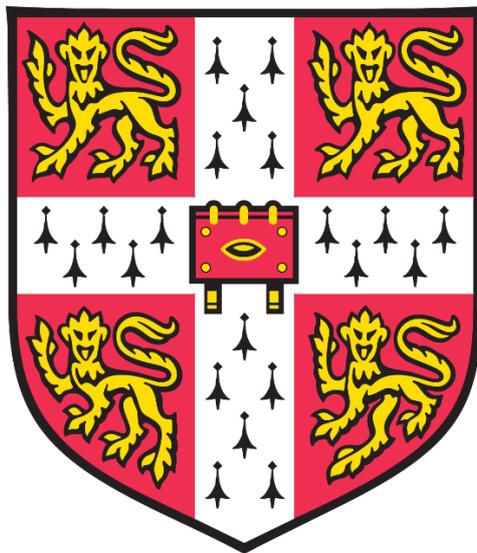


The Greedy Eaters

A moral politics of continuity and consumption in urbanising central Kenya

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Anthropology

Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Archaeology, Anthropology and Sociology Degree Committee.

Abstract

The Greedy Eaters: A moral politics of continuity and consumption in urbanising central Kenya

Peter Lockwood

Since before the colonial period, Kikuyu in central Kenya have argued about the morality of wealth and the delinquency of poverty. A kinship-based labour ethic was at the heart of these moralising debates. Men and women could gain public standing from accumulating the land and tenants that sustained families over generations. Wealth was virtuous, poverty scorned as the product of indolence. In the colonial period, this debate began to shift, as a growing scarcity of land and wages undermined the achievement of 'wealth in people' and the moral task of the household's social reproduction. Irresponsible consumption became the new mark of anti-social wealth destruction.

This thesis revisits the long conversation about wealth, poverty and civic virtue in contemporary central Kenya during a moment of profound change – a 'construction boom' emanating from an expanding Nairobi. Rather than a conventional story of urbanisation, however, this thesis explores how these transformations are playing out in 'emic' terms as a debate about the possibilities of continuity – of the future pursued through kinship – and the problem of consumption, an index of anti-social, selfish desire.

Drawing on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in southern Kiambu county, alongside archival research, this thesis establishes the historical context of these local arguments about continuity and consumption, before tracking their contemporary manifestations across a range of demographics and situations. Families and friends from peri-urban neighbourhoods argue over the limits and extents of reciprocity when wages can be gleaned from the city, condemning those who seek dependence on others in the process. Patriarchal figures continue to argue for the responsibility of investment in children's futures, now against the backdrop of apparently neglectful fathers who sell land to fund lives of short-term pleasure. Unemployed youth from local towns find themselves vilified by the same discourses yet claim that they will one day become 'serious', responsible men. Intra-kin disputes over precious plots of inherited land see family members accuse each other of greed and destructive desire to accumulate at the expense of their immediate relatives. Consuming figures are condemned as immoral 'greedy eaters' in a variety of ways.

Adopting the term ‘moral politics’, this thesis identifies moral debate about economic practice as an important and understudied terrain of anthropological inquiry. Departing from conventional understandings of the ‘moral economy’ as cohesive and harmonious circuits of reciprocity, ‘moral politics’ explores the divergent, conflicting opinions people hold about what counts as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ economic practice, and how such fields of evaluation and debate shape understandings of persons, their reputation and their public standing. In doing so, I show how central Kenyans see consumption as emblematic of a new type of self-interested individuality characteristic of a changing moral world: greedy eating. That economic change is argued about in a moral key underscores emic insistence on moral solutions to economic problems – that better futures are available through adherence to the right sort of moral values and that the solution to immoral predation lies in uprightness, moral fortitude, and, above all, the maintenance of the family.

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Glossary of key words

Kiswahili and Sheng

Bhang	Cannabis
Kijana, vijana	Young man, young men
Majanas	Youth (Sheng)
Makanga	Matatu tout
Mama	Mother (of)
Matatu	Nissan mini-van
Mkora, wakora	Thief, thieves
Mtiaji	Snitch (Sheng)
Mzee, wazee	Old man, Old men (honorific)
Mzungu, wazungu	White person, white people
Pombe	Beer
Raha	Fun
Shamba, mashamba	Garden, gardens (small plots of land)

Gikũyũ

Kĩrumi, irumi	Curse, curses
Mũgũũka	Khat leaves
Mũgũnda, mĩgũnda	Garden, gardens (small plots of land)
Mũhoi, ahoi	Tenant, tenants
Mũthomi, athomi	Reader, readers (Christian convert/s)
Mũthuuri, athuuri	Male elder, male elders
Mwanake, anake	Young men, young men
Mwĩĩĩ	Proud person
Mwĩĩĩo	Pride
Njohi	Alcohol

List of key persons

Paul Kimani's family

Paul Kimani – The patriarch of a smallholder family and a long-haul lorry driver

Catherine – Kimani's wife and head of household in his absence

Mwaura – Their 19-year-old son and university student

Njoki – Their 17-year-old daughter and high-school student

Mama Nyambura's family

Mama Nyambura – The female head of a wealthy household

Nyambura – Mama Nyambura's 25-year-old daughter, regularly absent in China

Shiko – Mama Nyambura's 18-year-old daughter and college student

Mama Gethi's family

Mama Gethi – The female head of a neighbouring household

Feye – Mama Gethi's 25-year-old daughter

Mike – Mama Gethi's 23-year-old son

Gethi – Mama Gethi's eldest son, 33-years-old

Ikinya – Mama Gethi's middle son, 30-years-old

Others:

Jata – The 23-year-old daughter of a neighbouring family

Stevo – Her 26-year-old brother

Ndovu – A neighbourhood elder

Murigi – Paul Kimani's younger brother, in his late 40s

Wangui – Paul Kimani's youngest sister, 40

Introduction

This thesis is about economic life in contemporary central Kenya and, more specifically, the imbrication of moral and economic *thought* past and present. It studies how Kenyans continue to debate the intertwined categories of labour, kinship, wealth, poverty and civic virtue from the 19th century and into present moment. Since before the arrival of the Europeans, Kikuyu in central Kenya have argued about what a good life is and how to attain it in material terms. This thesis builds on the work of historians of the region, tracking this changing debate into the ethnographic present as ‘current history’ (Moore 1987). It shows that the normative logic of ‘wealth in people’ – that family is where one’s obligations and responsibilities ought to lie – remains at the heart of moral argument in central Kenya. But this is becoming an increasingly contested arena for Kenyans who sense a growing threat to social reproduction posed by anti-social consumption.

Over the three centuries before 1900, Bantu-speaking migrants arriving at the foothills of Mount Kenya began the difficult task of clearing the dense forest wilderness to create space for sedentary agriculture. The arduous work of hewing down trees with axes and iron bars gave rise to a moral philosophy that valued that labour as the basis not only of economic success but of personal reputation (Lonsdale 1992: 332-4). With no overarching authority capable of commanding respect on this uncertain frontier, labour became the guarantor of public status. Visible wealth proved its worth. Through labour, these migrants found social membership, becoming Kikuyu, named after the mũkũyũ tree that grew throughout the highlands. Their proverbs celebrated their efforts, exhorting men and women to kuuga na gwika, to ‘say and do’ (ibid.: 340). Their language valorised the ‘prosperity’ and ‘flourishing’ (kũgita) of the homestead and its thick hedges that kept the forest wilderness at bay (Peterson 2004a: 11). Male household heads were athuuri (literally, ‘those who choose’, still the word for married adult men today),

successful patriarchal figures who ‘led opinion because their homes were far from going to ruin’ (ibid.: 337), their wealth measured in migrant clients received from elsewhere (ahoi), wives (atumia), children (ciana) and land (ithaka). Historian John Lonsdale described Kikuyu as possessing a labour theory of morality (ibid.: 353), one glimpsed in other peasant societies across Africa and Europe (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Hann 2018), that associated material success with moral personhood (cf. Guyer 1993).

Labour alone could not make men moral, though. It was what labour produced that measured its worth. Migrant Kikuyu, migrating further southward towards contemporary Nairobi sought remembrance as ‘founders’ of new family lineages that they would create alongside their relatives and friends when acquiring and clearing land on the frontier. Economic success was thought of as enabling, purposed towards social continuity, providing property to be divided amongst sons endowed with the ‘upbringing’ (irĩiri) to make best use of what had been left behind by ancestors – ‘those who left wealth’ (atiga-iri) (Lonsdale 1992: 334; cf. Kinoti 2010: 34-6). Family life, its reproduction and material advancement, was a marker of what historian John Lonsdale calls ‘civic virtue’ – the reputation earned in social relations with others whereby one’s success signalled the longevity of one’s lineage, agreed upon as the ultimate end (Lonsdale 2005: 564). ‘Wealth in people’ (Guyer 1995) was a stake in the future.

But Merrie Africa this was not (Lonsdale 1992: 338). The achievement of civic virtue through slow, hard labour was characteristic of the ‘dynastic thought’ promulgated by Kikuyu patriarchs (Lonsdale 2009: 36-7), men who had already achieved wealth and preached to others the goodness of gradual accumulation. They objectified the proper moral qualities a man ought to possess as wĩathi, a word commonly now translated as ‘freedom’, but at the time connoted ‘self-reliance’ or ‘self-mastery’ – qualities of determination and self-restraint that were cultivated amidst the harsh character of pioneering society. Wealthy men (athamaki) preached the virtue of hard work against the violent practices of youth (anake), warriors who sought to come into their own, far quicker than their elders might have desired, through raids carried out on other Kikuyu and nearby Maa-speaking peoples. Short-term accumulation was too unruly for the established, breaking trading agreements with nearby peoples (Kershaw 1997; Ambler 1988; Muriuki 1974). From the perspective of the young and ambitious, working for other men demeaned them. There was another means: to take wealth from others, specifically cattle that would provide bride-price and with it the establishment of a respectable homestead (mũcii). The poor, meanwhile, were condemned as lazy in a range of epithets, belittled as ‘beggars’ (atereki), a word that evoked their silence – a sign of their low standing (Peterson 2004a: 11). ‘Poverty shut men’s mouths, making them socially forgettable’ (Peterson 2001: 473). Wealthy Kikuyu were able to narrativise their

success because droughts periodically wiped out the unfortunate. There was a claim to superior knowledge, to wisdom as much as wealth - that they knew what they were doing far more than the unfortunate others who had perished.

In the midst of the forest, gradually being cleared, the long conversation about wealth production in central Kenya began, one that has been going ever since: wealth earned power, moral personhood and social standing, but how should one acquire it? What were the costs, material and moral, of using violence to do so? What did the wealthy owe the poor? What were the moral and material consequences of withholding assistance in times of need? What were the moral consequences of economic failure? With various options and divergent paths to wealth came debate about their relative morality, but in the pre-colonial period established men appear to have had the upper hand, dominating the debate by emphasising the labour ethic and the domestic domain as its proper locus of obligation (Lonsdale 1992, 1995, 2003; Peterson 2004a). From their perspective, '[p]overty was delinquent [...] The poor had no heart, no friends and would have no posterity' (Lonsdale 1992: 340). The poor criticised the rich for being miserly, for not sharing opportunity (Peterson 2004a: 12). Such debates were never permanently resolved, and their character was to change dramatically with the arrival of European influence at the beginning of the 20th century.

Before the arrival of Europeans, availability of land propped-up this 'dynastic theory' of social reproduction. Sons of the wealthy and sons of the poor were drawn to seek out their own fortunes, often in mutual company. Migration won legendary status for founders of new dynasties, whose names would recur across the following generations – from father to grandson in cyclical regeneration, 'the deep-rooted desire to remain immortal through remembrance' (Droz N.D.: 4). Space for expansion made these dreams possible, and the principle of 'land as people' (Kershaw 1997: 26-8) – as the foundation for social relationships rather than objectified property - held more or less true. Patronage was a moral contract, unequal though it was, and migrant labourers who worked on the land of the wealthy could hope to transcend their temporary status and become junior kin. Men sought opportunity for advancement in such social relationships, rather than fixed 'dependence' (Ferguson 2013).

The expropriation of land to European farmers in the central highlands changed all of this. Amidst the economic turbulence brought about by land alienation and overpopulation in the Kikuyu reserves of central Kenya, where Kikuyu expansionary and migratory patterns were now hemmed in by white-owned farms, the debate began to shift. By the 1940s, land had become valuable at labour's expense, as rural capitalists – both white settler and wealthy Kikuyu – sought to enclose their holdings, growing crops for export. Land poverty in the Kikuyu reserves became

marked. Fathers struggled to cater for even a single wife and children on much reduced landholdings (Peterson 2001: 473). Masculine authority in the home was undermined by marital strife, women accusing migrant men of impotence, unable to support them economically whilst their own farming efforts sustained the family (Peterson 2001: 475).¹ The earnings of itinerant labourers remained low, failing to keep step with the rising cost of land and bride wealth that would allow them to marry and become legitimate patriarchs in their own right (Lonsdale 1992: 358-9, 459-61). This was a time of ‘tumult’, of *mgogoro* (ibid.: 471).

Denied the material resources that would make them *athuuri*, young landless men, ‘greedy eaters’ (*Mau Mau*) their pejorative name, took to the forest in arms against the white man (*mũthũngũ*) and their own wealthy elders, *ithaka na wiathi* (land and freedom) their demands. It was the old self-mastery they fought for – the right to be an upstanding citizen in a moral universe that demanded responsible patriarchy and familial continuity – as much as freedom from British political domination.² Meanwhile, the wealthy continued to accumulate land in the reserves at the direct expense of their poorer neighbours and relatives. Access to income from beyond the farm continued to stratify neighbours, turning kin not only into strangers but driving an economic wedge between them. Wages became a necessity for many, whilst the wealthy few could choose to educate their children for entry into professions that won government employment and expertise that helped win land litigation.

Amidst the changes of the early-mid 20th century, debate continued to turn around the central question, now modified by changed material circumstance: how could one live a good life when land was scarce, and wages too meagre (not to mention their low-buying power)?

It was Christian converts, ‘readers’ (*athomi*) who had benefited from mission education, who stepped into this moral breach to restate patriarchal norms, taking aim at those who they saw as having adapted poorly to economic change, continuing to cast the poor as morally responsible for their predicament. Change, readers suggested, had corrupted Kikuyu, particularly the youth. The growing towns, especially Nairobi, had brought new opportunities, not only for accumulation through wage labour but for consumption – new styles of dress and leisure activities. Soon enough,

¹ Whilst this thesis discusses topics of fatherhood and masculine identity in an ethnographic mode, it avoids discussing these themes in terms of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ or a contemporary ‘crisis of masculinity’ in order to home in on the ongoing significance of masculine responsibility and its connection with accumulation in central Kenya over the *longue durée*. Rather than looking ‘sideways’ to contemporary theories of masculinity, this thesis primarily looks ‘backwards’ into the history of masculinity in central Kenya to show how notions of masculine responsibility have their roots in a longer history of ideas about wealth production and labour in the region.

² The most detailed historiography and ethnography contemporaneous with the *Mau Mau* rebellion attests to its fragmented, piecemeal character – that it entailed a series of localised uprisings where Kikuyu took revenge on wealthy elders and exploitative chiefs just as much as they attacked the infrastructure of colonial rule (Kershaw 1997; Lonsdale 1992; Anderson 2005).

Kikuyu began moralising not only about the poor but about those whose lives appeared defined by consumption, often at the expense of their families (Muoria 2009 [1942]).

As early as 1912, elders in Kiambu District complained that men returning from work in towns were ‘spoilt’, ‘different men’ who would not ‘bring money to their fathers as before [...] and think only of themselves’.³ According to Chief Wambugu based in Nyeri, ‘The young labourers mostly spent their money before getting home, the older ones brought it back. The younger men spent it on women, beer, and food in Nairobi, they also gambled with the women and houseboys’.⁴ Adult men from Kikuyuland wrote to the vernacular newspaper *Muigwithania*,⁵ edited by Johnstone Kenyatta, exhorting young men and women, labour migrants, to ‘think of tomorrow’, not to fall prey to the ‘delights of Nairobi’ – ‘For there is such a thing as old age that comes upon a person, and if you go on eating and drinking and will not remember that you have a home [...] When you get old you will experience much pain through lacking a place in which to enjoy that old age of yours [...] it would be a very good thing [...] to find a way to build your houses in your own country’.⁶ These were people who appeared to put their desires ahead of their responsibilities and obligations, and conservatives chastised them as such.

The conservative Kikuyu nationalism that emerged in the mid-20th century was designed to discipline its own youth and delinquent fathers as much as women and Christian evangelists (Peterson 2004b; Angelo 2019: 41-5). Henry Muoria, one such convert and later a speechwriter for Kenyatta, the soon-to-be Prime Minister of independent Kenya, had done so in his pamphlets penned in the 1940s whilst he worked as a railway guard. When he condemned poverty amidst the mid-20th century’s tumults, he did so not only as a Christian but as a patriot and a paternalist, a man moralising about the values other men ought to have. He did not stress obligation to God nearly as much as obligation to kin, and the moral value of kinship itself.

If you fail to work hard and diligently, you will find nothing but misery, and ignorance and poverty will walk by your side. These are enemies to the people, who [then] become ignorant, poor and useless. What can we do? We must work hard, with much love, to find the resources to educate our children. They will then be in good company, become good, and benefit our country (Muoria 2009 [1945]: 161).

³ East Africa Protectorate. Native Labour Commission, 1912-13. Evidence and Report (Nairobi: Government Printer Press, 1914) – a copy is located at KNA AG/7/6, p. 72.

⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

⁵ The name of the newspaper reflected Kenyatta’s desire to style himself as ‘the reconciler’, the man to solve domestic strife brought about by material poverty. He later reinvented himself as ‘Jomo’ (Berman and Lonsdale 1998: 32).

⁶ KNA DC/MKS 10B/13/1. *Muigwithania*, 1928-1929, ‘Think of Tomorrow’, Letter to the Editor from G.C. Job Muchuchu.

Muoria's words reframed the labour theory of morality of the forest frontier as a more concerted labour ethic for an era of piecemeal cash incomes. Responsible patriarchy was the new barometer of moral personhood. Muoria warned against alcohol, and its effects for a youth who appeared to abandon their responsibilities. 'They will learn there is a danger in remaining irresponsible — but too late' (ibid.: 217).

Years after independence, Kenyatta would echo Muoria's paternalism when he asked Bildad Kaggia, the former *Mau Mau* veteran, 'What have you done for yourself?'. Kaggia was upbraided by Kenyatta because he continued to advocate for land distribution in the aftermath of independence, particularly for former *Mau Mau* (Maloba 2018: 261). Kenyatta's rhetoric cast Kaggia's pursuit of justice as one of dependence, relying on others rather than one's own efforts. Kenya's independence and Kenyatta's leadership marked the victory of a gerontocratic ideal – that wealth was the product of labour. On the forest floor the relation between wealth and labour had been visible, but now the labour ethic masked deeper inequalities, moralising structural inequality and poverty as the consequence of indiscipline, of irresponsibility. Kenyatta's Kenya became an 'elder state', one that paternalistically disciplined youth, preaching hard graft as the route towards becoming an upstanding man (Angelo 2019: Ocobock 2016: 244, 253). The labour ethic of the forest frontier was turned into economic ideology writ large (Haugerud 1995: 147), one that displaced questions of redistribution after colonial expropriation with notions of personal responsibility.

In the decades since independence, Kenyans have continued to debate the value of labour, the consequences of idleness and consumption. Whilst for much of the pre-colonial period a good life was defined by familial longevity and social reproduction, the brute poverty engendered by rural capitalism spawned a moralising polarity that mirrored the material limitations of everyday life. To work was to succeed, to invest in one's family was to achieve social remembrance, to be poor was to lack status, to consume at the expense of survival was to be forgotten. If the poor had always been condemned as lazy, and young warriors unruly, this was something new – people who seemed to embody not so much a workshy ethic, but a desire to irresponsibly eat and drink the money that guaranteed social continuity. Poor but aspirant Kikuyu claimed to know better. Christian converts re-stated dynastic, household-based morality as a modern patriarchy. Money, a good thing, ought to be converted into the sustenance and embellishing of one's family, they argued – to maintain the land well and educate the next generation. The fate of many households over the course of the 20th century and now in the 21st has been to hold to the old virtues, though

under changed and pressing conditions. Their consuming alters have been forgotten by history, remembered primarily in tones of ill will.

*

Moral debate in central Kenya was re-shaped in the midst of the colonial period around a deep appreciation of material scarcity – of cash and of land. Poverty raised the stakes for the poor and the aspirant in central Kenya, making their lives deeply precarious, spawning new debates about the morality of thrift and the immorality of consumption.⁷ This was a moral debate bereft of a theory of capitalist transformation (Lonsdale 1992: 461-2). Despite structural change, moral thought ‘remained a theory of persons and reputation rather than of institutions and classes’ (ibid.). Kikuyu debated the effects of economic privation with recourse to an even stronger emphasis on wealth’s morality. In the flourishing of a household, even a modest one, Kikuyu could claim moral distinction from those in material poverty. Labour remained a prominent language of moralising debate, but consumption emerged as a new target of this moralising, vilified for its improper, misdirection of cash wages away from the household. A theory of free moral choice remained at the heart of moral debates taking place in central Kenya, one that afforded even the poor the capacity to claim moral personhood denied by their limited means. ‘I’ll never eat the sweat of another’, goes a prominent contemporary gospel song, ‘so that I’ll leave my children inheritance’. The morality of labour remains the opposite of immoral consumption, its ends socially destructive.

The crowing of conservative voices in the midst of the colonial period suggests that fewer and fewer Kikuyu saw the value of ‘wealth in people’ as an achievable one, particularly the young who experienced the privation and danger of rural-urban migration the sharpest. It was precisely such youth who threw their lot in with *Mau Mau* in the 1950s. What was the point of pursuing a patrilineal future when its material basis had been so thoroughly undercut? Meanwhile, ascriptions of impatience and ill-thought-out desires to consume was a stick with which a new generation of mission-educated Kikuyu used to beat the poor. Loyalists in the emergency had criticised *Mau Mau* in the same tones, associating the forest fighters with criminality and laziness (Branch 2007: 298-9). But for moralisers like Muoria, consumption was not wrong in so far as it offended God or transgressed norms about the inherent goodness of work. It was wrong because it diverted wealth away from the site of the family. His words speak to the topic of this thesis - a set of moral debates

⁷ This is not to inscribe central Kenya with the logic of neo-classical economics (Sahlins 1972: 4). To speak of scarcity in central Kenya is to articulate how colonialism radically altered and shaped a context in which wages are low, and land limited. As the anthropologist Chris Gregory puts it (1997: 79, my emphasis), ‘Scarcity, for an anthropologist, is defined with reference to *historically specific* human relationships of inclusion and exclusion whose borders are marked by the creation of inalienable possessions, i.e. goods, under the control of trusted guardians.’

about social continuity in kinship and anti-social consumption via wealth destruction that are the product of a historically situated experience of scarcity brought about in the colonial period.

Nairobi approaching

The long conversation about wealth, poverty and civic virtue is shifting once more amidst a contemporary landscape of aspiration and inequality, opportunity and constraint. On the northern outskirts of Nairobi, the old southern frontier of Kikuyu migrant expansion, a landscape of rural smallholders is being transformed into a peri-urban periphery. Kiambu's patchwork post-colonial geography – of enormous tea plantations and densely packed peasant homesteads – has begun to be swallowed up by Nairobi's urban sprawl. In areas like Muchatha, Gachie, Wangige, and Ruaka, farming families have uprooted coffee plants and sold off plots. The farming topography is being replaced by a forest of high-rise accommodation blocks. Fortress-like shopping malls now rise out of the landscape, whilst unemployed youth idle in towns waiting for work as politicians drive past in their SUVs. With the city's expansion has come rising aspirations to partake in the lifestyles of the 'working class' (an unwittingly ironic epithet for what is essentially a 'middle class'), those with regular salaries, fine stone houses and a car. What was once country is now becoming 'more of Nairobi', as one of my interlocutors put it. 'The area is coming up', is how cosmopolitan members of Nairobi's middle-class put it, perhaps not fully appreciating the upheavals experienced in the process.

It is in Kiambu that new wealth accessed from the city's expansion into its peri-urban hinterlands collides with structural inequality, stoking new moral debates about the right way to make one's way in a changing environment. Since the colonial period, families from Kiambu's pockets of smallholder families have relied on wages gleaned from Nairobi and elsewhere, brought back to their farms and invested in children's futures via school fees, stone houses, farming activities and other signs of 'progress'. These are families whose long lives of economising and thrift have been carefully attuned to the economic turbulence of Kenya's post-colonial history, and the legacy of poverty created in central Kenya during the colonial period (Chapter 1).



Photograph 1: A homestead on the rural outskirts of Kiambu’s growing urban sprawl.

Now, they ‘feel the heat’, as it were, of the expanding city, and the profound existential challenges and opportunities it presents. Debate has intensified about how to accumulate and what to prioritise in life as desires to partake in wealth and forms of conspicuous consumption associated with town life have become more prominent. Land, now more valuable than ever before, can be sold in the blink of an eye for more cash than many peri-urban families can hope to earn in a lifetime of ‘hustling’ in the informal economy. Such acts of sale come with enormous judgement from others, seen as depriving children of their inheritance and a home, indexing the selfish desires of those who sell – that they would put their accumulation ahead of the flourishing of their children.

Smallholder families pursue social mobility with growing anxiety about the lifestyles pursued by others in the peri-urban milieu prone to such acts of wealth destruction, not least the rife alcoholism that has ‘spoiled’ the futures of many young men and tempts their elders to sell land. A future lived in people appears under threat by a present lived in transient experiences of fun. But land sale and alcoholism are merely two examples of what conservative families see as a general problem of ‘bad desires’ (*mĩrĩria moru*) and ‘immoralities’ (*waganu*) brought about by new opportunities to accrue wealth in the shadow of the city. Peri-urban families have come to fear

their own kin and friends who might covet their wealth and property. Tensions flare up over unmet expectations of material assistance or when land is inherited from the previous generation and disputes ensue (cf. Haugerud 1995: 191). In central Kenya today, households pursue their own aspirational projects under suspicion that others will try to deprive them of ‘belonging to the future’ (C. Smith 2019: 179).



Photograph 2: New concrete rental buildings in the backstreets of Mashambani, a Kiambu neighbourhood, August 2019.

Kiambu’s landscape is hardly the only instance of a ‘construction boom’ taking place in contemporary Africa (see, e.g., Archambault 2018; Elliot 2016; Goodfellow 2017; Mains 2019), but what this thesis draws attention to is the way moral understandings and debates encounter

such change. It is a familiar trope in Africanist anthropology that towns are places of immorality, associated with unscrupulous people (Adams 2009). Typically, their immorality has been glimpsed through ethnographic accounts of migrants who accrue wealth there only to invest it in their rural homes. But what happens when the town approaches country, bringing its immorality with it?

New dilemmas implicate older concerns. Rather than a conventional story of urbanisation, what this thesis shows is how these transformations are playing out as a debate about the possibilities of continuity – of the future pursued through kinship – and the problem of consumption, an index of anti-social, selfish desire. It is an attempt to delve into the moral discourses and commentaries of a lifeworld undergoing profound change. In the shadow of the city, the long conversation about wealth, poverty and virtue continues, but with changing premises. Now, in Kiambu's post-colonial geography – of dwindling plots and waged work - the greatest challenge is the maintenance of the household, and its future flourishing through kinship. It is a challenge lived in relation to alternative pathways of living. The implications of wider changes are still debated by families in a conservative key. In contemporary Kiambu, Kikuyu continue to claim moral personhood in relation to a landscape that seems defined by immorality, distinguishing themselves from 'greedy eaters'.



Photograph 3: A high-rise apartment block under construction in Ndenderu, Kiambu, May 2018.

Moral politics: beyond ‘the political economy of everyday life’

In the introduction to a recent volume on ‘the political economy of everyday life’ in Africa, Wale Adebani (2017) takes important steps towards reframing the anthropological study of economic life on the continent. He seeks to move away from the ‘urgent and troubled tones’ (Ferguson 2006: 2) with which Africa is often apprehended by media and scholars alike. Inspired by the work of Jane Guyer (2002), Adebani invites scholars to consider how broader political economic processes affect Africans’ ‘capacity to live – including the living of a good life’ (2018: 2). Such re-framings are most welcome given that to some scholars, African economic life appears defined by

a perpetual crisis brought about by constant and unbridled change (Goldstone and Obarrio 2017; Roitman and Mbembe 1995). Jean and John Comaroff paint a picture of runaway world in their article on ‘millennial capitalism’ (2000), restating their classic argument about the proliferation of ‘occult economies’ (1999), of mysterious accumulation and growing witchcraft accusations, as cosmological responses to economic disruption (cf. Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001). Despite their avowed interest in how ‘the local is globalized and the global localized’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 295), the scale at which their analysis takes place – abstracted from the specificities of life as lived by Africans – means that it retains an impression that Africans are the troubled recipients of a capitalist terror delivered to them from the global beyond, made sense of primarily through mystical and/or magical means (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 316). As Harri Englund has noted in a recent appraisal of this narrative of capitalism, little sense is given of what ‘might constitute virtue, civility, and obligation for people living in the horrors they describe’ (2011: 54).

A welcome improvement though it is, Adebani’s emphasis on ‘everyday life’ as an analytical antidote to Afro-pessimism has relatively little to say about African perspectives on their own predicament. An overt focus on Africans’ economic ‘striving, struggling or surviving’ (2017: 3) promises to privilege narratives of African ‘resilience’ within such wider contexts of capitalist misery, rather than African modes of debating and understanding these processes. In underscoring the ‘agency’ of Africans, alongside their ‘persistence’ and ‘imagination (2017: 7), Adebani’s broad approach recalls literature on the topic of ‘resistance’ in anthropology – the inscription of the lives of the marginal with political value by the scholar (Ortner 1995, 2016; Theodossopoulos 2014). As recent critics have noted, anthropologists have now begun to make precisely the same argument when rubrics of ‘hope’ and ‘uncertainty’ are used to describe the lives of marginal people across the Global South and beyond (see, e.g., Jansen 2016; Lockwood 2020; Rajković 2018). One of the main examples of this tendency has been in ethnographies of youth – where the lives of young people, structurally poor, are invested with creativity and potential based on the form of their practices - their everyday predicament of searching for money (Honwana 2012; De Boeck and Honwana 2005; Di Nunzio 2019; Thieme 2018; see Straker 2007 for critique).

Scholars are left with accounts of how youth ‘struggle’ and ‘get by’ despite a deep lack of structural agency,⁸ but with little to no understanding of the moral aspirations of the actors themselves, nor the wider moral landscapes in which they dwell and conversations in which they take part. So too, beyond Africa, anthropologists continue to conceptualise the relationship

⁸ Tellingly, it has been historians rather than anthropologists who have been most sensitive to the long-running debates taking place in a variety of contexts about gender and age (Ocobock 2017; Thomas 2003).

between moral and economic questions in all too dualistic terms. Material conditions remain the stone around the neck of human projects to cultivate freedoms and agency, whether they ultimately end up merely ‘striving’ or ‘struggling’ in the process (see, e.g., Ortner 2016; Rajković 2018; Mattingly 2013). Ethical and moral questions about economic life remain remarkably ‘first person’ (Mattingly 2012).

Where is the place for ‘emic’ knowledge and argument *about* wealth, poverty and virtue? It remains an imperative empirical task not to overwrite interlocutors’ concerns with forms of analysis derived from social science problems, and a binary understanding of the relationship between material constraint and moral aspiration. It is for these reasons that I suggest that such ‘anthropological’ questions about the relationship between economic and moral life, derived from classic structure-agency dichotomies,⁹ can be avoided entirely, replaced by a far more detailed account of the interior architectures of moral debate taking place in changing contexts across the globe, informing practice, moral projects and the public standing of persons. In so far as notions of virtue, obligation and civility might be important to the persons we study, such moral ideas and practices may not be static over time, but rather the subject of fierce debate and constant re-evaluation and re-negotiation, particularly in light of changing material circumstances that undergird their accomplishment and lived experience.

The work of historians and historical anthropologists is instructive here, not least because of their deep attentiveness to the moral universes in which Africans have debated wider historical and economic processes (see, e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Feierman 1990; Peterson 2012; Smith 2008; Willis 2002). Such an approach transcends a binary opposition between a historical-cum-material ‘structure’ and a human ‘agency’, underscoring instead the narratives through which history and material conditions are lived and inhabited, recognising the power of narratives to give meaning and moral personhood (Peel 1995).

The seminal work of historians John Lonsdale (1992, 2003, 2005, 2009) and Derek Peterson (2001, 2004, 2012) in particular point us towards a rather different genre of scholarship, one attuned to emic argument and its moral foundations. Lonsdale famously adapted E.P. Thompson’s (1971) concept of ‘moral economy’ to describe what he called ‘Kikuyu political thought’, less a static kernel of ideas than a conversation evinced by a variety of voices all commenting on the same fundamental problems: precisely *how* moral life could be lived when its material underpinnings had been removed. Lonsdale’s (1992) contribution was to observe how land poverty in central Kenya undermined the material basis of masculinity, giving rise to new

⁹ See discussion in Laidlaw (2014: 5-10).

forms of political action, most notably the *Mau Mau* rebellion, a history recounted, albeit briefly, above.

Lonsdale's approach has the potential to breathe new life into anthropology's approach to the relationship between moral and economic life. Typically, anthropologists have addressed such questions under the rubric of 'moral economy', a term often adopted in a rather literal way to describe transactions defined by reciprocity in a Maussian vein (Edelman 2012: 62-3).¹⁰ Following Thompson (1971), James C. Scott's (1975: 32-5) described how Vietnamese and Burmese peasants understood their basic 'right to subsistence' as a threshold that elites infringed, prompting rebellion (cf. Edelman 2012: 59-60). The moral economy was a social relationship, agreed upon as fair (cf. Carrier 2018: 24-25). In turn, moral economy can appear as a reified 'culture', implying a harmonious arrangement to be disturbed by external events. It is a 'clumpish' term, as Chris Hann remarks (2018: 230). Didier Fassin's (2015) rather different use of 'moral economy' is more salient to my purposes here in so far as it draws attention towards 'dilemmas, debates, decisions, conflicts, the interpretation of which remains subject to discussion and negotiation', and how these emerge from 'human action'. 'What is morally or ethically at stake?', is his question. And yet, as Hann (2018: 230) notes, there is a lack of formal 'economy' in Fassin's usage. Adopting an alternative term can be preferable to once again re-defining the meaning of 'moral economy'.

That is why I have rested on 'moral politics' to describe the argument that takes place around central moral principles operative in a particular context, a discursive arena within which people renegotiate moral norms and values in response to the social changes brought about by colonialism, capitalism, and now in relation to more recent currents of socio-economic change such as urbanisation. The task is not to describe 'a moral economy' and its internal cohesion (as a sort of moral-economic functionalism, as it were) but to shed light on divergent ideas and discourses *about* economic life and practice. This 'allows for recognition of resilient dominant values that facilitate societal integration' (Hann 2018: 231) whilst keeping in frame the significance of rogue orientations. As I go on to explain below, Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch's (1989) emphasis on the evaluation of different types of exchange is vital here, since it directs our attention toward debate about divergent types of economic practice – from accumulation to consumption – and their relative morality. Moral politics opens up the possibility of exploring a terrain of evaluation, a moral landscape, where a multiplicity of voices speak on a particular subject, issue or problem. In this thesis, that problem happens to be the relationship between economic practice, material wealth, kinship and moral personhood.

¹⁰ See Carrier (2018) for a recent example of such an emphasis on moral economy as relations of reciprocity. Contrast with Edelman's commentary on E.P. Thompson's aversion to anthropology's Durkheimian emphasis on harmony at the expense of conflict and historical process (2012: 52-3).

Politics is also invoked to refer to the power of hegemonic moral norms to police social worlds. One of the main observations of this thesis is the resilience of a labour ethic, oriented towards social reproduction. In turn, that ethic – and associated ideas of responsibility – is wielded in discourse to denigrate the poor and those who appear not to hold to the same ideals. As David Graeber has forcefully argued of politics in general, its ‘ultimate stakes [...] is not even the struggle to appropriate value; it is the struggle to establish what value is’ (2001: 88). This thesis’ emphasis on competing styles of economic practice and associated moral debates also evokes Stephen Feierman’s classic emphasis on multiple discourses (1990: 31) and the challenge ‘to understand the contest in society over whose discourse is to become authoritative, whose practice will be accepted.’

Crucially, at the heart of Lonsdale’s work was an understanding of the consequences of economic success and failure for social membership, public standing, and reputation. Lonsdale showed how men inhabited a moral world in which ‘civic virtue’ was earned through access to land.¹¹ The poor ran the risk of not meeting such moral standards. Like Lonsdale’s work, this thesis emphasises the social consequences of perceived economic failures. Economic practice – known, discussed and debated – informs understandings of moral personhood in the eyes of others, the basis for respect and social membership. Historian John Iliffe in his seminal comparative study of notions of honour across African history called this ‘a right to respect’ (2005: 4), existing both subjectively (in terms of self-understanding) and objectively in so far as only the social world – other people, in short – could confer it (Bourdieu 2000: 240-2).

Such insights remind us central Kenyans have debated the terms of their immediate material predicament in moral tones. Underlying assumptions of moral agency shape the evaluation of persons, a deeply embedded insistence on personal responsibility and action, action that governs social standing in the eyes of others. As we shall see in central Kenya, to denigrate consumption, desire and anti-social, selfish intent is to insist on the power of moral agency to bring about meaningful change even whilst accepting that proper values of responsibility, care and obligation are in short supply.

Continuity, consumption, and ‘greedy eaters’

¹¹ Lonsdale’s emphasis on the ‘civic’ (1992: 333-343) aspect of virtue usefully distinguishes it from the recent resurgence of Aristotelian approaches to ethical subjectivation in anthropology (e.g., Lambek 2010: 16). Lonsdale’s formulation reminds us that persons find their ethical and moral statuses objectified in the eyes of others – that they are public persons.

One of the main currents of recent anthropological literature on Africa has been to explore how Africans have engaged with state-fostered imaginaries of ‘development’ not only as a state-driven project of material advancement towards modernity, but as an existential trajectory with personal, moral implications (Ferguson 1999; Prince 2013; J. H. Smith 2008). These interests have resurfaced again in recent discussions about ‘African futures’ associated with a reappraisal of the continent’s fortunes in an era of GDP growth (Goldstone and Obarrio 2016). The narrative of ‘Africa rising’ (*The Economist* 2011) has replaced an earlier anthro-pessimism (*The Economist* 2000), generating a growing interest in the prospects of an African ‘middle class’, its economic potential and social mobility. Whilst anthropologists and economists continue to debate whether narratives of a rising middle class in the global south is a myth produced by low poverty thresholds (see, e.g., Hickel 2018), anthropologists have contributed more nuanced ethnographic perspectives on Africans’ aspirational projects, the obstacles and blockages they face in their attempts to live what they consider to be good lives (James 2018; Melber 2016; Melly 2017; Mercer and Lemanski 2020).

