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CHAPTER 4: Showing Success: The Continuous Struggle to Leave the Gang.

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we have seen that alcohol distillers rarely made enough money to invest in the micro-businesses that would allow them to earn a steady income outside the gang and eventually leave. The desire to leave bound all of these young gang members together and emanated from a longing to be recognised as senior men. As noted in the previous chapter, working gangs were locally perceived as age-sets for recently circumcised men who were on their way to senior manhood, but who were still considered to be junior men. Access to a micro-loan programme, initiated by gang members and led by ex-gang members, as well as training in business skills, did help a few young men to leave the gang. Most of the programme's participants, however, were set back by emergencies that consumed most of their business loans. This leads us on to the following question: was it perhaps easier for gang members who made more money to build a livelihood outside their gang? I explore this question below by taking a close look at a gang of drug dealers in Kosovo, Mathare. These men earned three times the money of the *chang'aa* distillers, and also had more free time as they generally worked in pre-scheduled shifts of eight hours. Nevertheless, despite more time and money, most of these drug dealers also struggled to leave their gang.

In order to examine why it was just as hard for drug dealers to leave a gang, I need to describe the practice of ranking among gangs. This will help to bring out how the individual social statuses of young men hinged on their ranking in and of groups. Then, I will proceed to look at the life trajectory of a drug dealer in an attempt to explore the difficulties encountered in trying to leave a gang. Paramount among these predicaments and anxieties was the fear of becoming redundant in relation to women. This chapter thus aims to reveal the great lengths that many relatively wealthier gang members went to in order to obtain and maintain a high social status in relation to their cohorts. In particular, consideration is given to how this was tied to the challenges that these men encountered in trying to leave the gang, and why only a few of them have been relatively successful.

Ranking: a purported hierarchy between gangs

Gangs distilling *chang'aa*, such as the One Touch group, occupied the bottom-most tier with respect to other gangs in Mathare, as their work was dirty, hard and provided little in the way of income in comparison. *Kurank* is a Sheng verb (derived from 'ranking') to indicate that a person, an object or a group is highly regarded. If someone says: '*namrank huyo jamaa*' in Mathare Sheng this means: 'I have a high regard for that guy.' Taking a closer look at the practice of ranking, and how groups of young men in Mathare were engaged in maintaining their status with regard to each other, will help to unravel part of the answer

as to why gang members who earned more than the *chang'aa* distillers still seemed to be trapped within the space of the gang and, as such, in a position of junior manhood.

I became aware of the practice of ranking between different types of 'working' gang (alcohol, *matatu* touts or drugs) when I met a group of heroin dealers at the Police Depot football field, locally dubbed just 'Depot', near Kosovo in August 2008 (see map). Mwangi, a youth leader at Safi, asked me to accompany him to visit a group of friends in Kosovo after we had watched a football match at the venue. I was hesitant at first, because Kosovo was notorious at the time for its great insecurity. Mwangi assured me that this group had been organised as vigilantes and they would guarantee my safety. We thus walked from Depot to the sloping dirt road that cut Kosovo into two halves. Walking down, I admired the impressive variety of colourful kiosks, butchers stalls and video halls built from brightly painted iron sheets located on both sides of the rough path. The fresh colours of the houses and shops in Kosovo therefore differed completely from the rusty and dusty shacks that lined the streets in Bondeni Village. Down the hill, we entered a bar near the riverside with the name Ruff Skwad Beach Pub written in bright white letters set against a shiny purple background. Inside, I was met by red and blue disco lights, and saw a neat collection of clean and intact garden tables and plastic chairs. A professional counter took up one wall, and a fridge containing chilled sodas was positioned near a couch for lazing on. The beers and the other available drinks on display behind the counter gave the impression of an uptown bar in the city centre. A few men approached me. They were dressed in clean jeans, English league football shirts and flashy, clean sneakers, and they wore silver-like chunky chains around their necks. They escorted me to the "garden", as they called a patch of green behind the bar near the dirty and smelly Mathare River. They had organised a few chairs for us outside, and presented me with the first chilled bottle of beer I have ever enjoyed inside the Mathare ghetto. While passing the inside of the bar, my eye had been drawn to not one, but two, big plasma TV screens locked behind robust and freshly painted metal cages, and outside we could still hear the music that was softly coming from what sounded like brand new speakers. I was amazed. These men, this bar, the cold beer in my hand and the 'river garden' did not correspond with what I generally associated with gang members in Mathare.

At the time, my Sheng was still rudimentary, and my friend kindly translated while the young men from what I came to know as the Ruff Skwad gang fired questions at me. One of them uttered in amazement: "You work with *rowe* ('the riverside' in the Kikuyu language, where alcohol was distilled)? Ha ha, that is down, completely down. We are not like that, AT ALL!" They continued to make fun of me because I worked with, what they termed, dirty drunkards, and I realised that the word 'down' carried multiple meanings and was appropriated by these men to set themselves apart from *wasee wa rowe* ('guys from the riverside' in Sheng, also sometimes stated as: *wasee wa down*). Although we were also sitting near the riverside, and as such 'down' the valley, these young men positioned themselves as 'up' on the other end of a putative hierarchy of gangs. I later learned that the Ruff Skwad gang dramatically shot up an imagined ranking scale when the heroin trade was first introduced to Mathare. Drugs like marijuana, cocaine and heroin had long been

available in the area. However, it was not until 2001 that an open field, which was later dubbed Nigeria (after the alleged predominance of Nigerians in the international drug trade), was established.¹ This ground, which was situated behind the Al Badr gas station,² was easily accessible from outside for people who wanted to buy the product yet were fearful of going deeper inside the ghetto. Business flourished, and the *wadosi* ('bosses' in Sheng) looked to hire new dealers. As it happened, many *wadosi* had connections to and relatives living in Kosovo, and members from the Ruff Skwad gang were the first to be hired to work at Nigeria. The opportunity to deal heroin radically transformed the position of the Ruff Skwad gang, as money started to pour in on a steady basis. Gang members easily made between 500 and 1000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. five to ten Euros) a day, and they also practiced 'piracy' (stealing from their bosses and selling the product themselves) at times, through which they could double their earnings.

Within a few years, the Ruff Skwad gang established itself in Mathare as one of the most stylish and visible gangs, and the beach pub near the riverside became a pinnacle of pride to its members, with the two flat screen TVs underlining their status. To illustrate the difference between the two gangs at the opposite ends of this purported ranking scale: the One Touch members passed their free time drinking cheap liquor (*chang'aa*) while squatting near an open sewer. They usually gambled directly on the muddy ground without even a cover to shelter them from the rain. If it did not rain, they were still sprinkled with the wet and hot debris released from the drums in regular intervals (the 'bombs' in Sheng). Most days, the sun scorched the earth and slowly cooked the human waste that was openly flowing into the river beside them. Add to this the heat and smoke coming from the drums just a few metres away, and the environment these men worked in, and in which they spent their free time, can justly be called dismal. In stark contrast, the Ruff Skwad members generally relaxed with either a cold beer, which was a very expensive drink inside the ghetto, or with *miraa* ('khat' in Kiswahili), which was also an expensive substance, while watching football on one of the flat screens inside the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub. Given this contrast, one might imagine that a distiller from Bondeni would aspire to be a drug dealer in Kosovo. One day, I visited the One Touch distilling site with a Ruff Skwad gang member, and, after he left, a few of the One Touch men shared with me their envy of his *swag*. This is a Sheng term that means 'style', and is inspired by international Hip Hop slang. It refers to dress, speech, movement and, sometimes, even attitude (*see also* Mose 2013:112). This type of *swag* was out of reach for most alcohol distillers. For instance, a new football shirt (Ruff Skwad's trademark outfit) cost between 800 and 1600 Kenyan Shillings (depending on the team), and was thus unaffordable to an alcohol distiller who did not earn more than 1900 a week (including potential piracy earnings). However, mobility between different types of gang in different localities rarely occurred. As discussed in Chapter 2, membership of a gang, and thus access to the work the gang was involved in, was largely determined by

¹ I cannot delve into the history of how this ground was established, and by whom, for reasons of privacy and safety.

² In the course of this research project, its name was changed to Amana, but the place was often still referred to as Al Badr.

a person's locality and concomitant (family) networks, namely where they lived and what their family connections were.

From selling drugs to selling craft

The young man from Ruff Skwad I took to visit the One Touch distilling site was called Malik. I met Malik in August 2008 when he was a 21-year-old drug dealer. Since then, he has tried to leave the gang by selling crafts at tourist markets (popularly dubbed Maasai markets) in the uptown areas of Nairobi, but has never been able to make the transition completely. He did stop selling drugs in March 2009, and as such officially left this working gang. However, he continually struggled to make ends meet, despite his access to large loans through revolving credit schemes³ (*e.g.* Kimuyu 1999) and support from his family and friends. He was therefore always contemplating a return to dealing drugs, and kept close ties with the gang throughout this period. Looking at his trajectory shows the obstacles that many of the wealthier gang members in Mathare like Malik encountered in trying to leave the gang, and why leaving proved to be an incessant process for them, despite their relative wealth.

Malik's decision to leave the gang followed the death of a drug addict in front of him after he had just supplied him with a shot of heroin. According to Malik, the man "already had a weak body, so then he injected and he died because his body could not take the drugs anymore." Malik became very depressed and, after consulting his best friend and fellow drug dealer Blue, left the gang. He told me later:

When I saw this man die, it was not a first time, it is ...it happens many times at *grouo* ('an open field' in Sheng with which he meant the drug-trading field dubbed Nigeria in Mathare), but it shocked me and I never wanted to go back. I was thinking, how can I have a future with this. The money is good but we also lose it, the same, same day, we are *livest* ('prone to enjoy life' in Sheng), we live a life of bachelors. So how is this going to help me? I want to live in a stone house, and have a wife and children. I don't think *grouo* can help me.

³ The revolving credit scheme is a ubiquitous institution in Nairobi ghettos (and elsewhere in Kenya) that was historically initiated by groups of women (*e.g.*, Ellis et al. 2007). The first *chamas* (as these groups are dubbed in local Kiswahili) in Mathare emerged during the 1960s, and were inspired by the *Harambee* discourse instigated by the Kenyatta government (1964-1978) as part of its nationalist project. The mainstay of this discourse denoted the inability of any individual to progress without the help of fellow citizens, and was directed at organising people into groups within which members contributed the little they had (either in weekly instalments or through big fundraising functions) to help each other progress collectively and individually through, often quite intricate and elaborate, savings, loans and fundraising schemes. Other popular terms for such groups were self-help – development – groups, merry-go-rounds or cooperatives. In many cases, these *chamas* were dominated by women. Yet, more recently, and especially since the establishment of youth funds (*see also* Okoth et al. 2013) and other community development funds and loan schemes (by, for instance, NGOs such as Jamii Bora), young men have increasingly joined the women-dominated *chamas* or followed their example by forming their own as registered youth groups and/or community-based organisations.

