all of the illegal practices in the ghetto. With little faith in the law and law enforcing institutions, the people in Mathare constructed their own socio-cultural scripts that shaped local moral conduct. In doing so, they drew on dominant discourses on morality, but reimagined these to fit their local experiences.

Kingi explained to me that there were three important factors at play in popular conceptualisations of licit or respectable and illicit or criminal practices. He underpinned the difference between these practices by constantly opposing distilling alcohol as work with stealing (inside the ghetto) as a crime. Firstly, Kingi expounded that many people judged these practices primarily by the way they impacted on them. Young *wagondi* who robbed people on their way to work at the bridge inside the ghetto were regarded as harmful to the social and economic development of local residents. As a consequence, their income-generating activities were considered to be highly illicit and, thus, criminal. In contrast, distilling alcohol benefitted the local economy, as most of the families in Bondeni Village relied for their survival on businesses that were directly linked to this industry. Secondly, the *wagondi* risked a bullet from the police or mob justice at the hands of passers-by. In contrast, distilling *chang'aa* involved fewer risks. Thirdly, there were not many other options for young men in Mathare besides joining working or *wagondi* gangs (*see also* Odhiambo & Manda 2003). Members of alcohol gangs, however, had access to a more steady cash flow than *wagondi* gang members, since they generally worked several days a week. On the other hand, the proceeds of theft were highly erratic and so made it difficult to plan household spending. Accordingly, working groups such as alcohol gangs enabled these men to take care of family members in ways that earned respect among fellow community residents.

### **The impact of the legalisation of *chang'aa***

The circumstances discussed above beg the question of how the legalisation of *chang'aa* in 2010<sup>1</sup> influenced local notions of licit and illicit practices and the way these working gangs were perceived. Kingi and Brayo discussed the legalisation and its consequences in Mathare while sitting outside the latter's bar in January 2011. They both feared that the legislation would lead to a drop in the available work at the riverside. The anticipated plunge would thus diminish the space young men had to access income-generating activities, and this, they expected, would directly translate into an upsurge of petty theft inside the ghetto. *Chang'aa* was legalised in September 2010 (BBC 2010), yet its production by the riverside was still deemed to be highly illegal by law, since the bar owners and distillers continued to distil without a licence and without following set guidelines on hygiene and safety. Accordingly, little changed after the legalisation of *chang'aa* from the perspective of the bar owners and distillers in Bondeni, while the police continued to exact bribes at the sites. Smuggling, however, became increasingly dangerous, as the police were ordered to arrest anyone

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<sup>1</sup> The Kenyan government legalised *chang'aa* to improve state supervision and reduce the number of deaths among consumers. These deaths were the result of the chemical substances added to this drink to boost its kick, such as jet fuel, battery acid, embalming fluid and ARVs (Ngoiri & Mutambo 2012). A popular name for *chang'aa* in Kenya is 'kill me quick' (BBC 2010).

carrying illegal alcohol outside the ghetto. This had a drastic impact on local income and, hence, the availability of work for gang members.

Kingi was also worried about something else: "I think the police will organise a raid soon, they will pour *chang'aa*, just to show they do their job." From the time when the 'Mututho Law' (as the legislation that legalised *chang'aa* was popularly known) was passed in parliament, many of those in Mathare prepared for the worst; decades of police harassment had informed the general apprehension with which most people in the ghetto anticipated the implementation of the new law. Along with daily bribes and arrests, the police were known to periodically organise raids, which were often sparked by a public outcry following spectacular media coverage of the illegal '*chang'aa* distilleries' in Bondeni. Oblivious to the repercussions for local residents, journalists occasionally infiltrated the Mathare riverside in order to conjure up a sensational story for a national daily or a news show (e.g. Kamau 2014). These publications generally caused a fleeting but emotionally charged debate on Internet forums on the continued existence of the illegal distilling sites. This then prompted the police to act to show the public they were living up to their mandate and they were crushing criminal enterprises. During these raids, the police, often in the company of TV cameras, demonstratively poured away *chang'aa*, arrested distillers, bar owners and customers en masse, and destroyed distilling equipment (NTV Kenya 2013). The same policemen, however, always returned the next day to demand their daily bribes at the distilling sites. Kingi's fear that a raid was pending thus emanated from an accumulation of such experiences. Although the ghetto had been rife with speculation since the start of September 2010 when the law was passed in parliament, it took well over two years before a raid actually took place. This raid was probably propelled by the desire of the new government (which took office in 2013) to show its purpose. Nevertheless, the illegal alcohol industry is still active today in Mathare and many other ghettos, and Bondeni residents continue to pride themselves on being the *chang'aa* headquarters in Nairobi.

At first, I did not understand the widespread apprehension about the new law, because I, naively, thought the legalisation of *chang'aa* would be an opportunity for Mathare residents to expand their businesses without daily police harassment. Brayo laughed when I shared my hopes with him and Kingi, and shook his head in disbelief at my optimism.

No, this law, it will not help us down in *mtaa* ('ghetto' in Sheng). It's a problem 'cause we don't have the money to get a licence, and the equipment to brew ha ha like in a factory. Big Fish ('wealthy business people and politicians' in Sheng) can do that, it will give us more competition, and we will suffer more. Police can ask for more bribes because now they can say 'it is legal, you don't have to brew like this.'

Kingi reflected on why large-scale, fully licensed *chang'aa* businesses had probably not yet seen daylight. "Customers are used to *kumi* ('ten' in Kiswahili), ha ha they cannot pay more than *ashu* ('ten' in Sheng). You can't make a business, a legal one, and sell at that price." Ever since the colonial era, *chang'aa* as a type of moonshine has been associated with poverty, sex

work and crime. Its customer base has long been mostly inside ghetto neighbourhoods or poverty-stricken villages in rural areas (*see also* Lo et al. 2013; Izugbara et al. 2013). The reputation of *chang'aa* in popular imaginings would probably prevent affluent customers from buying the distil, even if it was bottled, (re-)branded and sold in uptown bars and restaurants. Without a potential uptown market, the ghettos and other poor regions in Kenya thus remained the main customer bases for the *chang'aa* industry. Too much was at stake to risk losing these markets by raising the price, which, as Kingi stated, would be inevitable if bar owners inside Mathare started adhering to the new regulations.

The daily profits earned by alcohol bosses described in the previous chapter provide a good indication of the amount of money circulating within the *chang'aa* industry and what was therefore at stake. A boss (*sonko* in Sheng) earning around or more than 100 Euros a day was called a Big Fish in Mathare Sheng. I asked Brayo how many Big Fish were operating in Mathare: "Ha ha ha...many Big Fish in the Mathare River, ha ha ha. At One Touch (the distilling site of this gang) there are now five, but Kiharu or Shantit, it can be 10 or even more." I also asked him if he was considered to be a *sonko*, because he was a bar owner, and Kingi almost choked from laughing. Embarrassed by my question, Brayo told me he was 'a small boss' (a *ka sonko* in Sheng), by which he meant that even though he was a bar owner, he was in almost, but not entirely, the same social position as the distillers at the riverside. This is why the other gang members considered him to be part of their group. A few of the other One Touch members, such as Motion and Mato, also sold *chang'aa* at a bar they rented in Mathare, and were thus regarded as bar owners like Brayo. They were not, however, considered to be small bosses, as they distilled for themselves because, unlike Brayo, they could not afford to hire a fellow gang member to do it for them. As a consequence, they were still regarded by the other gang members as being in a similar position to them.

Apart from the five Big Fish mentioned by Brayo, around 50 further small-time bar owners from Manoki were affiliated to the One Touch distilling site during my fieldwork in 2010. On the whole, at the time, close to 50 Big Fish and a few hundred small-time bar owners and distillers (gang members) were engaged in the *chang'aa* industry in Bondeni Village and Shantit out of an area with close to 30,000 residents (*see also* MuST 2012). It is overwhelming to attempt to determine the money that this illegal industry generated every day in Bondeni alone, and how many local families depended on it. Nevertheless, the bulk of these daily revenues found their way to the Big Fish and their associates high up in the Nairobi police force and within the local administration. Indeed, in return for a percentage of the profits, and ever since the prohibition of *chang'aa* and other illegal drinks such as *busaa* in 1983, highly placed officials have turned a blind eye to the operations of the illegal distilling sites in Bondeni (Nelson 1987). Brayo commented: "Police still come but nothing has changed (since the law). *Hongo* ('bribe' in Sheng) is still the same. Police don't want things to change in Bondeni. They eat, so why change?" All over Nairobi and elsewhere, the bars that did not observe the stringent opening hours and adhere to the other new rules stipulated by the Mututho Law were fined, and some had even been forced to close down (*e.g.* Gitonga 2013; KTN Kenya 2013). Curiously, the bars and distilling sites in Bondeni Village were left untouched, even though they were clearly not operating according to the new legislation.