Whilst Carola Lentz (2020) has noted that the very term ‘middle class’ is often used by scholars to describe people who may not invoke the category, I retain it as a way of describing how economic life is oriented towards ‘middleclassness’ as an aspiration. In a similar vein to the aforementioned studies, this thesis often refers to a ‘middle class’ and its economic priorities as a status not yet achieved. ‘Here in Kiambu, we are the middle class,’ a taxi driver dropping me at my host family’s homestead in Banana once told me. ‘There are no poor people in Kiambu,’ he insisted. Such claims of a lack poverty are always relative, but in the case of Kiambu they illuminate a perception of moderate economic security and what I think of in loose terms as a ‘culture of aspiration’ *towards* middle-class lifestyles. These manifest most powerfully in the images of wealth projected by an expanding Nairobi – in the newly built shopping malls of northern Nairobi and gated communities of the ‘working class’, salaried white-collar workers. Banana Town residents know they have not ‘made it’ like the working class, but aspire to its material trappings – living in a stone house, owning a car and a large flat-screen television, educating children who go on to prosper in their own right. ‘We are somewhere,’ the son of my host family, would often tell me of his family and the wider neighbourhood, articulating precisely this sense of ‘not yet’ having ‘made it’.

By focusing on aspirations not-yet-achieved, this thesis contributes to this broad set of discussions about how Africans seek to ‘belong to the future’ (C. Smith 2019) by showing how the future is pursued through kinship but how that very project is threatened by anti-social acts of predatory accumulation and selfish consumption. In the midst of an urbanising periphery, replete with new dilemmas and opportunities, this thesis shows how Kenyan householders continue to

insist that kinship charges the ‘hard work’ of manual and waged labour with moral meaning, vilifying poverty when it is seen to be the product of personal failure and neglect. They recognise that scarcity of cash has raised the stakes for themselves, requiring even greater levels of discipline and diligence in economising practice so that their families can be maintained. At the same time, they observe irresponsibility in turning land into cash, for instance, cash that is all too easily spent. This is not so much a Protestant ethic, the product of a cultural paradigm about what good investment might mean under the gaze of God, but a consequence of experience (Guyer 2004: 6), of shifting economic and moral repertoires adapted to survival and kinship’s continuity in specific contexts interfacing with wider changes brought about during the colonial period and after. It is the struggle to maintain long-standing practices of pursuing ‘wealth in people’ and existential longevity over generations, into futures unknown, that animates such practice. Kinship’s continuity is remembrance, of living in the future by being divided in one’s progeny (Droz 2011; Fortes 1949; Sahlins 2011; Shipton 2007). In light of kinship’s continuity, consumption constitutes a rogue value from such familial perspectives, one that prioritises short-term fun and transient experience over long-term gain. What scarce cash can be generated in Kenya today *ought* to be invested in the social future of kinship.

A brief look at the ethnographic canon throws up numerous similar examples of debate about life’s self-reproducing generativity and the possibility of its destruction through economic activity viewed as improper or indeed wholly anti-social (Ferguson 2006: 72-3). Parker Shipton’s classic *Bitter Money* (1989) described how Luo patriarchal figures in western Kenya produced the eponymously categorised cash through acts of sale that were viewed as the antithesis of proper investment in social relationships, channelling wealth towards self-interested ends. Land sale in particular was viewed as an anti-social transaction, tantamount to selling the ancestors who had been buried in it (cf. Shipton 2009). Hannah Elliot’s (2018) recent work has described the evil ‘desires’ (*tamaa*) that have animated the sale of land in northern Kenya to developers by businessmen who, it has turned out, expropriated ‘community’ land earmarked for the construction of schools and hospitals. The ‘forbidden money’ (*pesa haram*) that such sales produced was viewed locally as ‘cursed by the tears of those [...] who had suffered’, never capable of producing any further value (ibid.: 151). Robert Blunt (2019) has written of the ‘Satanic money’ that circulated in Kenya during the years of Daniel arap Moi’s dictatorship, when corruption and depressed living standards were the norm. Money was narrativised as immoral precisely because the nature of its accumulation was so opaque, associated with exploitation and the impoverishment of ordinary Kenyans.

Such works have similarities with the argument famously made by Michael Taussig (1980), who showed how Bolivian wage labourers who were said to have made pacts with the devil produced ‘barren’ money. Peasants who held to an economy of reciprocal exchange apparently avoided such tainted cash. Taussig rejected emic interpretations that devil beliefs were related to ‘desires for material gain’, preferring to see them as a ‘response of people to what they see as an evil and destructive way of ordering economic life [...] collective representations of a way of life losing its life’ (1980: 17). Taussig turned the prevalence of devil beliefs into a story about the transition to capitalism, the ‘moral holocaust at work in the soul of a society’ that was undergoing rapid change (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

But in contrast to Taussig, the aforementioned studies have shown that moral debates distinguish between different sorts of money, different sorts of wealth, depending on its acquisition and use. Money in and of itself did not represent a capitalist incursion, and, as Paul Bohannan (1955) once showed, money in and of itself was not necessarily a new ‘disembedding’ force in African lifeworlds but had a far older history on the continent (cf. Guyer 2004: 11). As Sharon Hutchinson (1996) showed in her examination of changing economic life of the Nuer, that contextual differentiation came into play when Nuer evaluated money’s morality (ibid.: 57). Exchanges were evaluated not in so far as they involved cash, but in terms of their social effects and moral consequences. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (1989) famously described such debate under the rubric of ‘the morality of exchange’, and all of these accounts appear to recognise the distinction they made between long-term and short-term transactions, the former that reproduced the social order over the longer-term, the latter standing for self-interested gain. Nancy Munn (1987) also made a very similar distinction between ‘positive value transformations’ and ‘negative potentials’ of consumption. Food could produce new social relationships if shared, but if consumed its relation-creating potential was destroyed. Such is the contrast between continuity and consumption in its most basic form.

Bohannan’s (1955) path-breaking essay on Tiv spheres of exchange cleared the path for these works, showing precisely how wealth could be categorised, belonging in different ‘spheres’ that could be hierarchically arranged. Bohannan showed that the lowest ranking sphere involved exchangeable objects – food for subsistence traded in market exchanges – whilst the highest-ranking sphere involved persons, particularly women acquired through bridewealth. As Bloch and Parry note, in Bohannan’s model conversions between spheres ‘were the focus of strong evaluations – grudging admiration for the man who converted “up”, scorn for the one who converted “down”’ (1989: 12). Great prestige could be won from investing wealth achieved via

farming if exchanged for wives. Utter condemnation could come from selling highly valued assets such as land to secure one's subsistence.¹²

Bohannan's account has been criticised for appearing typological (Guyer 2004: 28-30), but what it essentially uncovered was an *argument* about economic life - Africans criticising and suspicious of transactions seen to lead to poverty whilst valorising wealth creation.¹³ Tiv insisted that value resided in people, not money, in social reproduction, not riches (Guyer 2004: 27). That men needed to 'rationalize' their actions in terms of judicious motivation (Bohannan 1955: 64-5) points less to a 'model' than a terrain of evaluation and argument about economic action with contested moral standards.

Bohannan's work also underscores the dangers that Africa's poor and aspirant have seen in consumption – that it destroys good wealth by converting it into easily consumed subsistence, and in doing so undermines social relationships. The destruction of people and land – and the social future of remembrance that they facilitated by converting it down into cash all too easily spent – was even worse. It is important to register the significance of this deeply embedded moral aversion to overconsumption. In general, anthropological considerations of consumption explore the positive moral valuation of 'conspicuous consumption' (see, e.g., Miller 2008; see critique by Graeber 2011). In African contexts especially, consumption has been seen as a mode of public performance evoking status through wealth – through spending capacity (see, e.g., Posel and van Wyk 2018; D. J. Smith 2017). Such socially productive modes of expenditure are hardly ignored in this thesis. If conservative narratives about the morality of social reproduction are often hegemonic, they are rarely absolute. Normative perspectives on familial continuity coexist with other 'transactional pathways' (Guyer 2004: 30), that privilege forms of waste and the performance of expenditure (Chapters 3 and 4; cf. Newell 2012: 106-110). But what this thesis underscores is the social threat such acts are understood as posing to social continuity in kinship. Suspicion of consumption is the product of the enduring and sedimented experience of economic life in a context of scarcity – an idea of economising objectified not as abstract rationality, but as a situated perspective on what is valuable.¹⁴ It is a discourse on social reproduction, and how it is achieved.

¹² Annette Weiner has called such forms of inalienable wealth 'transcendent treasures', things 'to be guarded against all exigencies that might force their loss' (1992: 19, 33; cf. Gregory 1997: 79). Such forms of wealth that are generative in their own right (such as land, people, and social relationships) guarantee the social future itself (Rakopoulos and Rio 2018: 283-4; cf. Graeber 2001: 211).

¹³ An analogous literature exists in eastern and southern Africa on the 'bovine mystique' – the attachment of pastoralist groups to cattle, and their specific valuation of animals as a source of prestige and livelihood (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1969 [1940]; Ferguson 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1990; Hutchinson 1996).

¹⁴ I follow Jane Guyer (2004: 172): 'institutions, practices, cultural constructions must be historicized because they represent not (or not only) ancient fundamental principles but the long-term sedimentation of experience'.

This thesis draws together a number of different economic modalities under the rubric of consumption – literal acts of consumption (especially of alcohol) made possible by selling land (Chapter 3), acts of soliciting economic assistance (Chapter 2), the expenditure of fungible cash (Chapter 4), and outright economic predation (Chapter 4, Chapter 5). Whilst these distinct practices are explored ethnographically across the chapters of this thesis, my characterisation of these practices as ‘consumption’ marks an attempt to draw closer to Kenyans’ own moralising discourses about such practices as the problematic ‘eating’ the products of other people’s labour or indeed their very persons. ‘Eating’ is a widespread discourse in Kenya, one often levelled at corrupt politicians seen to selfishly consume public money (Branch et al. 2010; cf. Bayart 1993; see Conclusion). But even immediate friends and relatives can eat one’s own sweat through repeated requests for assistance (Chapter 2) or acts of outright chicanery (Chapter 5). Framing such ‘negative’ (sensu Sahlins 1972: 195) economic practice as consumption allows me to explore how Kenyans themselves recognise and debate the material limits of their lived experience – the scarcity of material resources in cash and land, a situation bequeathed by the colonial period, one which has given a social world characterised simultaneously by aspiration for better material lives and anxiety for its loss. The rubrics of ‘continuity’ and ‘consumption’ are designed to mirror Kenyans’ own anxieties that their households and families will be ‘eaten up’ by consumptive desires run amok, whether their own or that of others. Foregrounding these overarching themes draws attention to the lived experience and narrativisation of economic privation in accusatory tones of greed and fear of consumption’s threat to the social reproduction of the family.

The *moral politics* of continuity and consumption builds on the aforementioned genealogy of work about the morality of economic life, placing greater ethnographic emphasis on the terrain of *debate* and *contestation* about transactions and their moral meaning in a context of scarcity and their social consequences for persons and how they are evaluated by others. Evidently, ‘conversions between monetary and non-monetary values do not mystify people’ (Hull and James 2012: 9) but are the topic of fraught debate in their contexts. In this respect, this thesis goes beyond the formal identification of a polarity between continuity and consumption, between long and short-term transactions (Parry and Bloch 1989), exploring how embedded ideas about this polarity inform a debate about the morality of certain types of economic practice and the persons who partake in them, provoking moralising narratives, new projects and claims to distinction. When conservative rural families underscore the importance of continuity, they draw attention to other moral qualities they see as important – responsibility, care, uprightness and discipline. Consumption is so often an ascription of neglect and irresponsibility, of a person who prioritises

bad things. Worse than irresponsible consumption is unchecked desire – the pursuit of unabashed self-interest at the direct expense of others.

By exploring this debate ethnographically, what emerges is the sense of moral alarm with which Kenyans are apprehending their urbanising world – that predatory accumulation and self-interested consumption are viewed as the new norm. This thesis adopts the rubric of ‘greedy eaters’ as a way of referring to the people and practices that Kiambu residents feel herald these changing moral orientations typical of Nairobi’s urban periphery. These figures come in all manner of guises – from over-reliant neighbours (Chapter 2), neglectful fathers (Chapter 3), petty criminals and unemployed youth (Chapter 4), and even one’s own relatives (Chapter 5). To borrow and slightly adapt the words of James Howard Smith (2008), the greed eater is a ‘prism through which political argument and moral debate gets filtered and through which socioeconomic inequality [is] widely understood’ (2008: 63). To speak of greedy eaters recalls Nancy Munn’s (1987) famous invocation of the Gawan witch, who does not simply negate the ‘positive value’ that upholds social reproduction but subverts it, envisioning it under ‘the sign of its own destruction’ (ibid.: 20). Debates about moral and immoral economic practice have a long history in Kenya, as we have seen, but they have often invoked stereotypes and ascriptions of evil. The onomatopoeic *Mau Mau* was a slur conservative Kikuyu used to evoke the greed and criminality of its gangs and the wanton violence they carried out from their forest hideouts (Branch 2007: 308-9). It is this conservative fear of greed and the depravity of desire to which this rubric draws attention. So too attempts to control greed and desire, whether one’s own or that of others (Chapters 2 and 3). As I show in Chapter 5, increasingly in central Kenya, women, and particularly young women, are being stereotyped in misogynist discourse as untrustworthy at best and downright greedy at worst. Men fear the social and sexual mobility of women, their capacity to undermine the patrilineal homestead and its continuity by leaving it or undermining it from within. The discourses remind us that ‘wealth in people’ in peri-urban central Kenya is a gendered theory of social reproduction – an ideology of patrilineal descent and continuity.

This is where the thesis makes one of its more speculative arguments, elaborated throughout the chapters and discussed in the conclusion, that moral orientations are changing towards immediate accumulation and consumption at the expense of slow economisation and its investment in kin as the social future. Chris Hann (1998: 33) has recently wondered if discontinuity and disembedding arguments in anthropology have been given ‘sufficient consideration’. ‘Public and “moral” aspects of property relations [and, I would add, economic life and obligation writ large] atrophy, and considerations of short-term gain overwhelm long-term values’ (ibid.). The data explored in this thesis points in a similar direction. Ascriptions of greed and irresponsible

consumption appear as concerns about moral change towards a predatory individualism, if not exactly a possessive one (Macpherson 1962: 3). Just as the *Mau Mau* evoked the destructiveness of greed, ‘greedy eaters’ today appear as people who threaten not only to consume the wealth of others, but to reorient moral values towards the short-term, the ‘horrendous possibility that the individual will become so embroiled in the short-term cycle that he will ignore the demands of the long cycle’ (Parry and Bloch 1989: 27-8). Conservative families fear not only immorality itself, but a growing propensity towards predation, irresponsibility and self-interest – that such malign moral orientations will outstrip and undermine the ongoing project of social reproduction on Nairobi’s changing periphery.

Fieldwork on Nairobi’s peri-urban outskirts

This thesis is not the product of my original PhD project proposal. At the outset of fieldwork, this research was to study masculinity and labour in central Kenya. I had planned to situate myself within a workshop in a central Kenyan town to explore everyday shop-floor life and activities, thinking that by ‘listening in’ and participating in such events I could contribute to a revised version of what Lonsdale (1992) called ‘Kikuyu political thought’, a topic that I have mentioned above. Lonsdale had committed to exploring the perspectives of marginal, non-elite men through his history of the *Mau Mau* rebellion in central Kenya, though he lamented his lack of sources that captured their voices. I planned to address this gap with a concerted inquiry into the perspectives of young men on everyday life and politics by hanging out on the ‘workshop floor’. This was a proposal largely dreamt up in the academy, one informed by my previous interest in masculinity and not the product of the extensive fieldwork that was to come between January 2017 and July 2018.

Though this thesis bears the traces of some of that early thinking and reading, it was utterly transformed by the fieldwork itself. My original plan after arriving in Nairobi in November 2016 was to spend my allotted time for language training studying Kikuyu before moving to a field-site further into central Kenya and beginning my fieldwork proper (at this point, still oriented around workshops). After brushing-up on my Kiswahili between November and December 2016, I decided in January 2017 to begin my Gikūyũ language training.¹⁵ To facilitate my training, I asked one of my teachers, Gitau, a Kiswahili and Gikūyũ language teacher I had known from an earlier

¹⁵ Kiswahili spoken in Kiambu incorporates a great deal of Sheng, a composite language spoken in Nairobi drawing influences from Kiswahili, English and various mother tongue languages in Kenya.

stint in Nairobi in 2011 as an intern for a UN agency, if he would be able to find a Gĩkũyũ-speaking family I could live with during my studies in order to better facilitate my training.

Gitau arranged for me to stay with his late brother's daughter Catherine, on the northern outskirts of Nairobi and into the adjacent Kiambu County. Hers was a rural homestead in a neighbourhood called Mashambani located on the outskirts of Banana Town, itself bordering northern Nairobi, buttressed between the expanding city's urban sprawl and the tea plantations that stretched further north towards the towns of Limuru and Tigoni. Catherine's husband, Paul Kimani, was regularly away due to his work as a long-haul lorry driver but, as Chapter 3 attests, when he did make appearances, he was intent upon ensuring I understood the difficulties Kenyans experience in everyday economic life. Their son 19-year-old son Mwaura would become a key interlocutor and broker of social relationships as I began my fieldwork, whilst their daughter Njoki (17) was regularly absent at her boarding school further towards Mount Kenya.

Whilst initially I pursued my original course of study – attending a workshop in Banana Town to learn welding from a local *fundi* (craftsman) - I soon shifted my focus towards everyday goings on amongst the homesteads of Mashambani. The workshop was not the place of political debate I had imagined it to be and my interests were being swayed towards the households. At the time, campaigning for the 2017 elections was in full swing, and since Catherine was working for a local politician, I decided to begin collecting fieldnotes on the elections, and its relationship with household life. I have published elsewhere some of my initial perspectives on how elections played out in my fieldsite (Lockwood 2019) but I should stress here that this did not become the sole focus of my fieldwork. I do not reflect heavily on the elections here because of the sheer length of my fieldwork in which many threads of inquiry came and went. I have tried to focus on a particular aspect of it, rather than attempt to include everything.

For the first half of 2017 I spent much of my time in the day studying Kikuyu and writing fieldnotes, whilst spending time in the evenings with my host family and at the homes of their neighbours to whom they introduced me (Chapter 2). During the week I commuted to Nairobi to work with language teachers and to visit the national archives, though my attempts to find documents pertaining to the history of Banana Town were thwarted by its chaotic state. Richard Ambani's assistance was vital in navigating it to the extent that I could.

Weekends were when I spent the most time exploring the neighbourhood alongside Mwaura. My Kikuyu early on was poor, and it helped to accompany him on household errands to other people's houses – often collecting foodstuffs or petty cash for his mother, the sort that women exchange through their rotating credit groups. We would also go to the local motel and

watch football in the company of a range of men of all ages, and it was here that I gained further insights into norms of masculine sociality that are reflected in Chapter 3.

It was also during these early months that I first began to gain a sense of the judgement, sometimes outright scorn, that my family and others could feel towards those from the neighbourhood who had sold land, the beginnings of the analytical framework I have focused on in this thesis about the morality of wealth production and the immorality of wealth destruction. I learnt of the land's material significance not only by working on it but by observing the tendency of nearby households to construct 'plots' on their land – rental accommodation where farmland had once been. Meanwhile, Kimani's occasional appearances lamenting his lack of work iterated to me the importance of cash accrued beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

From July 2017, I expanded my research into Banana Town. Anxious to broaden my perspective on life in Kiambu gleaned from spending time amongst the households of Mashambani, I befriended a group of unemployed youths who provided me with a new perspective on my 'rural' fieldwork taking place a few kilometres down the road (Chapter 4). Throughout late 2017 and 2018 I also began playing football for a local youth team called Star Boyz. Again, though little of this data is reflected in this thesis, conversations with young men from the team have informed my overarching perspective.

It was in 2018 that my thesis topic began to emerge as I renewed my interest in matters to do with land sales. Events in the neighbourhood crystallised my understandings about the importance of land (Chapter 5), and a follow-up trip in 2019 allowed me to focus more specifically on dynamics of land sale, as I interviewed land brokers and those who had recently sold inherited land.

I never used formal research assistance in my fieldwork. Mwaura acted as a social broker in Mashambani, accompanying me around the neighbourhood to visit friends and relatives, and on more formal interviews. In Banana Town, Cassius, a 23-year-old aspiring hip-hop artist played a similar role, introducing me to his friends (Chapter 4). Throughout my fieldwork, language teachers in Nairobi assisted me with the translations of interviews, allowing me to check vocabulary and the strange formulations of Gikũyũ as it is spoken in Kiambu compared to the textbooks that I followed in my own learning. Any errors, however, are entirely my own.

Strengths, limitations and ethical problems of a household-based ethnography

My participation in a particular household has shaped my fieldwork irrevocably. Any anthropologist who does research in a neighbourhood-like setting will know that their emplacement with a certain family or set of persons will alter and define their relationships with others from that same milieu. And whilst I came to know other households and their members intimately, I never quite came to know any other household like my hosts. There is no ‘view from nowhere’ to be had when embedded in such a way – one can only embrace the way such embeddedness shapes one’s fieldwork. As will become clear, particularly in Chapters 2 and 3, I came to know the neighbourhood through the conduit of my host family. The structure of the thesis reflects the way my perspective expanded outwards from my own household to encompass wider social relationships.

Difficulty getting to know other families as well as I came to know my hosts has informed what I describe in this thesis as the sometimes standoffish moral politics of a neighbourhood like Mashambani, where even an anthropology PhD student can be coded as a member of another household and not exactly ‘a neutral’. As Ngũgi wa Thiongo writes in *Devil on the Cross*, citing Kikuyu proverbial wisdom, ‘the secrets of the homestead are not for the ears of strangers’ (1982: 7). This was precisely what I found in Mashambani – that membership in Catherine’s households limited the amount of information that others were willing to share with me. The atmosphere of suspicion that pervades neighbourhood relations, even amongst friends, is discussed in Chapters 2 and 5.

As a result, I gained my most important insights and perspectives on other households from spending time with my hosts – sitting with the family during the evenings, listening to Catherine and Mwaura gossip about local events. The more I got to know my hosts, the more I knew about others who I knew rather less well. It was in these conversations, that I participated in as a listener and an outsider (asking questions such as, ‘Why would so and so do that?’ and playing the novice in various different ways), that I realised precisely how much I did not understand about my ostensible field site – just how many inter-personal conflicts and events were coming to pass right under my nose and without my knowing. These conversations drew my attention as entry points into ‘what was really going on’ locally, and soon enough I decided that narratives of local events would be vital information for my research. Whilst opinions on politics and politicians are readily given, opinions on one’s neighbour are kept close to one’s chest. It was only through the privileged insight I gained as a member of Catherine’s household that I made any headway with this question of ‘what was really happening’ or ‘what were people’s actual relationships with each other’ at all.

The source of my local knowledge emanating primarily from within a particular household also meant that some of the things I found out about others I could never discuss with those particular others directly. I asked Catherine once if I could ask her friend Mama Nyambura about a land dispute of which Catherine had given Mwaura and me practically an entire one-woman dramatic reconstruction. ‘No’, she said. ‘They will know we have been talking about them’. Not only is this a methodological issue, but a deeply ethical one about precisely what one is meant to know when one conducts fieldwork in a domestic setting and discovers intimate information about others that could be vital to one’s research. I could never ask Mama Nyambura for consent about learning such information, though I learnt it, but such is my belief in its importance that I have decided to include such data in this thesis (Chapter 5). My defence is this: I do not recount these issues for the sake of prying. In anonymising the names of those involved, and altering their biographical information, I create a case-study that I take to be an important insight into wider social processes and moral premises. The point is not to dwell on the specifics of a family’s troubles but to observe it in context. After all, knowledge of what is going on in another’s house provokes discussion in the one that is gossiping in the first place. The sharing of news was always a key juncture at which to observe moralising perspectives about what others did and had done.

In studying private reactions to wider neighbourhood events, my approach broadly follows that of Sally Falk Moore (1987: 730) who advocated the study of ‘diagnostic events’ - ruptures in everyday life that provide vantage points on wider processes and social relationships revealed by their disruption – and ‘local commentaries’ on them. Whilst some anthropologists have dedicated themselves to the study of rumour and gossip itself (see, e.g., Bonhomme 2016 for a recent example), gossip in this thesis retains its status as a crucial vantage point on wider processes and events. As Max Gluckman (1963) once demonstrated, gossip is often a fertile terrain of moral evaluation. Gossip allows narrators to embellish their own actions, invest them with morality, and denigrate those of others (White 2000: 59-60; Van Vleet 2003: 505-6). This is brought out powerfully in Chapter 3, where circulating knowledge about neighbours selling inherited land provokes others to moralise about them in private. That strong opinions about the actions of others were almost always expressed in private points to what I describe in Chapter 2, and hint at above – an atmosphere of ‘civility’ (Whyte and Siu 2015) in which outright public confrontation is avoided in neighbourhood life, for fear of making enemies and spoiling potentially useful social relationships. As Julie Archambault (2017: xx) writes of the Inhambane neighbourhood in Mozambique, ‘to conceal is to respect’ – an act of managing social relationships. But if Gluckman saw gossip as a levelling force, maintaining group unity, gossip in this fieldwork underscores private

anger and frustration that ‘proper’ moral norms are not being lived up to by others. Gossip often appears as lament about the decay of proper moral life.

The particularity of perspectives and the significance of the narrator’s position in articulating moral thought has shaped the decision to cast this thesis as a ‘debate’ about norms rather than an outright characterisation of their social logics. I speak of the ‘narrativisation’ and ‘moralisation’ of certain types of economic activity. This should not suggest that this thesis is based purely on discourse, but rather that it takes an interest in local reflections on events and practices (discussed within the thesis), often from different standpoints. From the perspective of peri-urban families, Banana Town youth are often portrayed as gang members and thugs. But from the perspective of the latter, it is the Banana Town folk who are selfish, uncaring persons who have forsaken them by not offering them jobs. It is this clash of narratives to which this thesis’ term of ‘moral politics’ draws attention, not least which narratives are dominant and how they shape understandings of people, their reputations and respectability within wider social contexts.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 explores the making of the peri-urban context of Kiambu in which this thesis plays out, its transformation from the pre-colonial period as a place of territorial expansion for Kikuyu migrating southward, to its colonial iteration as a place of settler farms, and finally to its present guise as one of peri-urban hustling – where families dwelling on small plots of land must sustain their households through waged work, due to a lack of space for subsistence farming.

Tracking these changes in the first half of the chapter, I go on to explore the moral debate to which these changes gave rise and how these arose from rural capitalism in the colonial period. In the mid-20th century, educated Christian Kikuyu moralists began to contrast ‘good’ ways of acquiring wealth with the ‘bad’. In the colonial period, consumption arises in moral discourse as a threat to social reproduction, a predilection associated with the destruction of wealth otherwise better purposed towards social reproduction. I show how these debates about economic practice have come to shape a ‘moral landscape’ of divergent practices of accumulation and consumption. I show how for conservative rural families, kinship remains a vital source of existential meaning located in the prosperity of children.

Chapter 2 introduces my field site of Mashambani in earnest. I explore women’s friendships (and the matri-focal sociality characteristic of the neighbourhood) to reflect on the limitations of

relationships of ‘obligation’, ‘entrustment’ and ‘mutuality’ that other anthropologists have emphasised in similar contexts. What this chapter reveals is the ‘contingent altruism’ that operates within specific networks of female friends and the power of a labour ethic to exclude and moralise against those who seek dependence on wealthier persons. The chapter ends by reflecting on the atomised and fragmented nature of social life, provoking self-reliance through recourse to wage labour beyond the immediacy of the rural neighbourhood.

Chapter 3 examines the conflict between household-based moral values of social reproduction and what are alleged to be acts of self-interested consumption and the threat these pose to the former. I use the case-study of Paul Kimani, the father of my host family, along with those of other local patriarchal figures, to explore the importance not only of masculine labour oriented towards social reproduction, but also retaining inherited land in the face of its rising value. To sell land, despite its capacity to generate enormous wealth, is viewed as irresponsible. Meanwhile, other patriarchal figures and younger businessmen celebrate and embrace consumption on the basis that patriarchal remembrance is impossible in contemporary central Kenya. Controlling consumption is shown to be a vital aspect of responsible patriarchy and a means of claiming moral personhood.

Chapter 4 shifts the ethnographic focus to nearby Banana Town to further reflect on the spectre of consumption haunting aspirant families in the previous chapters, but by delving into the perspective of those who have apparently embraced it to the fullest. Exploring the lives of young unemployed and underemployed men who spend their cash, generated from casual work, relatively quickly on alcohol and other recreational substance, I show how they live with the normative weight of social expectation that they ought to be ‘responsible’, working towards patriarchal households via saving. Youth are shown to draw distinctions amongst each other as to who is truly a social failure according to the mainstream labour ethic and associated moral teleology of masculine becoming.

Chapter 5 returns to the farms of Mashambani to explore the micro-politics of ‘intimate exclusion’ that plays out in inheritance disputes over land. I show how the history of land reform in central Kenya dating back to the colonial period has shaped a situation of scarcity in which access to land, and contestation over it, is highly gendered. I show how rising land prices have fuelled intra-kin disputes over the status of women as inheritors of patrilineal land. These debates are shown to play out in archly moralising terms – not least with the ascription of greed to younger women by

rival male kin. It shows once again how material change and the changing structure of kinship patterns is lived in debates about what is deemed moral and immoral economic practice.

History and place

or,

Material change, moral debate

If you were to board the 106 *matatu* at Nairobi's busy Koja transport stage and travel along its route to Banana Town, you would observe the transition from urban Nairobi to peri-urban Kiambu first-hand.¹⁶ On a typical journey you would be ushered into a vehicle by a teenage *makanga* wearing the standard uniform of burgundy-coloured trousers and waistcoat.¹⁷ Exchanging greetings in Gĩkũyũ, you board the *matatu*, hunching down into a seat close to the back. Outside, people come and go amidst the din of the arrayed buses – their engines revving as they traverse the pot-holed tarmac of the Koja Stage round-about. Nairobi's customary late-afternoon traffic jam is at a full stand-still. The day is alive with the dense buzz of a multiplicity of voices – from hawkers selling cheap Chinese-imported jeans; touts ushering commuters into their *matatus*; and vendors idly chatting with customers under the canopies of their umbrellas, where they sell gum and peanuts to be chewed with mũgũũka.¹⁸ Like other transport hubs in Nairobi, one hears Gĩkũyũ spoken as much as Kiswahili. The audible sounds of *makangas* crying out their prices in the Gĩkũyũ

¹⁶ The Nissan minivan (*matatu*) is the most common mode of public transport in Kenya.

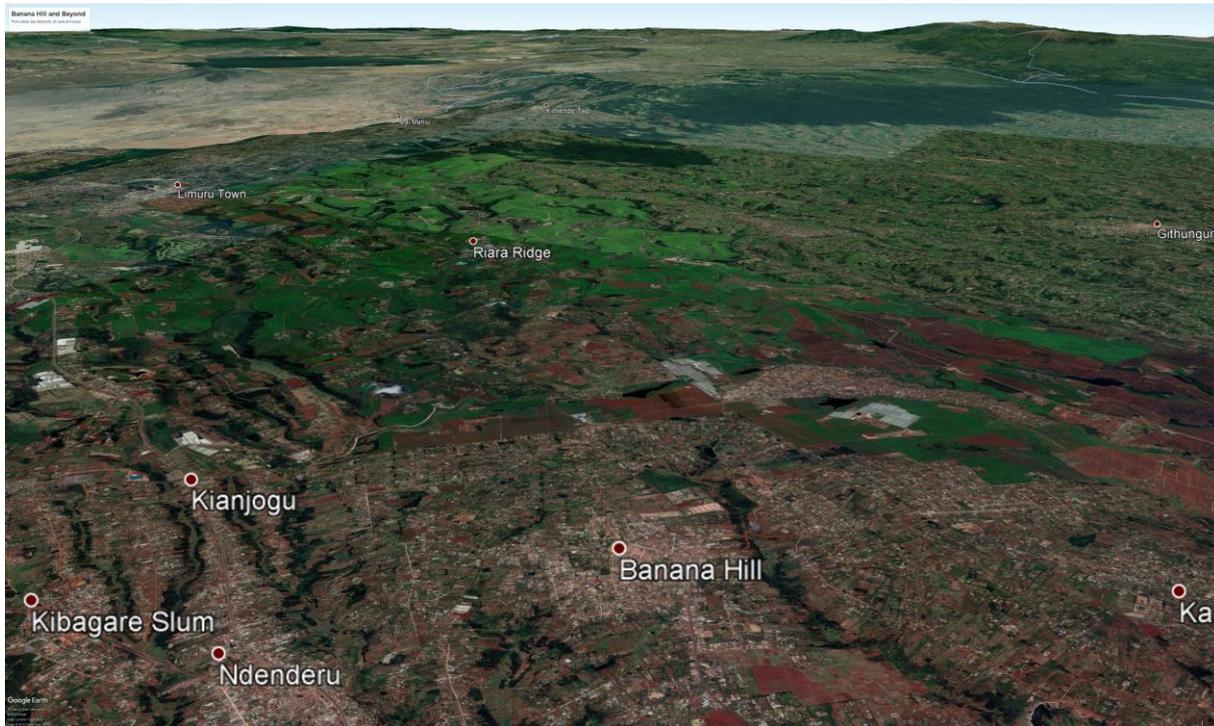
¹⁷ *Makanga* is the name for a *matatu* "tout" who rides with the vehicle's passengers, collects money, and ensures the vehicle continues to be filled-up along the journey. They are almost always young men in their late teens to mid-30s.

¹⁸ Unlike the more expensive stems (*miraa*) of the *kebat* plant, mũgũũka refers to the cheaper leaves that are purchased at roughly 50 KES (approx. .5 USD) and generally favoured by younger men and *makangas* as a stimulant to get them through the day.

‘*Magana matano!*’ (i.e. 50 KES) instead of the Kiswahili ‘*Hamsini!*’ is a reminder that the Koja stage is the gateway to a peri-urban Gikūyū-speaking hinterland beyond the immediate borders of the metropolis – where those borders blur and stretch into the fragmented farmlands of tea plantations and peasant smallholders.

The *matatu* fills up with its range of passengers - women carrying sacks of vegetables that had been taken to market earlier that day, well-groomed young clerks in suits, fashionably dressed students, and exhausted construction workers with blackened teeth, one clutching a bottle of spirit. Goods are loaded onto the roof, the engine starts, and after it crawls out of the busy Koja area – narrowly avoiding a group of pedestrian commuters - the *matatu* speeds towards the inner-city neighbourhood of Ngara where it passes its crowded markets of cheap second-hand clothes and shoes in a flash. By five o’clock in the afternoon, the way out of Nairobi is clear, and the journey down the Globe Flyover grants you views across the John Michuki Memorial Park.

You are driven through the leafy suburbs of Muthaiga, home to wealthy Kenyans from the business and political elite as well as expatriates working for Nairobi-based international NGOs and the United Nations. Soon enough, the quiet suburbs give way to the urban scene of Ruaka – the town on Nairobi’s border with Kiambu County that epitomises the city’s northward expansion and growing aspirations towards middle-class standards and styles of living. In barely a decade Ruaka transformed from a landscape of smallholder coffee plantations to a satellite town for commuters and now, more recently, real estate speculation. Land prices in Ruaka doubled in 2016 (Wanzala 2016, December 1). High rise apartment blocks dominate the landscape, many of them constructed of cheap building materials, painted in garish yellows and oranges, and emblazoned with grand names like ‘Kileleshwa Citadel’ or ‘Crystal Apartments’.



Map 1: Banana Hill at the peri-urban border with rural Kenya. Note the large tea plantations by the distinctive bright green colour beyond Riara Ridge.

In the streets of Ruaka, *matatu* shouts shout to passengers in Gikũyũ (‘Oya, oya!’) for journeys to Nairobi. Shouts go out for satellite towns too: ‘Muchatha, Banana! Muchatha, Banana!’. At the side of the street, young men sit in contemplative silence whilst chewing mũgũũka and fashionably dressed women walk up and down the market stalls perusing fruits and knock-off Adidas trainers. Ruaka, as one of my interlocutors often puts it, ‘is more of Nairobi’, a notion that encapsulates an appreciation that wealthier, middle-class Kenyans live there (or at least people with the budgets to adopt the trappings of its lifestyle, following contemporary fashions in the way they dress and partaking in a culture of weekend drinking at local bars).



Photograph 4: Ruaka Town, July 2019.

After turning toward Muchatha at Ruaka, the landscape begins to oscillate between urban and peri-urban. Fields of drying maize plants can be glimpsed between the buildings packed along the roadside. Speeding *matatus* are now forced to dodge carts pulled by donkeys and careering pick-up trucks transporting napier grass.¹⁹ Either side of the road, shops, kiosks and rental housing is interspersed with the so-called ‘new’ or ‘local’ Christian churches as well as signs for the established ones: Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic.

You reach Banana Town, a place that seems a lot less tall to the eyes than Ruaka, lacking the latter’s multitude of high-rise buildings. As a transport hub between Nairobi and the town of Limuru, the town centre is packed with mechanics (*fundis*) who spill out into the streets, working over open bonnets and inside broken-down *matatus*. Unlike Ruaka, a larger number of young men (*anake* in Gikũyũ, *majanas* in Sheng) sit at the road side chewing *mũgũũka*, waiting for shopkeepers and townsfolk to give them odd-jobs to carry out for cash-in-hand that is often, though not always, quickly spent on cheap beer (known as *keg*) in the bars behind the street.

At Banana’s *matatu* stage you disembark and switch to another vehicle, one bound for

¹⁹A high-yield fodder crop usually used to feed cows.

Limuru and then the town of Tigoni beyond, to reach your destination. This time you sit at the front near the driver. On the radio the sharp notes of mũgithi – Gikũyũ-language one-man-guitar music – ring out from the tinny-sounding speakers rigged to the inside of the vehicle. The male voices sing of their lovers, their travails working in Nairobi, and their own foolishness spending money on wives and girlfriends that ultimately pursue other men.

After Banana, the buildings begin to disappear. Only a couple of new, gated communities of walled-off stone houses stand out (built by Nairobi-based real estate companies in anticipation of a growing middle-class). In 30 or 40 years Banana will practically become a suburb of the city. For now, it remains a place where rural and urban lifestyles meet and mingle.

You pass by large, conspicuously empty tranches of land belonging to the famous Koinange family that give the area the semblance of space one might expect in more rural areas of central Kenya, Murang'a or Nyeri counties.²⁰ These vast lands that punctuate clusters of smallholder farms are emblematic of the post-colonial character of Kiambu's geography. Kiambu citizens are all too aware of which elite family owns what tranche of land, providing as they do rather large patches of open space between the pockets of households where the former mostly reside.

One such pocket is Rudi Mashambani (literally, 'return to the farms'), a dense patchwork of smallholder households located on the edges of Banana Hill, a stones-throw from the enormous tea plantations that continue along the hills of southern Kiambu and onward towards Tigoni.

You hail the matatu driver to stop at Macamba-inĩ (the Gikũyũ pronunciation of 'Mashambani') and disembark the vehicle after putting a 20 KES onto the outstretched palm of the *makanga's* hand. You turn off the road, and into the paths that lead amongst the hedgerows, walls and fences that surround each individual plot, most of which play host to houses of varying quality and building material – some are stone (*mawe*), others made from wood (*mbao*) with corrugated iron (*mabati*) roofing. You pass by countless houses and plots, some with distinctive tall maize plants growing in gardens, others with cheaply built one-storey rental accommodation blocks (housing wage-migrants from elsewhere in central Kenya, and sometimes much further afield). Much larger two-storey stone houses, built by outsiders who have purchased land in the neighbourhood, loom into view above tall concrete walls.