Ever since I met Malik, his greatest desire in life was to get married and become a father. Most Ruff Skwad dealers had already fathered more than one child in their young lives, and some were also married to the mothers of their children. Yet, they, as Malik voiced it, lived “a life of bachelors.” By this, Malik meant that they spent their nights at the pub, chewing khat and peanuts or drinking beer, watching football and eating roasted meat, all considered to be typical ‘manly’ practices in Mathare (and, indeed, in Kenya – *see also* Mboya 2013). Malik thought that getting paid on a daily basis encouraged this lifestyle, and shared with me that he wanted to be a different kind of husband and father than his friends. At 21, he feared he was already getting too old. He said: “I need to become a father soon to be a man in ghetto, people are already talking...ha ha, all my friends they have kids, and me I am just a single... no...I want to marry and have kids.” As a well-earning drug dealer, Malik had moved to a two-room apartment in a stone tenement building in Kariobangi, a few kilometres from Mathare. This was, he told me, a first step towards fulfilling his dream of becoming a father. He said: “The first night I listened to music in a stone house, it is so much better, I had no idea, but the *mabati* (‘iron sheets’ in Kiswahili) make noise (rattle) when you play loud music, ha ha ha, this is where I want my children to grow up, in a stone house, not in ghetto.” Leaving the work of dealing drugs indicated leaving the gang, but Malik continued to be a *mbeshte* (‘a male best friend’ in Sheng) at the Ruff Skwad *baze*, and spent most of his nights watching football with the Ruff Skwad gang members at the beach pub near the river in Kosovo.

After leaving the gang, Malik struggled to pay the rent for his house outside the ghetto, which cost twice as much as a similar space inside Mathare. He was, however, adamant that he would not move back to Kosovo, because living in a stone house and leaving the gang were part of realising his dream of getting married and becoming a father. As a consequence, these were key steps in his social navigation trajectory with a view to achieving senior manhood. He also did not want to lose face among his friends, as moving back to the ghetto would be the equivalent of admitting defeat. He feared that he would be viewed as a failure for not making it outside the gang and the ghetto, even if this was the material reality he lived every day. Gang members not only dreamt of leaving the gang, but all also expressed the goal of leaving the ghetto as well. This shows that many men were trying to strike a balance between pursuing future aspirations and maintaining their status in the now. Indeed, many of them regarded a strong position as a junior man as a key step in achieving senior manhood.

Malik hustled doing odd jobs to get by, before he finally decided to join his father's workshop in Kosovo. His father was a relatively successful craftsman who sold necklaces and other beadwork jewellery at the various Maasai markets in the city centre and other affluent areas. Malik's decision to join his father's workshop seemed to be a logical and obvious step at first glance, yet he had a very difficult relationship with his father, and it took him more than a year to finally decide to join his business. He did so eventually because he had met a girl in Kosovo and wanted to get married at the age of 22. Other

ventures⁴ had failed to provide him with a long-term prospect of earning money. Malik's father treated him as a servant from the start, and he was given little to no leeway to sell his own handmade jewellery. Competition at the market was high, and Malik's father told him that he could not afford to help his son for fear of losing business himself. In practice, this meant that Malik never made enough money to sustain himself and his girlfriend. Gradually, Malik also began to doubt whether he was his 'father's' biological son, and both the persistent lack of money and uncertainty about his family relationships sparked a highly troubled period in his life that eventually also had implications for his marriage.

'I scored two goals': becoming a father on a football field

A few months after he had left the Ruff Skwad gang, Malik met a beautiful young woman called BT, who immediately moved into his house in Kariobangi. He and his girlfriend, who he proudly called his "wife", both worked to generate an income for rent, food and even for a few, what were locally taken to be, luxury items such as a fridge, a computer and a microwave. BT worked as a hairdresser in a hair salon in one of Nairobi's back-alleys. It was not a fancy place, but she had a steady customer base and worked long hours. There was tension between the couple from the start, as BT felt uncomfortable because she made more money than Malik, which was a sentiment that Malik shared and felt deeply frustrated about. She soon began to hide her income from him, and only contributed to the rent and food when Malik clearly could not. After a few months, BT left Malik for another man, but when she found out she was pregnant returned to his house on the day I arrived back in Kenya in July 2010 for a long period of fieldwork. Malik and I met in the city centre for a beer, and he told me that he feared the baby was not his, and asked me whether it was possible to do a DNA test on a foetus. He really wanted to become a father and continue in the marriage, but felt unsure about BT's love for him. On 13 January 2011, Malik became a father of twin girls while he was playing a friendly football match in Mathare. He phoned me that evening to announce the birth as follows: "ha ha ha ha, you can't imagine. I scored two goals, one for each daughter. I honoured them with my game. You have to come tomorrow, we can go see my daughters."

The next day, we met in Nairobi city centre and bought food and medical supplies for his girlfriend and daughters. Malik had taken BT to Nazareth Hospital, which is a maternity hospital 25 kilometres outside Nairobi and widely known for the high quality of its maternity unit. He explained to me that it was the hospital his girlfriend had chosen. He had agreed because he did not want her to give birth at the Pumwani maternity hospital close to Kosovo, which was locally perceived to be a facility for 'poor people.' Indeed, he was set on giving BT the best care, even if it would cost him more than he could afford, and even if travelling to and from the facility took three hours in total. Malik had to travel to the hospital every day to take food to his girlfriend, along with other items needed for his premature daughters, such as nappies and medicines. Most hospitals in Kenya only provide the absolute basics, and the food on offer is of such a low nutritious value and quantity that

⁴ Such as sweeping roads as part of a failed youth employment scheme in Nairobi – and nationwide – that was linked to the city council of Nairobi; *see also* Majiwa 2011; Kasarani Youth Congress 2009.

a woman nursing a baby (or two) needs supplementary food items from outside. This meant that, for weeks on end, Malik could not go to the market and sell his crafts, as he had to take care of his girlfriend and daughters in hospital. Moreover, the Nazareth unit is more expensive than Pumwani, and the bill was enormous, whereas the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF –Mathauer et al. 2008) covered only a small percentage of this. As a consequence, upon his new family's discharge from hospital, Malik was broke, and started his life as a father deeply in debt.

Nonetheless, Malik was elated, bordering on relieved, that he was a father of two girls at the age of 24. He told me over and over again that his family and friends in Mathare had already considered him to be old to become a father, with most of his peers taking that step by the age of 20. Malik confided in me that he now felt that his social position as a man was more secure with regard to his community. Indeed, I noticed that inside Kosovo – where he still spent most of his time - he walked taller than before, a proud father of two girls, although in private he constantly worried about his relationship.

Who is the head of the house?

A few months after the babies were born, Malik's girlfriend resumed her work at the hair salon in the city centre. A housemaid was hired to take care of the young girls, and Malik concentrated on his craft business that he operated from his father's workshop in Kosovo. According to Malik, BT increasingly expected him to provide for daily expenses, while she saved her own wages and did not reveal to him how much she earned. Burdened with debt, he never sold enough to meet all their costs, and this caused him to search frantically for other ways to earn money. This dominated our conversations. He was so desperate that he even considered going back to dealing heroin, but Blue, his best friend and a fellow Ruff Skwad gang member, advised against it and stated in clear terms: "You came this far without *grouo*, we don't want you back, because you will never leave. We are proud you made it out, you are like a role model, we can't have you back." In the same discussion with Blue, Malik explained to me that he did not mind that BT did not disclose her earnings to him or that he was expected to be the sole provider for the household; in fact, he expected this of himself. This position fit in well with the dominant imaginaries on masculinities that he and many other young men in Mathare adhered to. "You know what we say? Ha ha, *chake ni chake, changu ni chenu* ('what is hers is hers, what is mine is ours' in Kiswahili). So yes, we need to provide and they can ask us anything. Even for hair!" Blue and Malik laughed about this, and tried to trump each other by confessing to the extraordinary items they had paid for during past relationships, which varied from beauty and styling products to school fees.

Yet, Malik remained strikingly silent during this discussion about the fact that he had recently paid off a 40,000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 400 Euros) debt for his girlfriend, which was money he had intended to use to pay the bride's wealth to his mother-in-law. On top of this, Malik had recently replaced a perfectly good sofa because his wife-to-be preferred a different style, requiring the spending of another 25,000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 250 Euros) within the space of three months. These are just a few examples of the

money Malik spent, seemingly at the request of his wife-to-be, on items that were commonly deemed to be somewhat of a luxury. Accordingly, he had already been heavily in debt with several local saving groups on the day his baby daughters were discharged from the hospital. He paid the hospital bills by taking on even more loans from different savings groups in different localities to avoid exposure. This was a highly dangerous endeavour, because these groups generally did not hesitate to involve the police in order to settle outstanding loans. Indeed, many people have ended up in prison by acting in that way. Malik thus took exceptional risks, because he imagined himself as the sole provider:

My wife, she thinks she can be the head because she makes more money. She works in town, and is proud. But even if she makes more money, I am the husband. She can give me advice, but I am the head, the neck can't take over the head. I can't give her permission to do what she wants, she can't take that freedom. Money is not the head of the house. But she thinks it is, she makes more money, she wants to complain, so we fight. She thinks money is the head of the house, but I am.

Malik went well out of his way to show BT and others that he was able to provide and should thus be regarded as a man according to local notions of manhood. The modes in which he and many other young ghetto men continued to affirm the role of the provider against all odds stemmed from a deep desire to still feel in charge. Malik's case was not unique; many men I worked with – both alcohol distillers and drug dealers – overspent in their performance of popular positions of manhood.

Many young men in Mathare grew up without a father, but nevertheless harboured ideas of manhood that defined men as heads of households and main breadwinners for, and protectors of, women and children (*see also* Silberschmidt 2004: 45-7/51, 2001; Hunter 2006: 102; Lindsay and Miescher 2003: 20). Most young men in Mathare carried multiple burdens and tried to care of a grandmother, a mother, several sisters, a wife, and children. Cast as 'ghetto boys' in dominant discourse, and blocked from social and economic opportunities to establish themselves as senior men in society, marriage and family were often perceived to be key domains in which they could still try and claim power. Trying at least denoted not giving up, but not being able to live up to dominant standards of masculinity exacerbated the sense these men shared of being stuck in the space of the gang.

Malik was continually frustrated, as necessity often forced his girlfriend to supplement his earnings. During these incidents, she accused him, not entirely without reason, of spending his money on drinking, clothes and football. It did not take long before Malik and BT were arguing over money almost every night, and one day he came back home from the market to find his house empty; his girlfriend had left him again, and this time she had taken his daughters and everything else in the home. The first night that he slept rough in his own house, Malik made a decision. A friend from Kosovo had found work in Qatar as a driver, and had told Malik that he made more money in a month than Malik

did selling crafts in a year. The next day, Malik went to the city centre with a broken heart and sold his place at the Maasai market. With the money, he bought a forged driving licence and hotel management certificate, and, at an unremarkable office in a backstreet off River Road, applied for a job in Qatar. He told me:

Maybe she wants to come back, if I have money. If we did not have children, I could let her go, this is the second time she leaves me because of money, she betrays me, I can't trust her, love is not good for me. But for my daughters, I cannot leave them. They are my angels. I want to earn money for their education, so they have a life different than me. But how can I take back my wife? Nobody trusts her now, they will look at me, ehhhh you know like you are the husband, but she can do this to you? My mother cannot talk with her now. We can't live in a family like that. But maybe I take her back. I love her. I want to be a father to my girls, they are my daughters. I can go to Qatar, and work, hahaha even handle dead bodies. I know people *majuu* ('the West' in Sheng) they can't do that. Just let me go there and I can face all the challenges, as long as I know I make money for them, enough, so they can go to school by bus.