Brayo stated: "In Mlango, or Kosovo (other ghetto villages in Mathare) they close bars, ha ha the police get *hongo* for video halls and other businesses, but here ha ha we only have bars and alcohol, so they can't close if they want to eat." Brayo did not even believe that there would be raids as a result of the new law, as this would seriously harm the flow of money to senior police officers and other highly placed government officials profiting from the industry.

### **Growing up with *chang'aa***

The information above provides a background as to why most alcohol gang members referred to their income-generating activities as work. Alcohol gangs are a quite recent phenomenon in Bondeni, and only emerged during the 1990s. As noted earlier, before that decade, women (and also a few men) mostly distilled the illegal beverage themselves and sold the finished product from their own homes (*see also* White 1990). To understand this shift in the division of labour during the early 1990s, I will now take a closer look at the life history of one of the founders of the first alcohol gang, the One Touch in Manoki, Bondeni.

It was a hot and dusty afternoon in November 2010. We were drinking tea at the *hotelli* ('a small roadside restaurant' in Kiswahili) owned by Kingi and his wife after finishing a lunch that had been organised by One Touch gang members. Monga, Kingi and I were talking about the lunch when Kingi suddenly became serious. His usual smile faded into a set expression and his eyes widened. "I think back a lot on the time, when I left the youth group. I was so ashamed when you saw me down." I asked him why he had felt ashamed. He explained that he had been afraid I would have been disappointed in him, which of course had not been the case as I had well understood his need to earn money as a young father. Kingi referred to the time when I returned to Kenya in 1998 after four years of absence. He had left the Safi youth group (*see* Chapter 1) in November 1997 in order to distil *chang'aa* down by the river in Bondeni seven days a week to provide for his young wife and newly born son. At the time of our talk in 2010, we had just started a counselling project with the One Touch gang, and this caused him to ponder his own history with this group, which he had founded in 1994 and left in 2007.

Kingi stressed: "*Chang'aa* is all we know, we grew up with it. But we know how people look at us." He refilled his cup with steaming hot, sweet and milky tea and continued to describe to me how he had often faced adverse reactions as soon as people from outside Mathare discovered he was from the ghetto. Even today, he sometimes notices people tucking away their mobile phones when they, as he put it, "found him out." Based on these experiences, he always tried to hide from outsiders that he had once been involved in distilling illegal alcohol. He did not believe that people from outside the ghetto could understand his past. Like Monga and many other young men from Bondeni who participated in my research, Kingi grew up helping female relatives with distilling, smuggling and selling *chang'aa*. When he was a student in lower primary school, he often stayed the weekends in Mathare and helped his grandmother by supervising the distilling process of the strong alcohol ("spying" as he dubbed it). He was also often asked to smuggle the illegal drink to Kangemi dressed inconspicuously as a child in a school uniform. Kangemi is a rural ghetto on the western outskirts of Nairobi where his mother used to make a living selling *chang'aa* from her house. At the time, Kingi was still considered to be too young to distil himself, as the heavy

steel drums used in the process had to be contained on an open fire, which was a too hot and heavy a job for a nine-year-old. A few years later, he started distilling for his grandmother on his own to save her the money that had been used to hire other men.

### **Going back to *chang'aa***

In 1990, a year before I met Kingi, he dropped out of school after years of interrupted attendances due to a perpetual lack of funds to pay the school's fees. As a school dropout, he began working for his grandmother as a 'driver'<sup>2</sup> (the person handling the big steel drums), and so became responsible for the entire distilling process. He nevertheless continued to be active in the Safi youth group at the weekends, but spent most of his weekdays down by the river in the company of older men and women.

Those days it was still older women who brew, now it is mostly younger people, young men, I don't think you remember, near Kinatiko. I helped *Shosho* to spy when someone helped her cooking. Then I became a driver so I cooked for her. She was getting older, ha ha ha, you can't imagine, this hard work and all those women and ha ha ha some they had their husbands. I remember these women carrying *kango* (the 'distilling-mixture' in Sheng – Chapter 1) and working with their husbands to cook. They were married, mature people... *Shosho* paid a lot of money to the distillers so I decided to help bringing the *kango*...and cook, I was very happy...can you imagine I was Victa's age (his 13-year old son).

At the *hotelli*, Monga had long since finished his tea and stood up from the wooden bench, vaguely mentioning that he had an appointment of sorts and had to leave us. As he was familiar with my way of talking to people, I guessed he sensed I wanted to go deeper into the conversation with Kingi. We were therefore left alone in the now deserted *hotelli*. There was the usual lull after lunch and before teatime, and Kingi's very pregnant wife had left to take a rest at their house; at times, she needed to escape the heat that slowly built up underneath the iron sheet roof of the small restaurant each afternoon. This gave us a rare moment of privacy to continue our talk.

Kingi shared with me that he had been happy to distil full-time for *Shosho* in 1991, because he was now starting to earn his own money and was proud to be the youngest driver at the distilling site. Yet, he also dreamed of a different life. "*Shosho* had some money and send me to this friend who had a garage in Ngara (an industrious neighbourhood known for informal businesses near the city centre). I learned *Jua Kali*<sup>3</sup> there, but I had to go back to

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<sup>2</sup> A 'driver' in Sheng indicates a person who is in control of the distilling process and who operates the drum. This, and other terms deployed to refer to roles and stages in the distilling process, is largely derived from the *matatu* idiom.

<sup>3</sup> With the term *jua kali* ('hot sun' in Kiswahili), people in Kenya are referring to informal businesses (other than food stalls and roadside restaurants) that are operated in the open air along the roadside. It mostly refers to garages and car-washes, but can also denote woodwork workshops (mostly furniture) and repair and maintenance workshops for electrical equipment.

*chang'aa* because there was no money. Also, the garage was demolished by the city council (because it had been illegal)." Kingi twisted his hands in frustration while reflecting on missed opportunities and unmet desires. He had not resented distilling *chang'aa* full-time, he said, but he had envisaged a different future for himself.

I know I am good at a lot of things. I stopped school, no *pesa* (money in Kiswahili), *Jua Kali*, no *pesa*. I went back from Ngara to cook (distil) full-time in...it was 1994. I still was part of the youth and go to camps, ha ha you were there, but I also worked down (near the river).

### **The first alcohol gang: independence and innovation**

Kingi continued: "And it was me and the other young guys at Kinatiko, we started the One Touch gang, we are a gang, we do things youth want to do, we gamble, ha ha ha."

Before the 1990s, Kinatiko was simply called *rowe*, which means 'near the river' in the Kikuyu language. Most of the distilling was done by women who mixed their own *kango* ('distilling mixture' in Sheng) and had their own bars. As described in Chapter 1 and mentioned above by Kingi, some of these women were married while others worked as sex workers from their home bars. These women (and some men) were increasingly assisted by younger, mostly male, relatives as they got older, because it became ever more difficult to do the work themselves. Kingi told me that it had not taken long before tensions emerged, given that these young male relatives felt underpaid but undertook the most dangerous part of the work. Kingi and the other young men thus began to demand a pay rise. To underline their demands, in 1994 they moved their drums to a new distilling site further down the river. This forced their bosses, often mothers, grandmothers, aunties and uncles, to hire them at a site that was, to a large extent, under their control. Instead of distilling, these bosses increasingly began to concentrate on selling *chang'aa*. The young gang members, however, still felt underpaid, and Kingi told me that they soon developed an elaborate, but highly dangerous, scheme of peddling stolen *chang'aa* to supplement their daily wages. During my fieldwork in 2010-2011, distillers earned around 300 Kenyan Shillings (approximately 3 Euros) a day and worked for around three days a week. Selling stolen *chang'aa*, termed 'piracy' in Sheng<sup>4</sup>, could potentially add 1,000 Kenyan Shillings (about 10 Euros) to that sum, more than doubling their weekly income. It is not difficult to imagine that when this was discovered, the bar owners struck back with a vengeance. Nonetheless, they have never been able to completely quell piracy, which still continues to this day.

The One Touch gang was not the first working gang operating in Mathare; others consisted of groups of mostly young men who worked in the *matatu* industry as conductors, or groups that were involved in selling drugs and stolen goods. The One Touch gang, however, was the first of its kind to be predominantly engaged in distilling *chang'aa*. These men had complicated and tense relationships with their bosses, as well as with the policemen who came to the site to collect a daily bribe for each drum on display. The distillers were given

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<sup>4</sup> The word 'piracy' in Sheng was inspired by news on piracy at the coast of Somalia.

money by their bosses to pay the mandatory bribes, but often asked the police to 'leave one' for them. This denoted that the young men wanted to share the bribe designated for a particular drum to divide among themselves without their bosses knowing about it. The phrase leave one was very popular among these young men, and underscored the relationship between them and their bosses and other authorities. Indeed, it marked their subtle defiance of the oppressive powers of the bosses, police and village elders. These young men were highly skilled in navigating these volatile relationships, and were sometimes able to tweak certain circumstances to their own advantage and enact agency. Piracy was one such practice of resistance, and making a deal with the police to keep part of a bribe was another. Often, such manoeuvres backfired majorly, but defeat never stopped these men from trying again to claim power in relation to the highly restrictive structures within which they were positioned.