²⁰ Senior Chief Koinange wa Mbiyu (b. 1865 – d. 1960) had been a chief under British colonial rule, before becoming one of the colonial government's biggest critics, throwing his weight behind the emerging *Manu Manu* rebellion. Prime Minister (later President) Jomo Kenyatta married one of Koinange's daughters, Grace Mutundu and Koinange's son Peter Mbiyu Koinange later became the 'man behind the throne' as it were in the immediate post-independence period, serving as Minister of the Interior. Today, one of old man Koinange's many other sons, Paul Koinange, is the MP of Kiambaa, the constituency that encompasses Banana Town.

Eventually you find a makeshift gate and begin to hear the familiar barking of a dog from the plot beyond. The foundations of an unfinished stone house stand nearby, ruin-like, in anticipation of better times. Women's voices can be heard from the small wooden house beyond the gate, and laughter punctuates the meandering gospel music playing in the background.

You are home.

*

This is Kiambu County, ostensibly one of the richest counties in Kenya. The World Bank estimates its GDP per capita to be the highest of all the country's 47 counties (*Business Daily* 2015, November 11). According to Kenya's National Bureau of Statistics, the county's poverty rate is 23.3 per cent, well under the national average of 36.1 per cent (KNBS 2018: 299). From the perspective of migrants arriving from other parts of rural central Kenya, peri-urban southern Kiambu County is a frontier of opportunity, an urban crescent folded around Nairobi (stretching from Kikuyu town in the west to the industrial centre of Thika town in the east) where jobs in the wage economy can be found, not least in the booming construction industry. Land prices in its satellite towns have grown at a rapid pace in recent years, fuelled by housing speculation in central areas of Nairobi and the reasonable quality of roads between Nairobi and these northern environs (Wanzala 2016, December 1).²¹ Since at least the early-mid 2000s, Kiambu has been experiencing a sustained process of urbanisation, and its growing real estate sector reflects sales by inheritors of land (Kamau 2017). New and amazing malls being constructed in northern Nairobi provide potent images of middle-class lifestyles to which many of my interlocutors from the rural hinterlands aspired.

What images and statistics indicative of growing wealth mask is a chasm of inequality in Kiambu between a small class of land-owning tycoons, and a much larger population of smallholders.²² The average plot size in the county is 0.36 hectares (0.88 acres), but amongst the larger farms growing cash-crops of tea and pyrethrum, the average is 69.5 hectares (172 acres) (County Government of Kiambu N.D.a). Kiambu is one of the most densely populated regions of Kenya (County Government of Kiambu N.D.b), and yet, as the journalist David Ndi (2016) surmises, 'Even today, you can still ramble your way from Limuru to Gatundu [a 50km journey] without setting foot on a peasant holding'. Mashambani, the site of my fieldwork, is precisely such

²¹ For a summary of housing speculation dynamics in African cities, see Goodfellow (2017).

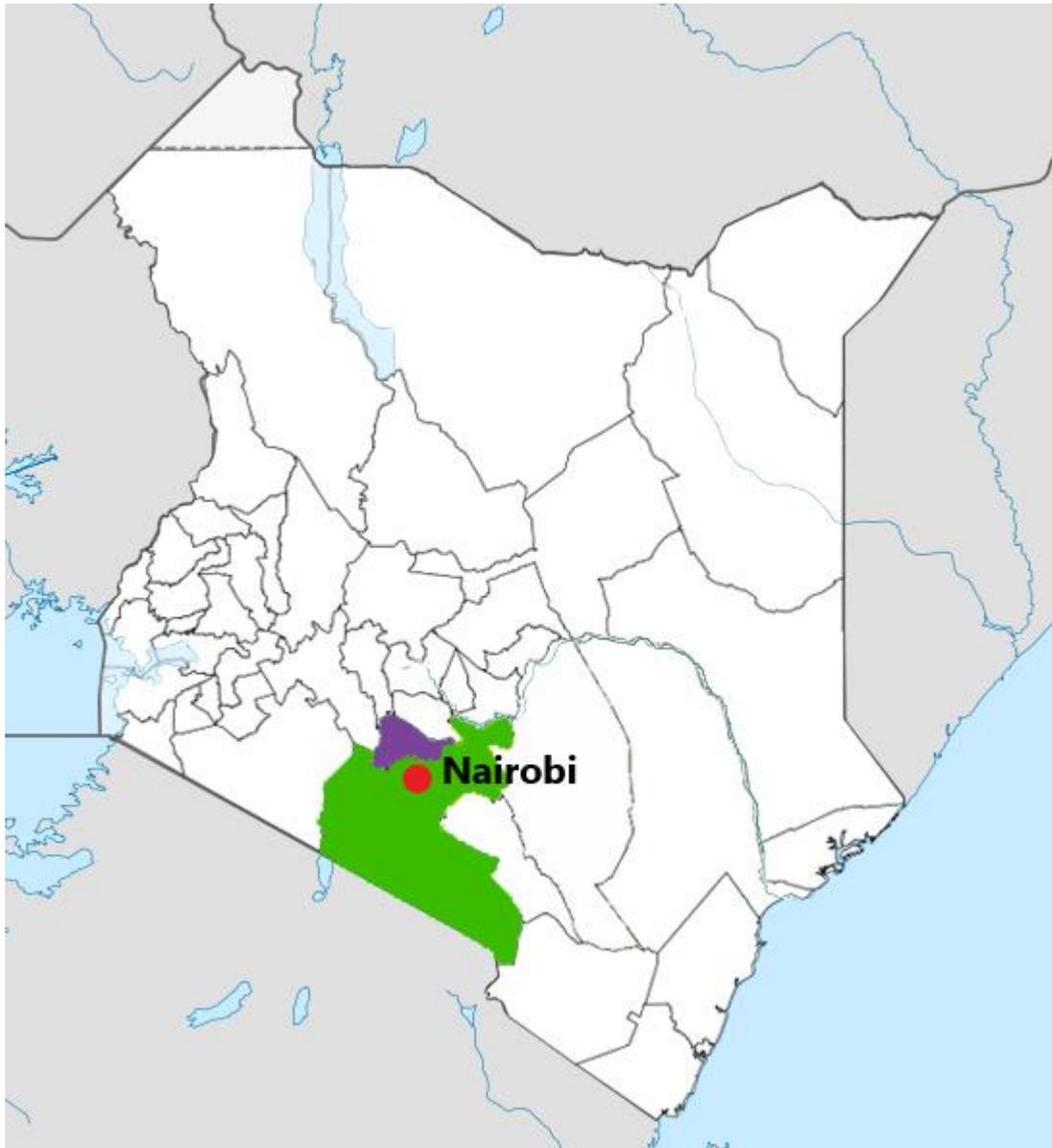
²² National media commentary on inequality in Kenya, and Kiambu specifically, describes how 'a few people who used their proximity to the Government to enrich themselves' (Wainaina 2013, July 9). The local appreciation that some families have benefitted from their access to the state overlaps with contemporary discourses about corruption and the 'eating' of money (cf. Branch et al. 2010; Peters 2013).

a cluster of peasant holdings sandwiched between much larger tranches of land belonging to wealthy, quasi-aristocratic families.

Kiambu County's history is etched in its landscape, a history that will be a familiar one to Africanists as an example of a context where land abundance in pre-colonial times gave way to a situation of land scarcity via expropriation and population growth in the colonial period, one that was never subsequently addressed politically in any substantial way.²³ The product of land poverty – exacerbated by widespread practices of sub-dividing land amongst inheritors – has been to force a general reliance on cash incomes from beyond farms (*shambas* in Kiswahili, often used with an anglicised plural or mũgũnda sing., mĩgũnda pl. in Kikuyu). 'Subsistence to cash', is how Kiambu's history has been described (Bullock 1974).

Whilst proximity to Nairobi provides an economic 'out' of sorts, it comes with its own distinct challenges. The buying power of wages is low. Consider, for instance, that the national average wage for an employee in the agricultural sector (for instance, a farm foreman, clerk or vehicle driver) is 8,595 KES per month (KNBS 2018b: 51). Plots of land of around half an acre in peri-urban Kiambu now cost as much as 2.5 million KES (on the lower end), upward of 7 million on the higher end. Fees for day schools can reach 9,000 KES and over 50,000 KES for boarding schools (Shiundu 2017). Saving for such life projects – expanding landholdings, educating children beyond local day secondary schools – are off the table for the many. And if costs are high, gaining a job in the first place can be just as challenging, or at least a permanent one.

²³ Iliffe (1987) gives the most comprehensive survey of this phenomenon, drawing on a range of cases across Africa.



Map 2: Kiambu County in purple. In green: Nairobi’s wider metropolitan areas.²⁴

Scarcity of land and scarcity of cash is nothing new in central Kenya, and in the century or more since Kiambu became the heart of a settler colony, the brute fact of material lack has shaped the region’s ‘moral politics’, a term I used in the Introduction to describe debate about what types of economic practices (in terms of accumulation, expenditure, and consumption) are good, and which are bad. As we saw there, scarcity raised the stakes, as it were, for central Kenya’s poor making normative pathways of masculine and feminine life – of having children, constructing a house, educating those children and enabling them to a prosperous though modest future – all the more difficult, and all the more pressing (cf. Haugerud 1995: 191). A historical appreciation of the economic landscape in which Kenyans in Kiambu dwell encourages

²⁴ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiambu_County#/media/File:Kiambu_County_in_Nairobi_Metro.png

anthropologists to ‘take seriously’, as it were, the effects of material change and its capacity to shape moral ideas and projects. Marshall Sahlins (1972) famously asserted that scarcity was the ideological bedfellow of neo-classical economics, the ‘institutionalization of scarcity’ the defining feature of market societies (ibid.: 28). What we observe in central Kenya is not so much an ideational adoption of a scarcity mentality but the restructuring of economic life on the basis of what Chris Gregory calls ‘limited goods’ (1997: 79). For Gregory, scarcity is not only a cultural construction but a material process, ‘the creation of inalienable possessions, i.e. goods, under the control of trusted guardians’ (ibid.: 79). As he shows in the case of central India, off-farm income protects the sale of family-held land and it is generally wealth from beyond the farm that leads to social mobility and stratification (ibid.: 113-4). Household maintenance becomes a moral project.

In the midst of this predicament, careful lives of economising practice, of slow and steady accumulation oriented around the family, have been narrativised as moral, though this is by no means an entirely hegemonic moral value. Alternative pathways to wealth of other kinds exist, particularly through modes of quick accumulation via violent appropriation. Taking advantage of others for selfish gain is moralised against by the former, familial perspective, as is consumption: the utter opposite of ‘good’ social reproduction of the household. The two sides clash and contradict in Kiambu, where many different life paths can be glimpsed in this peri-urban terrain. The real landscape can also be seen in analytical-cum-metaphorical terms as a moral one – where different accumulating and spending practices are observed and measured by all types of different standards and moral measurements. This thesis, limited as it is, focuses primarily on one of the starkest manifestations of this clash of perspectives: that of long-term social reproduction against short-term consumption. Conservative families see their futures threatened by a destructive individualism. A new individualism sees obligation as a fool’s errand (Chapter 3). This is a debate that takes place in everyday life – in idle chat in workplaces and households, but is also mediated in churches, on radio debates, popular song, and occasionally in writing.

Whilst the rest of the thesis explores this debate from different ethnographic angles, what I want to do in this chapter is set the historical and ideational scene for what is to come by showing the conditions under which this debate has been formed, particularly that of a material scarcity in Kiambu brought about during the colonial period. Scarcity of means puts enormous existential and moral (and moralising) pressure on economic practices of accumulation and consumption – as to whether it builds to a prosperous, normatively moral future in the family or another pro-social end, or whether it appears self-interested, flagrantly anti-social and thus immoral. The way in which knowledge about economic practice circulates is discussed over subsequent chapters, where we will explore ethnographic debate over the morality of familial continuity and the threat

posed by irresponsible consumption and predatory accumulation. What I focus on in this chapter is the historical emergence of debates about the morality of investment and immorality of consumption. Towards the end of the chapter I prefigure the conclusion of the thesis: moral concern is brewing in central Kenya that normative values emphasising the morality of kinship's continuity is under threat from anti-social consumption and its destructive potential, a potential manifested in the practice of calculating and consuming persons that thesis terms 'greedy eaters'.

Material change

The colonial origins of land poverty

In 1902 the stretch of the Uganda railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria was completed, marking a watershed moment in the incorporation of eastern Africa under the auspices of British colonial rule. The British East Africa Company, chartered in 1888, had established British military and trading influence on Kenya's coast as a private company associated with the Crown, but in 1895 Britain claimed full protectorate status of 'East Africa', then inclusive of much of contemporary Uganda. The railway consolidated this process of territorial incorporation, providing a key strategic link between Mombasa on the eastern coast and the city of Kisumu, on the shores of Lake Victoria – a new route across what is today Kenya for the movement of goods and soldiers. The problem the Protectorate faced was paying for it. To make the colony profitable, the Foreign Office encouraged the farming of the central highlands due to its plentiful rains and good soil quality. Proximity to Nairobi also made it attractive. Rights along the railway – that cut through Nairobi just to the south of Kiambu, were alienated to settlers in the early part of the century, and the creation of specific African reserves soon followed.

By that point Kiambu itself had been settled by Kikuyu only relatively recently, by mbarĩ – broad alliances, more like 'corporations' (Lonsdale 1992: 336) than static lineages.²⁵ These were vehicles of expansion, constituted of kin and non-kin who had likely migrated from further north, seeking new sites of settlement in the southern forests on the northern borders of what today is Nairobi. Kikuyu migrants found these forests inhabited by Ndorobo, a hunter-gatherer people

²⁵ Robert Bates (1989: 17) has compared Kikuyu pre-colonial social forms to Marshall Sahlins' 'predatory lineage system'.

from whom they bought and seized land, clearing it for agriculture (Kershaw 1997: 38 n.9).²⁶ These southern *mbari* were in-turn bolstered by the arrival of migrants from further north who settled on the land of established pioneers as tenants (*ahoi*, lit. 'those who ask'), exchanging their assistance in clearing land for rights in grazing and cultivation (Bullock 1974: 702-3; Kershaw 1997: 20). By the turn of the century, Kiambu had become the southernmost frontier of Kikuyu expansion, a fluid boundary between them and neighbouring Masai that inhabited the grassland plains to the south of Nairobi (Overton 1988: 109). Youth raided nearby Maasai for goats they could use to pay bride-price (see, e.g., Kershaw 1997: 65, 39 n.22), and by the beginning of the 20th century some Kikuyu had begun to seek work in Nairobi – then only beginning to emerge as the country's major urban centre (Overton 1988).

Alienation was to prove a dramatic 'exogenous shock' (Bates 1989: 17) on existing practices of landholding and livelihoods in Kiambu. Kitching notes how quickly Kiambu became densely populated. '[L]and will shortly be unobtainable', wrote Kiambu's District Commissioner in 1916, such was the enormity of alienation to Boer and then European buyers (Kitching 1980: 30). Kiambu continued to remain a frontier for Kikuyu arriving from further north, increasingly because of Nairobi's proximity rather than an opportunity to expand southward into Masailand. Boundaries placed by the colonial government froze any southward expansion that might have relieved the pressure of population growth. The 'African reserves' – territory designated specifically for Kikuyu outside of the white farms were formalised in 1926. These reserves characterised the contradictions of colonial Kenya. On the one hand, they were to be set aside for African production, and on the other they were to constitute a 'labour reserve', providing cheap labour for white farms (Lonsdale and Berman 1979: 494). To give a sense of the scale of exploitation, by 1927, 50 per cent of 'able bodied male natives' in central Kenya were in registered employment, and in areas of Kiambu that figure rose to practically 70 per cent (Cunningham 2018: 118). The majority of these were unskilled single men who worked on short-term contracts away from the reserves as agricultural labourers, construction workers, domestic servants, and in government departments.

Overpopulation in the reserves soon set in, and access to land became a pressing existential issue (Dawson 1981). As the epicentre of expropriation, it was from Kiambu that many families

²⁶ Whether this land was in actual fact seized, bought or occupied became a matter of immense debate during the colonial period, when the British government attempted to establish precisely what rights Kikuyu had to the land, and thus what compensation they might be given after alienation, through the Carter Commission (Coray 1978: 185-8). The most reliable ethnographic evidence from Greet Kershaw (1997: 38 n.9), who conducted fieldwork in Kiambu during the 1950s, suggests that land was indeed purchased by Kikuyu who migrated southwards into Kiambu. Notions of ownership appear to have existed well before the arrival of Europeans, but the British were reluctant to avoid the complications of individual compensation, preferring to think of Kikuyu as a 'tribe' to be compensated collectively with 'reserve' land (Clough 1990: 68-9).

left, literally seeking pastures anew for their herds in the Rift Valley (Kitching 1980: 30; Clough 1990: 71). A growing class of landless Kikuyu emerged – men and women who had fallen on hard times, or who had previously been tenants, turfed off the land of wealthier families from whom they had previously held use-rights to land. ‘The tenants who had occupied uncultivated land and swelled the fighting strength of the Kiambu lineages during precolonial times were now expendable’ (Clough 1990: 70). Contestation emerged from the kaleidoscopic webs of social relationships that characterised land access. Land scarcity played out through forms of enclosure and exclusion that drove wedges between kin and non-kin. Descent soon became the default logic for claiming access to land (Lonsdale 1992: 361-3). Litigation broke out in a struggle to establish clear rights where no government-recognised system of ownership prevailed, producing enmity and mistrust (Kitching 1980: 52; Kershaw 1997; Sorrensen 1967).

Under the conditions of land poverty, a process of social stratification took root within the ‘native reserves’ defined by two polarities – on the one hand, wealthy Kikuyu amassed land at the expense of their neighbours, and on the other, poor Kikuyu attempted to stave off outright landlessness through seeking wages in local towns and cities (Berman 1992: 229; Lonsdale 1992: 358-9; Iliffe 1987: 148). Scarcity of land and its inability to meet subsistence needs provoked new types of household as families were ‘forced to obtain their subsistence on the market’ (Kitching 1980: 152), turning either to cash crops – crops that yielded low rates of return throughout the 1930s and 1940s – or wage labour (Iliffe 1987: 153). Male absence created increasing reliance on female labour in poor households, and undermined patriarchal authority (see, e.g. Peterson 2001). Land sale became a common means through which the poor staved-off outright destitution (Clough 1990: 70). Meanwhile, wealthy Kikuyu, particularly local chiefs appointed by the British government, continued to amass land from those sold out of economic necessity (Kitching 1980; Clough 1990: 70; Maas 1986).

These transformations set the scene for the *Mau Mau* rebellion that rocked the colony in the mid-1950s. In many ways, the seeds of the rebellion were sown in Kiambu. It was returning migrants, ‘squatters’, from the Rift Valley – those tenants who had left Kiambu land in the 1910s and 1920s – who had lost the most and the least to lose by open revolt. They were evicted from white-owned Rift Valley farms in aftermath of the Second World War when rising food prices on the global market encouraged large landowners (on whose farms the migrants had been squatting) to enclose. In an overpopulated Kiambu, there was no welcome for those who returned. Many of Mau Mau’s most desperate fighters who took to the forest appear to have been Rift Valley returnees. From the forest, they attacked chiefs associated with the regime who regularly used force to mete out violence to their Kikuyu neighbours (Anderson 2005). They were neither universally

liked nor understood as the heroes they are described as today (Branch 2007). The majority of casualties in the rebellion were not British soldiers, but fellow Kikuyu. The *Mau Mau* rebellion was a pejorative name for ‘greedy eaters’ – how its young members were perceived in onomatopoeic terms. The slogan of their actual name, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, was ithaka na wĩathi – land and freedom, a demand that spoke to the existential and moral demands being made, that respectable masculine life was only possible with land to make a home for oneself. Some estimates are that enormous proportions of Kikuyu remained landless at independence, 23 per cent of those that dwelt in Kenya’s central province (Iliffe 1987: 148).

In the 1950s, the colonial government changed its approach to land titling practically in direct response to the uprising. The rebellion had awakened colonial anxieties about the nature and pace of social change. In response, titles were issued with the aim of creating a class of wealthy peasants sympathetic to, and reliant upon, the government (Sorrenson 1967: 118; Thurston 1987: 71-3, 108). Holdings to be titled would have to be at least four acres. Those with less would be resettled to the fortified villages constructed by the government to contain *Mau Mau*. Their land claims would be completely disregarded. For the colonial government, this was not so much a problem but rather an anticipated side-effect of their titling programme, which they believed would create a class of wealthy peasants whose land would be worked by the landless who would miss out on securing their holdings, or eventually be forced to sell meagre plots out of poverty.

Wealthy Kikuyu took advantage of their proximity to state machinery to accumulate as much land as possible during this window, and exclude others, particularly those who were absent from land (mostly *Mau Mau* fighters in the forest or in imprisonment) that they could claim for their own (Thurston 1987: 103). From the micro-politics of titling a Kikuyu ‘aristocracy’ emerged, in the words of Sorrenson (1967) comprised of large family owned estates (Bates 1989: 39). Kiambu was split in rather stark terms between smallholders and largeholders – a situation that continues to this day.

In the post-independence era, the ‘land question’, as it became known, was never resolved. Under Jomo Kenyatta’s leadership, the Kenya Africa National Union (KANU) – Kenya’s first ostensibly ‘nationalist’ government under independence - protected the private property of European owners, rejected nationalisation and redistribution, instead emphasising that private assets must be bought on a ‘willing buyer, willing seller basis’ (Ndi 2016). ‘I would not like to feel that my *shamba* or house belongs to the Government’, Kenyatta is quoted as saying at the time. ‘Titles must be respected and the right of the individual safeguarded’ (Branch 2011: 9). Kenyatta’s famous attack on former *Mau Mau* veteran Bildad Kaggia’s defence of land restitution illuminates how principles of private property as the evidence of personal achievement were matched with a

laissez-faire government economic policy that championed accumulation, often keeping quiet about its true origins in state coffers: ‘Kaggia, you are advocating free things [...] If you go to Ngei’s home he has planted a lot of coffee and other crops. What have you done for yourself?’ (Githuku 2016: 222). Such messages echo down the years today when Uhuru Kenyatta addresses the public about the potential of ‘youth’ to become ‘entrepreneurs’. I will comment on contemporary livelihoods in detail below, but it bears remark that the valorisation of individual achievement in political discourse continues to mask the political history that turned smallholders into ‘part-time proletarians’ (Peterson 2001: 473; Lonsdale 1992: 462). In contrast to South Africa, another settler colony, land restitution in central Kenya never became a widely politicised issue, though as a number of researchers have shown, its legacy continues to simmer under the surface of contemporary politics in the Rift Valley, rather than in central Kenya (see, e.g., Klopp 2002; Lynch 2011).

At independence, development (*maendeleo*) became the new ideology of the state, though as the *Mzee* Kenyatta made clear Kenya’s modernisation was to be the product of the initiative of Kenya’s citizens (*wananchi* in Kiswahili) via a principle of communal self-help (see, e.g., Haugerud 1995: 46, 48; Smith 2008: 14). Local funding drives would help build schools and hospitals, and government documents from the time are full of celebratory exhortation for the initiative of citizens to help themselves (compare Lal 2012). This was *barambee*, an ideology that hardly a single commentator of Kenya writes about without noting it conveniently allowed the government to shirk its responsibilities for redistribution. The ‘what have you done for yourself’ ideology of the ‘self-made’ Kikuyu patriarch was scaled up into an ideology of state development (Lonsdale 1992; 2008).

Coffee and cash – farming and the ‘informal economy’ after independence

If reliance on the state was off the cards at independence, one thing Kikuyu farmers with sufficient acreage could turn to was coffee. Being allowed to grow coffee for export like European farmers was a major point of contention for Kikuyu towards the end of the colonial period. In the aftermath of independence, coffee growing became a standard cash-crop for smallholders (Waters 1972). Kiambu became a ‘coffee belt’ (Kahura 2019, September 26), and the regions described in this thesis as now covered in urban sprawl – Ruaka, Ndenderu, Gachie – were once landscapes of coffee farms. Coffee brought prosperity. Amrik Heyer (1998) shows how some areas of Murang’a (the region to the north of Kiambu) became very wealthy through coffee growing, funding the

construction of stone houses and the education of children.

The success of smallholders with sufficient acreage highlights further the discrepancy between the landed and the landless in the aftermath of independence. As Sorrenson (1967) noted in his study of land tenure reform brought about by Swynnerton in the 1950s, even the land poor wanted title to secure what little they had in legal terms and begin growing coffee (1967: 250). The real losers of independence were the landless who flooded into cities like Mombasa and Nairobi, as well as those who were squatters on farms in the Rift Valley. This thesis can speak to little of the fates of these landless, emigrant Kikuyu and their descendants.

For those with land, the effects of accessing title had been to ‘root’ them to their plots, to borrow a term used by Heyer (1998). A stereotypical ‘Kikuyu’ household in central Kenya comprised of an absent husband, working for wages in Nairobi or elsewhere, with his wife present at the homestead tending to coffee. If coffee brought prosperity to peasant families in central Kenya, this prosperity eventually came to an end. The crash in coffee prices in the 1980s – widely blamed on the failure of Daniel arap Moi’s presidency – meant that many families experienced severe reduction in returns (Mbataru 2007). Heyer notes that the crisis of coffee prices undermined male domestic authority, just as landlessness had done in the 1940s and 1950s. So too did their ‘excommunication’ under the presidency of Moi, whose fears of Kikuyu holding authority manifested in enormous discrimination against Kikuyu men seeking jobs in the police and the army. Even at the age of 56, my language teacher Gitau swore he would never forgive Moi for his failure to enter the army when he was a young man of 18. As a result of male failure, women became more prominent in domestic affairs and in supporting their families as household ‘sustainers’ in the informal economy. Failed patriarchs tended to take to drink, and domestic violence was not uncommon, though others evidently diversified into livestock and other business ventures. I say more about livelihoods in contemporary Kiambu below. But it is notable that coffee farms are far less common in the region today. Coffee, once a ‘sentimental crop’ (Kahura 2019, September 26), is being replaced by blocks of rental accommodation.

Aspiration and becoming rentiers – the era of economic liberalisation

When Mwai Kibaki was sworn in as President in December 2002, Kenya was in the midst of economic malaise. Kenyatta’s successor, Daniel arap Moi, had inherited a one-party state from Kenyatta’s KANU government which had gradually clamped down on political dissent, most notably by outlawing Oginga Odinga’s Kenya People’s Union that splintered from KANU in the

late 1960s. Today, Kenya's immediate post-independence period is seen as having sowed the seeds for the ethno-nationalist character of its contemporary politics. Moi stoked these fires throughout his long presidency (1979 – 2002) to disrupt growing calls for 'multi-party', sponsoring militias to carry out attacks across Kenya in a bid to divide his opponents (Branch and Cheeseman 2009).

But Moi also presided over a period of then unprecedented corruption, bankrupting the state in the process. In the 1990s, government officials moved over half a billion USD from the treasury to Goldenberg International, a company to export gold that had never existed in the first place (Smith 2008: 34). The Goldenberg scandal came to symbolise the apotheosis of corruption under Moi. Such was Moi's government associated with corruption, not merely in political-economic terms, but in archly moral ones, that the singer Eric Wainaina was able to lament the debasement of public life as having diminished, as it were, the Kenyan people. '*Nchi ya kitu kidogo*', he sang (Country of the bribe [lit., small thing]), '*Nchi ya watu wadogo*' (Country of small people). Economic growth under Moi had ground to a sluggish 0.6 per cent in December 2002 when he handed over power to his successor (*Business Daily* 2013, January 3).

If corruption and economic malaise had defined the Moi era, Kibaki's that followed was characterised by economic liberalisation and rapid growth that Kiambu residents today recall as an era of prosperity and new possibility. Paul Kimani, the 55-year-old father of my host family, recalled living through the shift in national economic outlook, locating them in his own upturned fortunes.

When Kibaki went in [to the State House], the constitution was ratified. Banks started to give loans. We took off. A lorry like that one [he pointed to the photograph of a lorry he had bought partly with a loan in Kibaki's era] I couldn't buy. Even if you take a little money or you're given a loan, it wouldn't be enough [in Moi's era]. In Kibaki's time, you're running to all the banks.

Wakati Kibaki aliingia katiba ikapendulwa. Benki ikaanza kupeana mikopo. Ndiyo tukanyanyuka juu. Lori kama hiyo singeweza kununua. Ati utoe pesa kidogo ama upewe loan, uende kununua hungeweza. Wakati ya Kibaki unakimbia benki zote.

Loans could now be more easily acquired, and title deeds issued from the 1950s onwards often provided collateral. Kimani, for instance, used a loan secured by his land to purchase his lorry. Kenya's 'second liberation' is now recalled rather fondly in Kiambu, the Moi era associated with economic malaise.

One of the transformations brought about by Kibaki's government were enormous infrastructure projects like the Thika Road which has played a major role in turning southern Kiambu into an urban corridor. Enormous new residential areas have sprung up around it, and in areas within its wider orbit precisely like Ruaka and Banana towns. As Nairobi expands the rising value of land in Kiambu is attracting the eyes of property developers catering towards both a growing middle-class and labour migrants from further afield. These dynamics have given rise to desires to become rentiers – to construct rental accommodation on one's own land through selling land.

Concerns about the future of Kiambu's coffee growing and food more generally, its county government outlawed the uprooting of coffee plants in favour of housing in 2018, 'We do not want to see people uprooting coffee to put up houses,' said Kiambu County governor, Ferdinand Waititu (Wainaina 2018, March 5). But the horse had already bolted, and many have continued to build illegally. 'In high potential areas, coffee farming has no competition with real estate in terms of return of investment,' Mwari Maina from Nyeri wrote in a letter to Kenya's *Daily Nation* newspaper. 'The price of half an acre in high potential areas in Kiambu averages Sh20 million and it's impossible to grow coffee that has equivalent value.'

One of my friends James, a farmer from Banana Hill in his early 40s, remarked that Kiambu was storing up issues for its future. 'Where will our food come from?'. But there was another issue: the temptations brought about by the returns made through land sale. 'Those people had never seen half a million shillings before, now they had a million shillings,' James told me, echoing perspectives I heard numerous times throughout my fieldwork about the pitfalls of selling land. 'A lot of them started to... [Me: Drink?] Yah! And when that starts what follows is... getting sick. Many of my age-mates from Ruaka went that way.' Whilst selling inherited land outright is frowned upon as taboo by some (a topic discussed at length in Chapter 3), others defend the notion as one of a limited set of options. Selling a portion of inherited land to build is now fairly common and is seen as a sensible economic decision since whatever the land grows is nothing compared to the rent that can be generated, perhaps 5000 KES a month per renter. As one of my neighbours put it to me, pushing back on the idea that there was something wrong with selling to build:

But how do you expect people not to sell their land and yet they have their land, and more tenants are asking for houses? [...] The problem that we have is that we don't have money [...] and most of us we don't want to work hard looking for other ways to get money. (Male, farmer, aged 45)

A 'pocket of life' in an aspirant Kenya

It is now time to introduce my field site of Mashambani, and how it sits within these wider economic shifts. Mashambani, as the opening vignette was designed to evoke, is emblematic of Kiambu's post-colonial geography. A cursory walk through its geography would reveal the inequality etched in the surrounding landscape – the enormous tea plantations that are interspersed with towns and pockets of smallholders – a pattern repeated throughout Kiambu. The socio-economic legacy of the colonial period meets rising aspirations emanating from an expanding Nairobi, and the new forms of wealth encoded in gated communities of middle-class stone houses springing up on the peri-urban periphery.

Throughout my fieldwork I lived in one of these pockets, on Catherine and Kimani's homestead. Kimani's life trajectory was fairly typical of other Kiambu men I came to know in Mashambani in so far as he worked for piecemeal cash through 'hustling', returning to the homestead only sporadically. By the time I met him in January 2017, he had been working as long-haul lorry driver for around ten years. Having only attended primary school in his youth, like most of his male siblings he had lived his younger years farming and eventually found work as a pick-up driver. He lived in a temporary house, made of corrugated iron and wooden planks, in anticipation of a stone house as yet unfinished. He was neither rich, but nor was he poor. Neither he nor his family conceded they were 'working class' – a term reserved for a Nairobi-based middle-class for whom white-collar office work is the norm. But they were 'somewhere' in the words of Mwaura. They are, in a sense, emblematic of Kiambu's demographic of aspirant post-peasants, people who have lived their lives in the shadow of the city, relying on wages rather than farming to pursue their life projects.

Kimani had been born in 1963, the year of Kenya's independence. His father, Mwaura Gathee, was born in 1903. A farmer, Gathee lived throughout the changes described above. It is likely that he never participated in *Mau Mau* directly due the proximity between his home and the nearby farmland of white settlers. Gathee likely gained title to his land in the 1950s when official titling began in Kiambu, though some of it was 'grabbed' by members of the Koinange family in the 1950s or 1960s, diminishing his holdings significantly. That his sons began to work for wages speaks to the generational shift that took place over the course of the 20th century – from agriculture to wages. With this background in mind, I turn to the general socio-economic background of the neighbourhood.



Map 3: Banana Hill and its peri-urban environs. Note the clustered buildings bordering the road.

'Return to the farms'

Mashambani is a patchwork of homesteads located on the outskirts of Banana Hill, around 20km from Nairobi. Banana Hill pre-dates Nairobi's recent urban expansion. It has a fairly strategic position on the 'old Limuru road', once a key route between Nairobi and the tea-growing central Kenya. Today the road serves as a conduit for local farmers rather than long-haul lorries, and one regularly glimpses pick-up trucks with sacks stuffed with produce, donkey-drawn cars and herds of goats being ushered along the asphalt. Banana remains a shopping centre for its environs rather than a major transport hub. It has a hospital, a market and several schools and remains the largest town in the Kiambaa constituency.



Photograph 5: Banana Town, July 2019.



Photograph 6: Mashambani, July 2019.

Mashambani itself is a neighbourhood of mixed fortunes (compare Haugerud 1995: 187-9). There are some stone houses, mostly constructed by outsiders who have purchased land there, but many more are constructed from corrugated iron and wood. Save for the influx of a few outsiders, the neighbourhood remains comprised of consanguineally related male-headed households. Multi-generational households are often clustered on a single plot of land that is usually registered in the name of the person considered the household head. Individual plots are usually surrounded by hedges, fences or walls. All of these homesteads once belonged to larger plots of land owned and have been sub-divided over generations, being passed down on the basis of exclusive patrilineal descent until recently (see Chapter 5).



Map 4: Mashambani from above. Note the larger tea plantations belonging to local businessmen that have not been sub-divided.

In general, a homestead is comprised of a single house surrounded by a garden (*shamba*) used either for farming or for the construction of rental housing. But in many cases, homesteads are rather clustered with multiple different houses. A corollary of sub-dividing the land between multiple heirs every generation is a shrinking amount of arable land available to Mashambani's descendants. The average land holding in Mashambani is approximately an acre. Many families have what is commonly known as a '50 by 100' ft. plot, practically 0.5 hectares, just over one acre. The less fortunate might have 50 by 50 ft. or 20 by 50 ft. Clustering dwellings separately means that farmland can be kept intact, to serve the food requirements of all households. Whether the land can meet those food requirements throughout the year, however, is another question. The crops grown on *shambas* tend to form the mainstay of diets – potatoes (*viazi*), kale (*sukuma*), maize (*mbembe*), and beans (*mboco*). These crops are rarely sold and are primarily used for partial subsistence. Purchasing food strains practically everyone's budgets, depending on one's access to

land.²⁷ The 30-year-old wife of a local man, who had moved from the far more rural Nyandarua County, lamented this, recalling her youth when practically all of her food was taken from her family's much larger *shamba* of four acres. 'There are no *shambas* here', some of my neighbours told me of their reduced plots, with no space for gardening.

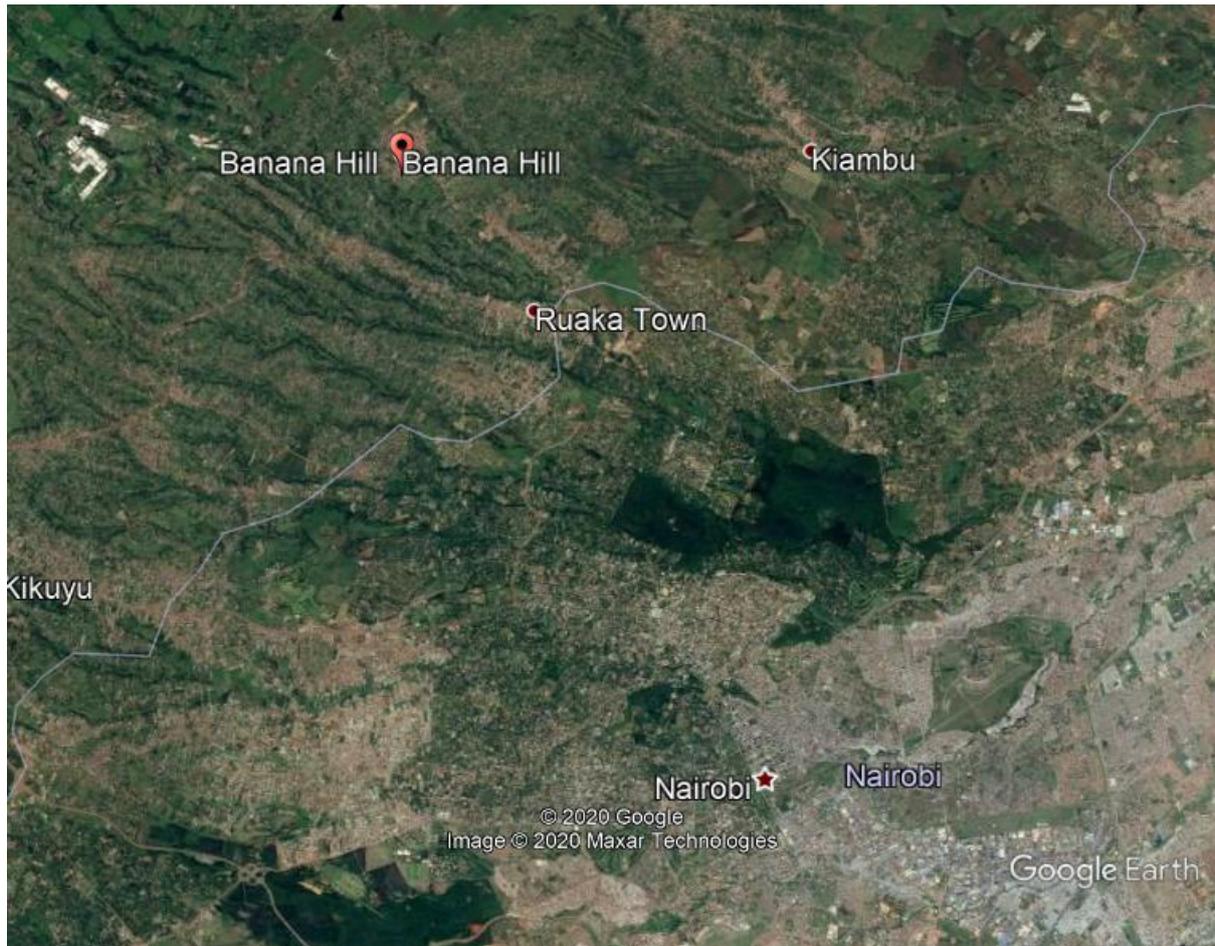
Whilst many homesteads have maintained separate fields, those on smaller plots tend to have abandoned arable farming altogether, instead using their limited space to build upwards – creating chicken coops and pig sties on two or three levels. Kiambu County is a place of genuine ingenuity and innovation when it comes to getting the most out of a small space. One can be surprised by the number of pigs being kept on these small plots. Animal rearing of this sort is popular, and residents attune their practices to the return for animals and the relative difficulty seen to be involved in rearing them. Pigs, once popular, are recognised as being difficult to rear because of their susceptibility to disease. Quail eggs, popular in the early 2010s, gave some businessmen in Mashambani a start in their careers. During my fieldwork, Mwaura and I purchased rabbits to rear and sell – 'high level hustling', as he described it but, in reality, little more than a way to create some pocket money, a practice favoured by boys (*ihii*) and younger men (*anake*).