Malik's girlfriend had left him because, as he saw it, she regarded him as a failed provider and thus a failed father, husband and man. Tellingly, he reassured me time and again that he had been a good man, had always come home in time to see his daughters before bedtime, and had shared all his money with his girlfriend. Even if this had not been the case all the time, his repeated attempts to convince me, and more so himself, that he had been a 'good man', all the more revealed his anxieties over his position as a man. It also shows how he tried to claim the moral upper hand by taking up a position of victimhood and blaming his girlfriend for his predicament. This position was, however, short-lived, as he also confided in me that he had to agree with her: he had failed as a provider. This made him feel extremely insecure about his social position as a man in relation to his peers and family. He constantly worried about what others thought of him, what they knew about his problems, and whether they too judged him as a failed father and husband, and, as such, a failed man. Not being able to live up to popular standards of masculinity caused Malik so much stress that he began to lose weight, and he also developed severe headaches and stomach pains.

In the end, Malik never went to Qatar, because it had been a scam. After he made repeated efforts to reconcile with her, BT and his twin daughters returned to him briefly. Yet, once again, the couple endured a turbulent period during which harsh words and blows were exchanged. Malik finally went for a DNA test, because he felt he could not leave his wife if he was the biological father of the now two-year-old girls. The test concluded that the children were not his biological daughters, and this eventually compelled him to separate from his wife and to stop acting as the father of the babies. Malik was left devastated, broke and extremely insecure:

I am back to square one. My mum tells me, I will get new twins, beautiful girls like them. I miss them so much. It is hard to get used to be without them. It is hard to trust again. How can I? I don't know why I have this life, I lost everything. I am so confused. No one is on my side, not my dad, not my wife, I can't talk to my friends, maybe my mum, but this life is too hard. Why is this happening to me? I sometimes can't believe this is all happening to me. I can even cry when I am alone.

At the time of writing this chapter, Malik was still contemplating re-joining the Ruff Skwad gang and dealing heroin again, given that selling crafts did not even earn him enough for his own upkeep. He struggled each month to pay rent for his house outside Mathare, but still did not want to move back to Kosovo, although he spent most of his time there and survived by eating at his mother's house. He told me: "If not for my Mum, I don't know how I will be living in the past few months." Besides food, she gave him some money each month to help him pay the rent, as she too was proud to have a son who lived outside the ghetto. Yet, Malik, to his own embarrassment, was still considered to be a bachelor at 27, not just by his parents, but also by his peers. Indeed, everyone close to him knew exactly what had been going on in his life, despite his efforts to conceal his ill fate.

Overspending by taking out loans had been one of Malik's key strategies in his social navigation struggles geared towards achieving senior manhood. As a consequence, performing the role of provider was his main mode of negotiating the dominant discourse on masculinities, enacting fatherhood and claiming his status as a man, but this had backfired dramatically. Even after failing to live up to his girlfriend's expectations, as well as his own, Malik continued to endow this dominant standard with certainty and judged himself accordingly. This was further affirmed by the way his friends, family and neighbours appraised him according to this standard. In compensation, he invested increasing amounts of money and time in dressing well and going out with Blue and other Ruff Skwad gang members. He went to reggae clubs, football matches in city stadiums and even to Uganda to watch the Harambee Stars (Kenya's national team) lose against Uganda's national team. Facing more and more obstacles, Malik increasingly sought refuge in the space of the gang, and this denoted investing valuable resources in concomitant bonding practices. He repeatedly could not pay his rent, yet continued to spend money on going out and dressing in a stylish manner because, as he put it: "I can't lose my value, I have to look smart to keep my value as a man in ghetto, ha ha *kuwaonyesha picha poa* ('to show them a good picture' in Sheng)." After losing almost everything in life, dressing well and going out with his fellow gang members became one of the only modes available to Malik to enact manhood and maintain some kind of social status, at least with regard to his peers. I have observed this mode among many Ruff Skwad and One Touch gang members who faced similar dilemmas.

On fake and real manhood

Performing *swag* ('style' in Sheng) became a way for Malik to claim power as a *mbeshte* ('friend' in Sheng) with regard to his peers (*mabeshte* in Sheng) and counter the impact of what he considered to be his deteriorating social position as a junior man. *Swag* was a significant mode through which young ghetto men were able to claim power with regard to peers inside the ghetto. This in part emanates from how they counterposed ghetto *swag* to the style performances of wealthy youths in Kenya. Although sharing many commonalities, the ghetto youths experienced deep distinctions between wealthy youths and themselves, and often enacted a position of 'ghetto pride' by articulating these fault lines. To them, their *swag* was more real as it was created in a context of extreme hardship (also dubbed *hard core* in Sheng), whereas wealthier youths were taken to be fake as they had the means to develop styles with greater ease and therefore with less creativity. This binary between fake and real in relation to creativity, talent and humour resonates with the way these terms are often conceptualised in international Hip Hop practices (*see also* Mose 2013:120-121).

One day, I asked Malik about his love for fashion, as he seemed to own a never-ending variety of high fashion garments from upmarket brands such as Louis Vuitton:

You see I like fashion ha ha ha, I want my *madigaga* (glasses in Sheng) to match my shirt and my shoes, and even my bag. I want a linen suit, I think it is smart on me, can you buy me one? Or next time, bring me one from Holland, I know they are cheap there. Here it is hard to find a match suit at Gikosh ('Gikomba' in Sheng, a big market in Nairobi), *mitush* ('second-hand clothes' in Sheng), they don't come together like in shops. I have a friend who selects my things from *camera*.⁵ With my style, I like it when people look at me and they can't read I am from ghetto, they think I am from *Westi* ('Westlands' in Sheng), they can never believe I am from ghetto. But *mapunk* ('rich and trendy youth' in Sheng) in Westi, I see them in tao ('city centre' in Sheng), at the market, they dress outrages ha ha ha, you can't dress like that. Jeans are too tight and t-shirts with very, very bright colours. In ghetto people will laugh at you. You see *wasee wa ghetto* (young men from the ghetto in Sheng), *maboyz* (young men from the ghetto in Sheng), they wear a (football) jersey, and (loose) jeans, maybe *rasta* or *jodo* (a shaved head in Sheng), but never a big Mohawk (at the time a stylish haircut among wealthier youths in Kenya), maybe just a shadow one, like footballers, but a big one, that is for *mababi* ('wealthy youth' in old Sheng), *mapunk*. That is fake. Even me, I can never do that, or a ring in my ear, ha ha ha in ghetto they think that is for girls. Before, heheheheh *rasta* was for Mungiki, so no one, no one had *rasta*, because the police can just shoot you, but they shaved it so now *rasta* is ok, ha ha ha it is cool. But now I am thinking of growing *mandefu* (beard in Kiswahili), and

⁵ This term is used in Sheng to describe the moment a new bag of second hand clothes is opened by wholesalers at Gikomba market, where people can buy items for a wholesale price.

shave my head, ha ha to look like an Al Shabaab ('Somali or Muslim youth' in Sheng), with my white (Muslim) cap.

With great enthusiasm, Malik observed the styles of dance hall, international Hip Hop, and many other types of black Atlantic music artist, as well as wealthier Kenyan youths. He appropriated, incorporated, imitated and re-styled elements, thus constantly broadening his registers of possibility. Using fashion, he sometimes intentionally downplayed his putative ghettoness by switching codes and using styles from different cultural repertoires. This included a style he appropriated from what he considered to be Somali youths and whom he, jokingly, referred to as Al Shabaab, after the militant Somali youth movement (*see also* BBC 2014). He told me he liked to confuse people and impress rich girls, and his sense of style helped him in navigating city spaces without too much police interference. Dressing a certain way, he had discovered, even fooled the police, as they too considered him to be *punk* ('rich and trendy youth' in Sheng). However, even if Malik always surprised others and me with his style, he did observe clear boundaries between what he and other young ghetto men considered to be ghetto and *punk* style codes, and although he stretched the borders of what was widely understood by them as appropriate 'ghetto fashion', as Malik also put it, he did not cross these boundaries. These boundaries changed constantly, but they were always imagined in relation to putative *punk* codes, which are codes that young ghetto men attributed to wealthy youths. *Mapunk* in Sheng refers to youths who are imagined by their ghetto counterparts to live on estates and practice a luxurious and trendy lifestyle.

The Ruff Skwad gang members generally encountered wealthier youths more frequently than their One Touch counterparts. This was because alcohol distillers mostly spent their time near the river, and rarely ventured outside the ghetto. Ruff Skwad members, however, were far more mobile, and had more money to go out to, for instance, city bars and clubs. These interactions greatly influenced the representations of the self among these young ghetto men, and as such shaped their modes of enacting manhood. Young men like Malik appropriated and re-styled allegedly *punk* codes to gain respect among peers, as it signalled to others what these young men called "exposure." With this, they mostly meant interactions with ideas, people, groups and organisations outside the ghetto. In other contexts, it could mean 'knowing too much' with regard to crime, pornography and other alleged perversions of local values. Accordingly, the local Sheng use of the term exposure has positive and negative connotations. With regard to *swag*, exposure added value to the performances of junior manhood by these men. Rejecting certain *punk* codes while appropriating others helped these men to mark ghetto *swag*, which to them was the embodiment of modern styles, and provided evidence of higher levels of exposure. For instance, the absence of ear, brow and nose piercings accompanied with the right types of jewellery, such as the chunky silver-like rings and necklaces also popular among *mapunk* at the time of my research, allowed Malik to display his levels of exposure. The right type of jewellery made the absence of piercings stand out twice as much. One had to be familiar with *punk* codes to be able to visibly reject certain aspects and

appropriate others. Which putative *punk* codes served which purpose shifted constantly, but the boundaries of what constituted ghetto *swag* were always imagined in terms of masculine versus feminine styles. At the time of my fieldwork in 2010 and 2011 for instance, ear, brow and nose piercings were considered to be feminine by young men in the ghetto, and thus only suitable for *mapunk*, whereas rings and necklaces, which were also sported by *mapunk*, were regarded as masculine and therefore also befitting ghetto *swag*.

