Ituura
A Neighbourhood beyond the Sprawl

It was Benni who I asked to drive me to Chungwa Town in January 2017 to begin the home stay that would mark the start of my doctoral fieldwork. It was a journey that would introduce me to the landscape of destitution and inequality across peri-urban Kiambu, where Nairobi's urban sprawl encounters the vast tea plantations and smallholder farms of southern 'Kikuyuland', the central Kenyan region the ethnic group calls its home.

I had visited the town in December 2016 with Gikari, my Gĩkũyũ language teacher, who had asked Catherine, the forty-two-year-old daughter of his late older brother, Peter, and her family to host me. We collected Gikari in Nairobi and, on the journey north, Gikari and Benni spoke in Gĩkũyũ as they listened to *Kameme FM*, a Gĩkũyũ-language radio station that was broadcasting gospel songs and mũgithi ('one-man-guitar' music). I was only a couple of weeks into my Gĩkũyũ-language training and I barely caught a single word.

Gikari was an *mzee*, a mũthuuri in Gĩkũyũ (lit. the one who chooses, i.e., an older, married man),[1] who had taught me my first Kiswahili when I had first arrived in Nairobi in 2011 for an internship in the international development sector. I had reached out to Gikari in my search for a host family, knowing that language acquisition would be an important aspect of the fieldwork that I was planning – an ethnography of workshops in the town of Nyeri, in the foothills of Mount Kenya, a project I would soon abandon. Then in his early sixties, Gikari spent most of his weekends at his homestead in the Rift Valley where he owned a small plot of land inherited from his father.[2] Gikari was not rich in the terms of contemporary Kenya, where images of celebrities' and politicians' immense capacity for

[1] Both terms evoke the respect that age fetches for men in central Kenya (Lonsdale 1992: 326–7).

[2] Gikari's father had himself acquired the land through a settlement scheme after independence, whereby groups of Kenyans bought land co-operatively before redistributing the land in parcels to individual co-operative members.

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spending circulates in the public sphere. Nonetheless, he had built his own house of cement blocks and his children had left his immediate care and gone on to find work. He continued to farm maize for subsistence on his *shamba* (farm or garden) in the Rift Valley of around two acres. In this he embodied a 'traditional' Kikuyu masculinity that is defined by the image of a successful smallholder capable of investing in his homestead and his future by bringing in cash from further afield.

At twenty-nine years of age, Benni on the other hand embodied the aspirations of Kenya after 2002, the moment of Kenya's 'second liberation' from the authoritarian government of Daniel arap Moi's Kenya Africa National Union (KANU). Many in Kenya recall the years of Daniel arap Moi's presidency, and the *de jure* and later *de facto* one-party regime (1979–2002) of KANU as ones of economic hardship. The year 2002 marked the demise of his one-party state and the beginning of a new era of political and economic liberalisation, the advent of multi-party democracy, and a period of sustained economic growth.[3] In 2017, Benni worked as a successful taxi driver, though that success concealed his origins. He had grown up in Kawangware, one of Nairobi's informal settlements. From my conversations with friends of mine in Nairobi who had grown up there, I could guess at the difficulties he must have faced as a young man growing up there in the 1990s. In 2017, Benni's pride and joy was his daughter, whose intelligence he regularly marvelled at, speaking with wide-eyed amazement as he explained how quickly she managed to master the games on his smart phone.

Our journey out of Nairobi took us through the leafy suburbs of Muthaiga, home to rich Kenyans from the business and political elite as well as expatriates working for Nairobi-based international non-governmental organisation and the United Nations. The quiet suburbs then gave way to the bustle of Ruaka – a growing commuter town on Nairobi's border with Kiambu County that epitomises the city's northward urban expansion and growing aspirations towards middle-class standards and styles of living. Cinderblock high-rises dominate the landscape, with grand names like 'Kileleshwa Citadel' or 'Crystal Apartments', bars and clubs pump out contemporary Afro-pop, and, in the street, groups of young men ushered passengers into stationary *matatu* vehicles bound for Nairobi.

At Ruaka, we turned, driving our way up towards Chungwa Town, the landscape now oscillating between high-rises and empty fields. Scores of drying maize plants (*mbembe*) could be glimpsed between the buildings

[3] A history recounted in vivid terms by Daniel Branch (2011).