Families have adapted farming practices carefully to a lack of space, but wealthier households might be able to raise the capital to construct, or at least begin constructing, rental accommodation aimed at labour migrants, particularly young men from elsewhere in central Kenya, who have moved towards Nairobi. But in general, it remains desirable to have land available for farming since the food it provides cuts household costs significantly.

Off-farm income

Despite dwindling plots, one should not underplay the economic opportunity that Nairobi represents – its growing labour demands throughout the colonial period and afterwards providing an outlet for land-poor Kikuyu in southern Kiambu (Bullock 1974: 709, 713). A recent survey of Kiambu demonstrated that whilst farming remains common, usually oriented towards subsistence as it was for my interlocutors in Mashambani, sources of income from off the farm remain crucial to the daily lives of Kiambu dwellers, regardless of background (Government of Kenya 2014; cf. County Government of Kiambu N.D.c.; cf. Haugerud 1995: 190).

²⁷ Recent statistics from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics suggests that practically half of all total household expenditure in Kiambu was spent on food (4,567 KES per month of a total 9,594). Whilst Kiambu encompasses urban areas adjacent to Nairobi where wages would be relied on to a much greater degree, it still points to a relevant phenomenon in peri-urban areas – that wages are used to purchase food (KNBS 2018b: 296).



Map 5: Nairobi's north-western outskirts.

Crucially, this survey noted 'business' as the most important source of net income for Kiambu residents beyond farming activities. An ambiguous category, 'business' (*biacara*) as used by Kenyans evokes the broadening of a term to encompass practically any small-scale economic venture, from establishing a shop with mobile banking facilities to hawking goods. The category of 'business' is suggestive of what my fieldwork has revealed – that in spite of government celebration of enterprise and business ownership, life in the 'informal economy' (see, e.g., Hart 1973) is not only normal but extremely precarious.

Taking up a popular idiom for such work, Tatiana Thieme has called this 'the hustle economy' (2017), where 'hustling' (a discourse reproduced by interlocutors of all ages) refers to the business of wage-hunting through taking-up odd jobs in whatever can be found through friends, relations and even strangers. Notions of 'just struggling' or 'trying' (*no kūgeria*) are widespread, a casual response to a greeting frequently heard on the streets of Kiambu's town. Notions of 'hustling' or 'trying' can, of course, manifest as casual labour, but whilst a common

language of economic struggle unites, distinctions are observable. Many young men in Kiambu take work in the booming construction industry for 500 KES per day (approx. 5 USD), the advantage of proximity to Nairobi. Young men who had not completed high school were reliant on the construction industry in general, often working as carriers of stones for more qualified craftsmen.²⁸

More promising is to have an asset of one's own to use independently, whether a pick-up truck, a *boda-boda* (motorcycle), or a power-saw to cut trees for firewood. These value-producing assets are vital. Guyer's (1997: 223; cf. MacDougall 2004: 156) concept of an economy of 'niches' cultivated by persons based on their own evaluations of the economy and their creative responses to it is useful here. Older men tend to have carved out a niche for themselves, usually by saving or acquiring loans to purchase or rent a vehicle – usually a pick-up truck, used to transport goods for larger farmers, but perhaps a taxi, or in the case of Paul Kimani, a lorry. Younger men might be working towards similar goals but have not reached them yet, starting with only their own bodies or what capital they might have acquired from their parents. Many men in their late 20s right up to their 50s work as drivers in the local transport industry, younger men working more sporadically as *makangas*. Divergences in 'occupation', broadly put, mean divergences in income: those with a low-paying job (e.g. for flower-growing companies that operate nearby) or hustling independently as a labourer could hope to earn between 8,000 and 10,000 KES per month. But these incomes might be supplemented by 'side hustles'. The low paid might have somehow acquired capital to construct rental accommodation or have farming projects as well as their wage. Meanwhile, taxi-drivers and those with pick-ups could expect to earn 20-30,000 KES per month. This was usually enough to maintain a modest household and pay for the school fees of children.²⁹

A conversation between Mwaura, two older men and me that took place at a mourning ceremony for a neighbour early on in my fieldwork revealed the sense of trepidation younger men feel when they begin 'hustling for themselves'. The two older men, in their late 40s, explained to me – the anthropologist outsider – the difficulty of generating cash except by saving due to high interest rates from banks that frequently lead to repossession of title deeds used as security (one only has to check the back pages of Kenya's *Daily Nation* newspaper and browse the auctioneers). Mwaura's sardonic interjection was to say that he would never become rich unless he became 'a criminal or a politician', in other words someone who exploits others, using morally spurious tactics to generate wealth quickly.

²⁸ Throughout 2017 and 2018 I carried out a survey amongst approximately 20 young men from the area aged 18-28.

²⁹ It can be difficult to pinpoint precise monthly incomes, but information from surveys carried out by the anthropologist correlated with early information from Kenya's national census in 2019 suggests this to be the case.

Carving out niches takes time and reveals the long journeys of economisation through which households pursue their aspirations. The idea that certain men in Mashambani are ‘too young to be that rich’, a comment from one of my interlocutors about two local men who had become successful in ‘business’, evokes the life path towards wealth based on saving and careful investment. Kimani, for instance, worked as a pick-up driver in his early 40s, saving his wages in order to purchase his first lorry, half of which was bought with a government grant. He eventually sold this lorry for 450,000 KES, investing this money together with another 450,000 KES generated from a bank loan (for which he used his title deed as a security) in a new lorry. By the time I had arrived in Mashambani, this lorry was in a poor state, or so Kimani insisted, arguing that it could only travel on certain roads. Though he was trying to sell it in order to purchase his own pick-up, he had not been successful.

The possibility of skipping through these stages is obviously enticing to young men, since the implications of a life spent ‘hustling’ are starkest for them, particularly those who only completed primary school or part of secondary school. The prospect of many years spent hustling was enough to encourage young men I came to know to become petty criminals in pursuit of short-term cash (Chapter 4). In a way, this prefigures the point I want to make below with more specific reference to moral thought in central Kenya: that scarcity has shaped not only practice, but moral argument and the moral values people understand themselves to be pursuing in this context. It is to such moral debate about economic life to which I now wish to turn.

Moral debate

Wealth in people as a source of ‘civic virtue’

Before the colonial period, wealth had been measured in broad terms – in people (including wives, clients and children) and land. Land scarcity changed this. Mere survival became a moral victory (Lonsdale 1992: 356). The social longevity of the family became the vital bastion of morality in central Kenya, but in the 1940s men struggled to secure even this. The testimony of Victor Mwaniki given to the Nyeri district commissioner in 1947, quoted by Derek Peterson (2001: 473), gives us some sense of the stakes as overpopulation put enormous strain on the lives of poor Kikuyu in the African reserves:

I am in severe trouble due to lack of residence and food for the family, as I am landless

even a small piece of ground on which to farm would enable me to fight for them. The family is ever miserable ... really I am awfully worried about them, surely they cry, and their condition proves to be unhealthy. I try hard to work, but without land I cannot do more than just keep the wolf from the door. (ibid.)

Whilst poverty characterised the lives of Kikuyu in the reserves, it also spawned moralising tendencies amongst a new generation of mission-educated Christian converts, *athomi* (readers), who styled themselves as learned advisors to their fellow Kenyans. In 1945, a young railway guard named Henry Muoria published his first pamphlet entitled *What should we do, Our People?*. Educated at an Anglican mission school, Muoria had learnt to read and read widely. By the early 1940s he had read Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*. Inspired by a fellow African and Kikuyu author, Muoria began to study journalism. His first pamphlet, *What should we do, Our People?* offers a vital insight into the terms in which the social change brought about by colonialism were understood and debated. Published in Kikuyu, it was an archly moralising reflection on what his countrymen ought to want in life, and how they ought to go about achieving it. Muoria emphasised the importance of one's labour and its most pressing product: the household.

Everyone knows that he sweats now so that misery will not face him later. He looks forward to helping himself and his people. That is to say his wife, children, father or mother, or even his kin. To help your people means being able to clothe and feed them, and educate your children. And during sickness you are able to buy them medicine. [...] you must know where to get money to help yourself and your family (2009 [1945]: 141).

As 'part-time proletarians' (Peterson 2001: 473) working on white farms in the highlands and for wages in Nairobi in the mid-century, old ideas were restated as much as they were revised. Muoria's message was that kinship remained the vital source of a person's pride and respectability.

Over ten years after independence, in the late 1970s townsmen in Nyeri would tell ethnographer Carl Dutto (1975: 177) much the same:

The income is so low that a good life is a life in which every day you have something to eat and you are sheltered. Not too many people would go beyond that. The majority of people would definitely like a place of their own, a regular income, and education for their children. Everyone seems to aim at these things [...] For someone like me, I want to have a family which is contented. I am not dreaming of much more than that.

Families retained modest aims over the course the mid-20th century social transformations – not of grand wealth but of maintaining families over generations.³⁰ Children’s fortunes revealed their parents’ virtue. As a genre of experience, family-based economic struggles are most notably objectified in Kikuyu-language gospel music that valorises the figures of parents and their labour when invested in children. Consider, for instance, Henry Waweru Karanja’s famous ‘My Work’ (Wĩra Wakwa), a song that defends the humble morality of manual and low-paying work from the judgemental eyes of snobbish relatives and wealthy passersby.

Tĩga kũnyarara wĩra ũyũ nĩ ndutaga
ũrĩa amu manjetagĩrĩa ũmateithie
Ngamahoyagĩra mũno Ngai andathime
Nĩ getha mone gĩa kũrĩa na gĩa kwĩhumba

Stop despising this job I do
It’s the one for sure they await for to help them.
I pray for them (that) God blesses me
So that they get something to eat and to wear

The ‘them’, of course, are Waweru’s children. Images of parenthood of this type circulate in public spaces – in *matatus* and restaurants, on televisions and personal radios – as part of an ambient Christianity where labour is tied to prayer, generating blessings through diligence (kiheo) that God might reward with miracles.

As much as a genre of song, Waweru’s verse – along with the words of Muoria, Mwaniki and Dutto’s anonymous interlocutors – points to a genre of economic life defined by careful conversion of wealth from wages into people (Guyer 1995; cf. Berry 1985), one that has emerged in proximity to urban centres where wages could be earnt. We can think of this simply as ‘investment’ in the terms of Paul Bohannan (1955: 64), accruing wages elsewhere and then converting these into ‘people’, typically by spending them on school fees. ‘I can go without a shoe so my children can have food’, said one of the older male taxi drivers from Banana Town. But the point is that families in central Kenya do not merely tread water, but constantly seek ‘marginal gains’, to use the term famously employed by Jane Guyer (2004: 17, 20) to evoke ‘a gainful margin

³⁰ Mark Hunter (2014) describes a similar transformation in South Africa, whereby investment in education has become a vital parental obligation.

in exchange, what people hope and plan for' (ibid.: 26). Turning wages into school fees represents a common example of such a gainful margin in so far as it realised the value of kinship's continuity. Wealth-in-people as a principle persists, though in an altered form due to dwindling fertility rates.³¹ Kiambu families recognise that it is better to endow fewer children with the means 'to go ahead' (*gũthũ na mbere*) in terms of education (*gĩthomo*).

A 'domestic ethic' – conversion and continuity

Typically, in the anthropology of Africa, aspirations for social mobility and improved living standards are presented as something new – the product of an era of economic liberalisation, the spread of Pentecostal Christianity and the emergence of middle-class lifestyles associated with modernity (see, e.g., Ferguson 1999; James 2018; Spronk 2014; Lentz 2016). These might well be new and overt modes through which aspirations for better material lives are expressed, but the aspirational projects pursued by Kiambu families, in so far as they focus on the family and familial futures, have a rather older genealogy.³² We have already seen in the Introduction how the logic of 'wealth in people' emerged on the forest frontier in pre-colonial central Kenya, and both there and above, something of how it mutated over the course of the colonial period – and the sedimented experience of poverty – into a moralising tendency.

There is little doubt that missionisation reframed earlier notions of wealth-in-people by infusing them with notions of modernity and progress.³³ In the Presbyterian heartlands of Nyeri, on the foothills of Mount Kenya, the first generation of Christian converts were known as *mambere* (lit., 'those who go ahead'), marking not simply their role as forerunners of wider Christianisation but how their conversion was associated with material advancement and social mobility (Cunningham 2018: 204-5). As Tom Cunningham (2018) shows in his thesis of the

³¹ Fertility rates in Kiambu are the lowest in Kenya (Republic of Kenya N.D.). Kiambu also has a higher proportion of 1-2 (41 per cent) and 3-4 (35.7 per cent) person households and a lower proportion of 5-6 (19 per cent) and 7 (3 per cent) and above person households relative to other counties, e.g., adjacent Murang'a with 5 per cent of households of 7 and above or more distant Kisumu in western Kenya with 14 per cent of households with 7 and above members (KNBS 2018a).

³² Consider, for instance, Rhiannon Stephens' (2018) exploration of Luhya notions of wealth and poverty over the *longue durée*.

³³ Lonsdale (1999) and Peterson (2004a) write of an encounter in which 'congruence' coexisted alongside 'detachment' – that Christianity constituted an alternative source of power for young converts, who later sought reconciliation with their elders via marriage and readopting Kikuyu customs. Rather than wholesale ideological colonisation, conversion marked 'a mutual field of questioning between old and new theologies' (Lonsdale 1999: 213). Cunningham (2018: 200-202) shows that by seizing upon the new material culture of the church – the stone houses, hygiene practices, and singing – what marked converts' motivations was a desire for distinction and status typical of existing Kikuyu practices of risky migration.

Church of Scotland Mission, the numbers of Kikuyu arriving at mission stations shot-up in moments of economic upheaval, particularly after the Second World War when '[m]ission schools continued to function as refuges and safe-havens but, offering training in the new techniques of reading and writing, they were now also seized upon as portals of personal, economic, and social opportunity in an ever more bleak, brutal and racially divided colony' (ibid.: 212).

At the eve of independence, figures such as former soldiers, along with Christian 'readers' (athomi) who had benefited from European education and employment, had become new exemplars of wealth and success in their home areas. As Daniel Branch (2009) has argued, it was these educated, conservative Christian converts who were victorious at independence, rather than the *Mau Mau* whose politics of land distribution was pushed off the agenda. The conservative labour ethic prevailed too. Kikuyu gauged the power of education to make them socially mobile. 'Today there is no other way for fetching wealth but that alone of letters', wrote Wathiomo Mukinyu, a man from Nyeri in 1948 – exhorting the importance of education as a means to livelihood in the pages of the Catholic newspaper (Cavicchi 1977: 95).

Early Christian converts were in some sense outcasts as well as forerunners, notable for their cleanliness and their monogamy.³⁴ But when it comes to the 'domestic ethic' of maintaining a household and seeking moral personhood in kinship, the continuities of thought are starker than the ruptures. Muoria's words evoke an earthy domestic ethic rather than Christian dogma: 'Everyone knows that he sweats now so that misery will not face him later. He looks forward to helping himself and his people. That is to say his wife, children, father or mother, or even his kin' (2009 [1945]: 141). His words speak to the sharpening of that ethic in the face of material want rather than a process of Christianisation outright. As Lonsdale has written, the established churches in Kenya iterated the values of a Kikuyu elite that 'preached salvation [...] but encouraged improvement, including the stone houses that symbolized progress' (Lonsdale 1992: 442). Anglican and Presbyterian churches were 'worldly in belief and practice, conventionally Kikuyu in its estimate of wealth' (ibid.). Christianity did not substantially alter old debates about the morality of wealth and the delinquency of poverty, but gave them a new language of moral expression, as Muoria's Anglican conservatism suggests (ibid.: 444). In contemporary central Kenya, Kikuyu continue to insist on the normativity of kinship in terms of remembrance and continuity – that families constitute genealogical lines projecting the self towards the future through existence in

³⁴ The decline of polygamy is accounted for by changing material circumstances as well as Christianisation. Kershaw (1997: 78) notes that polygamy was difficult to achieve even in the late 19th century. Rising bride-price throughout the colonial period likely made polygamy an aspiration rather than a reality (Lonsdale 1992: 358). Kimani explained to me that his father Gatheo, born in 1903 and who had married three wives (though in succession after their deaths rather than at the same time), advised him not to take a second wife if he could not provide for her as well as his first.

others (Shipton 2007). Exploring a contemporary, ethnographic iteration of such a domestic ethic, can further illuminate this point.

A birthday in the neighbourhood

By November 2017, I had been conducting fieldwork in Mashambani for around 10 months. The dry season in which I had arrived had given way to the rains and the following cold season. In the cold and wet conditions, Catherine had fallen ill with what was then suspected to be tuberculosis. Mwaura and his sister Njoki were caring for her, though concerns were growing about the bouts of coughing that periodically overcame her. Mwaura, now mostly based in Machakos where he attended university, had also suffered a chest infection and the general economic status of the family was low. It was a time of economic malaise and misfortune in Mashambani and Kenya more broadly. The excitement and free circulation of cash that had defined the election period over July and August had been replaced by frugality, and an absence of giving politicians from the wider area. Visits to neighbours' houses had become less frequent. Residents remained indoors.

At the end of the month, Mwaura and I were invited to a birthday party for the granddaughter of a neighbourhood friend known as Ndovu. An *mzee* in his late 60s, Ndovu was one of the elders of Mashambani with whom I had struck up a friendship through a series of interviews I had conducted with him on the history of the area, his knowledge of Kikuyu customs and traditions related to the land, and his political opinions. Mwaura and I had been interviewing Ndovu together sporadically, usually in the yard of his house where he tended to his cow and chopped wood, surrounded by chickens. His life as a cook at the University of Nairobi in the 1970s had fascinated me, not least since he had witnessed the early careers of contemporary politicians during their first forays into student politics. Ndovu was now retired. He and his wife looked after the children of their children, who had taken work in Banana. Like most older men in Mashambani, he drank alcohol, sometimes to excess. But he was not judged for this as young man could be. Ndovu had apparently earned his right to drink in his old age, through his hard work over the course of his life establishing a prosperous household.

Owing to Catherine's illness, Mwaura and I decided to go to the birthday 'bash' together. The birthday party was an informal but largely restrained family affair, though I noticed that the birthday girl's father was drinking tots from a large bottle of *Kenya Cane* – a strong and popular spirit in the region known colloquially as 'KC'. Eventually I was offered some KC myself and began drinking as I sat alongside Ndovu. Gospel music was played from the television, and family

members sang along. Eventually, silence fell as the cake was presented to the granddaughter. Prayers were then ‘added’, and Ndovu's wife began:

Lord, the day which this child was born our God, we were happy for her our God, and we said we have got a child Lord. And now the footsteps she has reached our God [Na rīu ona makinya marīa akinyīte], we will guide her our God as she goes. Continue to bless her again and again merciful Lord [Na ūthīr ūkīmūrathimaga o rīngī na rīngī Muthamaki ūrī tha]

Ndovu’s wife prayed in Gikūyū in what was by then a familiar style – a growing list of prayers to God that gradually gathered pace. Household prayers of this sort were common in Mashambani, characteristic of the ambient Christianity that pervades contemporary Kenya (Gez 2018).³⁵ Prayers are regularly used to ask for protection and success in terms of ‘blessings’ (irathimo) from God. It is God's capacity to ‘bless’ (gūthima) that marks his operative role in family life, paving the way for success in exams, and the flourishing of a family's future generations. At our closest Anglican church, the ‘theme for the year 2018’ printed upon a large banner draped at the front of the church was drawn from Deuteronomy 7:13:

He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers, he will bless the fruit of your womb, the crop of your land....

(Nawe niagakwenda na akūrathime na atūme wongerereke, o naruo rūciaro rūa mūthimo waku niakarūrathima ona maciario ma mūgūnda waku...)

In a Kikuyu language gospel song that was incredibly popular during my fieldwork, God himself was objectified as ‘the one who blesses’ (Ngai mūrathimi).³⁶ Not only would I hear this song regularly on public transportation, in shops and playing on the radio throughout the neighbourhood, but occasionally interlocutors might sing it themselves. But it should be noted that these blessings are rarely seen to operate independently from the work put in by those who

³⁵ Yonatan Gez’s (2018) thesis is an important contribution to anthropological literature on Christianity, emphasising mobility between churches and overlapping styles in the religious landscape rather than a focus on specific denominations.

³⁶ Aspirations to wealth expressed in terms of blessings have a much older history in Kikuyu cosmology wherein God (Ngai) along with other spiritual forces (for instance, the ancestors) would intervene in social life to reward moral behaviour and punish wrongdoing (Kershaw 1997: 15). ‘Spiritual blessings were expressed in land, fertile wives, a long life, wealth and authority’ (ibid.).

are blessed. A common rejoinder in central Kenya is that ‘God helps the one who helps her or himself’ (Ngai ateithagia witeithitie). One cannot merely pray for wealth (compare van Wyk 2015; Haynes 2012). Prosperity is generally seen to come from the combination of work and God’s support.

Ndovu’s wife’s voice faltered as it sped up, adding request upon request.

Moreover Lord, give her the gift of education [kiheo gĩa githomo] God, our father, the place where our God we’ll see her success [ũhotani wake] our God, we’ll be continuously happy Lord [...] Moreover Lord even that other Njoki because it’s the time she’s doing exams. Our Lord and Father, and her, show her Lord because the truth is we want her success. It comes from you Lord. Do her good our God and bless her so that, our God, she finishes all these things. God, you’re indeed the one who will show her results holy God [Mwike wega Ngai ithe witũ, na ũmũrathime, na nĩgetha Ngai ithe witũ, arikiã gwĩka mau mothe. Ngai, wee nĩwe ũkamuonia maumĩrĩra make Awa mũthingu].

Before his wife had begun her prayer, Ndovu had been sitting next to me lecturing me vociferously on the importance of having a family. I suspected he might have had a bit too much to drink, but I went along with it anyway, listening as best as I could amidst the gospel songs being played from the television at high volume. ‘*Huyu bila watoto analost!*’ (The one without children is lost), Ndovu told me. I had taken the opportunity to ask him about what he thought of younger Kikuyu men who drank heavily and to be quite honest I had hoped to provoke a reaction along the lines that I received. ‘They are lost!’, he practically shouted. ‘*Lazĩma ukuwe na watoto*’ (It’s a must you have children). He talked of his own children as his fruits (*matunda yangũ*) but he never quite got beyond the central point.

Home-based kinship rituals like birthday parties are precisely the sort of moments in which one can observe the domestic ethic of wealth-in-people expressed alongside notions of progress, social mobility. God’s help in facilitating the flourishing of future generations is sought, but at the heart of this request is what Meyer Fortes (1967 [1949]) called kinship’s ‘moral bond’, a vital relationship at the heart of the family. It is that moral bond turned into a powerful moral value with which this thesis is concerned. Ndovu and his wife’s words were emblematic of the ideas I found circulating in central Kenya – about the importance of familial continuity through which one’s life was projected into the future via one’s children. I continue this discussion by exploring parenthood as a facet of patriarchal obligation more thoroughly in Chapter 3.

Whilst social continuity in kinship was a life path that my host family, their neighbours and middle-class Kikuyu from the broader peri-urban milieu, emphasised a great deal, it was and is not always lived out. These pathways were contested in the mid-20th century just as they are now. Central to Muoria's moralising message in the 1940s was a contrast between those who valued kinship and those who appeared to neglect their obligations. Like Kikuyu proverbs and vocabulary that condemned the lazy, Muoria scorned those that turned away from the family.

Some people without compassion [[tha](#)] fail to help their wives, children, parents or even their kin. Such a person has become repulsive, with awful behaviour, to the point of lacking compassion. His mind is close to that of wild animals (2009 [1945]: 143).

What Muoria's words draw our attention to are such divergent and shifting moral orientations in relation to a changing economy. Just as Muoria contrasted the good with the bad, as we shall see, contemporary households narrativise the morality of social reproduction against the backdrop of practices of consumption that appear deeply problematic from the former perspective. Consumption of alcohol appeared as one of the most egregious examples of the conversion of cash into transient experiences of inebriation at the expense of the family. In Kiambu, social reproduction finds its opposite in wealth destruction.

But from the perspective of those at the bottom of the socio-economic rung – far removed from rural families pursuing continuity – modes of rapid accumulation 'make sense', as it were, given the lengthiness of the aforementioned journeys of life-long economising for familial longevity.

Peri-urban Kiambu is famous in Kenya for criminality, particularly organised crime. It was in the mid-2000s that John Michuki, as Minister for Internal Security and Provincial Administration, had led the government's clamp down on the Mungiki gang in Kiambu County and elsewhere in central Kenya.³⁷ In the early-mid 2000s Banana Hill was one the gang's main headquarters. By the mid-2000s Mungiki had become a powerful entity in central Kenya, recruiting thousands of impoverished youths to its ranks. Michuki had vowed to 'pulverise' the organisation (Branch 2011: 268). A former Provincial Administrator in the colonial period, Michuki had 'learned

³⁷ There are divergent opinions in the scholarship as to whether Mungiki constituted a neo-traditionalist movement attempting to re-capture the anti-state legacy of *Mau Mau* (Smith 2008), a youth movement (Rasmussen 2010), or simply a sophisticated criminal organisation (Anderson 2002).

[his] political skills in the disorder of the past' and his notorious 'shoot to kill' order issued to the police led to the deaths of around 500 young men, almost all Kikuyu from low-income, low-status backgrounds, in 2007 (Branch 2011: 268-9; *Daily Nation* 2007, April 21). Though the demise of the gang was celebrated by those who had tired of Mungiki's widespread extortion of businesses (most notably the transport industry), Michuki's memorial park is a reminder of a post-independence government's tendency to reckon with centrifugal forces through sporadic episodes of violence (Atieno Odhiambo 1987), and of the limited opportunities for young men in central Kenya.

Chapter 4 explores the ideas behind crime that point to a type of 'short-circuiting' of the logic of long-term, gradual economising and accumulating. I introduce a group of young men from Banana Town whom I came to know and, although they had refrained from joining Mungiki, most had engaged in petty criminality at some point in their lives and some had spent time in prison. Today, they hustle and idle like many of their age-mates. In general, the temporality of their lives is defined by 'living for today' – 'these guys, they don't want to think about tomorrow', one claimed. In other words, the accumulation of sufficient amounts of cash to spend in the short-term. Their low wages barely seem enough to save, and they engage in the culture of drinking that has emerged over recent decades in central Kenya, one that is fuelled by the availability of cheap alcohol. These men are judged, and judge themselves against the middle-class labour ethic that brands them as failures, though, equally even in consumption there are fleeting experiences and states of being to be realised – even that of imagining one is (temporarily) rich enough to spend cash as if it were in abundance.

At the same time, and as I go on to explore in the final chapter, Kiambu has gained its reputation to Kikuyu and Kenyans residing elsewhere as a county of proletarian and 'money-minded' people. 'Wirũ wendaga mbĩa hiũ', goes one piece of proverbial wisdom given to migrants approaching Nairobi, a piece of wisdom that speaks to perceptions of scarcity that warrant speed and qualities of 'street smarts' (*ujanja*) that are said to characterise the apparently deceitful nature of Kiambu residents and their business practices: the desert needs quick rats.

'Kiambu women' are frequent targets for these discourses, described variously as 'deadly' or self-interested, 'men in Kiambu fear women' according to such perspectives because their 'eyes have been licked by a cat' (andũ acone maitho nĩ mbaka), a proverbial piece of street wisdom to meant that 'they can see far'. Women are frequently described as money-minded. 'It's a bad spirit in them', one of my interlocutors from the adjacent county of Murang'a put it to me:

They've killed so many husbands. They've lost their humanity. They value people according to what they have. It's everywhere but it's not so much [as in Kiambu]. If the money's

finished they want to divorce you. Who does that? They've lost their values. Because of too much exposure. At the age of 12 you can know everything.

Moralising perspectives on Kiambu residents from within and beyond county borders allow us to more clearly observe the way such 'street smarts' are coded from the perspective of those who see themselves as holding true to the proper moral values: not only that self-interested people consume themselves, destroying their lives via addiction to substance, but that they consume others, and therein lies their threat – that they will consume not only value, but spread improper moral orientations. Conservative rural households pursuing social reproduction narrate their fears of a destructive individualism, one that is either irresponsibly consuming, or worse, deliberately predatory.

Conclusion

This has been a broadly contextual chapter, one bringing together two important strands of argumentation: on the one hand the socio-economic and landholding changes brought about in Kiambu as a place of settler colonial agriculture, and on the other, the moral debate spawned by changing material circumstances. This chapter has given only a brief glimpse at this debate, to be explored throughout the thesis, but gives a sense of its stakes: scarcity, and the promise of social continuity.

The point to be made here, and more ethnographically throughout the thesis, is that practices of accumulation and consumption have moral consequences for the status of persons in question. Economic practices, viewed in moral terms, pave the way for a landscape of divergent livelihood strategies that accrue or lose virtue in the eyes of social others. Measurements of evaluation remain hegemonic: the middle-class labour ethic (centred around domestic life). But we can also explore its opposite: consumption and, indeed, over-consumption that – from the middle-class perspective – appears to threaten normative pathways of accomplishment by destroying wealth, consuming cash rather than investing it in the future. The morals we explore in the subsequent chapters – the value of the family and its social reproduction – may not be in any way unique to Kenya. But moral norms and values have consequences for those who cannot or do not live up to them, or even those who do, realising there are alternative pathways. For in the moral landscape even the virtuous glimpse the paths not taken, knowing there is an otherwise.

Civility and the politics of obligation –
 an introduction to neighbourhood life

It was as a member of Catherine’s household that I began my fieldwork in January 2017, and it was through her and Mwaura that I came to know the immediate context of Mashambani. By the same token, neighbours came to know me through my membership in their household. I gradually came to be recognised as ‘wa Kimani’, a member of Paul Kimani’s family, less of a guest (mūgeni) than his fictive kinsman. Through Catherine and Mwaura’s invitations to join them on their trips around the neighbourhood, most evenings in the early months of my fieldwork were spent in other people’s houses, my ears slowly attuning to the rattling pace of the Gĩkũyũ language.³⁸ Copious amounts of hot milk tea (cai) and fermented porridge (ũcũrũ) were drunk from tin mugs (Mashambani is a cold place, practically 1800 metres above sea level), and numerous conversations were had about 2017’s impending national elections – an ever-ready topic of discussion.

This was a period of participation in mundane everyday life. I hung around in the households of my neighbours in the evenings, watching Bollywood soaps that had been dubbed into Gĩkũyũ on television whilst chatting about work and family matters. Eventually, I joined a local youth football team. I spent an enormous amount of time with Mwaura (the two of us were practically inseparable), and we bonded over a mutual love of football which we would often disappear from home to watch at the local ‘motel’ where older men would go to eat grilled goat meat (*nyama choma*) and talk politics. I carried out household chores alongside him for Catherine - from digging up potatoes at harvest to cutting up firewood. I visited Banana Town and made

³⁸ It is likely that Catherine was ‘showing’ this visitor to her friends (see Introduction), though I think Catherine also felt somewhat obliged to introduce me to the neighbourhood knowing that I was there for research.

friends with mechanics and unemployed youth (Chapter 4). It was during these early months that I came to know the immediate neighbourhood and its residents. And alongside this I spent time commuting into Nairobi to work on my language skills with my teachers.

Some of my first forays into the wider neighbourhood took place alongside Mwaura as we went house-to-house collecting peels to cook in the *jikoni* (an outhouse for cooking) and feed to the family's pigs – a typical household chore. On Saturday or Sunday mornings, before Premier League games had kicked-off (barely anything else punctuated the boredom of peri-urban life from Mwaura's perspective), we perambulated the immediate neighbourhood gradually filling up our buckets with vegetable waste left outside other houses in the neighbourhood – carrot and potato peels, avocado skins – all while greeting old men and women vendors on the road, and stopping at neighbours' houses to chat. It was through these trips into the backyards of neighbouring houses that I first came to know the homestead-centric geography of Mashambani – the fences and walls that separated each homestead. Mashambani was a neighbourhood of homesteads rather than an open village.

If fences and hedges separated individual plots, then between female friends from certain families there was an enormous amount of coming and going. I could not help noticing in those early months both the absence of men (especially middle-aged men during the working week), and the prevalence of a style of matri-focal sociality (compare Neumark 2017: 750). Mashambani is a 'localised patriline' (Moore 1986: 213) a dense patchwork of individual plots that have generally been inherited by consanguineally related men who can usually trace their descent to a common 'ancestor' or neighbouring ancestors. In this neighbourhood, women marry into households as outsiders, and yet it is most often through these women that neighbourhood social life is mediated. Men can appear rather absent from the social relationships between their neighbouring households. In the week this plays out via male absence at work, during the weekend men continue to spend time away from the homestead, often frequenting local bars. It was a rarity to find men visiting each other's houses as often as women did. Women from neighbouring households frequently assisted each other with household work – with cooking for guests, but also cleaning and gardening.

Such incidents of women spending time together, watching soaps on the television, cooking and talking were characteristic of every weekend of my fieldwork, if not every other day. These were such ordinary occurrences that practically no single occasion stands out in my fieldnotes. They are typical of a social context in which contingent friendship plays an important role in everyday life – more so than formal kin relations. Male residents of Mashambani who have inherited land there are rather more formally connected to their patri-lineal families, since they will

discuss together matters to do with the care of their parents if they are elderly, and so too matters to do with inheritance and land management if their holdings have not been sub-divided. But in general, although ostensibly a 'localised patriline', social relationships in Mashambani are rather more fluid, evoking friendship rather than kinship in formal terms, neighbourhood rather than patri-line (Abrahams 1965: 172-3; Vaughan 1983: 282-3). Catherine's best friendships in Mashambani were with women who were not directly related to her husband.

In time, however, I found that these social relationships were not the ones of unbridled mutual assistance I first took them to be. This chapter describes events in the course of everyday life that revealed underlying conflicts hidden by such surface appearances, conflicts brought about by processes of social stratification taking place in the shadow of Nairobi. It focuses on the changing dynamics of a friendship between Catherine and her best friend Mama Nyambura as a way of exploring the effects of this process of stratification on neighbourhood life, how social relations in Mashambani have been shaped by proximity to the city and access to wealth from outside of the neighbourhood.

Exploring this friendship, amongst others in Mashambani, reveals what I call the moral politics of obligation - arguments about what wealthy families and persons owe poorer ones, and what poorer ones can reasonably expect from the wealthy. Families that have been able to generate wealth from beyond the immediate neighbourhood context seek to control exchange relationships through careful distancing, though never breaking them entirely. In short, they seek to protect the wealth they have from the requests for assistance made by others. The responsibility to give is moderated by a labour ethic – the idea that one ought to generate one's own wealth from beyond the neighbourhood in the pursuit of familial continuity. Meanwhile, poorer families attempt to keep relationships with wealthier families open, anticipating future material support, by practicing 'civility' (Whyte and Siu 2015: 28), a mode of sociality that emphasises equality and achievement, whilst concealing material need.

These observations pave the way for the discussion of father figures who must generate such cash from 'off-farm income' (Kitching 1980: 3) in the chapter to come (Chapter 3), the two working together to give 'both sides' of the gendered ways of generating wealth oriented towards familial continuity. Crucially, this chapter discusses the moral orientation of families towards their own fortunes. Arguments about the limits of dependence revealed the varied experiences of different families trying to belong to the future through their own particular aspirational projects.

Catherine and Mama Nyambura – a friendship

Catherine and Mama Nyambura were best friends.

In the early days of my fieldwork hardly a few days went by without the latter visiting the homestead, either on her way to where she worked at a kiosk in nearby Ruaka Town or on her way home in the evenings. If she found Catherine at home, they would inevitably end up gossiping in exaggerated tones of astonishment and mirth about local affairs, laughing raucously, for instance, as they did when impersonating the ‘bad children’ (*watoto wabaya*) of the neighbourhood who played amongst the hedgerows of Mashambani’s backstreets and regularly demanded bread from passers-by (*‘Nataka mkate! Nataka mkate!’*). It was just one example of their regular criticism of the negligent parenting they observed amongst their neighbours.

Both Catherine and Mama Nyambura could laugh at others in the knowledge that their families were ‘progressing’ (*gũthĩ na mbere*, lit. ‘going ahead’), though not exactly in the same terms. In 2018 Catherine’s daughter Njoki (17) was boarding at a fairly reputable secondary school in northern Kiambu County, whilst Mwaura was attending a public university in Kitui town in the Rift Valley. That Mwaura was attending university and Njoki secondary school was a matter of great pride for Catherine. After Njoki had returned to school following a mid-term break spent helping her mother at the homestead, Catherine proudly showed me the backpack that the school had given her daughter as a prize for her excellent grades. Catherine also recalled Mwaura’s days at school when the teachers had identified his academic capability - ‘*Mwalimu alijua* [The teacher knew] he is clever!’.

The feeling of pride Catherine took in her children's achievements were matched by her anxiety over the finances involved. *‘Ngai, Peter, it's expensive. When they are finished [with school], then I can relax.’* The cost of Mwaura's education became a major burden for the family throughout late 2017 and 2018. As we will see in the next chapter, Kimani’s long spells without work during this period meant that the family were starved of cash (Chapter 3). Putting money together for Mwaura’s education costs - which ran into the tens of thousands of shillings - was always a constant and difficult pursuit. Whilst I sometimes saw Mwaura’s university education as evidence of a family as aspiring to a type of middle-class status, I could not help but notice how it stretched their finances to the limit.³⁹ Neither was the burden of providing Mwaura’s school fees limited to Kimani. In April and May 2017, Catherine took work for local aspirant politicians vying in the elections to bring in extra cash for his and Njoki’s fees. She spent weekdays going door-to-

³⁹ Mwaura was a ‘self-sponsored’ student, meaning he received no government assistance for his education. He believed he would likely have been unsuccessful if he had applied.

door attempting to persuade people to vote for whichever aspirant figure she was working for at that particular moment. Aside from the campaign wages, Catherine also found cash for household items through her participation in rotating credit groups, dubbed *kĩama* (sing., *ciama* pl), something Catherine was only able to do because of my arrival and the nominal cash that I paid every month to ‘rent’ Mwaura’s *keja* at the family homestead. Catherine was also in borrowing relationships with certain close friends, as I shall go on to discuss shortly.