Codes constructed by *maboyz* ('young men from the ghetto' in Sheng) were not, however, only informed by *punk* codes, as illustrated by Malik. Nevertheless, young ghetto men did predominantly demarcate ghetto *swag* by othering allegedly *punk* styles, and by taking their *swag* as a cut above *mapunk*. In their constructions of gendered senses of the self, *maboyz* like Malik constantly compared themselves to *mapunk*, giving their own expressions to the rift they experienced in urban youth culture in Nairobi between the rich and poor or, more accurately, between *Westi* and *Eastlando* (Eastlands in Sheng, a neighbourhood where most of the ghettos are located). In this dichotomy, *maboyz* regarded themselves as being men who listened to reggae and certain types of (political and gangsta) Hip Hop and dance-hall music, and who wore sneakers, loose jeans, chunky jewellery and football shirts (working gang members), or rolled up pipe jeans, plastic shoes, tight shirts and leather bracelets (*wagondi* gang members). *Mapunk*, meanwhile, were imagined to listen to house, r&b and other types of romantic and soft music, and to wear tight (skinny) jeans and bright colours according to the latest fashions from *majuu* ('the West' in Sheng). *Mapunk*, in the eyes of *maboyz*, were not street-smart (*ujanja* or *ujanjess* in Sheng), but foolish (*ufala* in Sheng), soft, feminine and fake – that is copying the West. In contrast, *maboyz* constructed a sense of 'ghetto pride' based on being street smart, tough, together and the provider. Ghetto pride was one of the sub-dominant positions of manhood enacted by young men in Mathare in order to claim status and negotiate dominant discourses on citizenship and masculinities that labelled these men as ghetto boys.

A telling incident that occurred during my fieldwork in 2010-2011 illustrates how these counter-positions were shaped by, and shaped, everyday encounters. One day, Malik's friend Kamaa entered the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub in Mathare sporting a big Mohawk, which was a trendy hairstyle in American Hip Hop and r&b culture at the time. However, he was ridiculed to such an extent that he left again and went to the barber shop to have his head shaved. Malik later explained to me that they laughed at him because he had copied a *punk* style, and that made him double fake, that is copying a style from *mapunk* who had in turn copied their style from *majuu*. According to these young men, there was a major difference between copying and re-styling, and this difference marked what they imagined to be real *swag*, which, as they saw it, could only emerge from the ghetto. Using stupid, soft, fake and feminine as derogatory terms when talking of *mapunk* was a serious challenge, as they were very conscious of the fact that they were talking about men of their age – their counterparts in wealthier settings – and not women. The othering of *mapunk* by constructing them as feminine in derogatory terms shows that these men tried to counteract their envy of *mapunk* by demarcating boundaries that separated masculine *maboyz* from feminine *mapunk* in order to revalue themselves and claim power as, in the

words of Malik, “real men.” This also highlights that how these young men negotiated dominant discourses and positioned themselves had an impact on their decision-making, and this shaped social navigation trajectories. Their particular positioning as *wajanja* entailed investing vast time and resources in performing *swag*, and this had repercussions for their other activities, as I will show below.

These men used the terms real and fake as English words in Sheng, and their meaning was inspired by international Hip Hop slang (*see also* Alim et al. 2008). The use of real and fake in Sheng, though often ambiguous, will become clearer when we look at the meanings of *punk* in this tongue. The word *punk* in Sheng is also inspired by international Hip Hop slang, and in this type of slang carries multiple meanings. It can, for instance, denote a gangster, an inexperienced youth or someone who has disappointed someone. Yet it also means someone who represents himself (it is generally used to refer to men) as autonomous and independent in style, speech and action. The latter meaning of *punk* in Hip Hop slang bears a close relation to the notions of autonomy, self-expression, resistance and anarchy that were central to the *punk* youth cultures of the early 1980s in the West. In this vein, a person who is imagined to be *punk* can, to some extent, be taken as someone who is considered to be 'real' by others. So why did *punk* come to mean the opposite in Sheng? To answer this, it is necessary to take a closer look at the older Sheng word for *mpunk* ('singular for *mapunk*' in Sheng), which was *mbabi*.

During the 1990s, the term *mbabi* also meant a youth who lived a wealthy and trendy lifestyle, and was a play on the word 'Babylon.' In the Rastafarian religion, the term Babylon has many different meanings, but is often used to describe oppressive systems of power that are infested with corruption, perversion and slavery (*e.g.* Murrell 1998:6), all of which are considered to be an affront to the 'Word of Jah.' Reggae has been the dominant popular youth culture in Nairobi's ghettos ever since it became a worldwide phenomenon during the 1970s (King 1998), and a lot of Sheng words are actually inspired by Jamaican Patois through the reggae and dance hall music that is played everywhere and all the time, especially in *matatus*. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, gangsta rap became popular worldwide (Fernandes 2011:9-10), including in Kenya. Many wealthier youths in particular took up and played with gangsta repertoires in their dress, speech and how they walked. Youths from the Nairobi ghettos also took a liking to gangsta rap, but retained their great sense of affinity with reggae and dance hall music and cultural styles, which they mixed with putative Kenyan and ghetto elements such as pipe-jeans, Bata Sahara boots, *kikoy* shirts (embroidered and woven cotton shirts for men) and *kangas* (colourfully printed clothes for women). The term *mbabi* became popular among these ghetto youths as a way to describe what they took to be spoilt copycats, namely youths who, in their eyes, dressed like American rappers in oversized t-shirts and baggy jeans without any notion of what living in a ghetto and like a gangster really entailed. With the rise of Hip Hop and gangsta rap in Kenya, the term *mbabi* gradually became replaced by the word *mpunk* probably for two reasons. The first of these was perhaps the ubiquity of the term *punk* in gangsta rap lyrics, while the second could be linked to the appropriation of Afropunk-fashion among

wealthy youths in recent years. Nevertheless, it retained its meaning of 'rich and spoiled wannabe.'

We 'African' men

Malik and the other Ruff Skwad gang members went a step further and often articulated notions of manhood while using the term 'African.' In doing so, they counterposed dominant masculinities in the ghetto even more strongly to the putative feminine and fake masculinities of *mapunk*, by taking the latter as having allegedly 'Western' qualities. But what does African in popular use mean in relation to masculinities, and why did putative *punk* codes become increasingly imbued with popular notions of the West?

Many young men in the ghetto often referred to themselves as "we African men" when explaining certain relationships, events or processes to me. They would say, for instance: "We African men, we just like football too much", or "We African men, we cannot do like white people, and share 50-50. We take care of our family because we are men, that is our job." The first layer of understanding as to why many Ruff Skwad members (and most other men I worked with) used this phrase has to be sought in the fact that they were talking to me, a white woman from Europe. They associated with me, for instance, certain ideas on gender equality because of their views on white people from the West. By positioning themselves as we African men, they aimed to, in advance, both demarcate a clear self in relation to me, and legitimise certain qualities of what they considered to be manhood, which are qualities they thought would be regarded critically by me. However, in light of the above, it is not difficult to detect that they were not just talking to me when referring to we African men, but also to their wealthier counterparts, and perhaps even more so.

In positioning themselves as we African men, they drew on the highly perilous and forged, but ubiquitous, dominant discourse on tradition versus modernity that in Kenya is often captured in terms of 'Africa' versus 'the West' (*see also* Spronk 2009). This is evidenced, for instance, by the way they used the term African men instead of referring to themselves as Kenyan. Although seemingly clear-cut in the dominant discourse, these intersecting binaries were highly ephemeral and inconsistent, and it was difficult for young ghetto men to pin down what to them constituted one or the other. The highly erratic and ever-shifting ways in which these men drew on these problematic dichotomies did, however, consistently reflect their shared position that young ghetto men embodied what they dubbed "real African manhood", even if it was not at all clear to them what African manhood actually entailed. This ambivalence led these men to constantly and anxiously redraw boundaries. Malik illustrates these inconsistencies and complexities, and ensuing anxieties, in the following:

I want to get rid of this African couch, ha ha I should say couch now, not sofa, ha ha. I learned that from couch surfing (a website for travellers worldwide). I am online, a member so tourists can come to my house and sleep on my couch. I want to have a European house, like my cupboard, that design I took

it from a picture from internet. I want to put glasses and wine, so it looks more for *mlami* ('white' in Sheng). I like fashion, trendy looks ...styles like in movies, from *majuu* ('the West' in Sheng). I don't like this backward African style.

In the brief period that his wife and daughters returned to him in early 2013, Malik had bought a new cabinet made out of steel and glass that replaced the old one made from heavy wood. He had painted his entire room a deep, dark red to provide the new cupboard with a complementary background. The heavy brown sofa set stood out as ugly and boring against this display of style, according to Malik. I laughed and made a half-hearted joke that it would be somewhat illogical to buy a new sofa, the third in three years, when he was already two months behind with his rent. He froze mid way through an animated gesture and told me with a smile that I did not understand. He explained that he could not live the way people did in the ghetto. He, in his words, considered their style to be "African and backward", whereas he dreamed of a more *mlami* ('white person' in Sheng) style, by which he often meant a trendier and more fashionable lifestyle, which is what he saw in Hollywood movies. He had to leave the 'ghetto style' behind, he said, and one way to do that was to change his style of living, dressing and even eating. For example, he never ate lunch at a roadside restaurant in Mathare, choosing instead to either eat at his mother's house or cross Juja Road to eat Enjera or Pilau in Eastleigh, which were dishes that were considered to be festive foods in Mathare and which cost about 150 Kenyan Shillings, or a half day's pay for most.

Malik expressed a deep desire to belong to, in his words, a bigger and more powerful world, which he dubbed *mlami*, Western, or *majuu* ('the West' or 'oversees' in Sheng). He was always engaged in re-styling, reinventing and appropriating elements from what he took to be *mlami* and global fashion trends. We often spoke English, but he always said these words in Sheng because they were laden with emotion for him, so heavy with meaning that he could only express this in a language close to his heart, namely Sheng. *Majuu* was where he wanted to go, where he thought he would find solutions to his problems, and where he got most of the inspiration for his lifestyle. As discussed above, he got his fashion ideas from many different sources. However, he not only looked at black Atlantic music cultures, Muslim Somali religious dress and local youth cultures; he also took inspiration from Hollywood movies, pictures of European football players, and websites on Italian fashion, American architecture and home decoration. From these latter sources, he picked up ideas that formed the foundation of what he imagined to be *mlami* and global fashion trends. Often, Malik showed me pictures of new shoes and clothes he had downloaded from the internet on his Samsung mobile phone with a touch screen. He used these pictures to shop at Gikomba, the largest second-hand clothes market in Nairobi, or ordered clothes from friends who sold second-hand goods and could pick out the best for him.

His notions of the global, the fashionable and whiteness were thus entangled in his conceptualisation of the West, and stood, ostensibly, in contrast to his ideas of what

constituted Africanness, backwardness and the local, and perhaps even ghettoness. Interestingly, he also considered the styles displayed by African American Hip Hop artists to be *mlami*, because to him they lived a *mlami* lifestyle. He saw parts of this lifestyle in Hollywood movies and on MTV Cribs, a US MTV programme that was also aired on MTV in Africa, and which showed international celebrities in their extravagant houses. Taking black artists as white was not uncommon among the young men in Mathare. Many, for instance, also conceptualised 50 Cent (a famous African American gangsta rapper) as white for similar reasons, and at times even jokingly took up a counter position by calling themselves 10 Cent (referring to the price of a glass of *chang'aa*, which is 10 Kenyan Shillings). The term white or *mlami* was therefore less based on phenotypes and more on notions of social class, geographical spaces, and specific cultural identifications, practices and performances. Malik did regard African Americans who lived in the ghettos of major US cities as black, and also perceived strong commonalities between him and them: "In ghettos, it is blacks, in America, also in Brazil, they have black people in ghettos." Yet, he never referred to himself as black, but always African, whereas he did imagine a common ghettoness⁶ with, for instance, African Americans who lived in marginalised neighbourhoods in US cities. This was a sentiment, or a sense of "diasporic intimacy" (Gilroy 1993), that derived from experiencing similar social realities (Samper 2004).