Far removed from the critical gaze of bosses, other family members and village elders, the One Touch distilling site slowly developed into a hangout where One Touch gang members distilled and drank *chang'aa*, gambled, brokered stolen goods and organised other income-generating activities together. Kingi smiled at the memory.

All of us down there, our own *baze* ('a hang out' and 'group of friends' in Sheng), ha ha ha. That time, there was a different style, we did not use *mitungi* ('jerry cans' in Kiswahili), but *ndebe* ('metal buckets' in Kiswahili). You take more trips [carrying the distilling mixture to the site]. We also did not use coils, but we built three stones, like a *jiko* ('a kitchen fire' in Kiswahili). Then we had a fire and a [long] tube to cool with a big tin. And we used clothes to close the drum. One day we went to Thika for a funeral and we saw they used coils so we came back with the idea because it is easier to cool because the tube is so long and it get holes. We also started to use the 'one touch' (a turning handle made from iron) instead of clothes, it is less dangerous. Although it is still very dangerous because it is very hot and the *bomb* ('the loud discharge of residue left in the drum after completing the distilling process' in Sheng) explodes as soon as you open it. That is why we call it 'one touch'. We put the *chang'aa* in *ndebe* in water [in the river] to cool, the water [from the river] was not black but brown, it was not so dirty. The sewer problem became much worse for the last 10 years.

Kingi here illustrated that funerals in the rural area were often taken as events that enabled Mathare residents to venture outside the ghetto, meet different people and get new ideas. In fact, he used the word "holiday", and told me he often enjoyed going to the funerals of people he did not know very well (otherwise it was too painful, he said), as this enabled him to explore new places in Kenya. Kingi and two fellow One Touch founders had taken back new ideas from this particular funeral to improve their own distilling process in Mathare. Using our empty, chipped, enamel tea cups, Kingi demonstrated to me how these perfections upgraded production, stating that this had markedly boosted the distilling status of One Touch with regard to Kinatiko (the distilling site where some older people still worked). Soon,

the One Touch gang had an average of 15 drums lined-up on the riverside spewing out smoke and *bombs* every 45 minutes.

Kingi's initiative to move to an independent distilling site had been exceptionally timely and successful, as it coincided with a growing demand for *chang'aa* in the sprawling ghettos of Nairobi. Gradually, older women and men moved away from Kinatiko, the old distilling site, and began to specialise in selling and smuggling, whereas distilling became increasingly monopolised by different emerging alcohol gangs of young men who followed the example of the One Touch group. At the close of the 1990s, Bondeni had a total of five distilling sites and associated gangs of young, male distillers. From the bridge that connected Bondeni and 4B (see Map 5), it was possible to view the impressive size of what was now commonly known as the '*chang'aa* breweries', which were a long line of black drums stretching out alongside Mathare's river banks, clouding the river in permanent smoke (personal observation, August 1998).

Suddenly, Kingi's eight-year-old daughter rushed in with her cousin looking for tea and a *chapati* (a type of Indian bread that is very popular in Kenya). Kingi hugged his child affectionately and ended our conversation by saying: "Ha ha ha, you know what? Without One Touch, I would have become a thief and would have probably died before even becoming a father."

### **Between options and risks**

The rise of multiple alcohol gangs was bolstered by rapid urbanisation during the late 1980s and early 1990s (*see also* Rakodi 1997), as this increased the demand for *chang'aa* in the sprawling ghettos where most rural-urban migrants ended up; the only drink they could afford was the ten Kenyan Shillings concoction. Other factors were also at play. Paramount was the appeal of *chang'aa* gangs to many young *wagondi*, because distilling was safer than robbing people and the work promised a steadier income.

Kingi had often told me that prior to the founding of the One Touch gang most of his friends had been thieves, and that many of them (he named 23 during our discussion) had now been shot dead by the police. Indeed, just a few weeks before our talk in his *hotelli* about the One Touch gang, Kingi's cousin Kuch had been tortured and shot dead by police officers. He had been killed during the night of 23 October 2010, ostensibly after being suspected of a robbery in Ngara, Nairobi. He had been in the company of a friend who had narrowly escaped the sudden spray of police bullets, and who had witnessed from afar how Kuch had succumbed to the gunfire and had even been slashed at with machetes before going limp. Kuch's mutilated body had eventually been discarded in City Park, allegedly by the police officers who had killed him. Other officers had found his body early on a Sunday morning. Upon receiving the dreadful news from Kuch's friend, his mother and aunt (Kingi's sister) had hurried to the local police station where they were told to try the different mortuaries in Nairobi to locate the body. After checking several facilities, they eventually discovered the body at the City Mortuary underneath a heap of anonymous corpses in various stages of decomposition. The horror of his cousin's death and the way his female relatives had found his body provoked immense anger in Kingi.

On Sunday 31 October 2010, a week after Kuch's death, Kingi and I were walking towards his aunt's house in Kayole (a poor neighbourhood in Eastlands, Nairobi) to attend a meeting organised to raise funds for the funeral. Before entering the *matanga* ('a funeral fund raising meeting' in Kiswahili), Kingi suddenly took my arm, pulled me aside and said in a strained voice: "I can't do anything today, I will be all right tomorrow. I first have to settle my mind, but now it disturbs me, my head is so full." A faint smile appeared on his grief-stricken face, but his jaw tightened, trying to hold back his emotions in an attempt to compose himself before facing his family inside the one-room house. As one of the few men of his age-group still alive in his family, he shared with me that he wanted to "be strong and focused". Some of his uncles and cousins had died from alcohol abuse, AIDS-related illnesses or police bullets, and he expressed the need to be a "leader" in his family.

They look up to me. Most of my family is women, some men died, some men, they went away. I need to show them we can arrange this funeral. Okay, he was a thief, not an innocent...but they (police) don't have to shoot you. Why not go to court? In *mtaa* ('ghetto' in Sheng) you can only become a thief or a distiller, or both. Me, when I was young, I admired thieves, thieves had too much *pesa* ('money' in Kiswahili), I looked up to them, I wanted their money, but Shosho scared me. Saying so and so is in jail, so and so died. That scared me. I did not have friends who thought not to steal...they steal mostly in Mathare, they are from a different category who steal inside than thugs who steal outside *mtaa*. Like Kuch. Shosho gave me a job, and that made me not to steal, also her advice, she helped me a lot.

Following a staggering increase in violent crime and gang clashes, the Kenyan government officially issued a 'shoot to kill' policy to bring down the incidences of violent robbery and quell the powerful political gangs that were outlawed by the state in March 2002 (Anderson 2002). Such extra-judicial killings (Alston 2009) in Nairobi's ghettos had been relatively commonplace before this date; reports had already referred to an upwards trend in the number of this type of killing of young, urban and poor men by the police in the 1990s, with as many as four to five deaths a week in 1998 (Kiai 2011). Yet these state-sanctioned murders escalated dramatically after the formal announcement in 2002. Indeed, the Kenyan police force, under the pretext of 'gangsterism', are reported to have killed over 8000 young and poor men in both Nairobi's ghettos and certain rural areas between 2002 and 2008 (Oscar Foundation 2008). After 2008, the number of killings went down, but continued nonetheless.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although a few civil society organisations increasingly highlighted these killings (KNCHR 2008a, 2009; Oscar Foundation 2008; Kiai 2011), there was no widespread public outcry. Conversely, the police response to the post-election violence of 2007/2008 has been heavily scrutinised by national and international civil society organisations (KNCHR 2008b; Waki 2008), as well as by the wider public. Accordingly, the latter wave of criticism did spark structural police reforms that are currently underway in Kenya, even if reluctantly. According to many Mathare residents, the widespread reproach of the police brutality during the post-election violence set in motion changes that, for instance, ended the existence of notorious execution grounds. What's more, many ghetto residents pointed to the promulgation of the new constitution on 27 August 2010 (BBC 2010), and especially its new Bill of Rights, to further explain the reduction in these unlawful killings. However, these

However, due to a lack of proper data, it is virtually impossible to present an accurate figure of the total number of young, urban and poor men killed by the police since the late 1990s. Nevertheless, an informed but careful guess would locate the figure far above the stipulated 8000. To provide an indication of the continuing abuse of human rights by law enforcers in recent times, all of the families in Mathare that I have met and worked with over the past 16 years have lost a son, a brother, a father, a husband, a cousin or an uncle to a police bullet. Some of these young men were innocent, while others were known thieves, but all were deprived of a trial the moment they were shot dead by police officers.

In this vein, the founding of One Touch in 1994 can be regarded as a watershed moment in the lives of the young men in Mathare on multiple levels; it was safer than stealing, and their work was part of a larger industry that involved most of the people in Bondeni. Their socio-economic position in the community gradually became stronger as a result of this marked shift in the division of labour within the *chang'aa* industry. This transition was accompanied by relatively little tension, as the demand for *chang'aa* rocketed and there seemed to be plenty of opportunities for all. However, membership of these gangs was not open to just anyone.

