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‘Respectable Illegality’: Gangs, Masculinities and Belonging in a Nairobi Ghetto

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Summary

This ethnography focuses on the multiple meanings of gangs in the everyday practices of young men in Mathare, a Nairobi ghetto, and analyses these meanings in relation to wider cultural, political, and economic frameworks and developments. In particular, it looks at the daily struggles of young ghetto men who faced multiple marginalities in their attempts to become senior men and how this was related to membership of a working gang. Accordingly, this book aims to move beyond the dominant representations of gangs in Kenya and elsewhere as criminal, political and mono-ethnic networks of idle young men. I thus hope to contribute to debates on gangs in Kenya and worldwide, African masculinities, and articulations of ethnic and local belonging. By looking at what pushed young men to join or leave working gangs, how this was tied to struggles over positions of manhood, and why and how gangs and individual gang members took part in junctures violence, this book goes beyond the stereotypical, but highly pervasive, depiction of these young men as "thugs for hire". As a consequence, I found that along with the much-researched concept of political violence, which is heavily intertwined with ethnicity in the context of Kenya, other factors like work, gender and belonging turned out be crucial in gaining insight into the social processes of working gang formation in Mathare, and into the participation of these gangs and individual gang members in violence.

The main challenge for my research is understanding why and how young men in Mathare both join and leave working gangs. I launched the term working gang for groups that focused on alcohol production and the drug trade, because the members themselves referred to their income-generating activities as work. Referring to illegal practices in this way is not uncommon among groups that are engaged in them, and it fully captures the notion of "respectable illegality". The young distillers were acutely aware of its illegal status, but they imagined it as reputable as it enabled them to perform (young) male duties and earn respect from community residents. The most obvious reason for young men in this ghetto to joining a working gang seems to emanate from economic necessity. Nevertheless, such explanations risk reducing complex social motivations and decision-making processes to monetary logics. I have tried to develop a broader view of the current and future social possibilities and constraints that young men imagined when making decisions and acting on them, especially pertaining to joining and leaving working gangs. All young men who featured in this book were driven by a shared desire to improve their social status and actualise the position of senior manhood. This predominantly shaped their social navigation trajectories, within which both joining and leaving working gangs were considered to be key steps. Accordingly, I show that the social processes of working gang formation in Mathare were predominantly shaped by notions of work and

dominant standards of masculinity, rather than by ethnicity or political affiliations. Ethnicity did play a role as a boundary marker in many other group-making projects that also involved working gang members from time to time, albeit in highly unexpected ways.

Especially striking was the role of working gangs in structuring the processes of becoming men in a community that was dominated by women. These processes were popularly imagined as following the gradual attainment of specific social, cultural and economic capital. One of the main pathways to gradually achieving such ambitions was by joining a working gang, as these gangs were popularly conceptualised as age-sets that helped young men to progress from junior to senior manhood. Most young men moved out of their family's one-room house after circumcision at the age of 16 to begin life as a junior man. Working gangs allowed young men to cater for and garner adequate capital with which to eventually establish themselves as senior men. The working gang also enabled these young men to maintain meaningful relationships with their families by working for close female relatives and performing security and other forms of community service in their neighbourhood area. Interestingly, notions of work, respectability and community service are not generally associated with gangs in the dominant discourses, whether in Kenya or worldwide. I, however, focused on the everyday role of gangs in ghettos, and studying these groups from local viewpoints revealed the fluidity and overlap between gangs and between gangs and other social groups of young men such as football teams, youth groups and even CBOs. This view thus helped me to approach the experiential level of the social processes of working gang formation, and to go beyond representations that prevail in both the media and academia. Accordingly, this perspective highlighted the quite different roles of gangs and gang members in the local setting.

This book shows that it is imperative to include gangs in sub-Saharan African ghettos in the emerging global agenda of comparative gang studies. However, gender is not a new trope in gang studies. Nevertheless, the roles of women as bosses and 'cheerleaders' of gangs of young men, and how this has a bearing on the latter's imaginings of gendered senses of the self, which is so central in this study, give new dimensions to the role of gender in this field. Moreover, the modes in which gangs play a role in and structure situational and relational processes of becoming men requires further academic exploration. These emphases are all the more urgent in a global context that is currently witnessing rapid urbanisation (particularly in southern countries), an increasingly younger population, and a growing number of households led by single mothers. The declining access to opportunities for young men within the formal realm in the global south calls for in-depth analyses of how the self-organisation among young men within informal economies can often become quite productive in terms of economic growth, social cohesion and community development, to the extent that it may even benefit the so-called

formal economy. Having said this, I also illustrate that clear distinctions between formal and informal and legal and illegal are in fact hard to make.