At the same time, Malik took great pride in being an African man from the ghetto. Indeed, he fully adhered to the position of ghetto pride, which centred on notions of real African manhood. This suggests that the seemingly rigid and highly problematic divide between white/trendy and African/backwards was just one of the modalities appropriated by Malik and others to negotiate the dominant discourse on tradition and modernity. On many occasions, Malik celebrated an imagined African masculinity that hinged on what was commonly referred to as 'African traditions.' These were popular and highly mythologised notions of what constituted 'authentic African cultures.' Among these notions, the role of men as the provider was paramount. In the same breath as he expressed his admiration for *mlami* styles, Malik often rebutted local imaginings of Western ideas and practices such as gender equality or homosexuality. In doing so, he drew from the dominant representation of 'Westernisation' as a growing process of immorality (Spronk 2009:507), which is widely perceived to be eroding putative traditional (or 'African') cultures in Kenya.

Interestingly, the provider was imagined as the embodiment of 'traditional African masculinity' in the dominant discourse, yet this notion emerged during the colonial era in response to changes wrought by government policies. The rise of wage labour and overpopulation in the Native Reserves had a profound impact on existing gender roles (Silberschmidt 1999:48). Women were less and less able to feed their families with what they produced on the family farms. Subsistence farm work is still generally taken as female labour in Kenya, and in pre-colonial times was one of the ways women contributed to the survival of their families. However, land became a growing problem within the confines of these reserves. As a consequence, families became increasingly dependent on the money

⁶ This emic term was often used by young men in Mathare, and described, among other things, 'being born in and having survived the hard life in the ghetto.'

(mostly) men were able to earn as migrant workers on, for instance, European farms (*see also* Chapter 1). As a result, a new social value system developed that bestowed men in particular with new obligations and responsibilities. This was epitomised by the imaginary of the provider (Silberschmidt 1999: 49). What this imaginary entailed in precise terms was constantly redefined in relation to ever shifting contexts, yet it continued to centre on male responsibilities. This was especially the case in the urban area, as women often continued to practice subsistence farming rurally, which shaped different notions of the provider. These changes, especially in the urban contexts, do not withstand the fact that 'the provider' predominantly remained a male position, including in rural contexts. Interestingly, among young, urban professional couples in Nairobi who earned comparable salaries, the male provider role continued to shape gender relations, which continues to be affirmed by both men and women (Spronk 2012: 62/266, footnote 17).

In his enactment of manhood, Malik also took pride in following, what he termed, an "African style", despite his earlier statement about *mlami* styles. When showing me pictures from the internet of shoes, clothes or houses, Malik often said: "We African men, we know how to dress well, ha ha, in ghetto we know *swag*!" He encountered many white tourists on the Maasai markets, and often shared with me that he never understood what to him seemed to be their lack of style, as he assumed that they at least had the money to dress in a stylish way. His remarks on ghetto *swag* were thus made as much with regard to white tourists as to *mapunk*. His notions of ghetto *swag* therefore seem to contradict his earlier view of the ghetto as backwards, and of Africanness as synonymous with this. All of this shows that Malik and other young men in Mathare often drew on the dominant binaries counterposing popular notions of tradition and modernity (intersecting with shifting notions of Africanness and Westernisation) when imagining the ghetto and enacting manhood, although they did so unpredictably and very inconsistently. African manhood in the imaginaries of young ghetto men could denote both tradition and modernity, and their positioning as we African men was not at all automatically counterposed to popular notions of modernity or the West. At times, African manhood and ghettoness were even considered to be the epitome of modern style. Seeing themselves as being in the vanguard of style creation allowed these men to claim power in their own way (not unlike Congolese gentlemen – and a few women – or *les Sapeurs*, Tamagni 2009), which they performed in relation to *mapunk* and white tourists, but mostly in relation to each other.

The multiplicity of meanings carried by the term African men, and the modes in which these served to draw boundaries around imagined gendered selves in diverse contexts, became all the more clear in debates that called for particularly clear boundaries. No debate sparked sharper boundaries among the young men in Mathare than discussions on homosexuality or, more specifically, lesbianism.

Lesbians: the ultimate other?

Malik and the other Ruff Skwad gang members sat around a wooden table, eating meat and drinking beer in a bar near the football field in May 2011. After discussing football at

length, the discussion suddenly turned to sex and, to my surprise, lesbians. A friend of Malik said: "Lesbianism is wrong, it cannot happen...it is like masturbation. It's like waste." I asked for clarification and Malik explained:

When girls do like that, we can beat them. It is not natural. Maybe some are hurt by men or they don't know men but we are here for them...they don't need to do that to each other, they need to be with a man first. Then they will know they don't need each other. It can't happen in ghetto, it does not exist here, never, and if it is there we can beat them. I have never seen it and it will never happen here, it is something for *mapunk*!

Interestingly, a few weeks earlier, Malik had told me about a friend, a young woman in her early twenties, who had come out to him and confessed that she had met a woman who was now her "boyfriend", as Malik put it. During that discussion, Malik revealed to me that he respected her choice, even if he did not understand it, although he later shared that they had stopped being friends because he could "not accept who she has become." He confided in me that he no longer knew how to act in relation to her, and that he felt awkward and out of place every time she met him to hang out together.

Lesbians, to these young men, embodied a crude denial of the adage that African men are providers and heads of the household, which are held dearly by most young men in Nairobi's ghettos. The tenacity of the notion of the provider was related to a fear they shared of becoming superfluous in relation to the women in their lives, which was a theme that was revisited over and over again in my conversations with these men. This fear also guided their negotiation of dominant discourses on alternative sexualities and practices, and their positioning as African men. This is illustrated above when Malik's friend described lesbianism as a "waste." With this term he was not referring to lesbians, but to himself and the other men who are supposedly excluded when women engage in sexual relationships with other women. As Malik clearly brought out above, lesbians were constructed as victims who may have been hurt by men or had not yet 'been with' a man. This ties in with the dominant belief that constructs same-sex boarding schools as sites where girls are 'introduced' to lesbian sex (*see also* Kweyu 2010), whereas, strikingly, boys at same-sex boarding schools are hardly ever mentioned in this debate. A majority of young men from the Nairobi ghettos considered homosexuality in general, but lesbianism in particular, as 'un-African' and part of a *punk* lifestyle. By calling same-sex practices and identities "something for *mapunk*", they pinpointed these as practices that youths in wealthier urban regions had copied from the West. I asked Malik why young men in Nairobi ghettos talked so much about lesbians and not about gay men:

Gay men do not exist for us. When they would be in ghetto we would beat them, laugh at them, eeh they could get killed. Gay men are worse than lesbians, much worse. We don't talk about them. It's disgusting what they do,

can you imagine? Lesbians are women, that is different but they can't ignore us, you don't need to be a lesbian in ghetto. There are so many guys!

These young men clearly regarded gay men with great contempt, and thinking about them triggered intense and potentially dangerous emotions. Lesbians were eyed more with fear, and the emotions triggered by the mere possibility of lesbianism seemed to pose an even greater challenge. Even when asked directly about gay men, Malik and other young men quickly guided the conversation back to discuss lesbians. This reveals the levels of anxiety with which these men regarded lesbians. It was especially striking to hear how much Malik insisted that "[Lesbianism] can't happen in ghetto, it does not exist", and later on "it will never happen." He even threatened that he and his friends could use violence if this nonetheless occurred. Gay men, as pointed out by Malik, ran the risk of being killed, whereas lesbians seemed to be more in danger of being raped and beaten. The repetition and emphasis on lesbians, as expressed by Malik and his friends, are clear evidence of their deep anxiety that such women may become more visible in the ghetto. In the second interview excerpt, Malik even said, almost in panic, that "they [women] can't ignore us." Many young men from Nairobi's ghettos seemed to fear lesbians because they were frightened of becoming entirely redundant in relation to the women in their immediate surroundings. This fear shaped their social navigation struggles and their attachment to the role of the provider. In the first interview excerpt above, Malik said: "They don't need each other", and perhaps meant to add 'because we need them.'

'Lesbophobia' among many of the young men in the Nairobi ghettos was thus greatly informed by the anxieties they endured over their increasingly insecure position as men, especially in relation to the women in their lives. These anxieties were most acutely felt with regard to their wealthier counterparts because, although they looked like them, they seemed to have it all. Malik again lashed out to *mapunk* at the end of the above excerpt when he said that women "don't need to be a lesbian in ghetto. There are so many guys!" Here he again evoked the counter position of *maboyz* as 'real African men' versus feminine, fake, Westernised, soft and, perhaps even gay, *mapunk*. Accordingly, their marked emphasis on lesbian practices and identities while using the word *punk* communicated to *mapunk* that they were actually not real men or, more specifically, not really African men. Their condemnation of same-sex practices and identities perhaps had less to do with lesbians, and more with the actual effects of the dominant discourse on masculinities in these young men's lives. Using lesbian bodies to position themselves in relationships of power with wealthier, male counterparts shows that growing anxieties over manhood led to stronger articulations of masculinities versus femininities in their enactments of the ghetto pride position. It is thus not unthinkable that these anxieties may result in more violence against allegedly lesbian women, even if the ultimate other to young ghetto men continues to be most profoundly embodied by their wealthy counterparts.⁷

⁷ See also Lock Swar 2012 and Morrissey 2013 for more on lesbophobia, homosexuality, same sex practices and identifications, as well as their putative un-Africanness and anxieties over manhood in South Africa.

Talking *swag*

Sheng was key to the performance of *swag* and enactments of ghetto pride among young ghetto men, and a prime example of how these youths turned a space of possible marginalisation into a one of potential power, albeit space and time bound.

Sheng has been the focus of research for two decades, yet no consensus has so far been achieved in terms of whether it can be categorised as urban slang, a dialect of Kiswahili or a language on its own (Mazrui 1995; Githiora 2002; Githinji 2006, 2008; Bosire 2006). It is enough to state here that Sheng is based mostly on Kiswahili in terms of grammar. It also borrows and plays with words (turning them around, clipping them and so on) from Kiswahili and English (hence the acronym **Swahili-English**: Sheng), and from many different Kenyan vernaculars and international languages (such as German or Norwegian). At times, Sheng speakers even invent entirely new words (Bosire 2006; Githinji 2006). It has been claimed that Sheng developed in informal settlements in Nairobi Eastlands (where Mathare is located) as early as the 1930s (Mazrui 1995), and has long since spread to other urban areas in East Africa. Sheng, however, rose to its current status of the dominant youth language in Kenyan urban centres, and even in some rural regions, during the 1990s. It has now become such a mainstream language that corporations (*e.g.*, Mutonya 2008) and even politicians (*e.g.*, Mutinda 2011) use it to appeal to young Kenyans, both poor and rich, and urban and rural.