### **Belonging to a *baze* and gang membership**

A few days before Christmas in 2010, I sat outside Brayo's bar on a jerry can full of *chang'aa*. Opposite me sat three members of the One Touch gang, Brayo (29 years old), Odhis (25 years old) and Roja (28 years old), who huddled together on a small, wobbly wooden bench trying to stay in the shadow of a piece of iron sheet roofing that was sticking out just above their heads. Roja proudly claimed to have been a member of the One Touch gang from the start. Brayo disputed this, remarking that Roja was too young and had also been in prison for four years for armed robbery. As a consequence, he had been absent during the gang's early years. I asked how someone became a member of the One Touch gang and was told that you had to be a family member of a boss. Like Kingi, most of the young men who became members of the gang were young, male relatives of bar owners and wholesalers; without family ties it was, they said, very difficult to access work at the site and become a gang member.

Brayo and the rest told me that a young man from the Manoki area (a neighbourhood in Bondeni near the One Touch distilling site) without the said connections could become a friend and a frequent visitor to a particular distilling site. He would then be regarded by others, and himself, as belonging to the *baze*. The *baze* was a rather fluid network of friends who hung out at a particular site (Githinji 2006). As alluded to in the Introduction, we can see here a possible difference between *baze* and gang coming to the fore. Brayo explained: "You see them cutting cards (gambling) down at the *baze*, they belong to our *baze*, heheheheh ... and we are all friends, but they are not One Touch (the gang), they don't work *rowe* ('down by the riverside' in the Kikuyu language)." So, young men who usually hung around at the

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killings have continued to the date of writing this book, and have actually been on the rise again since March 2013.

distilling site to gamble, and who organised short-term income-generating activities,<sup>6</sup> belonged to the One Touch *baze*, but not to the One Touch gang; only the distillers regarded themselves and were seen as gang members. At the distilling site, however, the boundaries between *baze* and gang were blurry at best. The fluidity of both gang and *baze* membership, and the fact that many of the young men I met and worked with considered themselves to be members of multiple *bazes*, and sometimes gangs, contributed even further to the ambiguity of both the *baze* and gang spaces. Moreover, not all *bazes* were spaces of gang activity, but all gangs were linked to *bazes*. Unsurprisingly, most gang members such as Roja, Odis and Brayo also considered themselves to be *baze* members. Gang members took themselves as having the upper hand in determining who belonged to the One Touch *baze* at the riverside, even if gang bosses predominantly decided on gang membership.

### **Locality, family and formation processes of working gang**

Along with family, locality played a vital role in processes of working gang formation, as most family members lived near each other. As a consequence, bar owners and distillers linked to a particular distilling site generally came from or lived in the surrounding area. More specifically, most of the young men belonging to the One Touch *baze*, as well as to the One Touch gang, had been born and raised in the Manoki area, where the One Touch distilling site is located. The proximity of this site to Manoki, where the One Touch gang members had grown up, was not a coincidence. Indeed, Brayo, who was a bar owner, shared with me how most bar owners prefer to allocate assignments to their workers at a site near the bar. According to him, there are several reasons why the owners of bars in Manoki only work at this site, and never seem to divert to other distilling locations. The present-day cooking style entails filling a 180-litre drum that is positioned on an open wood fire arranged between stones or in an iron stand. Carrying the distilling mixture down to the riverside is heavy work, and so the proximity of the site to the bar or house where the distilling mixture is prepared reduces both the workload and the time needed for the entire distilling process. The other reasons at play were equally pragmatic.

Before continuing our discussion, Brayo stood up to serve a customer who had ordered a double shot of *biko* ('the strongest distil' in Sheng). Upon his return, he continued to discuss the localised nature of *chang'aa* distilling networks. He said these networks included clusters of bar owners who only worked with a specific gang at a particular site. As noted in Chapter 1, small-time (predominantly female) bar owners often worked from their homes, and, as stated above, preferred to work with young, male family members. Since families in Bondeni generally lived close together, the sons, nephews, cousins and grandsons hired to work at the One Touch distilling site had often been neighbours to their future *sonko* ('boss' in Sheng) while growing up. Each distilling site served a surrounding area the size of a few football fields. Most of the bar owners and alcohol gang members who worked together at a particular site came from, lived and worked in this adjoining area, and this markedly foregrounded locality (intersected with family ties) in the process of working gang formation.

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<sup>6</sup> Short-term income-generating activities, dubbed *hustling* or *ku-hustle* in Sheng (Thieme 2013), varied from brokering stolen goods to fetching water.

Brayo shared with me that gang members also felt responsible for this neighbourhood area. "Like when thieves come to our area from another *mtaa*, they come here, and we are like our security so we have to chase them." These words from Brayo revealed that the One Touch gang members constructed the Manoki neighbourhood area in Bondeni as 'their' *mtaa* ('ghetto neighbourhood' in Sheng -Mose 2013:116). *Mtaa* in the way these young men spoke Sheng denoted a neighbourhood area inside a ghetto village, but could also mean a ghetto village or the Mathare ghetto at large, depending on the context. In contrast, their use of the word ghetto only referred to Mathare (and other ghettos) and never to smaller localities such as ghetto villages or neighbourhood areas.<sup>7</sup> Bondeni was comprised of a few neighbourhood areas like Manoki, and these were again subdivided into several *bazes* ('local hang-outs' in Sheng). Generally, each gang felt responsible for maintaining security in the area where its *baze* was located, and gangs belonging to the same *mtaa* often worked together, especially in larger conflicts (see Chapter 6). Most of these alcohol gang members did not, however, seek fees for their security services in the way the Mungiki and Taliban gangs had done before them; they instead commonly performed these duties to strengthen their position within their local community and gain respect. Their attachment to a specific *mtaa* again underscores the key role locality played in group-making processes among working gangs.

As stated above, the intimacy between bar owners and distillers was wrought by family ties<sup>8</sup> and by living and working in the same *mtaa*. Brayo, a bar owner himself, clarified that working with young, male relatives was a way for bar owners to establish control over the distilling process. All of the men and women who participated in my research, both distillers and bar owners alike, had often described the dilemmas of creating professional relationships between family members. According to these narratives, the interactions between family members working together were more often than not imbued with distrust, jealousy and even fear. Nonetheless, both the bar owners and distillers persisted in mainly working with family. Brayo explained: "At least family, like me, I use Kanach to cook for me. Yah, he is my cousin so I help him, he helps me, that is like a duty. He cannot cheat me maybe, you know, selling my *biko*, ha ha piracy. He knows if I find out I can talk to his relatives." Brayo thus revealed two crucial reasons from a bar owner's viewpoint to work with family. On one hand, it enabled him to perform what he took as his 'duty', as a (slightly) more affluent family member, and it also helped him to establish control over Kanach.

Many distillers also indicated a preference for working with family bar owners, even though this denoted more restrictions of movement and space. In general, small-time bar owners paid a salary after the illegal beverage was sold. However, as selling could take a few days, workers sometimes had to wait for close to a week before getting paid. Brayo said that small-time bar owners like him usually paid his workers after selling the alcohol, because they had to invest a large sum of money in advance to buy molasses in bulk for the distilling mixture. At times, however, the business failed or the police interfered, and a bar owner was

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, however, the terms ghetto and *mtaa* were intermittently used to contrast 'ghetto style' (also ghetto *swag* in Sheng) to the style of wealthy youths described as *punk* (see more in Chapter 4).

<sup>8</sup> The collaboration of family members in criminal enterprises has long been extensively researched, especially in the light of maintaining control over lower-ranked workers (see also Ianni & Ianni 1972). Despite this, various codes of such networks describe the separation of family and business.

thus unable to pay those who worked for her. Roja interjected at this point and stated that at least with family bosses a worker had more leverage, because they could also go to other relatives to pressure a bar owner into paying. "Some *masonko* ('bosses' in Sheng), they make excuse, they say business is low, but you know ha ha ha she eats the money (*anamanga doo* in Sheng)." He further elaborated that it was easier to access work through relatives: "With my uncle or mother or that aunt, she wants to see me work, to help me, so I don't depend on them, eat at their house."

### **Brotherhood and business**

In this section, I discuss a case of a young gang member who had a very troubled relationship with his brother and who wanted to share his story with me. He did not, however, want me to disclose anything else about his life, because he did not want readers to trace this story back to him. He therefore chose the name Imbo ('fake' in Sheng). He explained why he still wanted me to include his story about him and his brother: "I am down because of him, and many of us we are down because of our family, you know, family should help each other, but they keep us down to become rich, they themselves, but we are down."