Despite the fact that gangs offered work opportunities to young ghetto men, they were expected to leave the working gang and establish themselves as senior men around the age of 30 at the latest. However, leaving a gang has become increasingly difficult in recent times. This book brings out how this had an impact on the already tense gender relations in Mathare, and how young men navigated these shifts. I describe how, during their gang membership, these young men became fathers, got married (not necessarily in that order) and gradually took up other positions that were widely associated with senior manhood. Nevertheless, gang members were never fully considered to be senior men in the popular discourse as long as they continued to be part of the gang. The founding of the first alcohol gangs in Mathare in 1994, and later the drug gangs in the early 2000s, helped young men to carve out pathways for themselves to garner social and other types of capital that would help them to leave the gang. However, the economic slump after 2008 increasingly hindered their trajectories out of the gang, thus trapping gang members in a more permanent state of 'lesser manhood'. Accordingly, anxieties about manhood among both men and women put mounting pressure on gender relations in Mathare, and relationships between women and young men in particular became more and more unhinged.

A major thread running through this book is how these young men's fears of growing redundancy with regard to women shaped their social navigation struggles. These men may best be described by the term 'anxious men', referring to those who feared becoming lesser men, *mafala*. Their anxieties do not, however, indicate that young men were locally considered to be redundant or disconnected; instead, it denoted the qualms that young men had about losing more and more social, political and economic ground in relation to their community and society at large, but especially with regard to the women in their lives. I explore how and why, from the perspectives of young men, the recent economic decline affected the two genders differently in Mathare. Most young men thus felt increasingly left out. Furthermore, their anxieties were profoundly aggravated by the unlawful killings of young ghetto men by the police that have become a systematic phenomenon since 2002. I discuss in detail, and from different perspectives, how the double bind of depending on women for work and being expected to provide for women led to mounting anxieties among young ghetto men. Engaging in direct acts of violence was, to a large extent, aimed at forcing a shift in the, in their eyes, oppressive and anomalous gender relations. Dominant media representations often depicted these men as detached, idle, frustrated and prone to violence, and therefore a threat. Contrary to such perceptions, engaging in violent strategies was more often than not aimed at reinforcing their sense of belonging to their family and community. Regarding their participation in such violence

as strategic, and as part of their social navigation struggles, enabled a view that held these men as agents instead of mere victims of power configurations.

My focus on working gangs also became crucial for acquiring better insight into the rise and demise of ethnic-based gangs and into understanding mounting violence in Mathare from the early 2000s onwards. Nearly all direct acts of violence emanated from routine violence that structurally marginalised different social groups in Mathare. Dominant ethnic hate narratives at times gained performative power among these different groups in attempts to comprehend disparities between them. This book reveals that some working gang members shifted gang alliances during conflict, hence boosting ethnic-based gangs during critical moments. At other times, however, working gangs teamed up with local residents to oust ethnic-based gangs. Working gangs and individual members thus participated in conflicts that involved ethnic-based gangs in unexpected ways, and this brings important nuances to the dominant narrative in Kenya that explains the mounting violence in Mathare solely in ethnic terms.

This book also shows that in order to fully understand why and how episodes of violence emerge in this ghetto, and perhaps elsewhere, it is crucial to examine the historical, social, economic and political factors that come together in a particular locality at a particular moment in time. It is vital to investigate these elements from the perspectives of the people (such as working gang members) involved in such violence, whether as perpetrators, victims, or both. To understand this violence from the viewpoint of its participants, the context-bound histories of ethnic labels and how these intersected with popular notions of belonging and entitlement were crucial. Discourses about ethnic labels thus imagined were politically strategic constructs; the people who were supposed to belong to these constructs and reap the consequences, whether they wanted to or not, such as the poor with Kikuyu and Luo backgrounds, hardly ever fitted them. In their narratives, the young men increasingly imagined violence in terms of 'us Kikuyu' and 'them Luo' and vice versa. I argued that these ethnic labels hide more than they reveal and cannot be used as an explanatory concept on their own. The young men who killed and died in the name of an ethnic label turned out to actually know very little about the dominant history of those constructs, or about past social relationships between the particular ethnic groups to which they refer.