During the early 1990s, the majority of youths in Mathare spoke hardly any English, as most of them had dropped out of high school or had not even finished their primary education. Moreover, most had parents who conversed with them in either Kiswahili or a vernacular language. Among themselves, however, these young people spoke Sheng. In contrast, youths from more affluent areas spoke English at school, at home with their parents and, most importantly, with their friends. A major shift took place at the close of the 1990s when local Hip Hop collectives like Kalamashaka, which were part of the ghetto Hip Hop crew Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, emerged rapping in Sheng (Mose 2013:119-120; Samper 2004; Wa Mungai 2008). Their popularity prompted the youths in wealthier neighbourhoods to increasingly infuse their English with Sheng words taken from their lyrics, and this type of Sheng was called Engsh (as it was based on Kenyan **English** mixed with **Sheng** words). In the past decade, Sheng has become the marker of popular youth cultures among young people with very different class and ethnic backgrounds. Partly, this has been driven by the rise of both ever more Hip Hop collectives from the sprawling Nairobi ghettos that all rap in Sheng and the way artists and groups from other areas took up Sheng to display *swag*. The division between Sheng and Engsh nevertheless persisted, and youths from the ghettos continued to take pride in speaking a type of Sheng that young people from wealthier neighbourhoods found hard to understand, at least according to their counterparts from the ghettos. In more recent times, youths in Mathare have continued to dub the Sheng spoken by *mapunk* as Engsh, even if the Sheng spoken by these youths was less speckled with English words than ever before. Nevertheless, the Sheng spoken by *mapunk* was always considered by ghetto youths to still lag miles behind the 'real and deep' Sheng that was constantly under construction in the ghettos. As such, Sheng

continued to be firmly located within ghetto youth cultures, and so this language was one of the ways in which, especially, young men from ghettos claimed power in relation to wealthier youths, even if ephemerally. Malik explained:

Each ghetto, we have our own Sheng, our own words. You can hear if someone is from this place or this place, just by the way he speaks Sheng. Even in Mathare, you see, Sheng in Kosovo has many Kikuyu words, because we are Kikuyu, but 4B has many Luo words. Like that. Our Sheng is deep, very deep. *Mapunk* cannot understand, ha ha ha, never, they *float* (a way of saying in Sheng that someone does not understand something), ha ha *mafala* ('fools' in Sheng). Sheng is pure ghetto, and we come up with new words, all the time. You see when you come back next time, again, I have to teach you more so you can understand new Sheng. Every time you come you have to learn again.

The binary between Sheng and English reflects the putative dichotomy between notions of real and fake manhood imagined by young ghetto men, and resonates with the alleged binary between the hustler (*mjanja*) and the fool (*fala*) explored in the previous chapter. *Mapunk*, as Malik illustrated repeatedly in the above, were also often referred to as *mafala*. In this sense, *ufala* accentuates the ostensible lack of street smartness (*ujanjess* in Sheng) among youths from wealthier areas.

As noted, at the core of performing *swag* (enacted, for instance, by dressing in a stylish manner and talking deep Sheng) stood the ghetto pride position, yet the question remains as to how viable this position was for young ghetto men in their attempts to claim power. Malik often referred to notions of ghetto pride, even during vicissitudes marked by extreme stress.

One night, he was persuaded by some of his friends to join a gang who had planned a hijack on a City Hoppa bus (a privately-owned, large public transport bus) in the city centre. During the robbery, they attempted to take phones and other valuables from the passengers, but, unfortunately for them, one happened to be an armed policeman in plain clothes who instantly started shooting at them. They all fled on foot in different directions, except for one of them: Malik's best friend was shot dead on the spot. While narrating this incident to me right after it had happened, he shared the following:

Here [in Mathare] we are hustlers, we don't belong to the city, we belong here, this is our university. There is nothing for us out there, we have to survive, to hustle... here. I can't go to *tao* ('city centre' in Sheng) and feel like I belong there. I can try to fit, but I know I don't fit. I have to be *rada* ('alert' in Sheng), not like *mapunk* who belong there. You know, I am proud to be ghetto, we are together. I have learned everything here. But you feel pain, why do we have to live like this? We can just be chased like that and you don't know. Where can we go? And we see the big houses just here...

in Muthaiga (a very wealthy neighbourhood near Mathare Valley). We can't reach that, but I will, one day. I will drive my own car.

At first glance, Malik constructed a sense of belonging that seemed to affirm the dominant subject position of the ghetto boy, and which was informed by the actual dangers involved in venturing outside the ghetto. Nevertheless, he also expressed pride in being ghetto, a hustler, a *mjanja*. Later in our talk he said: "The ghetto is our mother, it raised us. We are proud of that." This shows that the position of ghetto pride entailed new possibilities and new identifications by constantly re-evaluating what they imagined as ghettoness. Many of my research participants identified with the hustler and conveyed this sentiment of ghetto pride, but also often felt powerless, which was a sentiment that some considered to be contradictory when it came to enacting the role of hustler.

These expressions of ghetto pride marked a shift from constructions of belonging that I have often encountered among older generations in Mathare. Many older residents I interviewed and worked with over the years negotiated the dominant discourse on slums and the subject position of 'slum dweller' (a common term in the dominant discourse to denote people living in ghettos – *see also* UN-HABITAT 2008) by imagining a sense of belonging based on temporality. People in Mathare, to them, did not live in this ghetto to stay there (see Chapter 1). Even if these older people had lived in Mathare for decades, they never seemed to articulate a sense of belonging like the newer generations of young men (and also young women) who were born and raised in the ghetto. During our numerous discussions and debates, Malik and his friends often emphasised the qualities of ghettoness, which they, tellingly, defined using an idiom that was similar to when they denoted local ideas of manhood, namely being street smart, together, real and tough. From time to time, Malik even toasted his friends with a beer in his hands by saying: "We survive ghetto? We survive anywhere!" Malik and many men like him imagined the ghetto as 'a university' and 'a mother', in other words a nostalgic space where young men learned about important values (such as togetherness) and the realities of life, but also a space that should also be left at the right time. These men often opposed it to the, alleged, cushioned and fake life in affluent areas, and as such seemed to transform their jealousy and frustrations into self-pride and a deep contempt for *mapunk*.

This all suggests that the notion of ghetto pride allowed Malik and other young men to carve out a space in which they were able to take pride in what was widely taken to be a derogatory subject position, thus turning the label ghetto boy into a sobriquet. This reveals how alternative positions of manhood (marked by hustling and ghetto pride) may help local young men to claim power in certain contexts. Using the Sheng term *maboyz* or *wasee* (saying thing such as *wasee wa ghetto wako hardcore*: 'boys from the ghetto are tough' in Sheng) to refer to young men from the ghetto underscores this. The terms *maboyz* and *wasee* (not to be confused with *wazee*, which means senior men in Kiswahili) can be understood as a play on the stereotype of the ghetto boy. Yet, the viability of this temporally and spatially bound alternative position needs to be scrutinised. Conjuring up a sense of ghetto pride and positioning oneself as a hustler in the face of enduring hardship

and feeling stuck as men often appeared to be more of a fleeting escape than a viable alternative subject position. In private, Malik (and other young men I worked with) expressed great despair about their lives and social positions.

In the end, all of the men I worked with not only wanted to leave the gang, but the ghetto as well. In this vein, the ghetto to them also continued to be a space of transition (from the rural area to the city) and, ultimately, displacement (when transition never took place). The difference, however, between their expressions of belonging and those of their parents and grandparents centred on notions of ghetto pride (see Chapter 1). Having said this, leaving the ghetto was also conceptualised by them as a key step in their social navigation trajectories. Malik said: "I see my friends, they have land and houses, they move outside the ghetto. I am still stuck, I have nothing to show." Interestingly, Malik did not live in Kosovo, but rented a house in Kariobangi. Nevertheless, he perceived himself to be stuck in the ghetto. Some of his friends had been able to buy a piece of land through the money they earned by dealing drugs, and Malik felt he was behind with "his plan", as he put it; he had lost his family and did not have a steady income. His prospects of leaving the ghetto and establishing himself as a senior man were growing increasingly dim as the years passed by. This led him to continually contemplate a return to the gang, although he never did; going back would denote a serious fall in social status. This shows that Malik, and many men like him, invested a lot in maintaining their status as a junior man, even if this meant fewer resources with which to achieve their main ambition of becoming senior men.

A cool mask

As well as clothing styles and talking deep Sheng, *swag* in Mathare denoted many other distinct bodily practices. Ghetto pride, which was at the centre of ghetto *swag*, was often performed by putting on a cool 'mask', not unlike the cool front or cool pose often displayed by African-American young men in inner-city ghettos (Majors and Mancini Billson 1993). Young ghetto men faced police brutality, all types of violence from fellow ghetto residents and humiliating, even dehumanising, living conditions day in day out, and it was striking to observe the lengths they went to in order to show each other that they were impervious to it all. A cool mask to them implied a strong mind, and helped to fend off danger, because it was thought to communicate control and power. Yet it was not only young ghetto men who were heavily engaged in seeming to be impermeable in relation to each other when encountering predicaments; Mathare residents (both men and women) in general did not easily disclose information to each other about private matters, let alone express emotion in public. Many reasons contributed to the level of secrecy with which people here guarded their private life in relation to each other, but the fact that Mathare residents were cramped together in tiny living spaces no doubt exacerbated their urge to keep their thoughts and feelings close to their chest. The public sphere was everywhere and competition for resources was high. Consequently, showing no emotion and hiding feelings and information from each other were ways to stay in control of one's own life course, at least to some extent, and claim status with regard to others. In this vein, it had a

similar function as fashion: it showed success, power and control in situations that were rife with the opposite. Most importantly, it fended off gossip and its destructive properties.

Young men in particular were very engaged in masking feelings, as to them it had become a distinctive way of demonstrating manhood and expressing ghetto pride. A cool mask, however, was not just about demonstrating, and so claiming, control, but also about emotionally protecting oneself, as both Blue, a Ruff Skwad gang member, and Kingi explained to me. In March 2011, Kosovo had been without water for five weeks, and the situation was almost unbearable as effluent from sewers flooded the small streets and even entered houses. People were forced to wake up at four AM to line up on time to fetch water from the other side of the ghetto, and growing numbers of children became unwell. I asked Blue if he and others felt angry about this situation, as I was struck by the ostensible apathy with which he and other gang members seemed to respond. He replied: "We are used, we [young men] can't be angry... we can't think about that, we can't lose focus." Using Kingi's precise words, Blue ended this narration by saying: "If you lose focus you die." In the previous chapter, Kingi had already alluded to the way that he, and many men like him, coped with stress. When his cousin was murdered by the police, anger and pain visibly registered on his face for a brief moment, but he soon managed to put his cool mask on again and close the "door in my head", as he said, to "get on with life." He told me: "If bad things happen I push it to the side of my head", and he kept himself busy all day every day, because he feared "doing nothing." Kingi said: "Doing nothing will open doors in my head and make me remember all the bad things that have happened." He was certain that he would not be able to handle these emotions. This tells us that many young ghetto men were possibly guided by a fear that the force of emotions, once let out, could turn on them, consume them, and would thwart their ambitions to become senior men. Accordingly, the men who demonstrated control were respected and taken as *wajanja*, whereas those who seemingly succumbed to such pressures (such as visible alcoholics) were mocked and taken as *mafala* ('fools' in Sheng).