Imbo was a long-term One Touch gang member, and one day shared with me his story about his troubled relationship with his oldest brother. Imbo's brother was one of the richest bar owners in Bondeni, and was rumoured to earn hundreds of Euros a day on average. He had built his "empire", as Imbo referred to it, by appropriating and selling some of their mother's informal properties and two pieces of land after her death in 1994. When their mother died, Imbo's oldest brother had been the only adult among his siblings, and the only one who knew how to sell these properties. In 1999, he had then invested these assets in setting-up his own distilling site next to the One Touch gang. He had his own gang of alcohol distillers who worked solely for him. He also smuggled and sold *chang'aa* to almost all of the ghetto neighbourhoods in Nairobi, and had established a conglomerate of bars in Bondeni near to his own distilling site where, at all times, a minimum of 50 customers enjoyed a steady supply of their favourite drink. Imbo uttered bitterly: "My brother is a selfish, he does not care about me. He never shared anything, never helped me [...] He is not a good man." For more than four years, Imbo had worked in one of his brother's bars; he had served drinks from five in the morning until 11 at night, seven days a week. He said: "I was in prison, but I had cash. Now I have no money but my heart is full of cash." This is how he verbalised his current sense of freedom. Surrounded by the constant noise from loud, cracked music that came from large, out-dated speakers, he had worked, slept and raised his young family in a bar. Months had often passed without him going outside the vicinity of the bar, and at one time Imbo had even gone without travelling to the city centre for almost a year.

Compared to the, even by Western standards, astronomically high figure Imbo's brother earned, Imbo himself received a meagre 500 Kenyan Shillings (about 5 Euros) a day. His salary thus constituted perhaps one per cent of what his brother made. It was just enough to keep him going (as it was more than the average wage in the ghetto of 300 Kenyan Shillings), but was certainly not enough for him to save and start his own business. His brother, as he put it, had enslaved him. In 2005, I visited Imbo regularly at his brother's bar,

and we had long conversations about their relationship. During these talks, he shared with me that they even had physical fights on occasions, and that one day the police had been bribed by his brother to arrest him. However, his friends from One Touch had come to his rescue by counter-bribing the police to release him again. Eventually, Imbo left his brother's bar with the help of the same friends, and started to work at the One Touch distilling site.<sup>9</sup>

As well as providing insight into the often highly volatile and oppressive relationships between family members working together in the *chang'aa* industry, this case also reveals a rather challenging aspect of conducting fieldwork in Mathare. It took me many years to establish the relationships of trust that enabled me to grasp the multiple layers involved in relationships, situations, processes and narratives, and yet I was still confronted daily with novel information and perspectives that shone new light on events, positions and the experiences of people. At the same time, I obtained details about people's lives that were often highly sensitive and even downright dangerous. On the one hand, learning more about the intricacies of the lives of those in Mathare enabled me to gain a much better understanding of social processes, dynamics and relationships there. On the other hand, it bestowed on me a great sense of responsibility and the awareness to know how to avoid endangering the people I worked with at all times. I have been able to tackle these challenges by involving my key research participants in the process of analysis (see Introduction). This not only favoured the depth of the analysis offered in this book, but also helped me to exclude details and analytical threads that were considered by my research participants to be potentially harmful for them.

### **Other pathways to gang membership**

Returning to the question of gang membership, it is striking to consider that Brayo was regarded as a member of the One Touch gang, but had never distilled *chang'aa* in his life. Brayo had grown up near the Manoki area, and owed his status as gang member to the fact that he was the son of one of the first female distillers in Bondeni Village. His mother's legacy had thus given him the permission of the One Touch bosses to have his *kango* ('distilling mixture' in Sheng) distilled at this site. Moreover, Brayo was a ringleader in a few other enterprises, such as controlling a *matatu* terminal, and was therefore able to provide One Touch gang members with hustle opportunities. Kingi had also relied on the reputation of a female relative, his grandmother, in founding and becoming a leader of the One Touch gang, but not all members acquired access to working gangs through family members. This brings us to the question of what other trajectories, besides working for family bar owners, were open to young men wanting to become a One Touch gang member.

Not all of the One Touch gang members, and thus distillers, were relatives of bar owners. Brayo explained to me how Motion, who was 27 years old and a leading distiller at One Touch, started working at the site: "He came from the rural area, he came to Manoki first, so he came down and worked for so many drivers, doing odd jobs. They see he is good and they hire him a next time. Also they know him from before." Motion had been a *baze* member

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<sup>9</sup> However, respecting Imbo's wishes, I cannot disclose any other details about his life. Unfortunately, I was also advised not to interview Imbo's brother by several people in Mathare for reasons I am also not at liberty to disclose here.

since the late 1990s, when he had still been a young boy selling doughnuts (*mandazi* in Kiswahili, a type of doughnut-bun many people eat for breakfast in Kenya) near the public toilet in Manoki. At the age of 17, Motion started working as a tout (the main distiller's assistant), fetching firewood and doing other odd jobs at the site. He was allowed to become a tout (or *conda* in Sheng) because he was friends with a few leading distillers like Kingi. At times, leaders allowed non-relatives to work alongside them. As well as piracy (see above), this was another way for gang leaders to assert their control over the distilling site with regard to bar owners, and these non-relatives could become members in their own right. Motion gradually worked himself up until the non-related bar owners began to hire him directly as a driver. Again, locality comes to the fore as a key marker in working gang formation in Mathare, as access to work at the distilling site, and thus to gang membership, for non-family members primarily depended on intersecting neighbourhood and friendship ties to established distillers (*drivers* in Sheng). Following this trajectory to gain access took more time, as men like Motion had to prove their worth, not just to the fellow gang members, but to the bar owners as well.

In a few cases, friendship connections on their own, without neighbourhood ties, enabled young men from adjacent neighbourhoods to become a gang member and start working as a tout. During my talk with a few of the One Touch gang members at Brayo's bar, Roja ran around the corner and suddenly re-appeared with Cosmos (a 26-year-old One Touch gang member). Cosmos had taken cover inside the small bar, despite the heat, in an attempt to hide his drunken state from me. He stood rocking on his feet while Roja punched him rather hard and stated teasingly: "He is not even Mathare *damu* ('blood' in Kiswahili), he is from the barracks (Moi Air Force Base) ha ha, but we accepted him." Cosmos had started out as a customer, and to support his habit did odd jobs (such as cooling the drums with water or fetching firewood) at the site for 10 Kenyan Shillings (the price of one glass) per job. At first, he had not been regarded as a tout (an assistant distiller); instead he was seen as a mere customer and *baze* member who needed cash to feed his addiction. However, his continued presence at the site and his quality as a comedian had helped him to eventually graduate from *baze* member to assistant distiller, and even to the level of a driver. Both Motion and Cosmos had eventually become leading distillers and gang members without the help of family connections, but through their friendship and neighbourhood ties to local distillers.

I wondered how many members the One Touch gang had. I asked Brayo about this, and he interestingly replied: "Sometimes 50!" Kingi, during a different conversation, also replied in a similar vein, and stated that the gang had between 30 and 50 members. Both Kingi and Brayo claimed that the total depended primarily on the availability of work, which fluctuated according to the seasons, police activity and sugar prices. During the December holiday, for instance, work was usually plentiful and membership could even exceed 50, as bar owners stocked up to meet the Christmas demand. Conversely, the number of steady distillers, approximately 30 on average, shrunk as soon as sugar prices began to rise, which made it harder for bar owners to earn a profit. Throughout my most recent fieldwork periods, the group of steady distillers at One Touch waned from around 35 to 20 members. This decline was a direct result of the legalisation of *chang'aa* (which, as stated above, increased

competition) and the rise of sugar and other food prices that occurred at the same time (Nzuma 2013). The senior drivers and their assistants had family ties to the bar owners, and remained the core distillers. The more occasional distillers were mostly *baze* members with fewer connections to the bar owners. Yet, even the senior gang members with family ties to the bar owners approached work with great anxiety; they constantly worried about it, and spent days on end waiting for an assignment and coaxing bar owners (family and otherwise) into giving them jobs to do. Most of the distillers I worked with did not work for more than three days a week on average, but spent every day of the week down by the site, afraid to miss out on an opportunity.

### **Non-membership: older men and women**

Along with family connections, locality, friendship and the availability of work, age also seemed to be another important criterion for gang membership, as most of the distillers were between 18 and 35 years old. Brayo told me: "Ah, you don't see *wazee* ('old men' in Kiswahili) down there, it is a hard job, too heavy for them." I teasingly reminded him that before the advent of distilling gangs, older women and men had seemed perfectly capable of operating heavy drums and spending days of hard physical labour in the face of the hot sun or torrential rain. Brayo laughed and remembered his mother who had distilled her own alcohol at Kinatiko, day in and day out. "I think nowadays, it is like our job, for *wasee* ('young men' in Sheng). Also, you can't brew when you are 40, you have to leave." Brayo was a bar owner, not a distiller, but given that he was part of the One Touch gang he spoke from the vantage point of a distiller. Brayo was referring here to the division of labour between young, male distillers and older, mostly female, bar owners that occurred after the founding of the One Touch gang. By referring to it as "our job", Brayo and other young men like him were able to claim entitlement and status. Interestingly, Brayo stated that older men had to leave the gang, and here he drew on the locally prevalent notion of working gangs as age-sets of junior men (see more below). The alcohol gangs encountered the problem of age for the first time during my more recent fieldwork periods, as the gang had only come up quite recently. Many of the young men who had joined these gangs late 1990s passed the age of 30 during the time I was conducting research with them for this book. Moreover, leaving the gang had been less difficult before the steep rises in the price of sugar and other foodstuff, and before the emergence of growing competition from other ghetto areas from 2000 onwards. The pressure to leave the gang on gang members over the age of 30 became the main push factor behind the establishment of collective businesses and other projects to help members leave (see more on this in the next few chapters).