The trope of the jealous neighbour was often evoked by working gang members (and residents in general) to explain all kinds of conflict in Mathare. This notion proved to be useful in this research for unravelling how, when and why conflicts emerged, because it added an often overlooked dimension of violence in Mathare, albeit one that is well understood by local residents. The dimensions described by this image included both the power of jealousy (emanating from feeling excluded) and the opportunity that violence may provide to improve one's own position. The notion of the jealous neighbour has helped in unpacking different layers

of the reasons behind participation in, and the meanings of, violence in Mathare from the perspective of young ghetto men. Accordingly, approaching such seemingly conflicting and potentially conflictive relationships called for an in-depth contextualisation of such relationships and their shifts. Through such analyses, and by following the logic of young working gang members, I have been able to bring into view their ostensibly contradictory and highly fluid positions during conflicts. I thus discovered another layer to the binary between popular positions of manhood, *mjanja* and *fala*. These positions intersected with notions of natives and visitors in unexpected ways, and this again helped me to bring nuance to the dominant trope of ethnicity.

The theoretical framework of social navigation (Vigh 2006, 2009) enabled me to bring out how young men, despite situations of extreme insecurity, continued to build their lives against all odds. This approach did, however, fall short when it came to elucidating how their considerations of the immediate and the imagined pertained to differences in choice-making among similarly positioned men, and how this all had a bearing on individual social navigation struggles. I have tried to overcome the limits posed by this framework by analysing the young men's life histories against the grain. Looking at processes of subjectivation from the perspectives of the young men led me to focus on their 'negotiation' of discourses. The different ways in which these young men negotiated restrictive subject positions shaped different social navigation trajectories among them. This focus has also helped to highlight the availability of particular alternative positions such as ghetto pride. Accordingly, the concept of negotiation has added to social navigation theory in crucial ways. It allowed me to analyse how individual young men positioned themselves within the context of the highly restrictive forces that moved all of them. Looking at their processes of negotiation enabled me to approach the different modalities in which young ghetto men navigated social relationships and highly unstable circumstances.

Analysing the process of negotiation through the narratives of young ghetto men made their social navigation struggles detectable to me from their own points of view. This type of discourse analysis was useful in grasping intersubjective patterns of individual experiences, and as such of situated and embodied histories and agencies. These patterns were not generalisable in absolute terms, but they did shed light on dominant and available alternative discursive frameworks and their mediated effects within particular spatial, temporal and social contexts. This enabled me to approach how some of these men were, at times, able to claim power and resist oppressive structures, however fleetingly, by constructing the position of ghetto pride. It also allowed me to contextualise ethnicity by analysing contingent notions of us and them based on shifting articulations of local and ethnic belonging from their perspectives.

In this book, a concept of agency came to the fore that encompassed the situational relationalities between structure and actor, and which included acts of both compliance and

resistance (Davids and Willemse 2014). The different modes in which young ghetto men negotiated dominant discourses, at times upholding while at other times challenging dominant notions and subject positions, revealed that affirming dominant subject positions could also indicate instances of agency. This begs the question as to under which conditions the upholding of a dominant subject position may allude to agency (*see also* Mahmood 2005). Kingi and many other young men in this book were highly invested in adhering to the position of the provider, and even during times of great adversity they took immense pride in at least trying to live up to this masculine ideal. As a consequence, it was not just in succeeding, but also in trying, that agency manifested itself. Interestingly, this type of struggling and hustling (dubbed by them *kung'ang'ana* – Kiswahili for 'to struggle' – or *kuhustle* in Sheng) perhaps affirmed one subject position, but also helped to, at times, resist another. Enacting the role of provider, even against all odds, was also part of enacting ghetto pride and resisting the ghetto boy position, as it underscored their identification as men instead of boys.

Above all, I hope this book brings out alternative meanings of what it means to be a gang member for young men living in Mathare, and of the role of gangs play in the everyday life of this and other Nairobi ghettos with regard to wider cultural, political and economic frameworks and developments. This in-depth view can enrich gang studies in Kenya, which are still dominated by top-down approaches, and it also has wider implications for gang studies elsewhere.