Having a cool mask was ranked as the most important aspect of performing *swag*, and stood above clothing style, talking deep Sheng and other *swag* practices. On the face of it, both Kingi and Blue looked rather unremarkable, but they were or had been unofficial leaders of their respective gangs. In contrast, Malik at first glance seemed to embody *swag*. He did, however, lack a cool mask; he invested greatly in trying to hide his pain, yet he never fully succeeded and was constantly engaged in other modes of *swag* (such as going out and dressing stylish) to compensate for this and still gain the respect of his peers. On many occasions, I observed how he changed his facial expressions, his posture and his Sheng, even the tone of his voice, when we met friends while walking in Kosovo: he would stretch himself up and stand on his tiptoes, broaden his shoulders, push his chest out and smile, showing his teeth, while pulling his chin up and moving his head a little backwards, as if to fend off an attack. The transformation was so obvious because when he and I walked together he normally did so with his shoulders down, his arms dangling alongside his lanky body and his back hollow. He enacted this hyper masculine posture as part of *swag*, yet he could not hide his weary eyes and soft voice. Kingi, Blue and Malik were all

considered, and considered themselves, to be very handsome young men, and they all took care of how they dressed. Nevertheless, Malik sported a more elaborate look, and never wore the same outfit for two days in a row. Most young men with some means in Mathare aspired to and evinced a style that resembled that of Malik. Kingi and Blue were exceptions to the rule in multiple ways. Dressed rather inconspicuously, they gained respect not by showing success, but by being successful.

Changing times, changing perspectives

In the previous chapter, I described how Kingi had been able to leave the One Touch distilling gang after a long period of balancing multiple income-generating activities. I often discussed with him the predicaments that Malik had encountered in his life in an attempt to comprehend why he did not seem to be able to establish a more sustainable source of income, despite having more resources at his disposal than Kingi ever had. Kingi explained to me that he thought young men today did not want vocational training like *jua kali*, but aspired to, what he dubbed, “white collar jobs”. This trend, according to Kingi, was to a large extent the result of the growing accessibility to internet training courses in Mathare since 2000 through Nairobi (a computer training college for youths from economically marginalised areas), whereas unemployment, and so competition in these sectors in particular, has been on the rise ever since. Kingi clearly spoke from the position of an older man given that he was almost 10 years older than Malik. Kingi also regarded Malik as spoilt, as he still had both of his parents to fall back on. His thoughts about Malik first stemmed from the way Kingi felt about his own problematic childhood and his pride with regard to his current social position, which he took as a personal achievement. However, many other young men also mentioned the year 2000 as a way to pinpoint what to them seemed to be a shift in opportunities and aspirations that had, according to them, had far-reaching ripple effects on cultural expressions and the processes of gang formation in Mathare.

Kingi had come of age before the year 2000, whereas Malik had only been a 12-year-old boy at the start of the new millennium. Both described an increase in the mobility of youths from the ghetto to the city, and more access to income-generating activities and to (social) media (TV, film and internet) from the early 2000s onwards. Their analyses were spot on. Since 2000, Kenya's economy has been on the rise (GoK 2011), and has only experienced a few periodic setbacks, such as during the aftermath of the political violence early 2008. In the period 1998-2007, informal employment opportunities increased nationwide, despite the sharp fall in formal employment (Wamuthenya 2010a, 2010b) that followed widespread privatisation and which caused a decline in public sector jobs. More young people from the ghetto were able to find temporary work at, for instance, roadside workshops and construction sites, or as domestic workers, which were all sectors that serviced the increasingly wealthy elite. Economic growth only structurally benefitted a few elites (Action Aid 2010), but in their wake many informal workers took advantage of the day-labour opportunities their success provided. Construction, for example, boomed in Nairobi, and a growing number of untrained young men worked as day labourers at the

sites that emerged. At the same time, hawking and petty theft, which were two major sources of income for young people during the 1990s, were increasingly curbed from 2002 onwards as a result of successful attempts by consecutive governments to bar street children and hawkers from the city centre (*see also* Ruteere & Pommerolle 2003: 598-9). More jobs in the informal sector, including construction sites, denoted more options for ghetto youths. However, as noted, government interventions reduced opportunities for them elsewhere. What is more, soaring unemployment rates in the formal sector caused a downward pressure from educated onto uneducated youths in the informal sector. As a consequence, the latter did not benefit from the growth in the informal sector as much as their educated counterparts. For instance, I have met several *matatu* drivers with a diploma in electrical engineering. Overall, growing opportunities (however minimal) in the informal sector did lead to more spatial, virtual and social mobility among ghetto youths when compared to the 1990s. Yet, these opportunities were often highly temporal. Raised expectations as a result of more mobility among young people from the ghetto without long-term prospects did, however, enhance feelings of being stuck among many of them.

Kingi identified the arrival of Nairobi's in Mathare as a landmark moment. During the 1990s, Mathare was largely the domain of one NGO, namely the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA). MYSA is an organisation that reaches out to children and young people in Nairobi through sport, and it also provides them with HIV-AIDS education, talent development and scholarships. I will explore the layered and highly problematic relationship between this NGO and Mathare's residents in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to state that prior to its gradual expansion to 15 other neighbourhoods in Nairobi in the late 1990s, MYSA was the dominant NGO in Mathare through which many other initiatives often operated. Nairobi's also started its work through the vast infrastructure of established groups and offices of MYSA, but soon became independent and began to work directly with local CBOs. More NGOs followed suit, and the trend of an increased NGO presence in Mathare corresponded with the increase in the presence of NGOs nationally (Brass 2010; Kameri-Mbote 2000). This sparked a rise in job opportunities for ghetto youths. Many youths who had been trained by Nairobi's, for instance, have found jobs either as trainers there or at partner CBOs. Accordingly, the growing NGO presence in Mathare also contributed to greater spatial and social mobility among young people in the ghetto. However, most job opportunities in the NGO sector were almost exclusively available to youths with a high school diploma, which increased the rift between youths from low-income and lower-income backgrounds in Mathare experienced by working gang members. I will return to this rift in the next chapter, but this too added to feelings of 'being stuck' among gang members, most of whom did not have the necessary qualifications.

As a result of the said changes, ghetto youths broadened their horizons, which shaped new reflections on their own positioning in society and future aspirations. Many factors contributed to changes in lifestyle, social horizons (Vigh 2006) and popular cultures among the young men and women in Mathare over the past decade, who were increasingly confronted with luxurious lifestyles through the internet, music, video clips and, especially, films. Malik described this as "shopping for ideas." I have already mentioned that he loved

to browse for fashion ideas on the internet on his phone, and he also enjoyed going to shopping malls near the Maasai markets where he worked to look at shop windows. At the same time, he also expressed great frustration over the fact that he could not "reach that life", and was often shocked to see the price tags on the garments displayed in these windows. He explained how he thought that "growing exposure to *majuu*", as he dubbed it, impinged on the relationships between men and women in the ghettos:

I tell you why so many young men in ghetto are thugs, highway robbers and conmen. You know, these young men risk their lives, so many are shot dead...and you know why? Because of girls. Girls in Mathare are so expensive. We have to get money so they like us, ha ha, they need money for hair, for clothes, for toe nails, ha ha. We want to take them to town, girls these days, they like luxury, not like before... now they want to be treated like a movie. So, we rob, we steal so we can get money to get girls. Better I die trying...than bring nothing home.

The frustrations expressed by Malik here again underline his anxieties in relation to women in general, and his girlfriend in particular, and he also added the dimension of changing horizons and aspirations.

Malik made an intertextual reference to 50 Cent's famous album "Get Rich or Die Tryin" when he said "better I die trying." Many young ghetto men often rephrased this slogan as "get rich or try dying" to better reflect the harsh realities of their lives. Kingi had a point when he said that Malik's generation faced more problems, not despite more spatial, virtual and social mobility, but because of it. Increased mobility or "exposure", as the ghetto youths termed it, triggered new perspectives and ambitions without the actual means to achieve them. Young men like Malik invested many resources in presenting themselves as trendy and successful. Indeed, they often diverted funds needed for rent, food and hospital bills to this end. Malik, for example, walked around with excruciating toothache for three months, but bought new clothes and went to clubs throughout this period. The standards by which success was measured among young ghetto men and women have changed drastically over the past ten years. According to Kingi, it seemed to be more difficult for Malik and other current gang members than it had ever been for him to live up to such standards when he was young. Upholding the status of a junior man in current times meant investing more resources than ever before, which were resources that could not be used to realise their ambition of establishing themselves as senior men. Balancing such social navigation struggles – gaining the respect of peers and pursuing senior manhood – became increasingly difficult for most young ghetto men. In Kingi's time, these trajectories had been mutually reinforcing and, as such, much more intertwined, whereas nowadays one increasingly thwarted the other for many. This applied all the more to men like Malik, who felt utterly insecure about their social position as men with regard to their families, feeling the need to compensate for this by engaging ever more deeply in bonding-practices between peers, using all their time and money in doing so. This also

applied to the current alcohol distillers; although their *swag* performances involved different “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988), which were shaped by different levels of income and mobility, they also invested a lot of resources in maintaining a high status as junior men in relation to their peers.

Malik’s best friend Blue seemed to be an exception to this rule, and taking a closer look at his highly successful trajectory out of the gang will give better insight into the factors that contributed to success and failure in more recent times.

Drugs dealers become ghetto farmers

Blue was a close friend of Malik and an unofficial leader of the Ruff Skwad gang. He was also the main initiator of several collective business ventures aiming to help members leave the gang. As it turned out, he was the only one from the Ruff Skwad gang to benefit from these collective ventures in the long run; he managed to carefully apply the skills he had acquired during the rise and fall of these businesses in building his private projects, which have become increasingly lucrative over the years. At present, he is the proud and single owner of the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub, a chicken project and an illegal electricity business. So, why did the collective businesses implemented by the Ruff Skwad gang fail, and why was Blue able to successfully develop similar businesses by himself in the same period?