Along with age and the other aforementioned factors, gender also determined gang membership, as I never met a woman who considered herself to be, and was taken as, a member of an alcohol gang. In May 2012, I walked down the slippery alleyway that connected the One Touch distilling site to Mau Mau Avenue (see Map 5). A woman in her late 30s, dressed in faded red jeans and an oversized dark blue t-shirt smeared with soot, stood barefoot in the dirty river amidst garbage, holding a tube directly above the mouth of a jerry can. A clear fluid dripped steadily from the tube. Alongside her, two male distillers were doing

the same. A few other male distillers were busy adjusting the fires between the stones, and others still were cooling the drums with river water to prevent them from overheating and exploding. Out of the reach of the *bombs*, a group of men (*baze* members) sat on the ground near the open sewer. They were gambling while drinking *chang'aa*. The sight of the woman operating a drum struck me as highly unusual. I had often observed female bar owners sitting high up on the cliffs supervising the distilling process to make sure the distillers did not steal from them. However, I had never seen a woman among the men doing the same hot, heavy and dirty work. The woman was in the middle of the most delicate phase of distilling (cooling the vapour and directing the alcoholic liquid into the jerry can), and hardly acknowledged my presence, yet I could not take my eyes off her. Mato, a long-term One Touch gang member, squatted beside me and I asked him who she was. He laughed and sneered: "You don't know? Ha ha ha. She is a *sonko* (boss in Sheng), but she does not trust us, she wants to distil her own *kango*."

Mato said that the woman was not regarded as a member of the gang, which was, to me, emphasised by the way the other distillers interacted with her; as usual, they engaged in vivid conversations with each other, sharing jokes, drinking and smoking, but they completely ignored her. At first, I thought that maybe she was not perceived to be part of the One Touch gang because she was a bar owner, but Brayo, Mato and Motion were also bar owners and they were still considered to be gang members. Then, it dawned on me that the distillers at the One Touch distilling site did not regard her as a fellow gang member solely because she was a woman. There are many gangs in Mathare, for instance groups involved in stealing (both in and outside the ghetto), which have both male and female members. As a result, I initially took the woman as a gang member as well. However, distilling was reconstructed solely as a 'young man's job' after the shift in the mid-1990s and the ensuing division of labour between the predominantly female bar owners<sup>10</sup> and the male gang members. Moreover, the distilling style had changed, and gang members nowadays used larger drums and bigger fires, requiring a lot of physical strength. Accordingly, the process of distilling

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<sup>10</sup> Since 2010, more and more men have gradually become gang bosses in Bondeni. Indeed, although women still dominate the industry today, their numbers have fallen significantly. This is the result of two converging developments. Firstly, a few gang members garnered enough social and economic capital to join the ranks of gang bosses. These young men had to pay at least 200 Euros to the group of alcohol bosses from one distilling site, which is an amount of money that only a few could produce and only with the help of family members. Accordingly, the young men who broke through the ranks of alcohol bosses were often designated as heirs or add-ons to existing businesses. At the same time that a few new young, male bosses established themselves, tensions between the Taliban and local gangs in Shantit led to the mass evacuation of a group of what was locally termed 'refugee families from Uganda.' These families had been involved in cooking *busaa* because *chang'aa* (with a higher profit margin) had been tightly controlled by just a few families in Shantit. During the violence, these Ugandan families moved a few 100 metres further down Mau Mau Avenue, and settled in the heart of Bondeni. At the time, this village was still recovering from the post-election violence in 2007/8 and the violent expulsion of the Taliban gang in 2009. As a result, there was little cohesion between gangs in Bondeni Village, and some of the men from these Ugandan families were able to establish themselves as alcohol bosses without much resistance, as long as they paid the same amount as the other starters. On New Year's Eve 2013, however, these families were violently ousted by a joint attack from several gangs. These gangs were hired by the older, predominantly female, gang bosses who sought to reduce the competition within the local *chang'aa* industry. At the time of writing this chapter, these tensions were still ongoing, and the Ugandan families had temporarily settled among other Ugandan families in Kosovo, Mathare, where they continue to sell *chang'aa* and *busaa*.

*chang'aa* and the actual distilling site was locally taken as a 'male' space, whereas selling the drink (and sex) continued to be mostly the domain of women (see Chapter 1). I will delve further into the contingent relationship between men and women in Bondeni, and why certain spaces were constructed as either male or female, in Chapter 5. It is enough to state here that the woman's decision to distil her own *kango* at the One Touch site traversed the gender roles that were dominant in the division of labour with regard to distilling *chang'aa*, and so was met with great contempt by male distillers. This was illustrated to me by both Mato's sneer when he explained her position, and the way the other distillers snubbed her. According to them, she was doing 'their' job, and as such not only denied them work, but also their claim to the distilling process and the space of the gang, all of which had become part of their gendered sense of the self. However, the fact that she continued to distil by herself shows that she was backed up by the other bosses, and this support helped her to resist the resentful stares she received at the site.

### **Gangs as age-sets**

In the section above, Brayo had already alluded to age as an important factor in gang formation, and this emanated from the popular conceptualisation of working gangs as age-sets of junior men in Mathare. In this vein, working gangs were taken as pre-senior social and economic networks through which young men were able to prepare themselves for senior manhood. Accordingly, gang membership was only considered to be appropriate for men within a certain age-bracket. Most of the gangs in Bondeni formed around groups of young, recently circumcised, men who lived and worked together. Kingi elaborated:

It was me and Buda's brother, at One Touch, we shared a room, also with Maich. I was young when I wanted to be circumcised, you know I was too independent hahaha. You remember the other side (in Mathare, across the river)? It was like a *shamba* (vegetable garden in Kiswahili)? We played football, and we swim there, and it had those plants, with white flowers, that is what we used to rub on our penises, and then it get infected. I did that to force circumcision, it gets infected they bring you to *hosi* ('hospital' in Sheng) to cut, they have to because you have a wound there. I was very young, first Shosho did not agree so I used these flowers ha ha. [...] Remember I told you before, I slept in a bed behind her house, and after circumcision I was 14, I moved together with Kevo and Maich. We all worked *rowe*, like leaders. They were a bit older and also circumcised [...] No, not at the same time. That is not how we do it. Ha ha, they torture you. I stayed with Uncle (in his house in the Nairobi ghetto Kangemi), older guys they come to beat you, like at night, and elders come to advice you, how to be a man. Sometimes a lady is brought...that is painful, because you have a wound ha ha. It is an abuse...I don't want that for my son when he is circumcised. You have to eat uncooked food, or *pili pili* ('hot peppers' in Kiswahili) and drink too much, dirty water... so much you vomit...Some boys they die because of infection...even today!

I have discussed circumcision with 21 young men in Mathare with a variety of different ethnic backgrounds (see more below), and many depicted a similar sequence of events as recounted by Kingi, although most boys waited until a parent or elder family member initiated the ceremony. Many of the men with whom I discussed their circumcision were operated at a nearby hospital by a doctor. After this hospital visit, the young men generally moved into a house with slightly older male relatives for the duration of the rite of passage (mostly a week). On the first day, mothers, aunts and other female family members cooked festive dishes and sang and danced together to kick off a week of healing, education and transition. After this day, female members, especially the mother, as most interlocutors claimed, were not allowed to be in contact with the 'boy-in-transition' for the duration of the ceremony. The male family member with whom the boy-in-transition stayed (usually an older cousin or a young uncle) commonly lived in Mathare or one of the other Nairobi ghettos. Three of the men I interviewed still had close relatives (such as parents or grandparents) upcountry, and had travelled to the rural area to undergo this rite of passage. The majority of the young men had, however, stayed in the city and most did not have a father.