Catherine often re-iterated her hopes for Mwaura to find work after graduation with ‘God’s help’. That Catherine invoked God’s assistance when describing these hopes to me belied their precarity. Joblessness amongst university graduates in Kenya is widespread, as is youth unemployment more generally. Such knowledge could not have escaped Catherine, who likely understood that even with university education Mwaura’s future would be highly contingent upon the relationships he could strike up with those in the position to offer him work, much as he had begun to do in the Rift Valley with a government office running municipal waste disposal. Family jokes about Mwaura having the brains to become the local Member of County Assembly⁴⁰ did little to conceal widespread knowledge about the very real challenges that would await him after graduation. Mwaura himself anticipated that his driving licence might prove more useful than his bachelors, and he anticipated a life driving pick-up trucks, transporting produce for local farmers more readily than office work in Nairobi, the preserve of those ‘who know someone’.

Mama Nyambura, on the other hand, embodied a greater degree of economic stability, status and capacity to aspire than was possible for Catherine. By the time I arrived in Mashambani in 2017, her eldest daughter Nyambura (24) had spent most of the past two years in China, where she worked teaching children at a nursery school (though as I note towards the end of this chapter, the nature of this work was usually left quite ambiguous by Nyambura, a sign that she did not want either me nor Mwaura to know much more about her experiences and life in China). Nonetheless, I came to understand that this was a job that allowed her to send some modest remittances back to her mother. Mama Nyambura also had her paid job working for a dairy company’s kiosk based in Ruaka Town, and rumour had it that she regularly appropriated canisters of milk that she would sell herself for a not insignificant 3,500 KES. With her younger daughter Shiko (18) attending college in Nairobi (at a rather more affordable cost than Mwaura’s at his university), Mama Nyambura had far fewer outgoings than Catherine’s household, and many more streams of income to boot.

But there is also another important contextual difference between Mama Nyambura and Catherine that I have not yet mentioned. Whilst Catherine married into the neighbourhood, Mama

⁴⁰ An elected official in Kenya’s devolved county governments.

Nyambura is the daughter of a neighbourhood notable, the late Gachohi. It is worth recounting the significance of this briefly, since it sheds light on the rather different economic fortunes experienced by neighbours as the partial product of events that took place in the previous generation.

Mama Nyambura had become pregnant with her eldest daughter Nyambura whilst a teenager but had ultimately never married. Mama Nyambura had raised both of her children as a single mother in her parents' home. As is now common practice in many parts of Kiambu and central Kenya more broadly, her father later encouraged her to build her own house on land held in his name (Chapter 5). Despite the aforementioned phenomena of dwindling plots in Kiambu County (Chapter 1), Gachohi was in a strong position to apportion land for his unmarried daughter. Having worked in his youth to find wages to support the education of his younger siblings, he claimed the lion's share of his father's land at the time of inheritance. Though his younger brothers were jealous, Gachohi's word had stood, and he ultimately sold a piece of his (now moderately large for Kiambu) *shamba* to generate money to spend on construction materials. Gachohi also made his money, and more specifically his nick-name (not to mention a certain degree of notoriety) through his business exploits: brewing and selling what today are referred to as 'illicit brews'.⁴¹ Gachohi had opened a 'club' (*kīrabu*) in Banana, where he sold what he had brewed, making him a small fortune, and he acquired four pick-up trucks that he used to transport crops and water locally. One of my neighbours once put it this way: 'When I was small, he was the richest guy I knew'. Meanwhile, families became anxious about the growing propensity of their men to ruin their health via alcoholism at bars like Gachohi's (I return to the theme of alcohol's socially destructive potentials in Chapter 3). Over time, these had been sold off, and Gachohi's family had hardly become wealthy by comparison to members of Nairobi's *nouveaux riches* who were now buying plots of land in Mashambani and elsewhere in peri-urban Kiambu for the construction of rather large two-storey homes with tiled roofing. Gachohi and his wife wa Ng'endo had lived in one-storey concrete buildings with corrugated iron rooves. They had been wealthy, but only in comparison to the rest of Mashambani's inheritors.

It was on the basis of inherited wealth that Mama Nyambura had been able to invest in the construction of a stone house, and in 2018 she had also built a small row of one-storey concrete apartments that she intended to let out. As I noted in Chapter 1, the changing landscape of southern Kiambu (from *shambas* to high-rise apartments) is the product of the desire many have to become rentiers, an 'easier' (*raithi*) mode of work than farming and a way of generating

⁴¹ Gachohi is derived from *njohi*, meaning 'alcohol' or more typically 'beer'. The diminutive 'ga/ka' prefix implies an altered, corrupted version of the real thing – precisely what Gachohi was selling at his 'club'.

value from the land without selling it.

Mama Nyambura's one-floor stone house with tiled roofing stood in stark contrast to Catherine's wooden house, with its earth floor and *mabati* (corrugated iron sheeting) roof, as did her flat-screen television and leather sofas. 'I think this house is amazing', Mwaura once told me on one of our visits there. Catherine's house, meanwhile, was built on land that belonged to her sister-in-law. Kimani remained in the process of constructing a stone house on his plot nearby, though construction had been much delayed by money problems brought about by the elections and the need to prioritise Mwaura's university fees. During the rainy season, water would flow from the hill our house sits at the bottom of, sometimes flooding the floor. 'Our house is shit!', swore Mwaura on one of the occasions the house suddenly filled with water, jeopardising the electrics. On another occasion during the 2018 rainy season, I sat in the darkness of the house with Catherine and her daughter Njeri with the mud floor covered in puddles, the power out. 'God

will bless us', Catherine insisted. 'This year, we will be in that house *ya mawe*' (of stone).



Photograph 7: Mwaura drinking tea at Mama Nyambura's house, February 2017. Note that the poster on the wall depicts an image of a glorious mansion-like home. These are found in many houses in Mashambani, Kenya, and eastern Africa more broadly. Its slogan reads: 'Hard work is the mother of all success'.

The distinctions in dwelling laid bare the differing fortunes of the two friends but despite their different economic circumstances, Mama Nyambura and Catherine would regularly take turns assisting with household labour at each other's houses, often cooking together at weekends for each other's guests (*ageni*). As I have mentioned above, female friendships in Mashambani were characterised by such acts of material assistance – sharing household items and foodstuffs

(fermented porridge, for instance) but also via household-based labour (compare Shipton 2007: 111). These acts of assistance often took place during moments of dire need. Catherine fell badly ill in late 2017 and in 2018 with what doctors suspected was tuberculosis.⁴² Women from neighbouring households often volunteered their own labour at weekends to help Catherine cook and clean. With little in the way of amenities beyond perhaps a gas stove for cooking and water tanks, practically all household labour must happen by hand. The process of making meals can take hours. Throughout my fieldwork, Mama Nyambura would often arrive at the homestead early on a Saturday or Sunday with her younger daughter Shiko, who would dutifully peel potatoes whilst her mother chatted with Catherine. Shiko rarely seemed irked by having to give-up her Sunday, and as long as the music being played on Catherine's radio was more or less contemporary (*Ghetto Radio's* reggae music, for instance) then all was well. Nyambura often joined us too, and Mwaura and I would try to question her about her time living in China, often to little avail.

But then something happened that completely transformed my impression of this friendship, as it did the impressions of it held by the two friends themselves and their wider families.

One evening in mid-March 2017, after returning from a language class in Nairobi, Catherine and Mwaura relayed to me the news that Nyambura had suddenly returned to China the previous night. Mama Nyambura and Shiko had escorted Nyambura to the airport without any hint of a goodbye. Along with Catherine and Mwaura, I too was rather taken aback since I'd considered her one of my first friends in the area. Catherine was particularly bemused. 'I asked Mama Nyambura how is Nyambura, Peter has been texting her. She says, "Oh, Nyambura has returned to China. I said, "What!?"' In her usual style, Catherine finished her story with an invitation to 'Imagine!'. Mwaura filled in the blanks. 'They think we are jealous of them. They think we might try to stop her going back to China somehow'. Mwaura's implication – as I found out at a later stage in my fieldwork – was of the 'crazy' things people are said to do when animated by jealousy (*ũiru*). 'You're assuming that,' I told him. But he was certain. 'What else can it be?'. Catherine continued with her tone of surprise. 'Weh! Imagine!'. 'I thought they were like our best friends here,' I said, perplexed. 'Me too', said Mwaura. 'I thought they were cool with us.'

Catherine told me that what had likely brought this about was a perception held on the part of Mama Nyambura that because Mwaura had no job (at the time he was supremely bored, on a long holiday from university) they thought he would 'bother' them. 'Mwaura *hayuko kazi* [doesn't have a job]. They think he will bother them. Imagine!'. In fact, as Mwaura saw it, he had

⁴² Catherine's brother Isaac sent his daughter Wambui to live with her in early 2018 during her school holidays in order to provide a more consistent presence to help with such chores.

practically been promised a job by Nyambura at a car wash she ran in a nearby town but this had never materialised, leaving Mwaura disappointed. For Catherine, as Mama Nyambura's friend, it was a bigger surprise, one with a lesson.

I gave them everything, I told them this, this. Now I will keep my things close. Peter, keep your things close – *angalia mambo yako* (Fieldnotes March 25th, 2017).

According to Mwaura, this news meant that 'now we can't know what Mama Nyambura is thinking'. The suggestion of jealousy on the part of Catherine and Mwaura created a new sense of alterity between the families.

Socio-economic stratification and the politics of moral obligation

Nyambura's shock departure to China was one of my first experiences in my fieldwork of what Sally Falk Moore calls a 'diagnostic event', an occurrence 'that reveals ongoing contests and conflicts and competitions and the efforts to prevent, suppress, or repress these' (1987: 730) – an opportunity to find out 'what's really going on', as I would put in my own terms, and 'what people are saying about it' (ibid.). My initial impressions of a seamless friendship between Mama Nyambura and Catherine were shattered, and the tensions they had concealed brought into view. The socio-economic distinction between the two families – one embodied by their children's differing fortunes – was laid bare, the expectation of jealousy evoked.

Mama Nyambura's active distancing of herself from Catherine's household revealed tensions that arise in the course of everyday life in a context of social stratification – where some households are gauged as having become more successful than others, either due to accruing wealth from outside or from leveraging the rising value of their land via sale. In so far as Mama Nyambura's decision to actively distance herself was understood by Catherine as a reassertion of her economic *independence* – to avoid Mwaura becoming dependent on them, 'bothering them', as she put it - the episode also speaks to a wider tension in Mashambani, and across Kiambu's peri-urban milieu more broadly (Chapter 4), between dependence and a labour ethic.

On the one hand, proximity to the city and wider economic opportunity has allowed some households 'to go ahead' or 'progress' (*gũthĩ na mbere*) in material terms, building stone houses and educating their children. A concomitant labour ethic has emerged, stressing the extent to which 'work' (*kazi*, *wĩra*) is good, and can lead to success.

‘He who relies on relatives and friends die poor’. The slogan accompanied the line drawing of a rather sorry looking seated figure, his expression utterly bereft. Throughout my fieldwork, and long before it began, this image of destitution through dependence was displayed on the wall of my host’s house. Likewise, the positive valuation of ‘working for oneself’ or one’s own ‘progress’ and ‘growth’ abounds in central Kenya. I was reminded of such perspectives one day in 2017, travelling to the incredible Two Rivers shopping mall with Feye, the 26-year-old daughter of one of our neighbouring families. We took a *matatu* from Banana’s main thoroughfare, stopping in Ruaka where I spotted the rare sight of a female *makanga* ushering passengers into a *matatu*. ‘She must hustle for herself’, Feye said, praising her perseverance in a male-dominated line of work. Feye could contrast the morality of such labour with the idleness of her elder brother Ikinya, a man who had entered his early thirties in a state of alcoholism, always relying on his elder brother Gethi for cash, ‘my sweat’ (*thithino yakwa*), as Gethi himself put it, to support his drinking.



Photograph 8: Proverbial wisdom hung on the wall of Kimani’s house.

Others valorised their own conduct. Mwangi, a 26-year-old member of the football team I played for, Mwas for short, emphasised his desire to move out of his parents’ home from a young

age, unlike some of his teammates who were slightly younger at the ages of 19-23.

I think our parents are too good to us. They [his peers and younger men from the team] are just eating from their grandmothers. They do *jua cali* [work under the ‘fierce sun’, i.e. hustling in the informal economy] one day, then think they’ve got enough for the week, 20 shillings for mũgũũka. They think, “Now I’m good”. (Fieldnotes, 31st January 2018).

Mwas told me how he could not wait to leave home after leaving secondary school. ‘Because I’m like that’, he said, highlighting his ambition. In 2018 he was working for a company that grew flowers for sale, spraying them with pesticides. But he also had bigger ideas and had banded together with his friends to create a small table banking cooperative from which they could borrow at a low rate of interest.

These are examples of what I think of in rather loose terms as ‘a culture of aspiration’ in central Kenya, propped up by faith in a labour ethic – that economic struggle will take you to where you want to go. As a prominent political discourse adopted by Kenya’s governing Jubilee Party, it has an ideological role in the ‘responsibilization’ (Butler and Athanasiou 2013) of Kenyans, allowing the state to shirk its responsibilities for economic and social welfare, passing them on to citizens (cf. Dolan and Rajak 2018). President Uhuru Kenyatta has regularly praised youth and celebrated those who adopt an entrepreneurial spirit,

I am encouraged by the much larger number of our youth who are working hard, who are hustling, and who approach challenges as an opportunity to overcome. You are uplifting your families, your communities, and our nation (President, Republic of Kenya 2017, December 12).

‘Hustling’ as a concept dovetails with notions of entrepreneurial skill in Jubilee Party discourse, and critics of Uhuru Kenyatta regularly note that he has turned a notion of struggling in the informal economy into a moral undertaking, effacing government responsibilities to address unemployment and poverty (Njoya 2020, June 18).

If such sentiments can be found in political discourse, they are also widespread in Mashambani and peri-urban Kiambu County more broadly, evoking notions of self-reliance that are not so much the direct replication of mainstream political ideology but economic experience (Guyer 2004: 21) and the known uncertainty of relying on relatives unlikely to give if their own finances were stretched. Such a labour ethic also has a micro-political role at the level of everyday

life, allowing Kenyans to claim distinction by valorising their work, condemning those seen as prone to indolence.

The valorisation of labour and its use as a tool of discipline is nothing new in central Kenya. As we saw in the Introduction, a labour ethic has long been at the heart of moral thought and debate in central Kenya, emphasising the deserving nature of the wealthy, and vilifying the poor for their own predicament. In its fundamentals, the slogan on the wall of Kimani's house echoed proverbial wisdom passed down by centuries of toil on the forest frontier. 'The fear of toil keeps your house poor' (*Guoya ūtūragia ūkīa mūcī*) (Barra 1960: 12).

In contemporary Kenya, the 'wilderness' of the forest has been replaced with the vagaries of the informal economy or what Guyer's terms an economy of 'niches' (2004: 106). Job security is desperately lacking, but the perceived difficulty of 'making it', in terms of achieving a middle-class lifestyle, heightens the value of that struggling work itself. In Nairobi and its environs this labour ethic is a powerful idea, one that celebrates people who are seen to have 'hustled for themselves' (*kujibustle*) or 'planned for themselves' (*kujipanga*), notions that implicate personal effort and competence. The popularity of rags to riches stories that circulate in the Kenyan media is a case in point (*The Standard* 2018, August 1). From the perspective of the successful, their wealth is an index of their effort, masking any advantages they may have had in accumulating it. Gikūyū language gospel music celebrates 'the work of hands' (*wīra wa moko*) characteristic of the informal economy, but also scorns the 'grasshopper mentality' (*ūdahi*) of those who fail to pursue their dreams and 'success' (*ūhotani*).⁴³

Such ideas evince a competitive egalitarianism, rather similar to what Peter Geschiere (1997) described in his classic ethnography of the Cameroonian Grassfields as the 'ostentatious show of ambition and personal striving for supremacy' (ibid.: 82) – a desire for distinction and prestige that emerges from an initial assumption of equality. The homestead is significant here as a social entity, so too family-oriented aspirational projects for education and social mobility. Stone houses are the most visible forms of a family's success, signifying achievement in a particularistic way, and signalling the status of a nuclear family that has 'made it' to a middle-class standard of living.

Deborah James has discussed similar practices of 'status competition' (2015: 45) in the context of South Africa and the growing tendency towards debt-financing aspirations, in terms of purchasing cars and funding education for children. Her interlocutors note the tendency for

⁴³ These terms are taken from: Ruth Wamuyu's 'Ngai Murathimi' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmUWl9ZARi4>), Shiru wa GP and Betty Bayo's 'Udahi' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0m2js3SvFI>), and Loise Kim's 'Uhotani' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jO7Iwr_5Sfc) respectively.

families to emulate each other's' projects. As James notes, this may not be quite the same dynamic as jealousy, but 'something more like "keeping up with the Joneses" than striving to surpass them' (ibid.). But as she notes, negative feelings are never too far away, especially when one feels they are being left behind - the shame of failing where one's relatives and friends succeed.

In Mashambani, this is palpable amongst male siblings whose households have become separate after entering adulthood. It was rare for Paul Kimani to spend time with his brother Jim Murigi. Mwaura thought Jim was 'going ahead' more than his father, and I wondered if Kimani thought the same and felt jealous. Kimani was also said to be jealous of another local woman who had constructed a stone house. Consider here, the words of Mwaura:

[...] And then my dad! You see this house opposite our house, the big one there's another house there [...] That woman was, before she built that house my dad used to be her very good friend. Then after she built the house and she – my dad become – now he doesn't even talk to her anymore. He doesn't like... [PL: Is that coming from her or your Dad?] From my dad. She's very cool with us but my dad doesn't talk to her. [PL: Oh he feels bad cause?] Cause she's made it... He's very bitter against her and they've never done anything against us [...] He even says she's a prostitute, that the men who get along with her are the ones building the house for her. And man, it's not good. Because her children in China. One of her daughters is in China, the other is in Dubai. (Fieldnotes, 14th March, 2018).

Our conversation turned, and I ventured my own perspectives on competing with friends with whom I had studied undergraduate – how one could not help feel disappointed when comparing one's failures to others successes? 'Exactly', Mwaura told me, comparing one of his situations to that I had mentioned.

There's this friend of mine, I did better than him in high school. He used to be my very good friend, we used to waste a lot of time together. We used to hang out a lot. After high school – right now he's in US doing medicine and I'm in Kenya doing *nothing!* Man, you feel challenged. As much as he's my friend [...] [PL: He's in US?] Imagine! Maaan [...] (ibid.)

I want to stress, however, that such competitive envy is rather different from the disappointment of not having one's requests for assistance met by one's friends and kin. Whilst fixed forms of dependence are hard to come by in Mashambani, the idea that the wealthy ought

to distribute their wealth to less fortunate others persists, sometimes rousing strong feeling that those with means ought to share (compare Geschiere 2013: 94). The problem is, the successful are seen to be far from forthcoming. In Mashambani, Mike, the son of our neighbours (mentioned briefly in Chapter 1) and the brother of Feye complained to me that ‘people act differently when they are blessed with prosperity’. At the age of 24, he was looking to establish himself in economic terms – especially by improving his dwelling which was made of wood unlike his elder brother’s corrugated iron house. For most of my fieldwork, Mike made a living as a casual worker on local construction sites, earning 500 KES per day. But such work was irregular, and he frequently spent weeks without work, whittling down what he had saved, or borrowing money from friends. Mike saw his predicament as a ‘hard’ one. ‘It’s tough out there’, he once told me, elaborating his financial woes on the way to football training. Like Mwas, he contrasted his own struggling with his younger peers who still ate in their mothers’ houses.

Mike was also somewhat frustrated by his lack of opportunities in relation to the visible prosperity of others in the neighbourhood. He claimed that successful businessmen from the area would never offer him a job, always tending to look for people ‘they don’t know, from outside’. Mike claimed that successful people in the neighbourhood failed to acknowledge others like himself who had not experienced that success. In Gĩkũyũ, he called it mwĩtĩo, pride, a word that connotes haughtiness and a sense of distinction that precludes association with those deemed poor. His words echoed similar statements I had heard from unemployed youth in Banana Town that middle-class people ‘can’t help you’, that they actively chose not to, in other words (Chapter 4). Even the formulation of Mike’s statement speaks to the way those at the bottom of the rung see the wealthy – ‘*blessed* with prosperity’, that is to say a result of contingent luck rather than the product of personal effort. Claims for distribution effaced the personal effort that went into it, a claim that suggested what was freely gained ought to be freely shared. Again, such arguments have their precursors. Kikuyu proverbial wisdom states that, ‘ĩrĩ tha nĩ irĩ irĩa’, merciful people have milk. In short, the rich should help the poor (Barra 1960: 23).

Consider in this regard Mike’s friendship with Francis, another youth of the same age from a neighbouring Mashambani family. The two men played for the same football team and often walked to and from training in each other’s company. However, Francis was experiencing rather more economic success than Mike. By the time I met him in 2017, Francis had quite a prestigious job in comparison to other Mashambani residents, working for a bank at a shopping mall in Nairobi. The job had allowed Francis to generate some disposable income, and I sometimes bumped into him at other shopping malls in northern Nairobi where he took his girlfriend on dates. By 2019, he was married with a baby on the way, and Mike remarked, surprised how he had

fallen behind his friend and needed to catch-up.

But back in 2018, I noticed a degree of tension between the two men who were experiencing markedly different trajectories in their working lives. Mike told me privately that Francis ‘acted differently’ with him when he had money. It was not difficult to see the difference in means between Francis and his peers when one day at football training he had arrived from his job with a satellite TV decoder in his backpack which he planned to install in his house. Most of the players were surprised and excited by the prospect of having satellite television, but it was another clear sign of Francis’s relative success. By the same token, Francis was frequently chastised (in joking or sometimes scornful tones) by other team members for his inability to train frequently due to his job. He frequently arrived late to training, and his lack of fitness was always evident by how quickly he tired during practice games. Mike, by contrast, was fully committed to the team (and his regular joblessness meant that he rarely missed training in 2017), a workhorse of a player who was practically first on the team sheet. He was a lead figure in chastising Francis for his perceived lack of effort.

Mike and Francis’s rivalry was mild but marked the latter’s social distance – that he was someone who was on his way to ‘making it’. Francis was aware of what he saw as the capacity of his success to awaken jealousy in others if he was seen not to be sharing it appropriately. Speaking to Francis on the return trip from training in 2018, he remarked how he preferred to ‘live privately’ in Mashambani, staying at home rather than perambulating the neighbourhood as Mike often did when he lacked work. ‘I don’t tell people about myself, where I work, what I do. I lie to people. I lie a lot’. Francis evoked the requests for material assistance he anticipated from others, that he would become overburdened by constant requests for cash, but also the jealousy of his money that he saw in other people. He claimed that if he found even greater success, he would leave Mashambani instantly.

People don’t want to see you going ahead more than them. If my sister is doing well, and my mum praises her, starts to see her as more useful than me, that jealous feeling will start that maybe I can do something bad to my sister. (Fieldnotes, May 31st 2018).

Francis recognized that his success awakened jealousies – not only claims for distribution, but ill will from others who were not progressing as he did.

The moral politics of obligation

My first impressions of a neighbourhood defined by mutual assistance were called into question not only by Nyambura's unannounced departure to China but also by these murmurings of discontent by those who were at the bottom of the rung or in some way felt distant from the status of the wealthy or even economic opportunity to begin with. As we have seen, such divergent perspectives on obligation are nothing new in central Kenya but have taken on new valency in the shadow of Nairobi where wages are won, and hardly automatically distributed.

For an anthropologist, this is familiar territory, one of a politics of moral obligation and where its limits might be. Keir Martin's seminal ethnography of the Tolai people of Papua New Guinea explored very similar moralising debates taking place between 'Big Shots', an aspirant political elite, and their rural constituents. Whilst Big Shots denigrated their grassroots supporters for a culture of dependency, rural Tolai argued that Big Shots failed to meet their material obligations to distribute wealth properly and live up to the norms of *kastom*. Big Shots tried to delimit their obligations according to *kastom*, 'to fence in the relational person, which entails attempting to set boundaries around the social contexts in which claims upon his own person and autonomy can be made' (Martin 2007: 289). Meanwhile, Tolai attempted to keep the logic of 'reciprocal independence' as inclusive as possible.

For Africanist anthropologists such tensions between individual aspiration and material obligations famously reared their head with the widespread embedding of Pentecostal Christianity and its associated ideas in African Christianity from the 1980s onward. Birgit Meyer (1998) argued that Pentecostal Christianity encouraged urban Ghanains 'to make a complete break with the past', including their relatives. This was a particularly strong message for aspirant young men and women, as well as married women, stressing 'a new individualist ethics which matches their aspirations to achieve power and esteem' (ibid.: 320). Meyer observed 'its popularity among people who are involved in a struggle to close themselves off from kin' (ibid.: 336). '[W]hile the poor make claims for family assistance', Meyer wrote, 'the more affluent try to eschew obligations associated with the extended family and claim that in modern times one can only take care of one's immediate' (ibid.).

Meyer was careful not to associate this tendency too closely with Pentecostal Christianity, and this is important. Pentecostal Christianity was not in and of itself the ideological trigger for narrowing relations of obligation but complemented wider processes that were already stretching and fraying kinship ties, not least migration to the city and the relative access to wealth that brought. In other words, social stratification in Ghana was already turning 'kin into strangers', as

Pauline Peters has put it (2002). Associated with stratification was a labour ethic – the idea that wealth won in the city was one’s own and that on that basis, no one else had the right to lay claim to it. Anthropologists have shown in other contexts a similar distancing effect brought about by access to wages and the enclosure of household budgets. As Henrietta Moore (1986: 146-152) showed amongst the Marakwet of Kenya’s Rift Valley, women whose husbands had access to wages withdrew their labour from communally tilled fields. That they did not need to work became a sign of their distinction from other women. Tom Neumark’s (2017) recent work echoes these more sociological arguments, showing how even amongst low-income households in Nairobi, notions of ‘detachment’ prevail alongside social relationships defined by lending. Female-headed households wanted to avoid over-reliance on others, which would risk not only their reputations but also their social relationships by overburdening them with requests for assistance, in turn leading to quarrels.

We have then, I suggest, the basis to discuss a much wider tendency in Africa today, and in anthropology more generally, – a moral politics of obligation, one that debates and questions what its limits or breadths ought to be in contexts riven by socio-economic inequality due to the social effects of incomes drawn from elsewhere, such as from the city, for instance.

This is an important observation because it marks a departure from a tendency towards thinking about the working of material obligations in a rather ‘mechanistic’ or ‘functionalist’ sense, emphasising the mere existence of reciprocity as an African way of life in ostensibly bounded contexts. I have in mind here Parker Shipton’s famous work on ‘the nature of entrustment’ (2007) in western Kenya. Drawing on his fieldwork amongst primarily Luo interlocutors in a rural setting, Shipton describes an elaborate ‘fiduciary culture’ whereby loans and gifts flow relatively freely between persons. Shipton argues that it is this ‘flow of transfers’ that makes entrustment ‘more than outright gifts’ since Luo are obliged to ‘pass along’ favours that underpin social reproduction – paying for a family member’s school fees or a junior kinsman’s bride wealth costs if one has already benefited from similar acts of generosity (*ibid.*: 207). Shipton insists on the ‘asymmetry’ of debt relations – that loans in Luoland are not necessarily meant to be paid. In this regard, ‘entrustment’ appears as a ‘sharing’ economy of pure mutuality (Guyer 2004: 147; cf. Gudeman 2016: 58).

Alongside Shipton’s work is James Ferguson’s (2013) now classic essay on dependence in southern Africa which presents a bold attempt to turn African desires for employment into a paradigm for a new welfare state, recapturing a positively inflected paternalism for an era of mass unemployment (*ibid.*: 237-8) – the obligation of national governments to provide universal basic income in an era of ‘jobless growth’ (Li 2014). In a rather ventriloquist mode, Ferguson reflects

on the predicament of jobless youth seeking employment. ‘At every turn, the message sent by poor black South Africans [...] seemed to be: “Let me serve you! Be my boss! Exploit me!”’ (ibid.: 224). Again, there is a familiar relativistic bent to Ferguson’s argument. Ethnographic vignettes and historical episodes are played-off against the normative ‘emancipatory liberal mind’ (ibid.). In this respect, his argument comes to rest on a troubling objectification of an African relationality contrasted with Euro-American individualism. ‘Dependence on others’, writes Ferguson, ‘has often figured, in liberal thought, as the opposite of freedom’ (ibid.: 223). As H. J. Dawson and E. Fouksman (2020) have recently shown in the context of South Africa, such objectification of apparently non-modern modes of relationality conveniently ignores African claims to independence, and the denigration of the dependent and the so-called lazy.

In so far as Ferguson’s aim is a classic and deliberate instance of what Keith Hart (2015) once called ‘cultural critique’, the argument can hardly be challenged. The problem arises when the status of these arguments as theoretical products begins to blur with their representative claims, especially when their insights are viewed as somehow paradigmatic of social life in Africa and get ‘fed-back’ into ethnographic conversations as such, rather than treated carefully as the artefacts of critique that they are.

China Scherz (2014) and Naomi Haynes (2017), for instance, have developed Ferguson’s emphasis on dependence through ethnographic observation. Noting the aversion towards dependence amongst scholars in anthropology and development studies, Scherz and Haynes find in their respective ethnographies ways of viewing social relationships that span inequality as productive from the perspective of their interlocutors. Again, a mode of relativism provides the basis of their approach. Euro-American notions of dependence are to be dispelled through realising the positive valuation of modes of assistance across inequality. Scherz describes a Kiganda ‘ethics of interdependence’, according to which those with wealth are obliged to accumulate dependents. People without resources are seen to actively attach themselves to such patrons (2014: 1-2). In a similar style to Scherz, Haynes (2017: 41-3) takes up the Bemba verb of *ukumfwana* and its suggestion of mutual understanding, empathy and feeling, glossing it as ‘mutuality’ to describe how Zambians living in the Copperbelt region pursue aspirations through association with the wealthy, hoping to be offered work.

Vigdis Broch-Due and Margit Ystanes (2016: 15) have pointed out ‘how problematic it is to take folk theories about the family and kinship network, as entirely harmonious spheres of mutual support, as an unquestioned premise for explorations of trust, regardless of whether these theories are “Western”, Latin American or African in their origin’ (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016: 15). The general problem here is one of reification – of generating theories and models of exchange

and social relationality rather than exploring their internal politics and inequalities. As Susana Narotzky (2012) has warned, searching for such ‘alternative economies’ often comes at the cost of exoticisation, what Victor Li (2006) has described as a ‘neo-primitivism’ in anthropology. Li (*ibid.*: 181-2) recalls James Carrier’s (2003) observation that Mauss’ gift rests on a civilization-scale that contrasts Euro-American economic rationality with non-modern gift economies. Literature on dependence, mutuality and entrustment in Africa and beyond looks set to reinscribe this bifurcation.

But the problem with such work is not only one of reification (and associated orientalism), though it is that too, but also one of empirical dispute. One of the criticisms levelled at one of the more recognisable manifestations of this tendency to bifurcate trusting non-moderns with individualistic and interested Euro-Americans has precisely been Sahlins’ notion of a ‘mutuality of being’, which as others have observed (Englund 2015: S144-5), conveniently elides conflict and mistrust typical of kinship contexts defined by divergent and competing interests (see, e.g., Gluckman 1955; Turner 1957).⁴⁴ Rather than endemic or abstract ‘social conflict’, however, this chapter underscores the lived, moral effects of socio-economic stratification in central Kenya. We have already noted its history in Chapter 1. But its real-life consequences are illuminated here. Catherine and Mama Nyambura’s divergent fortunes are the product of historically contingent access to wealth gleaned from beyond the farm (in this generation, or the one prior) which have in turn shaped ideas about dependency and mutuality, their extents and limits.

Geschiere (1997) pointed toward similar debates taking place in the Cameroonian Grassfields. He showed how accusations of witchcraft coalesced around families that appeared to access vast wealth in mysterious ways, driving their families up the social ladder through the construction of stone houses and paying for their children’s university education (*ibid.*: 94-100). This provoked jealousy amongst their neighbour-kin, particularly if these wealthier families failed to practice some form of localized distribution – for instance, by offering jobs to the less well-off.

However, Geschiere also noted that forms of ‘sharing’ or ‘just redistribution’ were on the wane in the Grassfields because of precisely the same process of stratification that created larger and larger distances, physical and monetary, between kin and neighbours. Geschiere suggested such deepening inequalities and increasing social distance amongst neighbourhoods in the

⁴⁴ Rather than a field of harmonious social relationships, anthropologists of Africa as far back as Max Gluckman noted both ‘the extent to which close relatives cooperate with and depend on one another, and the extent to which they yet compete with one another’ (2014: 372). ‘He who kills me, who will it be but my kinsman?’, went a Barotse song Gluckman quoted in his Marret lecture on witchcraft accusations. Gluckman’s point was that in many rural African contexts, people are embedded in localised kin relations to a greater degree than in Europe, his point of comparison (*ibid.*; see also Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]; Geschiere 1997; Colson 2000; Desplat 2018; Wilson 1951).

Grassfields would contribute to growing social tensions that ‘can no longer be reconciled with any idea of ‘just redistribution’ (1997: 100). Redistribution was already no longer taking place, and no longer doing its work easing the tensions brought about by stratification (ibid.: 205). Geschiere’s account is a perfect example of how social conflict is provoked not merely by wealth itself, but by class closure – that wealthy households turn away from their obligations to poorer ones.

Like the Cameroon Grassfields, social stratification plays out in Mashambani as a feeling that some are ‘progressing’ (*gũthĩ na mbere*) at the expense of others and failing to distribute accordingly. Francis’s words hint at this, so does Mama Nyambura’s attempt to conceal her daughter’s departure. In the absence of distribution, envy has come to the fore as a prominent means of destroying the wealth of visibly successful people (cf. Foster 1972). Socially destructive acts are recorded in local memory. I was told of a man who had constructed a well on his land, only to find a donkey carcass had been thrown into it a few days later. It is difficult to see this as anything other than the product of envious comparison between self and other, as new forms of wealth create new types of inequality in the neighbourhood (Desplat 2018: S119, S122). I have described elsewhere the forms of ‘impatient accumulation’ practiced by those lowest down the socio-economic ladder, who seek to emulate the very wealthiest figures in their immediate contexts by appropriating the wealth of others via theft (Lockwood 2020, Chapter 4).

But envious accumulation and jealous destruction are not the only responses to localized, perceptible forms of socio-economic inequality. Women from the neighbourhood attempted to keep social relationships with wealthier families open by practicing what Susan Reynolds Whyte and Godfrey Etyang Siu (2015) call ‘civility’. Rather than a positively inflected ‘mutuality’, civility highlights the avoidance of conflict and the deliberate work of keeping social relationships open and positive in the anticipation of future material support. Whyte and Siu describe civility as ‘a kind of watchfulness for positive possibility’ (2018: 28), including the avoidance of conflict and ‘checking out people with potential resources’. Elizabeth Fox (2019: 35) calls this ‘anticipating relations’, a form of ‘speculative relation-making’. Their words remind us that friendships are pursued with certain aims in mind. Consider, for instance, the friendships between non-kin women that prevail in southern Malawi known as *chinjira* described by Megan Vaughan (1983). Vaughan shows how it is in this social distance – that such friendships are not kin-related – that trust flourishes. But Vaughan also notes that such relationships span distinct demographics of women – labour migrants are reliant on their husbands’ wages whereas village women have full access to their gardens. Labour migrants ‘use the relationship to help them complement their household resources and to escape some of the constraints of their economic circumstances’, Vaughan observes (ibid.: 283).

Aspiration and the atmosphere of civility

Amongst women in Mashambani, an atmosphere of ‘civility’ prevails defined by presence. Women show their availability to assist each other by being there for their neighbours, particularly in times of need. As I mentioned above, Catherine’s illness in late 2017 and 2018 saw various friends of hers from the neighbourhood come to her homestead and help her with daily household tasks. One of the contexts in which this style of sociality is most pronounced is at burials (mathiko), where women from households volunteer their labour and presence to assist with a variety of household tasks such as cooking food for the young men who dig the grave (kwenja irima) the day prior to the burial. Sons volunteer their labour as proxies for their fathers, often absent due to work and who tend to make an appearance on the day of burial itself with gifts of cash. Such gifts are usually recorded in exercise books that act as ledgers, collecting names and amounts of donations in order to create a budget to cover funeral and hospital expenses.⁴⁵

In one sense, burials instantiate a form of reciprocity that ‘expresses mutuality or empathy’ (Gudeman 2016: 58). The practice of caring labour in difficult times is often glossed in terms of ‘love’ (wendo), and the idea that people in Mashambani ‘help one another’ (gũteithania) on the basis of pure reciprocity. I could see this in 2019, when I travelled with Feye to her grandmother’s funeral in Kikuyu, a nearby town to the north-west of Nairobi. Catherine travelled with us, a deliberate intervention, seeking to offer comfort and solidarity to her young neighbour whose birthday happened to coincide with the day of preparation. Catherine’s characteristic teasing sense of humour brought some brief moments of cheer to Feye that day.

Such caring dispositions cannot be reduced to brute interest but I maintain that it makes sense to think about how in engaging in practices of care, people create the possibility that they will be cared for in turn at some point in the future (Borneman 2001: 43). Consider, for instance, the words of Jata, the 23-year-old daughter of a neighbouring family:

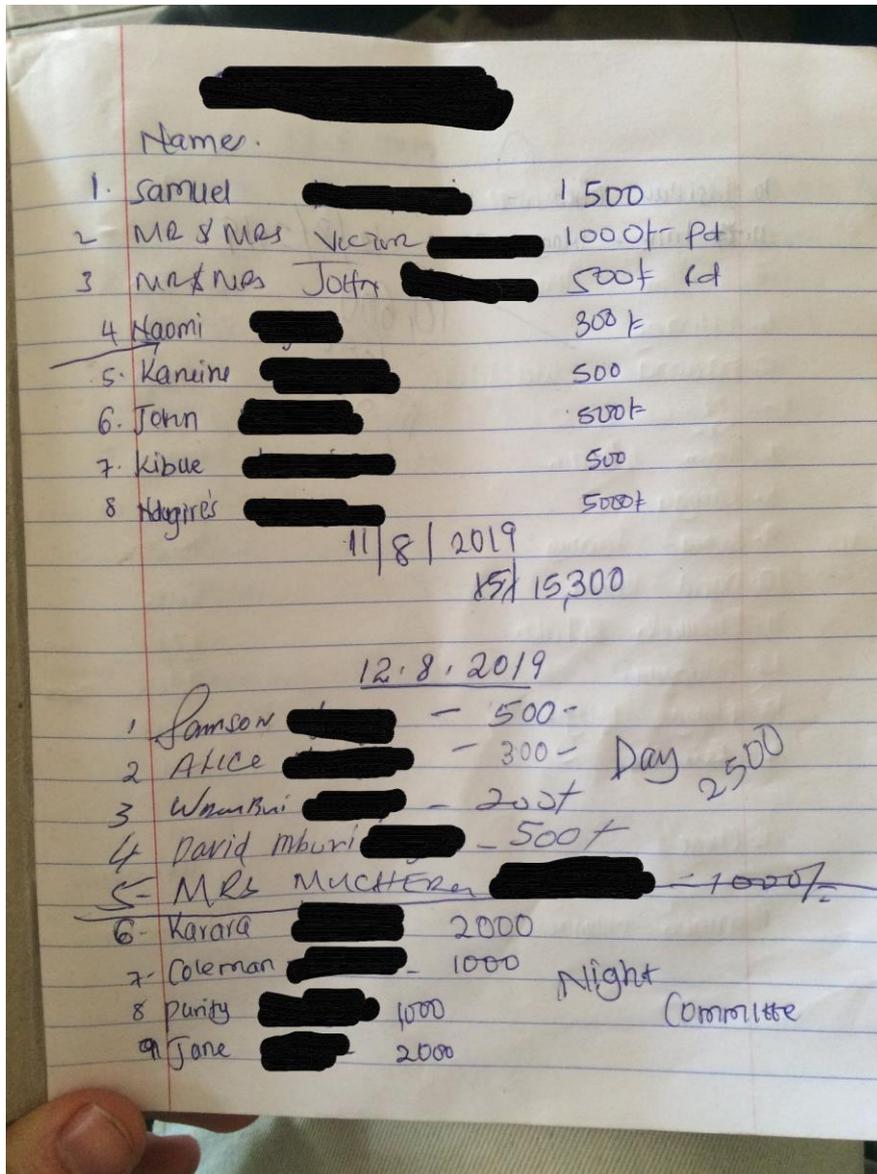
There’s so much love when someone is in need... people do really come together to lend a helping hand or for a good cause... or maybe this is because there’s an unsaid rules (if you don’t show up, go out to help financially or otherwise when there’s need, many people

⁴⁵ In the immediate post-independence period, Jomo Kenyatta objectified the spirit of such acts with the national slogan of ‘*harambee*’, meaning ‘pull together’ (Branch 2011: 26), evoking the forms of mutuality described in the aforementioned anthropological literature.

won't help you when you are in need) (Whatsapp message, 22nd March 2020).