On a cold August afternoon in 2008, Blue approached me in dark blue overalls and gumboots instead of his usual customised Manchester United shirt (proudly stating Baba Jackson – father of Jackson – on the back) and baggy blue jeans. He wanted to show me something and told me to follow him. We reached a corner, and I suddenly saw an open space where more than 30 pigs were rolling and grunting in a big puddle of waste where the sewer ended-up in the river. Some of them were enormous, others only a few days old. Another Ruff Skwad member emerged covered in dung from what turned out to be the pig-pen. He was cleaning out the sties by scooping up the waste with a big shovel and dumping it straight in the river next to where the open sewer ended up. The crushing stench of pig dung, rotting garbage and human waste clinging together and forming small floating islands in the river did not seem to bother him. Blue laughed when he saw my perplexed expression. “We got this place by the Chief, we bought pigs, and it is good money, but I have another surprise.” He turned me around and I saw two beautiful, fat Friesian cows eating a big pile of green grass. I laughed out loud. This was a surprise; these drug dealers had started a ghetto farm amidst open sewers and piles of garbage in an area that had the highest population density in the country. Later, I discovered that many gangs and youth groups had started similar farms in other ghetto villages in Mathare (and in other ghetto areas in Nairobi) with varying degrees of success.

Later that day, we met the group of 12 Ruff Skwad gang members who had registered as a CBO using the gang’s name a few months earlier. Malik and Blue explained to me that only older gang members participated because, as Blue related, most of the younger ones did not want to comply with the rules of weekly contributions. According to Blue, they did yet not feel any social pressure to leave the gang, and were still “just enjoying

life” as bachelors (*kuraha* in Sheng), even if most were married and had children. Nevertheless, the older men, through this official registration as a CBO, had received a certificate that allowed them to open an account at a local bank. The men then started saving money, following the example of the myriad savings-groups set up by women in Mathare. The Ruff Skwad version of these groups used its weekly savings to buy the pigs and cows to start the ghetto farm. After my visit to the farm that day, the *chama* members asked me to help them create a business plan, and we sat down in the pub and calculated expenditure and profits for the rest of the afternoon. We concluded that the ghetto farm was currently breaking even, but could be profitable in three months time.

All 12 of the participants in the Ruff Skwad savings-group were eager to make the farm profitable enough for them to leave dealing drugs and the gang, although this unfortunately never happened. Soon after our meeting, one of the cows developed sores all over its body and stopped producing milk. The young men lacked the expertise to properly gauge the severity of the animal’s condition in time, and it died before they could have it checked out by a local veterinarian. Unfortunately, there were further setbacks when a couple of fully-grown pigs were stolen a few months after the cow died, and again a few months later when the second cow also died of an untreated infection. Furthermore, when I returned in July 2009, the swine flu epidemic had just become global news (WHO 2009). In response, Mathare’s residents en masse turned away from eating pork, and neighbours had forced the Ruff Skwad gang members to kill their pigs because of a fear of contamination. Lastly, goats generally roamed free inside the ghetto and repeatedly destroyed the vegetable gardens-in-sacks and young trees that the Ruff Skwad savings-group members had planted near the river to boost the dwindling farm. When I returned to carry out fieldwork in August 2010, the farm had been reduced to a single young cow (a calf of one of the deceased cows) that had not yet started to produce milk and a few goats.

Blue contemplated: "We try, of course we try. There is no option, you can't lose focus, you die. But most of these guys they lack commitment, they don't believe in business." After all these setbacks, the majority of the savings-group members lost interest and stopped contributing money, time and energy to the farm. This led to tensions within the group, because the others did not want to lose the money they had invested and were set on holding on to what was left. They argued that more effort was required to revive what was left and hope for a better return in the future. The savings-group fell apart over this issue, which had ripple effects throughout the gang. Some of the members who wanted to continue with the farm worked in the same company (this was a set of two to six dealers who worked for a particular boss) as members who had left the savings-group, whereas trust was mandatory for the work they did. A few angry words and blows were exchanged, until Blue stood up as a leader and decided to close the farm, sell what was left and divide the money to share the losses equally. The gang did not have a clearly identified leader, but during moments like this it was generally Blue who took on a leadership role and was accepted as such by the other members. Some participants did not agree with his decision, but they accepted what Blue did because they also realised that tensions began to affect their work, and they saw that reviving the farm had little to no chance of succeeding.

Between business and reputation

The reasons why the farm project eventually failed were not only tied to an accumulation of setbacks. After talking to Blue and the other participants at length, I discovered that a few members had hired help to work for them. This had not been a secret, but was frowned on by the other members and they had therefore not mentioned it during our meeting and it was not included in the business plan. Yet this practice had a major impact on progress and business returns. According to Blue, many of the setbacks could have been avoided if all of the participants in the savings-group had committed themselves to the farm. Some problems, he said, had been left unattended because the hired help did not have the knowledge or the vested interest to see the farm succeed. Indeed, most of them had been notorious alcoholics who had cleaned the sties and fed the cows for a small stipend to buy *chang'aa*. They had thus been sloppy, consuming much of the daily profits. Blue alluded to the practice of hiring workers to do their job when he stated above that "these guys lack commitment" and "they don't believe in business." The participants who had hired help to work for them explained to me that farming was either for women or older men, not for young ghetto men like them. They were interested in the money, but were afraid to corrode their carefully crafted reputations by doing the work. They told me outright that they were afraid that it might harm their standing (*title* or *rank* in Sheng) with regard to friends and other groups of young men in the ghetto. Maintaining a status as a junior man thus denoted diverting some of the resources these men could have used to build the farm, and as such seemed to undermine their strategies to leave the gang.

At the same time, Blue had developed several highly successful ventures all by himself. Strikingly, even Malik, his best friend, had not been aware of his success, and this again illustrates how far people went to protect their privacy. In May 2012, Blue, Malik and I went to a Somali restaurant in the city centre, because Blue wanted to discuss something with Malik and me in private. Like many other research participants, he never talked about his business or private life in the ghetto, and preferred to organise our interviews in public restaurants outside it. People often gave me two reasons as to why they preferred to keep information close to their chests. The first was their fear of witchcraft, and they told me that if the wrong person got hold of information about their plans and possible social and economic success, he or she might interfere by "placing *juju*"⁸ ('witchcraft' in Sheng), by which they meant casting a spell. The second reason pertained to a widely held fear that others would use information about possible success to thwart it out of jealousy and boost their own business by, for instance, informing the police about an illegal business venture. Feeling safe enough to talk in the noisy restaurant, Blue took my pen and notebook and began to draw a house. "Next time you come, I will house you, and this will be your room." He was indicating one of the many rooms in what turned out to be a sketch of the stone house he was building in Ruai, an emerging neighbourhood on the eastern outskirts of Nairobi. He had already paid for the land and had just finished constructing the

⁸ The term *juju* in Sheng is inspired by the term 'juju' in West Africa, where it has many different connotations, including medicine and witchcraft (see also Meyer 1999: 197)

foundations. I gaped at him while quickly calculating that all of this work had already cost him over a million Kenyan Shillings (approx. 10,000 Euros). "Next time you come, I will not be working *grouo*, but I will be my own boss." Malik looked equally stunned and whispered: "You even have a gym, ha ha." For six long years, Blue had carefully invested the money he had made by dealing drugs in buying the pub and starting an electricity distribution centre. He had then used his profits to purchase a piece of land outside the ghetto. Both Malik and I were very impressed by Blue's perseverance and commitment, but also amazed by the businesses he had set up and the wealth he had been able to garner without even his best friend Malik knowing about it.

Despite earning increasing amounts of money, Blue had stayed inside Kosovo and, like Kingi in the previous chapter, had worked day and night to boost his businesses. Also like Kingi, Blue had been an informal leader of his gang. He was not, however, related to the drug bosses and so was not helped as Kingi had been by Shosho Kingi. Yet Blue had been known as a 'highway robber' (an emic term to describe people who hijack cars and steal from houses outside the ghetto) before he had become a drug dealer. In contrast to thieves who stole inside the ghetto, highway robbers and bank robbers were respected for their level of skill and courage and for the potential high returns. Accordingly, Blue did not have to invest extra resources in building his reputation in the way that Malik had felt compelled to do so, because he already had proven, at least to his peers, that he was a highly ranked *maboy* (single for *maboyz*, 'young ghetto man' in Sheng). Moreover, Blue had invested some of the remaining profits from his past as a robber into building his businesses, which was start-up capital that most of the other Ruff Skwad gang members lacked. Furthermore, his reputation had helped him to take bold steps in his businesses, for instance he was not stopped when he took over the electricity business from Mungiki gang members in 2007, because residents feared him.

Conclusion

This chapter revealed that drug dealers faced the same struggles to leave the gang as alcohol distillers, even if they earned more money. One of the reasons for this pertains to the ways in which the Ruff Skwad gang members negotiated the dominant discourse on masculinities. The manner many used to take up the alternative subject position of ghetto pride – and an othered wealthy youth in the process – denoted the investment of vast resources in performing *swag*. This greatly shaped their social navigation struggles. Malik's narratives reveal the different layers of how this played out in the lives of many of the wealthier gang members. At first, he went overboard in trying to live up to the role of the provider, almost killing himself in the process. When he lost his position as 'husband' in relation to his girlfriend and, most importantly, as a 'father' to his daughters, he started to compensate for this loss in social status by refocusing on maintaining the position of a junior man in relation to his peers. As a Ruff Skwad gang member, this entailed different and often more expensive technologies of the self than was common among the alcohol distillers. Redrawing his trajectory in response to changing circumstances thus included a diversion of all of his resources to enacting the junior manhood position, hampering his

ambition to achieve senior manhood in the process. This shows that many of these men were engaged in different social navigation trajectories at the same time, highlighting the need to analyse how these different struggles related to one another. Balancing the struggle of upholding the junior man role in the moment, while pursuing senior manhood in the near future, became increasingly difficult for young ghetto men in recent times as a result of higher aspirations and bleaker prospects. The ghetto pride position thus became harder to maintain in the face of these grim tides, which compelled many to invest ever more resources in adhering to this subdominant masculine ideal. However, this again added to feelings of 'being stuck' in the space of the gang.

Malik's life history represented the dilemmas that many of the Ruff Skwad members I worked with faced. Blue was one of the few exceptions; he did not have to invest many resources in obtaining and maintaining his reputation as a junior man, as he had already built a name for himself as a successful highway robber. This past had also given him the resources to kick-start several of his business ventures. In addition, his cool mask and leadership qualities, which were traits he shared with Kingi, allowed him to maintain a strong social position with regard to his peers. As a consequence, he was able to focus fully on pursuing his ambition of establishing himself as a senior man. This shows that it was important to analyse the way the different 'technologies of the self' that constituted *swag* were appraised by young men in performing ghetto pride as part of their social navigation. For instance, a cool mask was valued more than clothing styles. This also gives the reader an idea of why and how different the social navigation trajectories possibly were among similarly positioned men, whereas all of these men held onto a shared social horizon, namely becoming senior men.

How Blue was connected to local authorities, and how this helped him in his own social navigation struggle, only gradually became clear to me during my fieldwork. I take this up in the following chapter when I discuss the tense relationship between gangs and other social groups and authorities in Mathare. The frustrations emanating from feeling stuck in the space of the gang, which was shared by most young ghetto men, impinged heavily on the relationships between gangs and other groups and often led to conflicts and junctures of violence. More specifically, tensions within the intimacy of marriage also played out between groups of women and young men in the public sphere. Conflicts between gang members and their predominantly female bosses have even culminated in full-blown physical clashes, with casualties and the destruction of property on both sides, as the next chapter will show.