In the absence of a father, an older maternal uncle was usually in charge of organising a group of older uncles, grandfathers, elderly male neighbours and elderly male family friends who visited the boy-in-transition in the evenings. For a period of a week, these 'elders', as they were referred to, educated the boy-in-transition on issues related to what they deemed to constitute 'being a man'. What's more, all of the men who had undergone this rite in the city (as opposed to the rural area) spoke of groups of older, recently circumcised, men from the same *mtaa* who came to the house during the week of transition in the middle of the night to beat them and make them do things that would 'toughen them up' (such as eating hot peppers and food waste, or drinking lots of cold and dirty water). After a week or so, most of these young men moved into a house with other male friends near their old family home in Bondeni, and were from now on expected to live independently of their family. Sharing a house with other recently circumcised young men was often a pragmatic solution to dividing the burden of rent and other living costs. These men often joined their peers at the distilling site, and started working as distillers for family alcohol bosses to earn their own money and contribute to school fees and other necessities for younger siblings.<sup>11</sup>

### **From criminal to respected gang member**

In 2005, I conducted research with Buda, who was 28 at the time. As a boy, he had been involved in stealing both in and outside the ghetto. The emic term that people in Mathare used to refer to thieves was *mgondi* ('thief' in Sheng). Gangs involved in stealing were generally termed *wagondi* (plural for *mgondi* in Sheng). A closer look at Buda's transition from *mgondi* to distiller, and the meanings he attached to his (in his words) "transformation", show the

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<sup>11</sup> Many residents told me that in recent years more children in Mathare attend secondary school than ever before as a result of free primary education and scholarship programs by the government. Despite corruption and so called "hidden fees", families are now able to send more children to school than in previous years. However, the transition from high school to college or the job market is still erratic as ever.

importance of circumcision in a young man's life trajectory in Bondeni Village. As noted, the *wagondi* gangs were perceived in a very different light to the alcohol and drug gangs, because stealing was locally considered to be a crime. During the 1990s, local *wagondi* gangs (these are groups that stole inside the ghetto) were mostly comprised of uncircumcised boys, whereas the members of alcohol and drug gangs were mainly circumcised young men. As a consequence, these latter groups were considered to be more mature networks than the local *wagondi* gangs Buda had belonged to as a boy. In 2005, Buda stated that, in his words, circumcision had "reformed" him. During a more recent fieldwork period (July 2010-June 2011), we revisited our old interviews together, and he again repeatedly emphasised how important circumcision had been to him.

Until the age of 16, Buda had lived what he termed, with an intertextual reference to 2pac (2pac 1994), a "thug's life." As a young child, he had dropped out of school because he was severely dyslexic, which was a condition that was unfamiliar to most of his teachers, who had taken him to be lazy and had punished him harshly. From the age of seven, he began to skip school and started begging for money in the city centre. Later, he joined a gang of local *wagondi*, and experimented with all kinds of drugs and alcohol which helped him, in his words: "To get a boostah (by which he meant courage) to go and rob people." He was the last-born in his family, and his older siblings were either busy working with his mother in the thriving family *chang'aa* business or going to school. Feeling like an outcast in his own family, Buda explained that the local *wagondi* gang (which had many different names) became his substitute family when he was aged between seven and 15. He told me that he was able to finally leave the *wagondi* gang, after several failed attempts, when his mother decided that the time to circumcise him had arrived.

People started to notice that I was doing bad things. In Bondeni. They started to complain with my mother. She did not love me then. Most of the guys I know were in a (*wagondi*) gang ...but some were from families who did not have a stealing heart (by which he meant 'not having members who were involved in stealing') and they did not start. My family also did not have a stealing heart but I was young. I only had my brother, the rest was older. I felt peer pressure and I wanted material things. I saw friends in good trousers and I wanted good things too. The easiest way is stealing. People really feared us [...] I think sometimes I could die and I am happy for my change. I could be dead now, shot by police. Or mob justice [...] I changed when I was circumcised because your company changes. You are not allowed to walk with uncircumcised boys. The guys I walked with were big and had big ideas. I changed, no more sniffing glue. I slept everywhere before I was circumcised, after that I had my own place. I felt proud and I did not want to disappoint my mother and my brother. [...] I was ready to change and I was ready for the responsibility. The elders from my community educated me on my behaviour, I felt good about that, I felt I could do it. I was circumcised with Msaja (a friend). We had to eat uncooked *sukuma* (a tough kind of kale) as a test of manhood and samosa with *pili pili* (samosas are Indian

inspired pastries). They just tell you to eat it. When I did bad things after circumcision they (the elders who had educated him) took me and punished me. They could beat me with a *rungu* ('a club' in Kiswahili) or a belt... that is much worse. My mother can't come in to stop them... that would break the custom. One time I decided to lost because of the beating. They took me again and fed me samosa with *pili pili*. [...] I was 17 when I was circumcised... sometimes a young lady is invited to torture you but not in my case. Eeeh! That is too painful. After the clinic there is a big party, women are singing and there is food. You are educated by your elders. My age mates and elders come into my room to congratulate me and give me support. Now I am a grown-up and people fear ('respect' in Sheng) me. Sometimes in Kikuyu custom it is too early and young guys ha ha ha they become very arrogant. It depends on your mentality. I was sooo bad and it was the right time for me, I became good. I became educated. I was mature enough, ready for it. These other guys might enter (*wagondi*) gangs and start to do bad things because now they believe no one can stop them. With me it was the other way around.

Every time Buda talked about circumcision, his chest swelled with pride. The attention he received from the elders and friends helped him to develop a new sense of belonging outside his *wagondi* gang. Following his circumcision, he moved into his own house and worked as an alcohol distiller for his mother. He had already been a *baze* member at the One Touch distilling site, and many gang members also worked for his mother. He thus left the *wagondi* gang of younger uncircumcised boys, and joined the more mature One Touch gang by becoming a full-time alcohol distiller. Accordingly, Buda became more respected by his family, friends and neighbours, and this had a positive impact on his gendered sense of the self.

### **Circumcision and peer pressure among gang members**

A majority of ethnic groups in Kenya practice male circumcision as a rite of passage for boys between the ages of eight and 16 (Spronk 2012:96/181-186). The performance of this rite was not set in stone, but varied immensely according to ethnic group, social class, and the urban and rural setting. These practices were under constant negotiation, not just to fit new and ever-changing social dynamics and settings, but also new belief systems. In the urban settings of Nairobi, young men were, for instance, hardly expected to build their own house, or even move out of the family home. Consequently, people improvised with such practices to suit local contexts and popular perspectives and values.

Mathare constituted a particular kind of urban setting that did enable young men to move into a house of their own after circumcision, since renting was cheaper here compared to other urban neighbourhoods. Most families lived in one-room housing facilities sharing 6 square metres between a minimum of four people. This lack of privacy caused many families here to seek alternative housing for their teenage children. In Mathare, it was deemed to be highly inappropriate for circumcised (or otherwise mature) junior men to sleep in the same room as their sisters and mothers. They were permitted to become sexually active (Spronk

2012: 181-186), and as such were entitled to some form of privacy. Likewise, it was considered to be an affront to local notions of respectability if mature girls (that is girls who had started their menstrual periods) continued to sleep in the same room as their fathers. Although girls were not actively encouraged to engage in sex (often on the contrary), they were considered to be sexually attractive after having their first period. Yet, most households consisted of single mothers, and it was therefore more common for mature boys to leave the house than mature girls. The latter were thus able to continue sharing the single-room house with their single mothers without breaching popular morals, whereas the young men had to move out to protect the honour of their family.

A week after he was circumcised, Kingi moved in with Kevo, who was his childhood friend and a leader of the One Touch gang. Despite his Luo identification, Kevo had been circumcised a year before Kingi. Most of the young men I discussed their circumcision with identified as Kikuyu, three identified as Luo and four with other ethnic groups such as Kamba. Strikingly, the Luo group does not normally practice male circumcision as a rite of passage into adulthood (*see also* Izugbara et al. 2013; Ahlberg & Njoroge 2013; Spronk 2012). Accordingly, many of the young men who identified as Luo in Mathare had not undergone circumcision. Why then did a few men with Luo backgrounds in Bondeni practice male circumcision? There is no easy answer to this question, but some enlightenment has to be sought in what OC, one of the One Touch gang members with a Luo background, dubbed “the effects of peer pressure”:

The Kikuyu they say you are not a man without circumcision, they say we (men with a Luo background) are not men. And they are our friends, all of them they do this and become men, so we do it to feel like a man. Ha ha, you know at Kiharu, they took Richie (a member of the Kiharu gang with a Luo background) to *hosi* (hospital in Sheng) to circumcise, they can't accept you if you are not a man, ha ha ha.

As noted in Chapter 1, a slight majority of Bondeni residents were considered to have a Kikuyu background. OC said that most of his friends who had this background and had undergone this rite of passage made fun of alcohol gang members who were not circumcised. This, according to OC, prompted many of the gang members with Luo backgrounds to follow suit, and they went to a nearby hospital to undergo ‘the cut’, as it was commonly referred to. OC thus revealed that circumcision even determined gang membership at a distilling site, further illustrating the important role of this rite of passage in men-to-men relationships and gang networks in Bondeni. The representation of uncircumcised men as ‘boys’ in Bondeni was drawn from the political discourse that was forged by the Kenyatta era (1964-1978). This label was aimed at pitting the Luo group against the Kikuyu group (Ahlberg & Njoroge 2013; Throup & Hornsby 1998; Wa Wamwere 2003), and continues to be appropriated by politicians, mainly with a Kikuyu background, in political discourse today in an attempt to discredit their counterparts with a Luo background. These imaginings resonated deeply with many of the young men in Bondeni, and shaped popular ideas on what constituted being a

man. OC concluded that he too had been circumcised and added with a smile: "Kikuyu girls are so beautiful, they can't accept you if you are not circumcised."