Sending young family members to dig the grave, for instance, ensures that the same neighbourhood labour can be called upon at one's own ceremonies later down the line.

But crucially, burials also provide poorer Mashambani residents an avenue of association with wealthier neighbours. This is where civility comes into play.



Photograph 9: Feye's ledger from her grandmother's burial, recording the names of donors to cover hospital costs, August 2019.

As I have already discussed, with its homestead-based topography, Mashambani is a place where one observes what Jane Guyer calls a 'social gradient' (2004: 147) – not so much hard-and-

fast status-based or economic distinctions between persons, but a range of much finer, marginal distinctions between who is successful and who is not. Guyer is clear that this is not a model of sharing, but a ‘political economy of *recognition*’ (ibid., emphasis added), one experienced through comparisons between self and other. But as we have seen, problems arise when the wealthy are seen to disassociate themselves in order to avoid claims being made upon them by those with more limited means. This is precisely what Mama Nyambura did, and I suspect this is what Francis meant when he talked about his own distancing.

In Mashambani, people are all too aware of this gradient and speak of distinct ‘levels’ which people are at in terms of their success. But these levels are also seen as doing the type of ‘delimiting’ and distancing work that we have already observed. Consider again the words of Jata. We were discussing the notion that ‘proud’ people disassociate themselves, but she rejected the premise.

I wouldn’t say [disassociating from others is] proud because that’s what most people [i.e. those who ascribe pride to prosperous people who distance themselves from others] interpret from a change of behaviour. To prosper, someone has probably worked hard, had a plan and particular goals. But before that success, they were associating with people of the same level, maybe with the same aspirations. Prosperity means that goals and aspirations change which in most cases means a change of people we associate with, places we hang out, and what we make time for. People expect you to remain the same, but that’s not possible. This change, unavailability might be interpreted as pride but it’s just a change of priorities. (Fieldnotes, 21st August 2019).

Jata’s words speak to the possibilities of association through distinction and distinction through association – of a type of moral (rather than economic) stratification through actively portraying oneself publicly to be ‘on a level’ with wealthier people. As Richard Vokes has also observed in his own fieldsite in southwestern Uganda, ‘concerns over how to define the limits of exchange networks, and the practices that these concerns generate, are in fact socially productive’ (2013: 104). He shows how tight-knit gossip networks emerge amongst those who share perspectives on the neighbourhood’s ‘uninvited guests’ (ibid.: 103) who outstay their welcome by consuming too much of one’s own resources, whether in food or alcohol.



Photograph 10: Men digging the grave (*kwenja irima*) the day before Wachira's burial (see Chapter 3), February 2018.

Burials are precisely such events at which women from distinct backgrounds could participate and transcend these fine-grain distinctions, demonstrate their other-interestedness, and maintain the possibility of potential future support from neighbours who might not be 'on their level' in economic terms.

One of the ways in which women close the gap of socio-economic distance is through the visible performance of their own prosperity. At such events, Catherine, like practically all neighbourhood women, liked to dress in her finest clothes, to look 'smart'. The performance of respectability (Skeggs 1997; cf. Ystanes 2016) on the day of the burial itself, dressing up and partaking in the church service, dovetails with the practice of 'being there' for the mourning family on the day before, helping to organise the house and cook for the young men that dig the grave. But they also convey wealth and accomplishment as an achievement of particular persons and their families. In other words, poorer families perform their wealth and status to show that they *can* compete with wealthy families – that they do not require material assistance. In this regard, the atmosphere of civility engages a 'politics of pretense', to borrow Julie Soleil Archambault's (2018:

xx, 8) term, demonstrating that one's household is not going awry. Gifts of cash are essential to this performance of status – giving an amount that meets the financial expectations elicited by one's outward projection of economic success.

For poorer families then, sociality at burials and other neighbourhood rituals (prayer meetings, birthdays and so forth) constitute a means of making relationships whilst concealing the anticipation that these relationships will yield future material support. Female friends practice an anti-opacity, a particular type of trust that involves showing one's intentions are good and making oneself familiar to others as an independent and morally responsible person (Haas 2016; Hardin 1996; cf. Carey 2017: 6).

Establishing civility is often a prerequisite for developing deeper, longer-lasting lending relationships, especially across distinct socio-economic strata and ages. In 2017 and 2018, Catherine first began to form a strong friendship with Feye and her 27-year-old sister-in-law Mary. In time, Catherine, Mary, Feye, and their mother, Mama Gethi, formed a *kiama* – a name loosely applied to women's rotating credit groups or other business ventures pursued in groups – and purchased a tent that they planned to hire out for burials, weddings and other neighbourhood events. At the heart of the relationship between the two families was Catherine's friendship with the younger Feye. An unmarried daughter of a nearby neighbourhood, Catherine always joked with Feye about her boyfriends, playing an aunt-like role in the younger woman's life, advising her to be patient and discerning when it came to selecting a husband.

The prevailing atmosphere of civility in Mashambani allows women from distinct backgrounds to associate together through shared aesthetics and implicit and explicit valuation of independence and respectability alongside participation in such caring relationships. Participation in neighbourhood life along these lines widened Catherine's ability to diversify her income streams. Catherine was, I should mention, fairly popular and well-known in the neighbourhood. She had cultivated a friendly relationship with the local chief in anticipation of acquiring paid work conducting local administrative tasks.⁴⁶ Catherine already had a job as a community health worker for a hospital in Banana Town. 'I walk with big people', she once told me in a joking manner, all too aware of her family's constant economic struggle – that she frequently bought ingredients to make soap to sell to the local Anglican church for a couple of thousand KES to make ends meet.

⁴⁶ I have written elsewhere about her work for local politicians during the 2017 elections (Lockwood 2019).



Photograph 11: Feye and Catherine at the former’s grandmother’s house, the day before the burial, August 2019.

If such neighbourhood events afford less well-off families an opportunity to anticipate for future relationships, for wealthier ones it is an opportunity to make themselves available in order to avoid accusations of being ‘proud’ (*mwĩũũ*). Wealthy outsiders who have bought land in the neighbourhood and constructed impressive two-storey stone houses are accused of precisely such disinterest. Such social distancing, however, comes with its reputational dangers – that others will come to see one as someone who ‘does not join together with people’ (*ndanyitanagĩra na andũ*), just as Francis hinted at in his own hiding away from potential requests for assistance. Wealthier and poorer families are thus drawn into the mutual dance of civility, the former attempting to show face whilst not giving away too much, the latter attempting to demonstrate social interestedness and independence whilst trying not to make obvious their desires for long-term supportive social relationships.

The limits of civility

Civility could conceal socio-economic distinctions, but not inevitably nor permanently. Consider, for instance, the fate of Catherine's family in late 2017 and 2018 as flooding and illness blighted the family. Catherine and Mwaura both suffered from bad chest infections brought about by the shift to the rainy season, and the former experienced a prolonged illness. It was then that the house flooded, and Mwaura's impatience with his father Kimani's lack of income grew. As Catherine's health deteriorated, neighbours gossiped that she was suffering from HIV. All of this was confirmation that they were not on the same 'level' as families like Mama Nyambura's.

In the midst of these events, Catherine and Mwaura were forced to ask for money from Mama Nyambura. As I have mentioned, stumping up the cash to pay for Mwaura's school fees was an immense financial burden for the family. In 2018, Mwaura required around 50,000 KES to sit his university exams. Without them, he would not be able to graduate and find himself waiting a whole year to sit them again.

By this point, Mama Nyambura and Catherine had patched up their friendship. The precise circumstances were unknown to me, but when Nyambura eventually returned from China again in 2018, she spent time at Catherine's homestead with her mother as if nothing had ever happened, exchanging 'stories' and gossip from the neighbourhood as they did before. Nyambura went back to China again in 2018, and afterwards Catherine proudly showed me the photographs on her smartphone of her visiting the airport in their company. This time she had been included. Civility had been restored.

I paid half of the fees, and Mwaura tried to acquire the other half from Nyambura via a loan to be paid back once his father's work resumed. 30,000 KES was hardly an unsubstantial sum of money, and Nyambura was initially very reluctant to give Mwaura the cash. Eventually she was won around by his 'sincere story', as he put it, that without it he would not be able to graduate. But she insisted upon prompt repayment. Kimani's work resumed shortly afterwards, and Nyambura was repaid in a mere three weeks.

As Jane Guyer notes, 'shortages always throw categories of person into relief' (2004: 106). The pretence to middle-class status afforded by the engagement in the neighbourhood's wider social life was punctured by contingent misfortune. Catherine's family's hardship revealed to Nyambura their precarity and as such, they could barely be trusted to repay the loan. The relationship between the families became distant once more. Nyambura in particular made far fewer appearances at Catherine's homestead. Civility's assumption of equality could not encompass the enormity of Catherine's request.

In this sense, civility does not equate to entrustment, nor is it unbridled dependence or mutuality. Debt relationships retain a contingent character, the product of specific relationships defined by trust (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016). A generalised flow of gifts or a social logic of mutuality was hard to find in Mashambani. Stories of broken trust and debt relationships going awry were common.

Consider, for instance, that throughout the middle months of 2017, the weekends at Catherine's homestead were marked by the arrival of her sister Esther and her young daughter Wairimu from nearby Muchatha, a town where the two were living. Esther had recently separated from her husband and Mwaura suspected that she was visiting Catherine not merely to help the latter with household chores, but also since Catherine was better provisioned with food due to Kimani's *shamba* (garden). For her part, Catherine was happy to have her sister around. Mwaura, on the other hand, hated these visits from Esther. For him, Esther's presence was a borderline insult to his father who had gone into business with her now ex-husband, providing him with a hefty loan to build a school. The school was never constructed, and Esther's husband had disappeared, never repaying the money Kimani had helped him acquire, having secured the loan by using his own land as security. Left in the lurch, Kimani had been forced to repay the loan through his long-haul lorry driving.

The financial risk Kimani took underscores once more the work women do in the neighbourhood to make each other familiar, to establish trust and good will through civility. Catherine once glossed her friendship with Mama Nyambura as one of 'love' as we chatted one day after I had returned from Kitui where I had spent a few days visiting Mwaura and hanging out with his friends at his university. Speaking of Mwaura and one of his friends, Catherine praised the mutual assistance that defined their friendship – its true sign. 'They love each other. When Mwaura don't have, Onasmas helps him. When I have, you help me. When you don't have, I help you. *Sindiyo*, Peter?'. Catherine went on, 'Mama Nyambura, we help each other... *And she is rich!*'. There were other people, Catherine insisted, who would not help you when down. It recognized the mercy of Mama Nyambura, but also the precarity of the relationship. Catherine emphasized the power of affection to keep such relationships open but there was no reason to automatically expect the rich to help the poor.

Conclusion

In egalitarian societies, no one has the right to refuse. This was the observation made by James

Woodburn in his landmark work on the Hadza people of Tanzania, a group of hunter-gatherers. The ethnography presented here, illuminated by the work of Geschiere (1997) and Martin (2013) amongst others, directs us to consider the moral effects of socio-economic stratification - the contingent and divergent means through which kin-neighbours have accessed income from beyond their farms - on notions of distribution. In central Kenya, the earning of wages has spawned a labour ethic that draws on long-standing notions of economic success in central Kenya – that one’s success is the fruit of one’s own labours, that people rise and fall by their own efforts, that to be dependent is to be vulnerable to refusal, to have dependents runs the risk of becoming overburdened. From the labour ethic comes the desire for distance, if not the right to refuse outright. The feeling on the part of successful persons that they pursue their fortunes independently, even competitively, gives them cause to limit exchange relationships. Civility was a means through which poorer families maintained social relationships with the wealthy without overburdening them. This mode of sociality evinces a careful management of social relationships – the avoidance of wanting to break them completely, while knowing all along that the wealthy hold the cards.

If civility was characteristic of female friendships in Mashambani, that civility belied the true limits to what one could reasonably expect in terms of economic assistance from others. Such altruism was contingent rather than given (Seekings 2008, 2019). ‘There is an element of chance in relying on another person to help you. He may be transferred or turn indifferent’ (Whyte and Siu 2015: 22). In Mashambani refusal is not mere indifference, however, but a fear of having one’s wealth consumed by others at the expense of one’s own ‘progress’. Wealthy families cultivate distance from poorer ones by anticipating requests for assistance that might threaten their own economic fortunes. The poor are implicitly cast as greedy and irresponsible – as desperate consumers seeking dependence on the better-off. Catherine’s challenge was to avoid such categorisation through civility. For poorer families, outright ‘mutuality’ and ‘dependence’ are hard to come by. The logic of ‘he who relies on his relatives dies poor’ recognised the precarity of relying on others attuned to their own fortunes.

As we shall see in the next chapter, as I turn to look at the predicament of male breadwinners, self-reliance is a difficult material predicament as much as a discourse used to denigrate the poor. With assistance from neighbour-kin often unforthcoming, families rely on limited cash wages to pursue their aspirational projects. The generation of off-farm income, however, comes with its own moral dilemmas of masculine responsibility. Household success is seen to be the product of a man’s economic decisions, diligent hard work, and the rejection of selfish desire for comfort and consumption.

Responsibility for continuity –

Fatherhood and off-farm income

Paul Kimani, Mwaura's 55-year-old father, was only sporadically present for much of the nineteen months of fieldwork that I undertook in central Kenya between January 2017 and July 2018. But when he did turn up he always left an impression, even inadvertently as he had done one chilly night in September 2017. Earlier that evening Kimani had cut an exhausted figure, beset with worries and tired from driving, talking in his sleep much to Mwaura's alarm. 'E na stress, Mwaura', Catherine told her son, as he looked over in surprise at his father's nervous tones emanating from beyond the wooden wall that partitioned the house's living space from Kimani and Catherine's bedroom.

As usual, Kimani had returned home to sleep after travelling from the town of Namanga on the Tanzanian border. Kimani worked as a long-haul lorry driver, using his own lorry, which he had purchased through loans and savings from his previous employment as a pick-up driver. Since then he had used his lorry to transport cargo of goats (*mbuzi*) and stone (*mame*) to markets in Nairobi. Being tasked with actual work – with the short-term contracts to transport these goods – was an uncertain prospect for Kimani, and he could go weeks waiting at the border until suddenly a job transpired and he made enough cash in a few days to pay his debts left over from previous months. After ferrying goods to Nairobi, he would often return home to sleep, spend some brief time with his family and tend to his homestead. When at home Kimani could regularly be glimpsed

panga-in-hand⁴⁷ working on his *shamba* or tending to the hedges and fences that surrounded his plot.

As I noted in Chapter 1, Kimani's neighbourhood (*itũũra*) is emblematic of Kiambu's geography – a patchwork of smallholder farms that have shrunk with subdivision, interspersed with much larger tea plantations owned by businessmen and Kiambu's wealthy elites. Unlike some of his neighbours, Kimani's *shamba* (*mũgũnda* in Gĩkũyũ) was fairly large at slightly over an acre but generally most men in the neighbourhood are all in much the same situation: many own a little over an acre at most, and less than half an acre at least, sometimes leaving no room for even a small garden. Where farmland is available, full subsistence is impossible. Practically all of Kimani's age-mates work for wages whilst their wives and children (when not at school) tend to houses and gardens. Kimani's brother Mwangi, for instance, worked as a taxi driver in Nairobi and is also absent for most of the working week, coming home only on Saturday and Sunday to oversee matters at his homestead (*mũciĩ*). Other local men worked a variety of jobs – selling sausages at the roadside in nearby towns, driving agricultural produce in pick-up trucks, or as *matatu* drivers in the local transport infrastructure. The absence of middle-aged and older men from the neighbourhood during the weekdays was fairly stark, though a few would arrive in the evenings - exhausted construction workers, and the local shopkeeper who sold bread and *mandazis* (a type of doughnut) to the people of the neighbourhood (*andu a itũũra*) from his kiosk.

But it was on occasions like the above, when struck by the sheer extent of Kimani's exhaustion, that I began to reflect more concertedly on his predicament as the family's breadwinner. I wondered what sustained Kimani in spite of the immense stresses, the economic setbacks and struggles that characterise life for families like his in peri-urban Kiambu, many of which are reliant on a mode of what some anthropologists have described as 'wage-hunting' (Kalb *et al.* 2016: 51; Gill 1999; *cf.* Day *et al.* 1999: 7-10) carried out by one of or both parents. Kimani's predicament – as we shall soon see – is a reminder of the precarity that defines the income of Kenyan families, the sheer temporal unpredictability of when money would be 'found' (as they put it) to cover household costs. As with other families I came to know in my fieldwork, it was Kimani's determination to educate his children that drove his work, even if the pursuit of this horizon was defined by a degree of exhaustion.

In Chapter 1 we caught a glimpse of how the moral value of 'wealth in people' (Guyer 1995) has mutated and yet prevailed in central Kenya in spite of enormous socio-economic shifts during the colonial period. This chapter expands on these earlier observations, directing further attention towards how families continue to invest in people, primarily their own children via

⁴⁷ *Panga* is the Kiswahili word for a long bush knife, ideal for cutting firewood.

endowing them with education. In particular, we observe how generating cash to be spent on education from ‘off-farm income’ has become a cornerstone of masculine adulthood and patriarchal responsibility. That endowing children with what Pierre Bourdieu called ‘social capital’ (1984: 91) might form the basis of a working adult man’s life is hardly a novel observation in Kenya or anywhere else (cf. Gregory 2018). But these virtues take on a more pronounced character when contrasted with the actions of others. As we shall see in this chapter, Kimani narrativises his obligations in relation to what he sees as the flagrant disregard for children and familial futures on the part of other men from the neighbourhood. The wider phenomenon of Nairobi’s expansion is important, here, not least since it led to the rapid inflation of land prices as buyers seek to construct apartments to attract renters. Men like Kimani, whose families have lived on these peri-urban outskirts for more than a generation, are now able to ‘cash-in’ on their inheritance as never before, selling inherited land for enormous amounts of money. Such acts are scorned, however, by self-styled moral figures like Kimani, who see in such acts only the neglect of children, and the denial of their rightful inheritance. In this sense, recent events have spurred and intensified rather more long-standing debates about the depravity of individual desire, its cost to familial continuity, and the valorisation of responsible fatherhood and wealth production for future generations as its most vital concern.

Exploring Kimani’s perspective on wealth production, as I do in this chapter, affords further comment on his framing of his obligations as a decision not to give in to desires to consume like certain ‘bad’ others. In other words, Kimani’s words invoke what Harry Frankfurt (1971: 9) once described as ‘second-order’ desires, the desire not to have a certain desire, and a broader meta-discourse on moral values (of obligation to children and their futures) that ought to prevail. A wider moral debate about values is, of course, hardly alien to anthropology. David Graeber’s notion of ‘politics’ amounts to a process of contestation around what one ought to want in life - ‘the struggle to establish what value is’ (Graeber 2001: 88). Consumption, local moral thought maintains, is foolhardy, the destruction of wealth that might secure the social future for oneself and one’s family. In the following chapter, I will go on to explore the effects of a hegemonic value on the self-understandings of low-status youth, and how their inability to live up to such a hegemonic value degrades their status in the eyes of others. But for now, I want to maintain a focus on the significance of the virtue claimed by patriarchal figures when they live up to norms that are in some sense being put into question by wider economic life in which such obligations are not met mechanistically. Andrew Walsh (2002) calls this ‘the freedom to do otherwise’. Obligations in central Kenya are articulated as choice precisely because of the counter-

value of consumption, and the alternative pathways it presents to what Kimani would view as irresponsible economic activity.

In this regard, this chapter also offers an opportunity to re-evaluate fatherhood as an object of interest to anthropologists of Africa, particularly in light of a prominent structural Marxist scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s that defined it in terms of *patriarchy* more specifically. Structural Marxists understood kin relations in terms of the expropriation of a ‘domestic surplus’ that older male figures were seen to control at the expense of wives and sons (see, e.g., Donham 1990: 79-80; Meillassoux 1981 [1975]). Prior to that, anthropologists had studied male authority figures through the prism of kinship and its ‘moral bond’ (Fortes 1957 [1949]), later expanding these insights into the realm of politics. Max Gluckman, J. Clyde Mitchell and John Barnes sought to clarify the demands placed on prominent authority figures such as ‘the village headman’ as a product of his having need to balance ‘the moral sanctions of kinship’ with his newfound role as a local governor in a colonial administration (1963: 151-2). As Richard Werbner writes of the Marxist scholarship that replaced this earlier work, the ‘virtues’ of elderhood were ‘[s]tripped away’ and in its place ‘[p]atriarchy emerged as [its] unacceptable face’ (2004: 134). Kinship was merely a supporting beam in the ‘ideology of power’ that underpinned elders’ economic exploitation of dependents (Meillassoux 1981 [1975]: 86-87).⁴⁸

Without denying that central Kenya is a patriarchal context, my approach explores how responsible patriarchy as a self-professed moral orientation is not simply an ideology of control within the family, but a caring disposition, one that prioritises social reproduction. In central Kenya, responsible fathers emphasise that they work for their sons (Berry 1983; Lonsdale 1992: 334), investing in their futures as much as their own. In contrast to Meillassoux’s portrait of an exploitative patriarchy here we see that behind the ‘informal economy’ are moral values of household reproduction that are future-oriented. Rather than a story of patriarchal power, it is one of fatherly anxiety – that economic precarity threatens their modest projects of seeking social mobility for their children.

Struggling for school fees

It was late March 2018, and Kimani’s work had taken a turn for the worse. His lorry had broken down twice in quick succession, forcing him to call upon friends to provide him with loans of as

⁴⁸ Historian E.P. Thompson (1978) criticised a similar strain of structural Marxism, arguing that its adherents ‘find themselves unable to handle, except in the most abstract and theoretic way, questions of value, culture - and political theory’.

much as 50,000 KES to help pay for its repair (approximately 500 USD).⁴⁹ The break-down had hit Kimani just as his work was beginning to return to normal following a long spell of disruption in the aftermath of the 2017 elections. Throughout 2017, Kimani regularly complained that money had become scarce (*pesa imekosa*), and he speculated that even after Kenya's year of elections was over, the heavy rains of early 2018 had possibly extended the economic malaise.⁵⁰ With his father's already inconsistent income in jeopardy, Mwaura knew that life at home would quickly become defined by scarcity. Whereas in times of abundance his mother Catherine can afford to shop regularly for meat and milk, stretches when Kimani went without work were usually marked by the repetitive meals of *ugali* and *sukuma wiki* harvested from the *shamba*.⁵¹ But there were also less mundane effects, as I found out when Kimani's daughter Njoki was returned from her secondary (boarding) school in northern Kiambu in a state of tears after Kimani had failed 'to find' the money to pay for her school fees upon her return for term in early April. Whilst it only took Kimani a couple more days to come up with the money, the precarity of the family's aspirations for their children's futures was laid bare by the episode.

A few weeks later, I talked with Kimani about the incident. By then Njoki was back at boarding school, and Mwaura in Machakos. Kimani had stopped home from the border for just a few days. As we began to talk, our conversation quickly turned to his own priorities and obligations as a father.

You see people like us... For example, I or my brother Mwangi. People from the neighbourhood normally say we have progressed a lot [*tuko mbele sana*] because of denying ourselves [*kujinyima*] things like those cigarettes, alcohol, *bhang* [cannabis], something called shisha that we use, and that is why at least [we are ahead] - not to praise ourselves [*kujivuna*] too much. Now God has helped me because I have returned to work. Now Njoki is heading back to school. But you see people from this area, in some houses if a child gets to standard eight [i.e. finishes primary school] that's it [*utaona mtoto akijika standard seven, baas*]. He doesn't continue with education. He searches for a construction job [*anaenda kutafuta kazi ya kujenga nyumba*] or something like that, because his mum and dad don't have what? They don't have enough money for him to continue with school [*hawana nguvu ya pesa aendeleo*, lit. 'the strength of money']. Therefore, I give thanks to God because I have an income [*ninaambia Mungu asante kwa sababu mimi nimepata*]. Mwaura is finishing university,

⁴⁹ Throughout my fieldwork, the conversion rate between the USD and the KES hovered at around 1:100.

⁵⁰ Throughout 2017 the price of maize flour – a staple for practically all Kenyan families – steadily rose in 2017 until the government subsidised the price (Otieno 2017, May 20; *Daily Nation* 2018, January 5).

⁵¹ *Ugali* is boiled maize flour, either bought or grown and then ground at a mill. *Sukuma* is a type of kale grown in most family gardens.

Njoki will go to university too because of denying myself that kind of fun of alcohol and what not. You know it finishes a lot of money [*unajua inamaliza pesa sana*]. (Interview, 21 April 2018).

I found it striking that not only did Kimani contrast his own fortunes with those from other families unable to send their children to secondary school, but that he described this as the consequence of his and his brother's decision to deny themselves (*kujinyima*) the transient fun of substance abuse. Kimani knows the fun (*raba*) of this other life all too well, having quit alcohol in the mid-2000s after his financial obligations to his son, an unwell wife, and his ageing mother forced him to become 'serious' (in Mwaura's words) and he gave up alcohol for good. To quote Mwaura's gloss on his father's decision to give up alcohol, 'He was hit by reality!'

Kimani went on, this time reflecting on his decision to postpone the construction of his stone house in order to fund his children's education.

If you go to work and get 10,000, you keep it in the bank [*ukienda kazi, ukipata 10,000, unaiweka kwa benke*] because you know at the end of the month Mwaura needs 50,000, 60,000. Njoki needs to go back to school with 20,000, meaning you don't want to do what [i.e. spend your money, a rhetorical question]? And that's why you see this house? [Kimani gestured towards his unfinished stone house standing nearby] That's why I am unable to move out from this house to go to that other one, because I feel if I move from this and go to the other house, that house will cost [lit. eat, *kula*] like 300,000. Now, if I spend that money Mwaura and Njoki might not continue studying, and that's very bad [*Sasa nikitumia hiyo Mwaura na Njoki waweza kukosa kusoma*]. That's why I took that position. (ibid.)

It was always a matter of satisfaction to Kimani that his children were in school. Nonetheless, Kimani's position as his family's chief breadwinner made him painfully aware of the economic risks to his family's modest aspirations and in times of wage scarcity, decisions had to be made about how to use his money appropriately.

Mwaura's university education, Kimani hoped, would allow him to 'stand for himself' (*kujisimamia*) before long. Whilst the expectation was that Mwaura would inherit a portion of his father's land, along with his sister who would inherit a separate portion, an implicit hope was that Mwaura would find paid work (*kazi*), perhaps for the government or a business based in Nairobi. Mwaura reckoned what motivated his father was paternal pride – the satisfaction that would come from having a son who had finished university and progressed to paid work:

Their main purpose is to see me stable. They want to have that pride to say, ‘I took my child to school, he learned, he made me proud and now he’s doing this and this, he’s working somewhere, he has a family.’ I think that sense of *I am stable*, I think that is the satisfaction they want - being able to not rely on them anymore. (Fieldnotes, June 2018).

Although Kimani himself never went to secondary school, such have things changed in Kenya since the days when he grew up.⁵² Neither Kimani nor any of his siblings attended secondary school in contrast to some of their relatives descended from their father’s brothers. Since the colonial period, education has been not only a marker of status (Lonsdale 1992: 398; Brisset-Foucault 2013) but, parents believe, a requisite for their children to lead better material lives than they did.⁵³ Now more achievable than ever, pursuing education for one’s children is just one of the manifestations of aspiration in a new Kenya where improved economic growth and foreign investment since the early 2000s has given rise to all sorts of new hopes and dreams. And although Kenya, like other countries in Africa and across the Global South (see, e.g., Masquelier 2013; Mains 2012), has seen an explosion in the number of graduates who expect to be able to find a government job only to be disappointed by their unemployment, the positive valuation of education as a worthwhile investment of time and money persists. That said, there is no naivety on the part of Mwaura who knows all too well that it is ‘who’ he knows that would help him find a white-collar job, rather than his degree in Commerce. Mwaura predicts that after graduation it may be himself rather than his father who returns to his family’s land to intensify their farming activities.

Regardless of Mwaura’s real or imagined prospects, Kimani’s determination to educate his children contrasts sharply with the fates of most of Mwaura’s own age-mates. Mwaura is the only young man in the neighbourhood to attend university. Practically all of his peers ‘hustle’ for low wages in the peri-urban wage economy on construction sites, as *matatu* (a Nissan minibus for public transport) ‘touts’ and tea-pickers. Mwaura is keenly aware of his father’s commitments to his

⁵² After the introduction of free primary education in 2003, President Mwai Kibaki introduced measures to reduce the cost of secondary school education for parents in 2008 by having the government pay for tuition (Shiundu 2018). Costs for parents can still run into the tens of thousands of shillings though in Kiambu completion rates of secondary school are high (County Government of Kiambu n.d.). Secondary school costs remain an issue for parents in Kenya, and both current President Uhuru Kenyatta and challenger Raila Odinga promised Kenyans completely free secondary school education in their election campaigns in 2017 (Shiundu 2018).

⁵³ In the context of South Africa, Mark Hunter (2014: 468-9) calls this the ‘bond of education’ between parents and children, a contemporary iteration of ‘wealth-in-people’, shaped by aspirations for social mobility wherein it was hoped children would become professionals (ibid.: 477). Kimani and Catherine hoped Mwaura’s success would allow him to take care of them in old age, but they drew pride from his successes even if they brought no material benefit (ibid.: 483-4).

future, one registered in guilt when it comes to his studies, not least because of his astronomically high university fees at practically 55,000 KES per term, the household's single largest expense.⁵⁴ 'You know sometimes I think of my dad and man, I feel sorry for him because we are like... We are sort of letting him down... in all aspects. I mean this guy is ever driving, day and night. And we are here [at university] and not studying hard enough.'

Parental obligations and examples of a good life (maica mega)

In Kimani's words we hear one man's perspective on what matters – what he feels is worth 'struggling' for (kūgeria). But his description of his own economic decisions implicates moral values – notions about what one ought to want in life – that are circulating far more widely in central Kenya. In this section I want to situate Kimani's moral values not merely as personal but as emblematic of a standard of patriarchal responsibility mobilised in wider discourse. As we shall see, arguments over patriarchal responsibility rear their head when it comes to debates about selling inherited land. But first, it can help to make some basic points about masculine moral conduct.

In criticising others, Kimani held them to a standard of moral uprightness grounded in proper familial relationships, an abstract one rather than one he had necessarily entirely achieved in his own right. His words point to a contrast between conduct as is and as it ought to be and recall long-standing debates in the anthropology of morality about the relationship between moral norms and practice. In his seminal work on notions of morality in Lozi legal discourse, Max Gluckman showed how judges deployed notions of the 'reasonable man' to invoke the behaviour expected of a particular person in a particular social position (1955: 125; see also Werbner 2014: 481). Gluckman referred to a range of Lozi terms used to describe the figure of 'the reasonable man' – a term that connoted 'uprightness', 'decency', 'principle' and so forth. This was a moral standard that provoked debate since it was hardly always lived out. Judges used it to criticise and police behaviour in a flexible way. Standards were evoked as moral values to which people ought to aspire - one ought to be 'a good husband' (Gluckman 1955: 126), for instance.

We saw in Chapter 2 how a labour ethic is wielded in discourse as a tool of moral chastisement, used to police those cast as 'lazy' and valorise the conduct of men who work. 'As a man you must get up in the morning and do something to find money', Catherine's 45-year-old brother Isaac once told me during a brief period in which he stayed with us as he explored work

⁵⁴ One journey to Nairobi can earn Kimani 15,000 KES, so four journeys are required for him to raise Mwaura's university fees. During the economic malaise of late 2017 and early 2018 Kimani sometimes barely secured one journey in a month.

opportunities in Nairobi. Whilst we will explore the contrasts made amongst men regarding their adherence to such standards shortly, I also want to explore the mobilisation of such an ethic in narratives of self-worth and moral identity. The labour ethic is at once an ideological tool used to criticise and a lived morality grounded in the valuation of kinship.

Kimani's emphasis on parental obligation in negative terms – that he had denied himself – drives my account here, because it crystallises a central point of contestation in central Kenya when it comes to the living of a good life (*maica mega*), what it is and how it can be achieved. The standard of upright masculine responsibility also constitutes a tool with which men like Kimani could criticise and discipline others for their failure to meet them – men who appeared not to place the same emphasis on land and children as the basis of a good life. Desires to build stone houses at the expense of children's education serves as a case in point, a secondary priority compared to kinship. The normative weight Kimani attaches to them also implicates notions of agency and decision – that obligations entail the 'freedom to do otherwise' (Walsh 2002) possessed by father figures that is an essential part of how responsible fatherhood is lived and experienced. Responsible conduct accrues meaning in relation to the moral agency that people are understood to possess.

That the denial of fun in order to work for his children defined his self-professed responsibility underscores the standards according to which men are evaluated. Kimani's age reminds us that he is a particular type of father figure in this context, one at a certain stage in a Kikuyu man's normal life course. Though all Kikuyu youths must move out of their mother's house after initiation and into their own house (see Chapter 1), it is marriage (and often, shortly after, the arrival of children) that more clearly defines the beginning of a new type of responsible male adulthood (cf. Geissler and Prince 2007: 126-7), turning a 'young man' (*mwanake*) into an 'adult' or 'married man' (*mũthuuri*). Occasionally this is referred to (in English) as a process of having become 'serious' in life (Cooper 2018). Usually this happens in a man's mid to late 20s, and as we shall see in Chapter 4, one of the problems Kikuyu in central Kenya currently perceive is that jobless young men no longer appear capable or, to some more moralising perspectives, even interested in fulfilling the normative teleologies of masculine becoming, choosing instead a life of alcoholism. By contrast, Kimani has not only long been married, but he has children who are both practically adults.

By this point in a man's life his father (or mother if a widow) would have set land aside for him to build his own house, possibly by sub-dividing it formally between children or by informally telling children where to build on land to which he holds title. It is this establishment of one's own homestead or *mũciĩ* – a word that connotes both an affective notion of home (cf. Englund 2002:

137, 141) and usually thought of as a free-standing house adjacent to one's own garden (Dutto 1975) - that begins a process of detachment from parents and siblings. Once a man inherits a portion of land and builds a house for a wife and child, it is establishing the particularity of one's homestead that becomes a focus of his work (Englund 1996: 145). 'Hustling' becomes 'a must' (no muhaka) in light of dependents – particularly children in primary and secondary school. Jealousies can arise between relatives and there is a great deal of concern with maintaining the boundaries of one's land through the construction of fences and the growing of hedges, clearly demarcating the boundaries of one's plot.

It is at this later stage of the life course that children's success comes into view, and their success can be read as evidence of investment (in terms of time and labour) of parents in them. This emphasis on children can also clarify what the household or homestead really is – its longevity through people (Sahlins 2011; Shipton 2007). In this regard, Yvan Droz's (2011: 77-9) writings on Kikuyu burial practices draw our attention to vital principles of patriarchal achievement – a good death and remembrance. Burial at one's homestead, on one's ancestral land is vital, an expression of male rootedness and belonging to the land. Being buried in public cemeteries is a matter of great shame (ibid.). Droz shows how excessive land sale amounted to 'the very picture of failure for a Kikuyu man', an effect of 'a lack of foresight or through an inordinate desire for money' (ibid.: 78). Notions of 'leaving behind wealth' (gũtiga irĩ) are as prominent in central Kenya today as they were in the pre-colonial period (Lonsdale 1992: 334). Those who leave nothing to their children or worse, have no children, die social deaths.