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packed along the roadside. Speeding *matatu*s were now forced to dodge carts pulled by donkeys and careering pickup trucks transporting napier grass.[4] Either side of the road, rental accommodation buildings of varying sizes and quality were interspersed with corrugated iron shacks selling maize, charcoal, and vegetables. Nightclubs with names like 'Club YOLO: You Only Club Once' and 'New Whispers' sat alongside the so-called new or local Christian churches as well as signs for the established ones: Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic.

A transport hub, Chungwa Town was stationed at the gateway between metropolitan Nairobi and rural Kiambu beyond it. Unlike in Ruaka, a much more noticeable number of young men (anake in Gikuyu, *majana*s in Sheng) were waiting at the roadside chewing mũgũũka. Driving further beyond the town, the landscape shifted to rural hedgerows. Only a couple of new, gated communities of walled-off stone houses stood out, built by Nairobi-based real estate companies in anticipation of selling to the growing middle class.

Eventually, we arrived at Ituura, a patchwork of smallholder households located on the edges of Chungwa Town, a stone's throw from the enormous tea plantations that continue along the hills of southern Kiambu and onward towards the towns of Limuru and Tigoni. We turned off the concrete road that leads onwards through the tea farms towards the town of Limuru and onto a dirt road leading into the dense interior of small farms, the car's spinning wheels kicking dust into the air.

When we arrived at Catherine's house, she welcomed us indoors, making sure that Benni joined us for a lunch of *chapatis* and *kabeji* (cabbage, fried in oil). Benni began enthusiastically showing Gikari, Catherine, and her then nineteen-year-old son Mwaura photos of his wife and five-year-old daughter saved on his smart phone. He spoke proudly of his success as a taxi driver, telling us how he had once earned 17,000 KSh in a single night. As I would soon discover, for Catherine and Mwaura, this was no small sum of money. To them, Benni looked like someone who had 'made it' in life, and they showed their amazement at his success.

Meanwhile, Gikari was approving, saying to me how impressed he was with young men like Benni who are 'for their family and work hard'. 'You have to work hard, and then these miracles can happen.' For Catherine and Mwaura to meet Benni was for them to encounter a powerful image of the future success they desired. Mwaura took his phone number, a potential contact for another day.

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[4] A high-yield fodder crop usually used to feed cows (*nguruwe*).

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Benni did not meet Mwaura and Catherine again during the course of my fieldwork, but I always thought of their encounter as a revealing one. Mediated by hospitality, here were two households interacting by reflecting on the importance of wealth (*ũtonga*) and family (*bamirĩ*) – encoded in the care of children (*ciana*), elaborating the theories of success (*ũhotani*) and work (*wĩra*) that lie behind them, contingent as they are upon the occasional assistance of God (*Ngai*). Benni gained approval in Catherine and Gikari's eyes by demonstrating not only his economic success, but a proper moral orientation towards his family. It was implicitly understood that it was not simply his own quality of life he worked for but, by extension, his daughter's future prosperity. In embodying such a family-oriented work ethic, he proved himself to be a responsible and upstanding man.

That Benni appeared to Gikari to be living up to certain norms about what is good or important in life only implied his moral agency because there were alternative ways to live. Understanding the normative emphasis placed on family life as a horizon of self-realisation in contemporary Kenya is impossible without an appreciation of its opposite – the destruction of wealth via overconsumption. In particular, Benni appeared good in contrast to other young men who were considered to drink too much alcohol. Broader moralising was taking place in Kenya – of which Gikari was certainly aware – about the threat posed to social reproduction by widespread alcoholism, itself a sign of masculine irresponsibility.

My research began in Catherine and Mwaura's neighbourhood of Ituura. The dense hedgerows separating individual homesteads, and the tall stone houses that loomed beyond them, offered an image of solidity and permanence. But this was punctured by glimpses of privation and my own growing knowledge of Kiambu County's relative poverty, a contrast made by Kiambu residents themselves as much as my Kikuyu friends from Nairobi, themselves hailing from the county of Nyeri where larger rural homesteads would have dwarfed the patchwork plots of Kiambu's smallholders. Joblessness was palpable, and Ituura's rust-red earth backstreets were places where unemployed neighbourhood men would gather to pass the time, sometimes discussing local gossip or national politics but often sitting in silence. As we shall see more keenly in later chapters, my early perceptions of rural idyll were soon dispelled by a growing understanding of the neighbourhood's economically stratified character, its local rivalries and tensions. Over the next two chapters, I want to focus on the region and the neighbourhood's parallel nature as a site of male futures undermined by an eroding agrarian economy and the prospect of pauperisation.

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