Circumcision was a widespread practice in Bondeni (and in most of the other ghetto villages in Mathare). It marked a phase of growing independence among young men. Groups of circumcised young men in specific localities such as Manoki formed small networks of friends that often became part of existing or emerging gangs. A few years after his circumcision, Kingi founded the One Touch gang with the other local young men who worked *rowe*. In this vein, we can understand their move to an independent site as an act to underline their newly-acquired social status as circumcised men in relation to their older female relatives who were also their bosses. Kingi, Kevo and Maich were the lead distillers at the One Touch distilling site during its inception, because they were connected to the most influential bar owners (like Shosho Kingi and Kevo's mother), and they subsequently received more assignments than other distillers. They formed a posse, namely a small group of friends within a *baze*, and together with other posses (other small groups of young, mostly circumcised, men from the Manoki area) formed the One Touch *baze*. Some men referred to their posse as *riika*<sup>12</sup>, which means age group in the Kikuyu language (*see also* Lonsdale 2003:56-60). The term *riika* is connected to the Kikuyu word *ituika*, which denotes a generational transformation of power (Kenyatta 1938:196; Lonsdale 1992:344-350). Both concepts have been highly politicised, especially since the Mau Mau struggle during the colonial era. Some young Mau Mau fighters used these terms to grasp their own unease and impatience with the older nationalist leaders (*see also* Ogot 2003:10; Lonsdale 2003:56-60). Nowadays, these concepts are often deployed in popular discourse to describe the frustrations of growing groups of young leaders in relation to established elites (Kagwanja 2005). In the following chapters, I will flesh out and elucidate why and how these notions resonated with young men in conceptualising their deteriorating social position. For now, it suffices to state that the use of the term *riika* with respect to a posse did not include all of the young men of the same age or in the same locality, and nor did it refer to all of the young men who were circumcised around the same time. The new meanings that were brought to *riika* in Mathare, that is denoting a small group of young men who started living together after circumcision, were wrought by the social and economic changes in this ghetto during the 1990s. The Sheng term that these young men also used was *mabeshite* ('friends' in Sheng). Although this word was often used in very broad ways, and could also include people one hardly knew, it was also used to describe the ties of brotherhood within these posses.

The *baze* was constituted of a fluid network of small groups (posses) of neighbourhood friends (*mabeshite*) through which its members sought the social and economic support they previously received from their families (especially from their mothers). Kingi reminisced: "We (the posse) worked *rowe*, like a company ha ha ha and if we had money we cooked together. Sometimes I ate at my Shosho. When I had a girl, I tell Kevo and Maich to go somewhere else, ha ha. One time I had a girl for two weeks ha ha ha." Tellingly, these men were not expected to

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<sup>12</sup> The term *riika* was also more broadly used by ghetto residents to describe people who were the same age – and not only by those who spoke the Kikuyu language.

contribute financially to the family household other than doing chores, such as fetching water in the morning or picking up younger siblings from school, and perhaps chipping in for school fees for these brothers and sisters. In return, they could not, however, rely on being catered for, even though they would still occasionally join in with family meals. In a way, their relative independence relieved the family household of another mouth to feed, as these young men were expected to largely fend for themselves.

As noted above, a majority of gang members in Mathare started their gang membership by living with other gang members after circumcision. In this vein, circumcision can be taken as an initiation rite into the gang, and can thus be compared to the wide variety of initiation practices (such as beat ins, gang rapes, or the act of committing murder on behalf of the gang) among gangs in other cities worldwide (*see also* Vigil 1996). Similar to many other types of initiation among gangs worldwide, circumcision in Bondeni marked the transition from boy to young and independent man and member of a brotherhood, and provided proof of courage, commitment and perseverance. This may, to some extent, explain why young men with Luo backgrounds also practiced circumcision; to them, it meant initiation into the working gang. From the day these young men became gang members, their everyday lives were geared towards garnering social – connections, skills and status – and economic capital – money, long-term employment/businesses and material goods – (*see also* Bourdieu 1986) in order to gradually gain full independence from the gang. Aiming to leave the gang was thus an inherent part of becoming a gang member for the working gangs in Mathare. This stands in stark contrast to the way some gangs in other parts of the world (such as the USA) regard leaving a gang. In a personal discussion with a former leader of the Gangsters Disciples Detroit in March 2014, this young African-American man told me that leaving the gang had involved an extremely sensitive and long journey for him, as it was commonly taken by his peers to be defection and thus a sign of ultimate betrayal. Likewise, the Mungiki gangs were commonly perceived to punish defectors (Kwamboka 2004). Accordingly, the coupling of gang membership with the objective of leaving the gang, which is central to working gangs in Mathare, seems to be quite exceptional with respect to many local and international gang practices.

Many working gang members in Mathare took several steps towards independence and, as such, towards achieving senior manhood, including marriage and becoming a father. Accordingly, these young men slowly grew into their role as men during their gang membership with regard to their extended family (parents, wives, children, family-in-law and so on) and to their local 'community.' The responsibilities they had in relation to their own wives and children, and to their parents and other family members, steadily increased as these gang members grew older and obtained more social and economic capital. Most men were expected to leave the gang in or around their early 30s at the latest in order to fully take up their role as senior men. When asked about this during a focus group discussion in January 2011, the One Touch gang members imagined and defined being a fully recognised man mostly in terms of: 'being a provider', 'making family decisions', 'helping younger and poorer relatives' (financially and with advice), and 'taking part in and chairing community activities.' Gang membership thus structured the process of becoming senior men in Bondeni, helping

men to progressively move from boyhood to junior and, eventually, senior manhood. As a consequence, leaving the gang was not only part of becoming a gang member, but was also part of becoming a senior man. The next chapter will, however, also reveal that this was extremely difficult.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter traced the history of the emergence of a particular working gang, namely the alcohol gang, and looked at its role and position in the local political economy. It first examined why distilling alcohol was considered to be work in popular binaries between licit and illicit practices to generate income. These binaries drew on state law and dominant discourses on morality, but reimagined certain aspects to fit local experiences of what constituted crime and work. In these conceptualisations, distilling alcohol was taken as a respectable way to earn an income for young men. This was partly informed by the failure of the law inside the ghettoscape, following entrenched illegal practices by local police, such as taking bribes from alcohol and drugs bosses and killing criminal suspects on sight. The notion of respectability with regard to alcohol distilling was also shaped by the dangers involved in stealing, which was one of the few other options open to young men to generate an income. Working for an alcohol gang was taken to be a safer and financially more stable option, and contributed to an industry that directly and indirectly fed most of the families in this ghetto village.

The rise of the alcohol gang marked a shift in labour divisions. Increasingly, women, and also a few older men, were in charge of selling the alcohol, whereas young men mostly started out their independent lives by working for these gang bosses. This chapter showed that gang membership was predominantly determined by family ties to gang bosses, although other pathways to becoming a gang member were also relatively commonplace. In contrast to other types of gang, such as brokers of stolen goods and thieves, the alcohol gang was a male only space. Locally, the alcohol gang was taken as an age-set for recently circumcised men. This shows how rites of passage were reinvented to fit local experiences and notions of manhood. The fact that gang members with Luo backgrounds also practiced this rite of passage reveals the fluidity and contingency of ethnic identifications, and underscores the fact that these groups were multi-ethnic and mostly based on locality and notions of work. Within the space of the gang, young men enacted popular and shifting notions of manhood that marked major transitions in their life. Interestingly, young men like OC did not feel any less Luo for adhering to such notions, despite the fact that these deviated from the cultural practices generally associated with their ethnic backgrounds and despite the vigorous debates about this practice in dominant political discourses. For many young ghetto men (regardless of their ethnic background), circumcision was part of an initiation into working gangs, and these groups structured the processes of becoming senior men by helping these young men to garner social and economic capital, with the goal being to eventually establish themselves as head of their (extended) family. This chapter revealed that all of the young men I conducted research with shared the desire to achieve this status, and this longing significantly shaped their individual social navigation trajectories.

At the same time, however, these men depended mostly on women for access to work and to earn money. Even their performances of manhood within the space of the gang often took place under the powerful gaze of women watching over their alcohol. These locally divergent gender relations – as compared to dominant gender roles – brought about extreme tensions between young men and women that will be further explored in the following chapters. This chapter also revealed that the process of becoming a gang member was intertwined with the process of leaving the gang, and both were key steps in becoming senior men. In the next chapter I will reveal why alcohol gang membership was increasingly considered to be a trap by young men in Mathare during the first decade of the new millennium, unlike attitudes in the 1990s. I will look at both individual and collective and failed and successful trajectories constructed by young, male gang members to try and leave the working gang. This will also help to provide insight into the mounting violence in Mathare during the same period, as these young men grew older and became more frustrated with their junior positions.