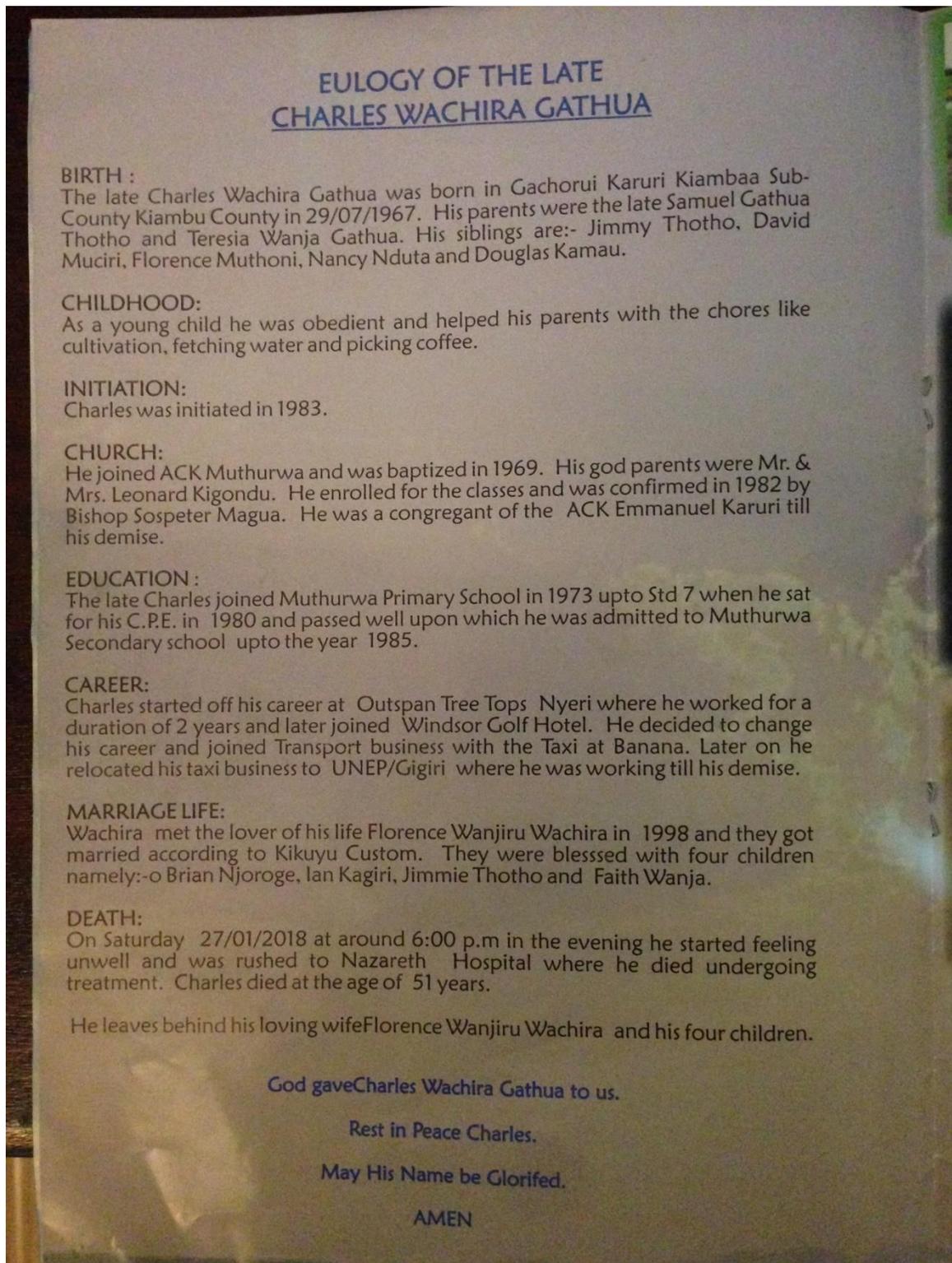
Consider, for instance, the eulogy of Charles Wachira Gathua, one of our neighbours who died an untimely death from a heart attack at the age of 51 in late January 2018. Wachira was a popular man in the neighbourhood. As a taxi-driver, he had not exactly achieved immense wealth, but he was seen to have more than adequately supported his wife and four children. He drank with his friends at local bars – though not excessively (see below). He often bought beers for his friends and his young cousin Stevo, my 26-year-old 'age-mate', a good friend of Mwaura's, and even myself. His eulogy enshrined his accomplishments (Photograph 9). That his funeral was extremely well attended was a testament to his character.



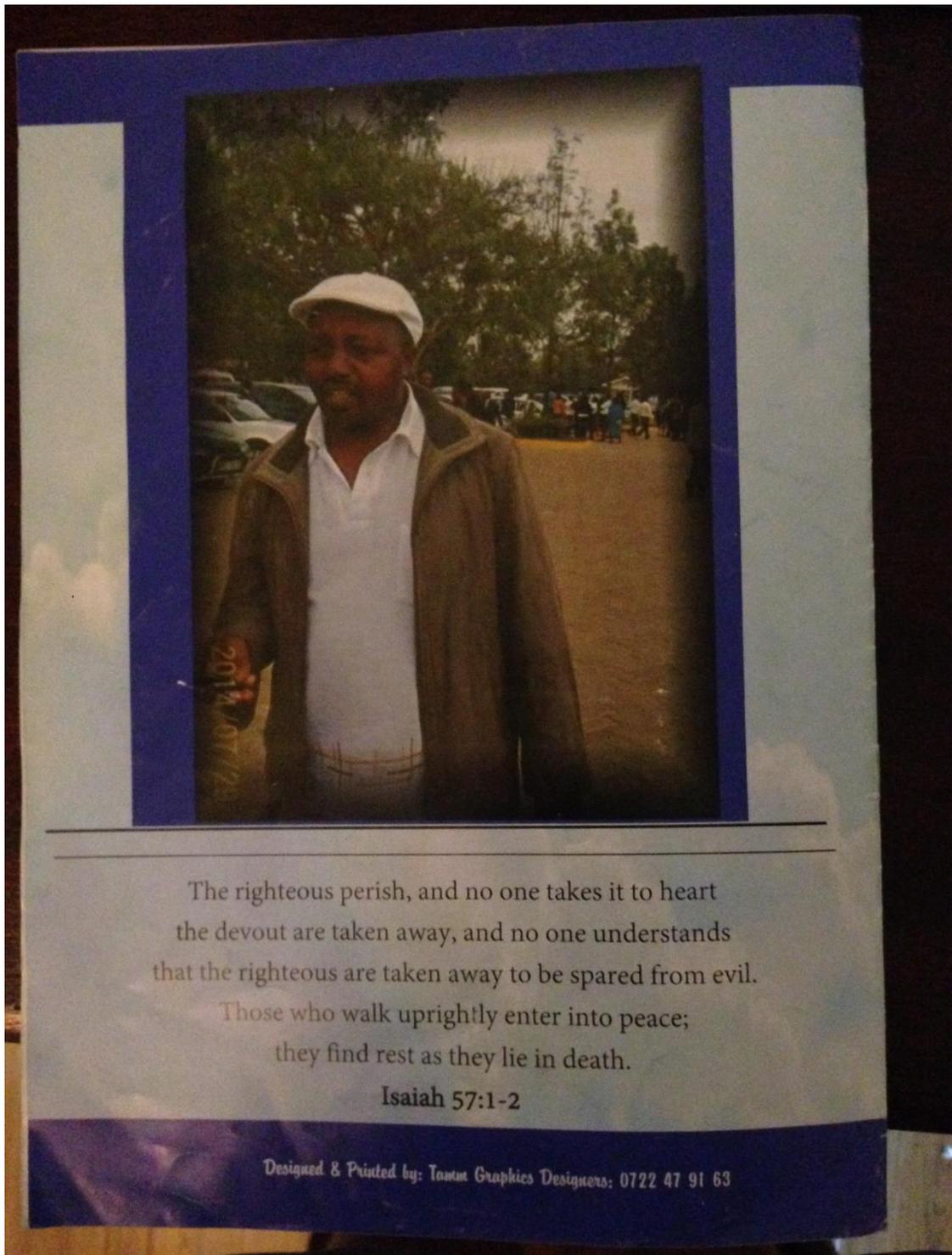
Photograph 12: Wachira's burial, 2nd February 2018.

Consider, by contrast, an 'elder' in Mashambani known as Mkono. Mkono was a man who could be regularly found drunk at the local county motel, usually on harsh spirits. He often sat aside from the tables of wealthier men local who drank bottles of Tusker and discussed politics at great length (see below). In 2019, he died at the age of 56, but without children. He had sold much of his inherited land, and rumour had it that some of it had been directly exchanged for alcohol.

Few attended his funeral. Mwaura saw his life as one of abject failure with an ignominious end.



Photograph 13: Wachira's eulogy, February 2018.



Photograph 14: The back-cover of Wachira’s eulogy depicting him in his normal attire.

Mkono represents an extreme sort of social failure in Mashambani, but Kimani contrasted his virtues with the actions of others who had failed in milder ways – particularly in the neglect of their sons, an oft-discussed topic in central Kenya where the predicament of the ‘boy child’ is

widely debated (Pike 2019). In central Kenya, discourse about the ‘boy child’ has become a cipher for a failed Kikuyu masculinity – of the widespread alcoholism that appears to affect young men.⁵⁵ Alcoholism has a long history in central Kenya – Heyer (1998) associated its origins with the failure of coffee crops in the 1980s - but it has become more prominent in public discourse since 2015 when President Uhuru Kenyatta declared a ‘war on alcohol’ after several deaths in central Kenya, underscoring its devastating effects on young men, labelling illegal alcohol brewing ‘the business of death’ (Nzwili 2015, August 13; Gathigah 2015, March 27). For conservative commentators, the roots of such generational loss were in family breakdown. In 2018, Kiambu County’s Women’s Representative blamed youth alcoholism on irresponsible men who had fathered children outside of marriage, encouraging them to ‘take responsibility’. Kimani’s words speak to these wider ideas about fathers neglecting their sons because of their own desires and self-importance. Kimani himself had deliberately intervened in Mwaura’s life in an attempt to improve his future job prospects. Mwaura told me how after high school, he had planned to ‘hustle’ in Banana Town like his peers, seeking construction work or whatever he could find. It was his father who had wanted him to go to university, so as not to get caught up in the hustling economy of the town, its vagaries, and likely too, a perception of its temptations of short-term fun in alcohol. It was on that basis that Kimani took aim at neighbours who had looked to their own comfort and prestige by building themselves stone houses ahead of educating children.

The actions of ‘bad’ social others meant that Kimani framed his actions not as obligation but as a decision to control desires to consume that he otherwise might have. The decision itself is worth dwelling upon, since it recalls what Michael Lambek has described as ‘judgement’ (2008: 136) – the decision to meet a particular *type* of commitment, a choice that recognises certain values are incommensurable (ibid.: 138-9). In this case, provisioning for one’s children’s futures trumps the modicum of status gained in the eyes of others by possessing a stone house. The normative, moralising aspect of Kimani’s articulation of his personal values is also illuminated here. He suggests that others ought to want what he wants, but do not. That they do not suggests not merely an economic mistake but a moral failing on the part of parents who appear to have invested in the construction of their houses to the detriment of children – particularly male children – who end up hustling in the peri-urban wage economy because of improperly invested wages.

Comparative literature can further illuminate the association between social mobility, social reproduction and virtuous patriarchy. In a survey of ethnographic literature on southern and central Africa, James Ferguson (2006: 72) has described how ‘the production of wealth [...] is

⁵⁵ Gathoni Wa Muchomba is advocating for polygamy, NTV Kenya. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5kGQ71zk_A [Accessed 18th May 2020].

understood to be inseparable from the production of social relations’, a process that was generally understood as morally good. Ferguson’s point is general but a more specific association between material provisioning for kin and the good crops up elsewhere in the literature, even in West Africa where Meyer Fortes’ classic ethnography of the Tallensi saw young men speak of the advantages of having a living father, ‘the one who bears all responsibility for one’s welfare in economic, jural and ritual matters’ (1957 [1949]: 171-2). Fathers accumulated bride-price money that enabled their sons to marry and begin their own households, whilst those without living fathers lamented taking ‘the burden of responsibility for himself’ (ibid.: 172), delaying marriage and forcing sons to begin more intensive farming at an earlier age.

In central Kenya, much closer to home, we also observe notions associating the material with the moral. Historian John Lonsdale’s classic essay sub-titled *Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought* (1992) underscored the responsibility of fathers to produce wealth for their successors. Kikuyu ‘fathers [...] worked for their sons’ (1992: 334). A remembered ancestor was a *mũtiga-irĩ na irĩrĩ*, a ‘leaver of wealth and honour’. Wealth implied not only well-tilled fields but children, and ‘honour’ evoked the ‘upbringing’ children received in order to succeed on their own terms (see also Kinoti 2010). Fatherhood in central Kenya was not solely defined by the extractive dynamic that Marxist scholarship emphasised – usually in terms of the exploitation of sons’ labour (Meillasoux 1981 [1975]). Sons and clients may have owed obedience, as Fortes notes in his ethnography (1957 [1949]: 172) but wealth was accumulated in order to be passed on and facilitate that passing on process in the first place.

Such literature not only provides a point of comparison about the flow of wealth from fathers to children but also that such decisions to meet obligations are objectified as moral in so far as they were precisely that: choices, recognising that obligations are rarely mechanically met (Lambek 2008: 136). Lambek’s notion of judgment connotes a degree of moral agency (a term he does not employ) on the part of those that exercise judgement. Critically, Lonsdale leaves us with an impression of the concepts of agency that informed respect for oneself and others in Kikuyu moral thought. Older, married men were known then as they are today, *athuuri*, literally ‘those who choose’ (ibid.: 326). Without such an underlying notion of agency, a man’s actions maintaining his household could not be interpreted as moral. Andrew Walsh’s useful formulation captures (2002) precisely this understanding of possible alternatives that a morally valued type of responsibility assumes, of the ‘freedom’ people have ‘to do otherwise’: ‘[t]o be responsible for an act [...] one must have the option not to do it’ (ibid.: 453).

Such a moralising stance was spurred by wider anxieties circulating in central Kenya about over-consumption’s destructive potential, and particularly how desires to consume alcohol could

destroy family life. They threw Kimani's agency into relief as they did the wider 'genre' of his economic life. In the contemporary moment, ideas enunciating patriarchal labour's proper ends as endowing children with various kinds of wealth continue to circulate, not least in popular song. Such songs recognise the choices a man makes to 'do the right thing', living up to one's values and claiming virtue in the process. Consider, for instance, Kikuyu gospel singer Henry Waweru Karanja's 2013 hit, 'I'll never eat the sweat of another'.

Ndaugire ndikaaria thithino yene

I said I'll never eat the sweat of another

Atĩ nĩ nguo ndigĩre ciana mũthitho

So that I'll leave my children savings [a more proper way of saying *indo*, property]

Songs like Waweru's that valorise wage labour are consumed widely in Kiambu both in public transport vehicles and in the pick-up trucks that men drive transporting goods. They are particularly popular amongst Kimani's generation of men and women, though younger men also enjoy their aural aesthetic alongside a more eclectic variety of hip-hop from Nairobi sung in the Sheng creole or reggae music broadcast on the popular *Ghetto Radio*. Their lyrics are also telling. Whilst on the one hand, the 'sweat of another' in Waweru's song implies a criminal livelihood or dependence on social others (family, friends) to find the cash reproduce one's household, it might equally imply the consumption of wealth meant for one's children and their futures. Waweru's song and others in its genre celebrate the work of men like Kimani who have spent decades establishing what Jane Guyer has called 'niches' for themselves in an economy where formal employment opportunities are hard to come by (Guyer 2004: 106, 126; McDougall 2004: 155-6). Kimani worked for many years as a pick-up driver in the 1990s in order to save the cash that paid for half of his lorry and as we saw above, continues to face economic adversity in his current work. Crucially, it is because responsibility is chosen – or a proper version of responsibility by meeting obligations to children – that it can be valorised, as Kimani's words of borderline 'self-praise' (*kujivuna*) suggest. And as we saw, his self-praise came in relation to 'self-denial' (*kujinyima*) of a morally reprehensible alternative of drinking his wages.

Consumption in its place – the County Motel

Kimani's notion of responsibility is an abstraction – one reflected in actions and conduct rather

than persons – as a moral standard it provokes debate, and so too flexibility in its application. Consider, for instance, that the culture of weekend drinking that many men partake in to varying degrees and did not always garner moral condemnation, particularly if undertaken by older, economically established men of a similar sort to Kimani. The visible act of drinking creates a powerful image of economic success and capacity, one encoded in the accumulation of beer bottles on one's table within such haunts, to 'dirty the table' (*chafua meza*) as this practice of conspicuous consumption is known. This is an image of economic success that other men attempt to emulate, with rather reduced means (see below, Chapter 4). Consumption does not always have to appear as anti-social, anathema to the task of household reproduction. In some cases, it is a reward for having done so.

Amongst other places, it is the local County Motel where neighbourhood men from Rudi Mashambani like to enjoy a drink. This is an all-male context removed from the normal settings of kinship relations of the neighbourhood, a place where older married men come to drink in order to escape the obligations that define the household setting. A somewhat dingy place, more so at night when its disco lights descend in the evenings. The rancid stench of urine emanates throughout the bar from the direction of the bathroom. County Motel, motero to locals, is busiest at weekends when it broadcasts Premier League football on its solitary flat screen television but men from the neighbourhood arrive on foot and, less often, (where possible) in cars to simply spend time with one another exchanging gossip, debating politics and consuming large amounts of alcohol. Men from much further afield drive to the motel in search of a context suitably removed from kin and friends who will recognise them. Economically successful men drink Tusker, at 160 KES (approximately 1 USD and 60 cents) the bottles that accumulate on their tables are an indication of their comparative wealth. Poorer men drink cheaper, harder spirits in whatever quantities they can afford. Kenya Cane (or 'KC' for short) is most popular, followed by Napoleon brandy and Legend whiskey. The local notion that on Sundays women go to church whilst men go to drink has some truth to it, and one can find in the motel men avoiding their families, doing nothing but sitting in silence whilst slowly becoming increasingly inebriated as the quantity of alcohol in their 1 litre KC bottle drops slowly towards the bottom.

Consider, for instance, the groups of relatively successful businessmen in their 30s, 40s and 50s who gather to meet at the local motel. These are hardly social failures like those against whom Kimani contrasted himself. On the contrary, they are respected local men who are seen as having 'made it' – in other words, that they have reached a point in their lives where they had generated enough cash to enjoy themselves at the weekends. These men are, in a sense, 'hustlers', in the language of contemporary Kenya – a word that can identify a man having become successful

through hard work and clarity of mind, seizing economic opportunities that come one's way.⁵⁶ In many cases, they have also come into wealth through long journeys of economising that opened up subsequent opportunities, particularly through agri-business trends. Karis made a small fortune buying quails and selling their eggs to distributors and local vendors. In 2018 he was living not in Mashambani but in Platinum, a gated estate that had been built a stone's throw from the neighbourhood, closer to Banana Town. Its fabulous middle-class stone houses had been built primarily by the labour of local youth. In Mwaura's words, Karis was 'too young to be that rich'.

'They were where Kimani was like ten years ago. As you can imagine they are far much ahead!', Mwaura told me whilst looking over at the table of such a group of men at the motel one weekend, their wealth made visible in the gradual accumulation of Tusker and Guinness bottles on the surface of the table in front of them. They drank with the owner of the motel himself, who sometimes appeared there with much younger women who he was said to be 'sponsor' of, in the current parlance of Kenya, in other words maintaining separately from his wife.

Such groups of men are not only drinking as 'resistance' to wider domestic norms, as Papataxiarchis (1991) suggests of men in Greece who escape the home to drink together in a spirit of 'free sociality', though these are the types of men who might see the strict avoidance of alcohol as evidence of 'womanly' (*umama*) rules associated with the domestic domain. But they also exchange news and convey their intelligence to their friends by discussing Kenya's politics, or sharing opinions on football.

Crucially, such sociality must not be seen as the type of flagrant *overconsumption* vilified in household-oriented moralising thought. Consider, for instance, another discussion I had at the motel with Karis' brother Andrew upon my return to Mashambani in 2019. Like Karis, Andrew was a relatively successful local 'hustler' in his 40s, though slightly less successful than his younger brother. Throughout my fieldwork, we normally saw each other at the motel on weekends when I would go and watch Premier League football with Mwaura, Mike, Stevo, or other young men from the neighbourhood. Stevo often attempted to ask for them to buy him alcohol, and they sometimes obliged.

Upon my return in 2019, Andrew was happy to see me, but having had quite a few drinks at this point, began rambling. I was at the bar ready to purchase another drink, and it was then that he began talking to me about the need to control consumption carefully. 'Never spend more than you earn!', he said, smiling. 'Today I have earned 800...', he trailed off, perhaps searching for the

⁵⁶ This is a word frequently applied, and actively embraced and cultivated, by Kenya's Deputy President William Ruto, a man who has no dynastic connections in Kenya's politics. His relative lack of a family history in politics has allowed him to style himself in this way, but conveniently ignores his accumulation of assets (land and buildings in Nairobi) over the last half-decade of Jubilee Party government.

words in the English language he rarely spoke other than with me. ‘I have spent 150 on food, and now 400 on alcohol, but you cannot spend more than you earn’. Likewise, Karis knew when to leave the motel to meet business associates in Ruaka who might help his future prospects.

Curiously, and importantly for my purposes here, sitting at the table alongside Andrew was a local man who had recently sold land who Mwaura and I had tried to engage in a discussion the previous week whilst eating *nyama choma* (grilled goat’s meat) at his butchery shop. He was loosely related to Mwaura, a descendant of his grandfather Gatheo from his first wife. This man had evaded our questions about his sale of land, insisting that since he had bought a plot elsewhere, he could not be afflicted by the ‘curse’ (*kĩrumi*) said to attach to, and kill, those who sell ancestral land (see discussion below). Mwaura doubted the man’s logic, ‘But it’s all Gatheo’s land’. Mwaura insisted that the curse still applied. He began impersonating the tone his father regularly took when describing such people: ‘Let me tell you Peter, it doesn’t make sense. How can you have sold land for 4 million, bought one acre elsewhere, and you’re drinking?’.

As far as Mwaura was concerned, this man was consuming his inheritance to associate with men far wealthier than he really was. In the next chapter we shall see the pull of competitive consumption in more detail, but this phenomenon evokes precisely the allure of consumption – the image of ease and a ‘good life’ that it entailed, and yet with none of the cost associated with Kimani’s lifestyle of economising, nor Andrew’s careful budgeting for that matter. To sell land in order to enjoy that same consumption contradicted the logic of household-based economising, and the ultimate aim of continuity underpinning one’s work, and neither was it legitimate consumption. To the moralising gaze of Mwaura, this man belonged to a different ‘genre’ of economic life, far closer to that embodied by the aforementioned Mkono – a man who wanted to drink more than he wanted to expand his wealth and status. It was, in other words, from the perspective of continuity this was consumption out of place, the victory of selfish desire over moral duty from which could come only moral failure and social death.

Urbanisation and land sale

Kimani’s narrativisation of his obligations in a negative sense – that it was because of ‘denying’ himself alcohol that he met them - points us now in the direction of those who apparently indulge such vices. His words hint at events afoot in the social milieu. In the last decade or two the topography of southern Kiambu has shifted rapidly from rural to peri-urban. As Nairobi approaches, and its metropolitan sprawl swallows more of its surrounding countryside, land values

continue to increase, bringing debate about the relative morality of selling land for a large, one-off amount of cash.⁵⁷ Kimani and other older men in the neighbourhood have an especially low opinion of fathers who sell their land, only to spend the proceeds on alcohol (*njohi*) and prostitutes (*maraya*) rather than sending their children to courses at local colleges or purchasing potentially much larger plots of land elsewhere with sub-division to their children in mind.

Nowhere is this evident than in the case of Ruaka town, just 10km away from Banana Hill. According to conversations I have had with a number of interlocutors, it is there that men who had inherited land from their fathers sold their plots to housing developers and – according to popular opinion - drank the proceeds, beginning instead a life of poverty and destitution. These men are seen as fools according to some of my interlocutors in Banana, and one news headline captures the tone of condescension and judgement towards these men: ‘Ruaka’s poor millionaires: They boozed and whored their birth right away’ (Kamau 2017). In the words of Banana Town folk, ‘They died like dogs’. In short, they sold their homes. Reduced to a state of wandering alcoholism, so the stories go, many died young. Others maintain their deaths were the result of ‘curses’ (*irumi*) laid down by their fathers that their ancestral land should never be sold. I turn now to an instance of such condemnation of selling inherited land and begin to explore its relationship with ideas about patriarchal obligation.

Land sale as wealth destruction

It was not long after my arrival in Rudi Mashambani in January 2017 that I began to be told ‘just so’ stories by members of my host family and their neighbours about other neighbours who had sold land that they had inherited from their parents. Those who sold land, so these stories went, ended up putting the proceeds to poor use, frittering away the finite quantity of cash they had acquired before ultimately falling into destitution and untimely death leaving nothing to their children.

At times these land sales triggered a great deal of disappointment, even anger at those – usually men – who had sold inherited land. Usually it was senior family members that I knew from Mashambani’s households who would cast scorn upon neighbours and distant relatives. Occasionally, such sentiments were articulated by unlikely figures.

Whilst at home from his university in Kitui during September 2017, Mwaura began to find fault with one of our neighbours who had begun a job serving soup at the motel where we usually

⁵⁷ Land prices in the town of Ruaka doubled in 2016 (Wanzala 2016, December 1).

spent time at weekends watching Premier League football. It was on a typical Sunday whilst watching his beloved Manchester United that we were served soup by the man in question. The hot broth was steaming on the bar in front of us and as soon as the waiter was out of earshot Mwaura began his tirade. ‘He sold his land for like 7 million shillings *at February!*’, Mwaura told me, emphasising just how quickly this man had spent his money. In his typical style he talked as though addressing the man himself in the second person. ‘And now you’re a cook? You’ve finished that 7 million already!? How!?’.

Whether Mwaura was parroting household wisdom (reflecting the likelihood that this news had been relayed to him by his mother or father) or expressing genuine moral outrage, I was not sure. In all the time that I knew him Mwaura regularly displayed a tendency towards taking positions and then reversing track very quickly (in our conversations about football players he could flip in a matter of moments from arguing that Arsenal FC midfielder Aaron Ramsey ‘is shit!’ to simply, ‘He’s alright’). Nonetheless, what I detected in his words that afternoon was the moralising tone of the household-oriented logic embodied by older figures like his father who want to see futures opened-up for their children by education. What had so incensed Mwaura was the man’s neglect of his teenage son, who now worked in the soup kitchen with him. ‘Man, he should be in college!’.

My questions to him at the time were more practical. Where had the money gone? ‘These ones with short skirts’, was Mwaura’s speculation. In other words, the money had probably been spent on prostitutes. ‘He was not seen for like four months, and he came back with 50,000... *Imagine!*’. In other words, the money had been squandered. Mwaura was appalled. After a short pause he went on, ‘Man, it’s like witchcraft’.⁵⁸

Some people you can’t understand. They sell their land because they’re poor. Now he’s not sending his children to school, they’re just idling. One of his kids is working in that place [i.e. in the soup kitchen] and he should be in college! [...] It’s because these people have never touched money like that before, so when they do... (Fieldnotes, 9th September 2017).

He trailed off. The man’s soup kitchen work was all the evidence he needed of his irresponsibility. ‘Sometimes I feel that I want to slap him. He should have sent his son to college first! Then drink!’. Mwaura’s voice was one of propertied propriety, who judged the poor,

⁵⁸ The theme of Kikuyu men as under a ‘curse’ of alcoholism emerged time and again through my fieldwork but tended to be used in more metaphorical terms by interlocutors to describe the extreme and unknowable nature of ‘anti-economistic’ [Day et al. 1999; cf. Parry and Bloch 1989] behaviour rather than their actual origin in witchcraft practices or the unseen hand of the Devil.

understanding them in terms of their lack of education and general ‘uncivilized’ nature (a term used when others would resort to extreme and unreasonable behaviour).

Mwaura never slapped the soup-kitchen worker, and eventually his disappointment faded. But the intensity of feeling that the sale of this land and its improper use evoked – however fleeting – raises further questions about the ascription of responsibility (and, indeed, irresponsibility) to parental figures (usually men) who sell land, which is usually seen to be to the detriment of their families and in pursuit of the short-term, transient fun (*raha*) of drinking alcohol (*kūnywa njohi*).

Patriarchy and land ownership

Changes to the law in Kenya have meant that in theory men are less capable of disposing of the land how they please – that land cannot be sold without it being gazetted, giving families time to appeal the process of sale. In practice, men continue to exert ownership and agency over their inherited land, usually informally since ‘customary’ titles are common (in other words, title has not been formalised) or the age of children and other relatives is such that they can exert very little agency. That men call the shots economically in their households continues to inform evaluation of them. Ownership entailed possibilities for action, including the ‘immoral’ appropriation or ‘drinking’ of one’s assets by turning it into cash.

In the contemporary moment it is the responsibility of fathers to make provision for future generations when they sub-divide their land. Consider, for instance, the words of Ndovu, one of my oldest interlocutors at 72 and an elder (*mūthuuri wa kīama*) of the neighbourhood, when describing how his father sub-divided his land between himself and his children. According to Ndovu’s age, I estimate that this sub-division took place shortly after independence in 1963, by which time land titles had been consolidated and it is therefore likely his father was part of the first generation to have received a freehold title.

He told us, ‘Now, I want to give everyone their portion [...] And you should know it’s not that I don’t have a mouth to eat meat or to drink beer [i.e. he could have sold the land to finance such activities but was thoughtful]. Therefore, you all [i.e. his children], be very careful. [...] This shamba is a small shamba, but it’s for your children. They shouldn’t go and rent in Karuri when their father had a shamba – it’s very shameful’.

(Akatwambia, ‘Sasa, mi nataka nipatie mtu sebemu yake. [...] Na mjue mi si ati sina mdomo ya

kukula nyama au ya kunywa pombe. Kwa hivyo ninyi muangalia sana [...] Hii shamba ni shamba kidogo lakini ni ya watoto wenu. Wasive wanaenda kukomboa buko Karuri, na baba yake alikuwa na shamba – it's very shameful?.) (Interview, 31st March 2017)

Ndovu's recollection of his father's words shows us the terms in which subdivision is viewed – as paving the way for generations beyond in a similar way to education. His father's reminder that he could have done otherwise also serves to underscore the understanding of a man's agency that underpins responsibility. Like Kimani, he claimed a degree of virtue for himself in meeting obligations to his children.

Ndovu's words evoke the sense in which responsibility itself is passed on through its own conduct. Murigi, Kimani's brother, would speak in similar terms about land:

[Selling land can] *kukosa* [i.e., fail] to make the sense. [PL: Why?] Because, that *shamba* is to help your family. There is no need to sell the *shamba* and then go to rent. That money *kuunza* [to sell] the *shamba*, you are eating, you are drinking and then it's finished. The people who are benefitting are the people who bought that land. (Fieldnotes, 4th August 2019)

'If you sell you are lazy', Murigi continued, evoking once again a contrast between the work of adding value to one's rural homestead by hustling for wages in Nairobi and destroying value through selling. He spoke to the domestic ethic underpinning his labour. He paused briefly to hail his daughter as 'mum', a common practice in central Kenya evoking the responsibilities given to children to tend to the homestead and that they are also named after the parents of their parents. Murigi asked her to pour some *chai* and then turned back to me. He recalled the instructions of his father, Gathe. 'He said this land [*Amesema hii shamba*] is a nursery to this,' and gestured to his daughter. 'So there's no need to sell the *shamba*.'

Ancestors and curses?

For some residents of Kiambu's peri-urban corridor, the refusal to ever sell land is grounded in the existence of *irumi* (sing. *kirumi*, a type of curse) issued by their fathers and grandfathers that their land should never be sold. Kimani himself had seen the effects of the *kirumi* when his half-brother Kang'ethe (a son of his father's first wife) had sold land in order to open a butchery in Banana town. Kang'ethe was paid gradually by the new owner, and Kang'ethe grew accustomed

to having an income. According to Kimani's story, when the final payment was made Kang'ethe realised he no longer had enough money to purchase the stock he needed to maintain his business. 'The money was finished' (*zimeisha*). Kang'ethe then committed suicide.

According to what my father used to say, we fear something like that of passing on because it is his, the title deed is his (*Kwa vile baba yangu alikuwa anasema, tunahofia kitu kama hiyo ya kupass kwa sababu ni yake, title deed ni yake*). (Interview, 21st April 2018).

A kĩrumi is a type of curse that emanates only from one's parents or senior relatives. The kĩrumi takes effect either when issued (i.e. through the words of a parent saying 'Never sell this land') or when the issuer dies (e.g. when the issuer says, 'After I am dead, never sell this land'). When its rule is broken, it begins to afflict the rule-breaker in question, usually leading to death in about a year.⁵⁹ My conversations with interlocutors have suggested that it is not simply a type of curse that afflicts a person's health but also a quality of the money that is gained from the proceeds of land sale, as in Kang'ethe's case. The money that one gains from land sales, as one of my interlocutors put it, 'can't help you' (citigagũteithia) and that it is unable 'to bring blessings' (kũrehe irathimo) of further accumulation that properly earned money can.

On the surface at least, ideas about money that 'can't you help' once again recall the work of Shipton from his landmark book *Bitter Money*. Based on fieldwork carried out in western Kenya during the 1970s and 1980s, Shipton argues that the metaphor of 'bitter money' (1989: 31) used by his Luo interlocutors referred to ill-gotten money, from the sale of ancestral land or the accumulation of wealth through selling homestead roosters (which he argues is akin to selling the household lineage) – transactions understood to be against the grain of normative moral expectation.⁶⁰ Shipton's research primarily focuses on the phenomenon of how the money that emerges from such transactions may have different *qualities* depending on how it was acquired. (Shipton 1989: 10). What is at stake in my analysis is not only the categorisation of different types of transaction (Bloch and Parry 1989) but the morality attributed to the *persons* who made them. Shipton (1989: 67) noted that the problem of land sales amongst Luo of western Kenya was not individualism per se but 'self-indulgence' – 'the individual usurpation of benefits, and symbols, for

⁵⁹ Here I draw from my interviews with Kikuyu elders (athuuri) and consultation of ethnographic materials on Kikuyu cosmology (largely from the colonial period [see, e.g., Kershaw 1997; Leakey 1977]).

⁶⁰ Analogous work has been produced on the subject of the commodification of pastoralist herds (Comaroff and Comaroff 1990; Hutchinson 199: 57-8). Hutchinson's (1996: 57-8) observations have been the most important – recognising that it was not money itself that disrupted a pristine Nuer lifeworld but rather that Nuer came to categorise money according to the relative morality of how particular money had been acquired (*cf.* Bloch and Parry 1989).

which others have lived and worked'. I sharpen this focus on moral condemnation as a way of shedding light on the ascription of responsibility and irresponsibility.

There are also clues in Shipton's analysis that suggest land might become significant symbolically in western Kenya not for its immediate indexicality of kin relations (via ancestral graves) but through its productive capacity. In Shipton's analysis, land had generally had a 'genealogical' significance (ibid.: 30) and claims to ownership of land were regularly made with reference to the presence of ancestral graves. Affective relations with land were forged through the visible evidence of the lineage's ancestors. Curiously, however, when an elderly Luo woman tells Shipton that the importance of land is that 'It feeds us and it swallows us' (ibid.: 31), he turns this into an argument solely about the symbolic value of the land: 'In a sense, selling land is selling the ancestors, and thus one's patrilineal kin' (ibid.). However, what I read in the words of the elderly Luo woman Shipton quotes are also *practical* ideas about social reproduction and not simply symbolic ideas about the attachment to one's ancestors. Land guaranteed the reproduction of the family. Selling it did not simply amount to selling an ancestral past but one's family's material future.

My suggestion is that the negative judgement of those who sell land indexes moral ideas about the proper way to accumulate, and the error of destroying the potential value to be realised from one's land either through cultivation, animal husbandry or even the construction of residential apartments with one's own or borrowed capital. The corollary of increasing land values has been the emergence of desires to become rentiers, possibly to replace one's small farm-land with so-called 'plots' – rental accommodation blocks for those from elsewhere moving closer to the peri-urban periphery. As Kimani himself noted, 'Building isn't bad [...] Isn't it also a business? If someone rents out he can be getting money per month. Won't he get a lot of money?' (*Kujenga sio mbaya [...] si ni biashara? Akodeshe apate pesa per month. Si atakuwa na pesa nyingi sana?*). As attractive as such investments were they also required 'capital' (a term used by interlocutors), and because of high interest rates attached to bank loans, most attempt to generate such capital by saving wages in the long-term or letting land out. During fieldwork Kimani began letting a piece of land at the edge of his *shamba* to a man who had constructed a kiosk, bringing in a small amount of rent (approximately 7000 KES per month), though this was little in relation to Mwaura's astronomical university fees.

It is likely that the figures who left *irumi*, such as Paul Kimani's father, did so because in their era it was the land's productive capacity that was critical to sustaining their families in terms of farming for subsistence.⁶¹ They probably did not foresee the extent to which their land would

⁶¹ Kershaw (1997) notes that *kĩrumi* were originally invoked by fathers that their children should not split and divide their land or come into conflict.

gather a more intrinsic type of value that could only be realised through its sale. Describing the nature of the curse, Kimani explained that his grandfather's land 'is meant to take care of [literally 'to grow'] his children and his great grandchildren, but not to be sold' (*ni ya kulea watoto wa watoto wa watoto wake, lakini isiuzue*). It was on this basis that Kimani judged those who sold land not only because of the threat of a curse, but because they used their proceeds irresponsibly, often with no thought to long-term familial concerns.

When you see many people here selling land, it's just that someone decides to sell to get money, to go and drink alcohol or [do] other bad things.

(Mashamba mingi bapa ukiona watu wakiuzua, ni vile mtu anaona tu auze apate pesa, aende akakunywe pombe ama mambo mengine mbaya.) (Interview, 21st April 2017).

Older men in Mashambani like Ndovu would regularly talk about the money from such sales being literally drunk (*kunywa pesa*). What should be emphasised is that the land's productive potential – increasingly in terms of the emergence of rental accommodation - that defines its value. The home-like quality of the land is not tethered to an ancestral past but to notions of future-oriented wealth production, as a 'nursery' for future generations. The brief vignette above serves as a case in point. What so incensed Mwaura about the soup kitchen worker was not his sale of the land but that the proceeds had been squandered. It was not social failure but actively chosen irresponsibility, a desire for the antithesis of wealth production – consumption of wealth for transient fun.

Valuing fun against the grain

Thus far we have observed what irresponsible behaviour looks like from the perspective of responsibility. But what does responsible behaviour look like from the perspective of irresponsibility? On what basis might supposedly irresponsibility economic behaviour make sense? In late March 2018 a 49-year-old man called Daniel from a neighbouring family was killed in a car accident on a nearby road having stumbled into traffic whilst drunk in the middle of the night. As is customary in neighbourhoods like ours – comprised of households that relate through more concrete notions of patrilineal descent as well as looser ones of cousinage - Mwaura and I attended the grave-digging (*kwenja irima*) the day before his burial on Daniel's father's plot of land. Like

other grave diggings I attended in Mashambani, it was an all-male affair, a display of mutual assistance between households through volunteering their younger kin to the party in need.

The atmosphere on the rainy March morning was not sombre though but full of wise-cracks, stories and gossip. Men stood around the deepening grave chatting, smoking cigarettes as diggers rotated in and out of the empty grave, shovelling earth out and onto the surface of flattened maize plants.

But as one might expect, the death of a man did eventually bring forth reflections on the transience of life. One of the neighbourhood men, Chege, a successful man in his early 30s with an office job in Kiambu, took it upon himself to advise his age-mates to enjoy their lives in the present. Dressed in overalls, shovelling earth as he spoke, Chege reminded those present about the perils of oblivion, and the thankless task of family patriarchs. 'Instead of keeping money in the bank, it's better to kick it [i.e. money] around with prostitutes, drinking [it] alcohol instead of leaving it behind to people. They will spend it [lit. eat it] without thinking!' (Handũ ha kũiga mbia cia kũbengi-rĩ, kaba gũcihũranga mateke na maraya, ugĩgĩcinyuaga njohi handũ ha gũtigĩra andũ. Magũcirĩa mategwĩcirĩa). The implication was clear: working as hard as patriarchal figures like Kimani was a fool's errand since in contemporary Kiambu one's legacy was all too quickly forgotten.

Another youth could only agree and echoing typically misogynistic discourses that describe Kiambu women as money-oriented, argued that: 'By the third day of mourning there's a guy in the house guarding the property [lit. 'taking care of things', i.e. sleeping with his wife]' (Na mũthenya wa gatatũ wa macakaya-rĩ, hena kanda nyũmba ãkarangĩra marĩ). Perspectives such as this argue that even close family cannot be trusted with one's wealth, and neither is it unique to Chege. Stories circulate in Kiambu about wives that have murdered husbands in order to seize control of their assets, whether land or cars. Many younger men in Mashambani and Banana Town perceived women as money-oriented, a perception that indexes a concern that even close kin cannot be trusted.

Walsh (2009: 63) has described this as a 'loss of confidence' in an exchange system, and I think that his suggestion has a wider import here. We are not talking about mistrust in a generalised sense, nor its productive uses in discourse and practice (Carey 2017), but rather the threat posed to a moral value of social continuity by consumption that eats cash – the very lifeblood of that continuity. Meanwhile, confidence in the new orientation – consumption – becomes more and more overt as that begins to look like the moral orientation embraced by others. What interests me about this exchange of words is that a self-interested worldview attributed to others becomes the basis of one's own self-interest. If even family can forget you, negating one's efforts in life to

sustain it, what else is there to do but embrace the temporary but nonetheless compelling fun of alcohol? Consider Mwaura's take on this:

In my view, I think it's happening, because that's why I think many people are selling their land and just drinking the money. Because when you look at some people who have sold their land they haven't done it for a specific reason like something that makes sense. They're just doing it because they want money to make their lives more comfortable than they are. So I think that's why they're doing, because they think their families aren't worth being left the land so they think they'll also sell the land. (Fieldnotes, 17th May 2018).

Questioning Mwaura about such attitudes the day after the burial, he shed doubts on his own father's legacy. 'If Paul Kimani dies, we'll mourn him like a month then continue with our lives, maybe sell his truck, maybe sell his land'. Was that what he really thought? I pushed him to commit to what he had said. He back-tracked. 'I'm just saying'. And what about the dangers of selling the land? Mwaura shook himself, recanting quickly, 'I can't support that motion'. But my doubts had already begun.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how father figures in Mashambani frame their responsibilities and obligations to familial aspirations (in terms of education and paving the way for their children to inherit their land) in an active voice. This is the product of a contrast these men are able to make between their actions and those of social others in the broader peri-urban milieu. They make this contrast on the basis of a moralising distinction between 'good' economic activity – hustling for wages, economising and budgeting – oriented towards familial futures and 'bad' economic activity – land sale, alcoholism – that evokes the consumption of money that could be otherwise put to 'good' ends.

The chapter raises questions about the 'breakdown',⁶² as it were, or of a loss of confidence in the value of wealth in people – of investing in the future of one's family. It suggests that some

⁶² This should not be confused with Zigon's rather more phenomenological understanding of 'moral breakdown'. What I refer to here is closer to Walsh's (2009) notion of a loss of confidence in a system, or even Iza Kavedzija's (2016) notion of a loss of hope in a given norm or moral aspiration. Yunxiang Yan (2011) has noted that Zigon's notion sidesteps the question of immorality and suggests a much less strictly phenomenological or subjectivist approach than the latter's 'moral breakdown' by studying contestation, including narratives about moral breakdown as I do here.

father figures have come to see their obligations as a fool's errand, since their legacies as dutiful fathers will hardly be remembered by ungrateful kin. Wives in particular are seen as threats to their legacies as fathers. I return to this theme in Chapter 5 where I show how familial continuity is seen as under threat by women who are viewed as covetous of men's inheritances, narrativised in misogynist discourses as people who are self-interested, desiring to consume wealth at the expense of others. To the extent that consumption, or desires to consume, are viewed as a threat to life projects oriented around the family's future flourishing, they provide a backdrop for men like Kimani to claim moral personhood. It evokes the pride and satisfaction still available to men by living up to certain norms of virtuous patriarchal life, even as those norms are under threat.

Youth

or,

The Greedy Eaters

Karuri is a town that has gone to the dogs [...] In my two months at Karuri, I can declare it is the most horrible town in Kenya. Banana Hill is facing self-extinction from drugs, illicit liquor and prostitution. Brothels are big business [...] Every youth is a Mungiki adherent and their oath of silence is mystical. The youths must be the laziest in the world yet they eat and drink. Churches are for the old who know their youth are beyond redemption.

- Letter in the *Daily Nation*, Sunday November 24th, 2013

Mtaani life ni so hard so utado venye utado kutafuta pesa ya kunyua ili kupunguza stress (In the ghetto life is so hard so you do what you have to do to get money and drink so you can lower stress)

- Gaku, 24, Banana Town, Kiambu County (Diary Entry, August 2017).

The problem with we black people is that we like what comes easily and hate working hard. Yet we love good things. Because we hate the work that achieves good things, we eventually lack the necessary effort. For if you want to get something good, you must sweat for it.

- Henry Muoria, 'What should we do, our people?' (2009 [1945]: 145).

The previous chapter (Chapter 3) reflected on the economic lives of patriarchal figures able to attain a degree of virtue through their achievement of moderate economic stability. We saw how adult men like Paul Kimani – who worked to save his income for his children's education – scorned those who ‘ate’ money that he argued ought to have been spent on school fees but was in fact spent on short-term fun (*raba*) through the sale of inherited land. These practices of, and ideas about, investment were compared to a once hegemonic moral value in central Kenya that emphasised social continuity in kin relationships – and the wealth that guaranteed it – as the basis of achieving ‘civic virtue’, the self-respect and respect of others that was the basis of being recognised as a person.

The contrast between a life of familial obligation and a life of fun defined by consumption can be better viewed by engaging with those closer to it. As such, I now want to turn to a very different demographic in peri-urban Kiambu – younger men, usually between the ages of 20 and 35 or so, who are generally unemployed and often vilified as ‘idlers’ or indeed criminals by mainstream middle-class opinion. These are the types of men who can regularly be found in bars behind Banana Town's *matatu* stage or by the side of the road, chewing mũgũũka (cheap *kebat* leaves bought at 50 KES a bag, favoured by youth I knew).⁶³ Whilst on the surface the connection between such a demographic and Kimani and other male patriarchs might seem tangential, what I argue is that their perspectives on the life of fun can further explain the aforementioned contrast between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ accumulation and investment that Kimani’s words evoked, studying the latter via the perspective of those that practice it. Whilst many young men in Banana Town are engaged in the ‘hustling economy’ of Banana Town – working periodically as *matatu* touts, construction workers, or carriers of goods for market traders – their lack of obligations to family dependants combined with their marginal status usually means that what small money they earn is quickly spent on the transient experiences of fun and intoxication afforded by alcohol, mũgũũka, and marijuana (*bhang*). Immediate returns for labour were usually immediately consumed.

⁶³ Throughout fieldwork the USD to KES conversion rate hovered at around 1:100.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to know a group of such young men in Banana, men who are all too aware of their structural impoverishment in a Kenya where actual employment is as hard to come by as a briefcase full of money – which some of them optimistically dream of happening upon. So too are they aware of their lowly status in the eyes of the aspirant middle-class who suggest – to the contrary – that they are simply ‘lazy’, men who have chosen not to work in favour of an easier life lived ‘*ishirini ishirini*’, from one 20 KES coin to the next or, in other words, between hand-outs from *makangas* for helpfully helping to fill *matatus* at the local stage with passengers.

These young men are emblematic of what has been called the era of ‘surplus people’ in the Global South – of a capitalism that produces GDP growth without a concomitant expansion in employment (Li 2014: 3; Ferguson 2015; cf. Hart 1976; Iliffe 1987). Attending to the lives of such men, a large and growing ethnographic literature now exists on the subject of ‘hustling’ youth, a structural poor seeking piecemeal work in the informal economy, (see, e.g., Di Nunzio 2019; Sommers 2012; Thieme 2013) and a notably better off demographic of youth in ‘waithood’, able to idle because of their access to support from their wider families (see, e.g., Mains 2012; Masquelier 2013).⁶⁴ The two phenomena are connected, as we shall see in this chapter, but it is the wider anthropological approach to the predicament of youth unemployment that I want to dwell upon at present.

In writing about the structurally unemployed, anthropologists have tended to focus on the agency and creativity of youth in spite of their circumstances. Alcinda Honwana (2013: 4) writes that ‘youth in waithood are dynamic and using their creativity to invent new forms of being and interacting with society’ (cf. De Boeck and Honwana 2005; Weiss 2009; see also Durham 2000: 117). In a similar vein, anthropologists have argued that ‘daily survival strategies’ (Honwana 2013: 4), lifestyles of ‘getting by’ (Thieme 2018) or ‘moving around’ (Di Nunzio 2019), are not defined by mere subjugation to brute economic marginalisation, but by an inherent agency (cf. Simone 2004). As Thieme writes (2018: 542), ‘diverse forms of hustling can become integral to a potentially progressive politics of adaptation and experimentation [...] experiments [that] have the potential to resist, escape, and rework hegemonic structures of power in incremental ways in the everyday city’. In a similar vein, Marco Di Nunzio (2019: 4) argues that for his young male interlocutors in Addis Ababa ‘Getting by and surviving are not mere experiences of letting oneself live and breathe. They are what ultimately enables the actualization of existence as a site of

⁶⁴ The phenomenon of youth ‘waithood’ is by no means limited to Africa or the Global South (see, e.g., Jansen 2015; Jeffrey 2010; O’Neill 2017).

possibility'. He seeks to explore how his interlocutors cultivate 'open-endedness' and possibility throughout their everyday uncertainties (ibid.: 3).

Whilst I share the desire not to render the lives of our interlocutors mere epiphenomena of wider economic structures, I am concerned about the direction of this literature for two main reasons. As others have noted, the vitalist or potentialist aspect of such writing risks romanticising the plight of the structurally unemployed and precarious, 'valorizing sparks of indeterminacy' (Jansen 2016: 54). Ivan Rajković has called this 'the virtue of precarity' (2017: 54). I share Matteo Rizzo's concern that 'the celebrations of the choices and repertoires of "people at the grassroots" crowds out an understanding of the concrete realities they face' (2017: 7).

But there is also an adjacent problem in so far such literature imposes concerns derived from Euro-American social and critical theory onto youth lifestyles. Anthropologists have become fixed on the *form* of the predicament youth find themselves in (that is to say, the question of identifying agency or potential), rather than the ideas that circulate about masculine personhood, uprightness, ideas and norms against which they measure themselves and debate their predicament in situ (see, e.g., Dawson and Fouksman 2020; Jones 2020). As I set out in the introduction, one of the achievements of historians of central Kenya has been to show how young men struggled to achieve masculine personhood when its material basis had been removed. In the 1950s, young men in central Kenya no longer able to establish patriarchal households took to the forest but continued to debate their new status as proleterians (Lonsdale 2003: 31). The *Mau Mau* rebellion was one of economically disenfranchised young men. It is in the vein of underscoring debate, argument and contestation amongst youth as they articulate and comprehend their predicament, that this thesis intervenes.

Extending this thesis' inquiry into ideas and debates about the morality of economic life and practice, this chapter comments on the style of accumulation adopted by some of my young interlocutors during their previous lives as petty criminals, though one they are now keen to distance themselves from – that of 'getting rich quick'. In the previous chapter we saw a discourse emphasising long, slow, hard work reproducing one's family. In this chapter we see the speed of accumulation objectified as the ideal, so too a lifestyle of consumption. The problem of living on low wages is shown to create a situation of hopelessness that manifests in desires to rapidly appropriate large amounts of wealth in order to simulate a better life, one lived by wealthier men from the peri-urban milieu, men of a similar type to the successful but nonetheless consuming patriarchs we observed in contrast to Kimani in Chapter 4.

If what we see in this chapter are young men articulating an alternative moral ideology of accumulation, one that emphasises instant returns and 'living for the moment' (Day et al. 1999),

then what I strive to show is that such patterns of consumption stem from an inability to make significant wealth legitimately. In other words, there is a logic to criminal practices for those whose low wages grant them little to no buying power in a highly aspirational social context. Since consumption is valorised as the sign of a life well lived, it is practiced to momentarily experience a life that is not one's own, though this is ultimately little more than a transient replication of lives desired.

Ultimately what I show is that styles of accumulation come to fix status, inscribing young men with certain types of reputation they struggle with even after having left lives of criminality behind. Where crime is abandoned for relationships with other 'well-up' youth, there are stark limitations to the pursuit of aspiration through sociability even for the self-declared morally reformed. In the final section, I show how, despite such reformist projects, the moral substance of overconsumption and criminality sticks to the youth in question, denying them recognition by others as moral persons. Some youth attempt to distinguish themselves from others of their peers, narrativised as thieves, beggars and social failures, and declare themselves on their way to becoming 'serious' and responsible adults. But even where distinction is sought, the power of their narratives to overturn their moral status in the eyes of others remains limited.

Surplus people – Cash, Iregi, Gaku, and Henry

Throughout 2017 I travelled regularly from my host family's homestead on the outskirts of Banana Town to the northern fringes of Nairobi to meet with my Gikūyū language teachers for lessons. A *mzungu* man passing through Banana Town on foot was probably something of a strange sight. Whilst white Kenyans were known to live close to the tea plantations further north beyond the town of Raini, they would regularly pass through the town by car and would rarely be seen in the town itself. My frequent journeys through the *matatu* stage during the day and night meant that I soon became a familiar face and something of an object of curiosity (partly owing to my faltering speech in Gikūyū) to the array of petty traders, mini-bus touts (*makanga*) and drivers for whom the stage was a place of work. Before long, these brief encounters in and around the stage led to acquaintances and then friendships, as they did in the case of Cash.

In early March 2017 during the campaign period for Kenya's then upcoming elections I had stopped on my way through Banana's central thoroughfare to observe an aspiring politician addressing a group of middle-aged and elderly men who – I had come to appreciate – tended to hang around at the particular part of the street where the politician had found himself

campaigning. Struggling to comprehend what was being spoken in rapid Gĩkũyũ, I was soon helped by the assistance of a stranger who took it upon himself to explain something of the event that was unfolding in front of me. The youth who had offered to reflect on the scene introduced himself as Cassius.

Not long after our first meeting, Cassius, or Cash as he was often called, opened a small kiosk selling basic household foodstuffs opposite the transport stage – items like *mandazi* (a popular doughnut like snack often eaten at breakfast), loaves of bread, sachets of powdered hot chocolate. Stopping to talk with Cash at his shop or at the stage soon became a regular part of my day. He quickly came to understand my research interest in the economic travails of Kenya's youth – the '*majanas*' (a Sheng modification of the Kiswahili *vijana*, denoting male youth, sometimes pluralised as in English) - and he became a thought-provoking interlocutor as I began to find my feet on the streets of Banana, often taking it upon himself to represent the quality of their lives to me, the *mzungu* anthropologist outsider.

That he was living in an era of youth unemployment and underemployment was not lost on Cash, and he described the street as almost 'filling up', as it were, with ever more jobless youth. 'Ok, we're not the only ones', he explained one day at a barbershop where we sometimes hung out. He was referring to himself and his friends who hang around 'in the street'.

There are older guys too [who are jobless]. When we were in school they were there, and they're still there [now in their 30s]. Ok, some have left, but the ratio is small. All the time they're getting more and more [...] I'm telling you Peter, if you come back next year you'll find a whole bunch of new guys who've just finished school (Cash in Fieldnotes September 26th, 2017).

It was 11 o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday and Cash gestured towards the 'video' behind the *matatu* stage where *majanas* gather to watch the latest Hollywood action blockbusters. 'And you know there's like another 50 guys in there now!'

After meeting Cash, I began to hang out with him and his friends, first whilst passing through the town, then at local bars and cafes, and finally at their houses and in their rooms where we hung out after drinking, smoking *bhang* and listening to reggae. There were mundane moments, spent watching films, chatting about football and national politics. But there were also times when Cash and his friends would deliberately represent their lives and troubles to me in instances like the above. I suspect I was viewed as a sympathetic listener, a contrast from local Banana Town

people who, my friends would emphasise, ‘can’t help you’ out of what they took to be a generalised fear of young people and perceptions of their criminality.

To learn more about their everyday lives, I distributed diaries to Cash and a group of his friends (those mentioned here include Gaku, Iregi, Henry and Musa).⁶⁵ This allowed me to observe more keenly their hustling lifestyles built upon small amounts of money from temporary work and hand-outs from friends that were spent more or less straight away on food or cheap substances. What also became apparent was the sheer amount of time on their hands. Unless they happened to have a temporary job, my interlocutors’ lives oscillated between leisure and labour. Consider, for instance, this diary extract by 22-year-old Gaku.

6: 00 am – Wake’s up early to get physical training

8: 00 am - I go to do civil work (as a cohort for the government) up to 2:00

2: 00 pm - This the only time I stay idol [idle] in street (Banana bus station), where I interfeer [interfere] with drugs (*bhang* [cannabis], tobacco, *miraa* [i.e. *khat* leaves]) but it not in my will to do that, it life which puts me there.

4: 30 pm - goes to the field to do physical training (playing football which keeps me feet [fit], also we are in a subcounty league in banana playing with team's in Kiambu county but lacking support from the community which make it had [hard] for other youth lacking job in street). The so called Banana community takes youth as a thief but we know the bad and the good.

6: 30 pm - This time is the betting and gambling time in street

10: 30 pm - I enter home and also supper time

Written in August 2017, the above excerpt describes Gaku’s training regimen since at the time he was playing as a defender for a local football team called Believe Soccer. Gaku had managed to secure ‘civil work’ for the local county as part of its programme to rehabilitate alcoholics. Gaku

⁶⁵ I commissioned these diaries amongst a group of ten young men aged between 20 and 30 in exchange for 500 KES per completed diary. Cash acted as a broker for the process, helping me explain to his peers that I wanted to understand their daily routines. In essence, the aim was to understand basic information about where young men in Banana hung out, and what they did with their time. I had not specifically encouraged any wider reflections, comparable with what Susan Watkins and Ann Swidler (2009; cf. Ashforth 2015) undertook in their collection of gossip via diaries in Malawi. The aim was therefore not to record what others were saying via my own interlocutors, sourced as ethnographers in their own right (what Watkins and Swidler call ‘hearsay ethnography’). What was returned to me in the diaries was astonishing, however, in so far as the reflections I found went far beyond daily routines, implicating moral sentiments, the shame and injustice felt by young men cast as ‘idlers’ and ‘thugs’ by Banana’s ‘working class’. Since these young men wrote their diaries for the white anthropologist, they undoubtedly had an audience in mind. But since I had explained my research project to them beforehand, my political and moral sympathies with the predicament of Kenya’s unemployed youth and my intention to relay something of their predicament to western audiences, I would suggest that their accounting took place in relation to the gaze of a potentially sympathetic audience to whom they took it upon themselves to make their lives legible.

swept the streets and cleaned local buses in exchange for a small amount of cash – approximately 300 KES, practically 3 USD. It was one of the ways in which the local county government had attempted to create income for local unemployed youth and recovering alcoholics. It is therefore notable that Gaku likely spent some of that income on ‘drugs’. It is equally notable that he emphasises that it is not his ‘will’ to be ‘in the street’ but the conditions of his life. Desires for steadier incomes and formal employment are widespread amongst men like Mbugwa who resented working for low wages and being paid unfairly by bosses on construction sites.

An excerpt from Iregi’s reads much the same way.

I started finding money to eat lunch cause time is running and I have no work. I started to move here, there finding something or someone who can just give me anything. When I was in my walk someone asked me do you want work [.] I asked what kind of work. He told me it was for carrying sand with a wheerbrow [sic] [.] I asked him how much he was paying and he said he’ll give me five hundred shirring [Kenya shilling] [.] I said okey [.] I did my job until 6 in the evening [.] I went back home took a shower[,] went to a pedlar who sells weed bought three of them [pre-rolled joints] went back home to relax and I could say that was my day [.] (Excerpt from Iregi’s diary, 21st August 2017)

Gaku and Iregi’s words speak to staccato lives of uncertain cash-hunting (Kalb et al. 2016), and the tendency of young men to spend their wages on alcohol (*njohi*), cannabis (*bhang*) or cheap *khat* leaves (*mũgũũka*) as soon as they had been ‘found’, often to relax in the evenings, see them through the working day, or merely ‘push hours’.

In this regard, the daily routines of Banana Town youth evoke not only ‘waithood’ in Alcinda Honwana’s (2013) usage – their lives defined by boredom (Masquelier 2013) in which time is to be ‘reduced’ (*kupunguza masaa*) - but also ‘moving around’ (Di Nunzio 2019: 17) in search of opportunity. Distinct from the demographics of graduates who are able to bide their time applying to government jobs described in other accounts of youth waithood (see, e.g., Mains 2012; Masquelier 2013), these are men with more pressing financial needs – wondering about where the next meal will come from, or the next glass of beer. In general, they lack economic support from their families that would allow them to ‘wait’ indefinitely.

In the process of articulating their economic predicament, however, men like Gaku reflected not only on their boredom and their precarious livelihoods, but their moral status in their

own eyes and the eyes of others.⁶⁶ Gaku argued that it was not his ‘will’ to be in the street, Cash said that it was where he had ‘found himself’ (*nimejipata*). Their claims to morality recognised their problematic reputations in the eyes of middle-class onlookers who see them as having forsaken normative teleologies of masculine becoming. ‘Ask them why they won’t do those jobs [on the tea plantations],’ Mwas (26), one of the aspirant members of the Star Boyz football team once said when I discussed with him the predicament of the Banana Town boys. ‘They’ll give you some funny answers like, “These jobs are for Luhyas.”’ For Mwas, such men were lazy, having apparently decided to avoid manual work, thinking it befitting of Luhya migrants from western Kenya.

For Banana Town youth, claims to morality were informed by the distinctions they could make from social others who had resorted to crime, not least those of their peers who had joined the Mungiki gang that extorted cash from the local transport industry as a protection racket would. But Banana Town boys also distanced themselves from their own former lives of petty criminality, reflecting back on their desires ‘to have it all now’, to be rich in other words. Theirs had a problem of low wages and grand desires. As we shall see in this chapter, their hustling predicament overlapped problematically with images of vast wealth glimpsed in Kiambu’s peri-urban milieu – of rich businessmen driving SUVs, of hip-hop artists, not to mention known persons and friends from ‘well-up’ backgrounds. Spending money instantly was a solution to the problem of their structural poverty – to spend as if it was in abundance, simulating the lives of the wealthy, knowing it would take a long life of careful economising to reach that point.

In their diaries and in our conversations, Banana Town youth articulated and questioned the morality of taking from others to fuel short-term consumption. Consider, for instance, excerpts from the diary of Henry, one of my friends from Cash’s circle and a talented footballer whose fleet-of-foot eventually won him a position on the government’s National Youth Service programme through which he left Banana.⁶⁷ His entries tell the story of a man caught between desires to enjoy life, to be rich, and his addiction to alcohol. The son of an alcoholic, Henry found it difficult to stop drinking once he started.

20th August [2017]

⁶⁶ Daniel Mains’ (2012) ethnography of youth in Ethiopia also demonstrates how categories of person are shaped by the associations of particular types of accumulation and the aspirations associated with them (or lack of). Young male graduates avoid taking on menial jobs because they are associated with social failure. These young graduates preferred to wait for a government job by making repeat applications and ‘waiting’ in the meantime, since a government job provided the wages to be ‘someone’ by helping others – in other words, by having the capacity to take on dependants.

⁶⁷ Re-established by President Uhuru Kenyatta in 2013 as means to reduce youth unemployment, the ‘new’ NYS involves paramilitary training and the potential to be recruited for the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF), the national army.

Today I woke up having a good feeling of how the day is going to be a perfect day for me, having dreamt of how rich I was going to be. I make wristbands, so I went to town, bought some beads coz I ran out of beads on the weekend.

When I came I opened my “*kibanda*”

Some customers came and gave me order to make them 6 wristband. I charge 200 for a wristband. I was very happy for that day, slept well and thanked GOD for that day

28th August

Today no cash in my pocket, I had a lot of bad thinking on how I was going to get some cash. I saw a drunked man early in the morning. I went and robbed him but there was some witnesses who saw the whole thing. They knew me, they knew where I lived. So they told the police coz the man went to the station and reported that he was robbed and he knew who had robbed him, that's me but I went into hiding, coz I couldn't stay at home.

The subjective consequences of immoral forms of accumulation are in question here. Banana Town youth understood and articulated their predicament as a structural one. Like Gaku and Cash who ‘found themselves’ in the street, Henry told me he simply had ‘no other options.’ But their solutions to this predicament were archly moral – to retain a degree of moral fortitude in their own eyes and eyes of others by not resorting to crime, reforming oneself and abandoning that lifestyle. Decisions to resort to crime to fuel addictions and desires come with evident risks to one's life and reputation. As we shall see, not giving in to the temptations of immediate accumulation via theft was claimed a marker of moral personhood and maturity. As Gaku insists, although perceived as thieves, Banana Town boys ‘know the bad and the good’. Before observing the moral consequences of immediate accumulation, I want to explore how desires for wealth and conspicuous consumption fuelled by crime are structured by a terrain of inequality.

Urban Kiambu County – a landscape of aspiration, inequality and crime

Kiambu County has long been associated with crime and urban poverty. Its proximity to Nairobi and burgeoning population in the colonial period conferred on it the status of a dormitory suburb to the nearby city (Kitching 1980: 120). As we saw in Chapter 1, shrinking land sizes throughout the colonial period brought about by expropriation and subsequent population growth forced large numbers of Kikuyu into waged work in growing towns and nearby Nairobi (Iliffe 1987: 67-8; cf.

Lonsdale 1992: 356-9). With urban poverty came desperation and Kiambu began to gain a reputation for criminality. Government documents from the immediate period after independence show a rising rate of crime in Kiambu, a situation summarised by the District Commissioner in the early 1970s.

[...] the unemployed population is proportionately on the increase both in the city which is our neighbour here and similarly in the villages of the rural area. Going unclothed without food, and shelter is quite enough temptation to drive anyone/anybody into criminal life with all the risks likely to be encountered. To my mind this is one of the main reasons accounting for the current increase crime wave. Second reason is perhaps the present tendency and attitude in the minds of many people to “get rich over night” [...] ⁶⁸

It is intriguing that a DC would also comment on the desire to ‘get rich quick’ and I shall return to this below.

The town of Banana itself has a particular reputation throughout Kiambu County and in nearby Nairobi as a former headquarters of Mungiki, a group that has been variously construed in academic literature as a neo-traditionalist sect (Smith 2008), a gang (Anderson 2002: 532) or a youth movement (Rasmussen 2010). The general narrative – both from scholars and from my interlocutors in Banana – is that Mungiki began as a Kikuyu neo-traditionalist movement whose adherents saw themselves as inheritors of the *Mau Mau* rebellion of the 1950s. In Banana, Mungiki embraced criminal activity in the mid-2000s and began extorting businesses for money under threat as a protection racket might (Van Stapele 2007: 13-14). Local men I knew who worked in the transport sector as bus drivers remember the fees that Mungiki had to be paid under duress. One story I was told involved a bus driver being beheaded for causing a stir with Mungiki youth. In areas like Banana, Mungiki was eventually crushed by the strong arm of the Kenyan state in the form of Minister of Internal Security John Michuki, whose ‘shoot to kill’ order gave rise to flying squads of police that would gun down Mungiki suspects where they stood.

Today, urban Kiambu’s history as a place of crime sits uneasily with the gentrification of its southern border shared with Nairobi. The city’s expansion northwards has brought with it a number of changes – rising land values and the emergence of desires to sell inherited land or to become rentiers, a growing influx of newcomers to the busy urban rhizome, the construction of middle-class apartment blocks, along with enormous new shopping malls that rise out of the landscape like fortresses. What interests me most for the purposes of this Chapter, however, is the

⁶⁸ KNA S/6067. Republic of Kenya. Kiambu District Annual Report 1973.

emergence of new types of conspicuous consumption in towns such as Ruaka, which are replete with bars and *nyama choma* (grilled goat's meat) joints where middle-aged men, usually in their 30s at least, go to drink beer at weekends.

We saw these men in the previous chapter – successful men that have ‘made it’ in the parlance of my interlocutors, who have jobs in Nairobi either in government agencies or in businesses such that they can afford cars and bottled beer at 160 KES – rather unlike the cheap jugs of locally brewed *keg* beer that poorer youth purchase at 50 KES per cup. As men with incomes and status they embody not only a middle-class discourse that values wealth production but equally counter-vailing practices of wealth's consumption for the sake of momentary fun as part of a culture of weekend drinking. Though drinking is condemned in some circles, particularly in its most excessive forms, older and economically successful men are seen to have earned the right to spend surplus wages since it is often seen that their domestic lives are in good order. It is in such spaces that masculine sociability defines itself in relation to the ‘womanly’ (*umama*) logic of the household, defined by social etiquette, propriety and the careful saving of cash. More transient experiences are embraced in male company, as we shall see below.

The point I wish to make here is that desires to be a certain type of man emerge from the appraisal of others in a broader social milieu. Comparison of oneself with one's friends and other unknown figures becomes the basis of self-knowledge, self-respect, or indeed self-loathing. The other crucial point is that wealth is what structures these relationships, in a terrain of ‘social comparison’ and envy (Desplat 2017: S122; cf. Foster 1972). There was a vast chasm between the *majanas* I knew in Banana and those of the status they desired – hip-hop artists, gospel musicians, business tycoons. It is the place of comparison across gulfs of status that I want to expand on below, with a particular attentiveness to Cash and his friend Iregi and their attempts to cross this gap.

Reaching for Wealth – hopelessness and impatient accumulation

‘We like comparing ourselves with people whose lives we cannot reach’ (*twendaga kwūiganania na andũ tūtangĩkinyĩra maica mao*). These were the words of Iregi in April 2018 towards the end of my fieldwork. I had met him at a cafe in the centre of town where he sometimes hung out with other local youths chewing *mūgūũka*. It was there that Iregi usually waited alongside his peers for an opportunity to make a small amount of money, either by ‘asking’ (*kūhoya*) others to give him a

few coins or a 50 KES note or by taking a job offered by local market traders, such as transporting goods from the road-side and up the hill to Banana's market place.

I had met up with Iregi together with Cash. After spending time with them throughout my stay in Banana, staying up late chewing mũgũũka and drinking together in bars and at their friends' houses, I had wanted to pin down Iregi's life story and since Cash had known Iregi for a long time, the two friends decided to speak to me together. In the dingy back room of the mkahũa, the three of us sipped warm *chai* tea and Cash and Iregi began talking about what had motivated them in their previous lives as petty criminals when they had often worked together. Switching back and forth between English, Kiswahili (in its Sheng creole) and Gĩkũyũ, Iregi had recollected his reasons for robbing pedestrians in Banana at night time:

IREGI: You see like Cassius, that boy [in] their home there is money [i.e. they are from a 'well-up' family]. Why can't I get [from] them my money? So you take advantage – beat people, beat up people.

CASSIUS: To be on that level! So that we can hang out. If they're going to this club, you want to go to this club, you're young - you don't want to be at home. But at the end of the day these guys didn't work for this money. They've been given from their parents.

IREGI: When you find your friend has money, [and] you don't have. And you're trying to tell your friend, 'Give me something. Give me something'. He refuses. So when you go outside you see my friend has money, I don't have. [You think,] 'I'm gonna steal that person and I'm gonna go back there with my money [to the club]'

CASSIUS: It's your money when you get it. (Interview, 21st April 2018).

Marginal distinctions between local youths are keenly read and palpably felt through the medium of cash to be spent on the 'fun' (*raba*) of drinking. 'To reach for' (gũkinĩyĩra) something implies not only a distance, sometimes a chasm of wealth between oneself and another person, but the desire to forcibly take it and experience a life that is not one's own.

For men like Iregi and Cash the point of stealing was to facilitate experiences in which they could not normally partake – to simulate having skipped forward to an imagined future point in life in which they would (at that point, it was imagined) be rich. Comparison with others implicates one's own aspiration and the difficulties achieving it via normatively legitimate means.

‘You know most of us guys ain't got no patience’, Cash once told me.

Let's say I work in my shop and I work for like two days and I still ain't got much money, I'll want to give up. Most of us guys see those rich guys like, I've got some friends living at Crystal Plaza, these apartments near the market paying 15 K rent [i.e. 15,000 KES]. 15 K! And I'm working the whole month to see that much. You start to lose hope. (Fieldnotes, 7th April 2018).

In other words, it was hopelessness about being able to accrue wealth gradually that fuelled impatience. Honest work produced amounts of money that were simply too low in relation to the wealth possessed by known others.

Cash's words chime with the experiences of other young men I came to know in the area. Youths who had become addicted to alcohol were described as having ‘lost the hope of life’ (kūaga mwihoko wa maica), men who tended to spend their wages on alcohol (njohi), *bhang* or mūgūũka as soon as they had been ‘found’.

Raha, however, ought to not have been simply drinking to forget worries on a short-term basis. Ideally, it was an image of abundance. Cash's gloss on *raha* was an image of ‘when you're in the club, buying drinks, with girls, whatever’. Rather than simply ‘fun’, *raha* evoked an aesthetic of conspicuous consumption native to the context of contemporary Kiambu that I described above as being glimpsed in the lives of successful Kikuyu businessmen in the broader peri-urban milieu, but also in the music videos and images of hip-hop stars widely consumed in the area – for instance those of US gangsta rappers like Tupac Shakur and Dr. Dre.

Such aesthetics are also familiar from other accounts of youth in Africa (see, e.g., Fumanti 2012; Mains 2012; Newell 2012) and masculine sociality elsewhere (Papataxiarchis 1991; Marsden 2007). As I noted above, Banana is a context in which wealth is associated with a good life, though consumption when performed by those who are seen as wealthy is not seen as problematic by young men like Cash and Iregi, but rather as an outward sign of abundance. It was precisely that such abundance was off limits that made it desirable to simulate by forcibly stealing the wealth of others. *Raha* was the infinite capacity to have fun forever more.

Some of my own experiences with Cash and his friends involved nights of drinking, mostly funded by myself and others of his friends from well-up backgrounds. However, these were not so much evenings of raucous fun but of slowly drinking more and more until retiring to one of Cash's friends' houses to smoke *bhang* and listen to reggae at ridiculously loud volumes. I had the sense that the levels of *raha* Cash reminisced about from his younger days when he would go to

reggae clubs in Nairobi were never quite reached. *Raha* seemed other to our more modest experiences, even those that could be facilitated by an anthropology PhD student's research budget.

Nonetheless, our evenings drinking gave me some sense of what *raha* was, even if Cash, Iregi and their friends had to some extent retired from aspiring towards it. In particular, I was struck by the desire to reach alternative states of being through drinking, chewing mũgũũka and smoking *bhang* towards the end of the evening. This desire to experientially inhabit a desired aesthetic has been captured by Magnus Marsden in his notion of 'locally situated social aesthetics' that "'infuse" intellectual and sensory criteria for beauty with notions of personhood' and that such social aesthetics may focus particularly on locally embedded notions of manhood (Marsden 2007: 474; cf. Herzfeld 1985; Willis 2002). To experience *raha* implies the capacity of wealth to facilitate particular experiences that cannot be reduced to outward-oriented performances. This is why Sasha Newell's similar work on youth 'bluffing' in Cote d'Ivoire cannot entirely capture the nature of *raha* since its focus is primarily on the performance or demonstration of a 'spectacle of wealth' through drinking (2012: 99). At outdoor bars (*maquis*) Newell explores the types of conspicuous consumption in which young men engage in order to perform status outwardly to audiences in a local politics of reputation (ibid.: 106-8, 118). What is underplayed in Newell's account is the significance not only of images of wealth created in this process but the experiences of dwelling in this performance of wealth – which is how I understand *raha*.

The point I wish to reiterate is that as a social aesthetic, *raha* was generally the preserve of figures that men like Cash and Iregi observed either in the social milieu or in music videos. For them, experiences of *raha* were a simulation of a lifestyle they did not possess. To partake in *raha* – even momentarily – was to cross the chasm of wealth between themselves and others.

Stolen cash was the best means of partaking in *raha* since it had been acquired at little to no effort. But whilst stolen cash could afford experiences of short-term fun, the money itself retained a problematic quality because it was ill-gotten. This money was often referred to as mbeca cia werere, 'easy come, easy go money'.⁶⁹ Consider here, Iregi's description of the moment when stolen money runs out.

I don't know what I can tell you, Peter, because when you get these things your man tells you to go in the club, take beer, take girl, take a girl, go with a girl – you see you have

⁶⁹ Like *pesa nono* ('money gained without effort') described by Mario Schmidt in western Kenya (2017: 281, 293), mbeca cia werere could be ascribed to various transactions. However, there was a strong consensus that as money gained from *others* it was fundamentally tainted, never leading to good things, cursing the one who spent it either figuratively or reputationally (their criminality eventually coming back to haunt them).

money. So when the money finishes, now is the time you hear the police are searching for you. And you don't have anything so you don't have money to run. You cannot go anywhere. And you go to prison. This money can't help you. That's why I'm telling you I have decided to live my life, when I get 100 Shilling that's what I have earned, I tell God thank you and I take that 100. Because, Peter, that life [of petty crime] is hard. (Interview, 21st April 2018).

Likewise, Cash maintained that it was impossible for him to use money he had earned working in his shop since it had been hard earned.

CASH: If you have earned *your money* so you can't spend it just like that [...] I can't go. Like right now I'm earning my own money right? I can't take all my money to a club and drink alcohol with it. I've worked for this money so *I've got to do something with it* so I can prove whatever.

PETE: You can't waste it.

CASH: I won't waste it. (Interview, 10th September 2017).

Although Cash iterated to me – an outsider and a listener – that he was on his way to better things via more legitimate means, the reality was somewhat different. Towards the end of 2017 I began to find Cash's shop in Banana closed, and I soon found out that Cash had begun drinking his proceeds rather than investing it in further items to stock. In our private conversations, Cash recognised that this was 'not good' and that he needed to be careful with the amount he was drinking. Cash would nonetheless somehow justify it to himself, that it made sense to 'have fun' now whilst young, but that in a few years he would become 'serious' (see also Cooper 2018) and abandon the lifestyle he currently led.

'The greedy eaters' – impatient accumulation now and then

Wanting to be rich when one's capacity to accumulate is constrained creates the conditions for an ideology of accumulation based on instant returns. Violence becomes a viable option to accede to the wealth one views in others, but at a moral cost. Summarising literature on the morality of

accumulation in a number of southern and eastern African contexts, James Ferguson (2006: 72-3) observed a distinction between socially productive wealth that produced social relations and a social future, and destructive accumulation that exploited and extracted wealth and social futures from others. And as we saw in the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 3, central Kenyans continue to distinguish between socially productive wealth and destructive expropriation, often by contrasting gradualist accumulation for household continuity with acts of predatory accumulation. In the previous chapter, Kimani appeared to be the living embodiment of this norm, the products of his 'sweat' (thithino) purposed towards the social continuity of his household in his hard work to acquire wages to be spent on school fees.

Cash and Iregi's 'get rich quick' ideology embodies its short-term opposite. However, in line with this thesis' interest in the 'moral politics' surrounding accumulation, I want to go further than simply establishing a contrast between types of accumulation and expenditure, one that is hardly unfamiliar in anthropological scholarship, as we observed in the Introduction (see e.g., Elliot 2018; Blunt 2019; Parry and Bloch 1989). I want to focus on the moral implications of adopting a certain mode of accumulation as they play out in the social world. The lives of men like Cash and Iregi, maligned as they are by middle-class figures in *Banana*, suggests that when a life of immediate return is lived for too long, one becomes associated with it, becoming little more than a bandit, a socially excluded one at that. Exploiting the wealth of others risks one's reputation. The extensive literature on witchcraft accusations stemming from perceptions of anti-social accumulation attests to this (Ferguson 2006: 72-3; see also Colson 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; Smith 2008). The moral consequences of living life for immediate returns will become clearer in the following section but first I want to further illuminate the moral politics of this contemporary scenario by looking briefly at the region's history.

In the midst of the transformations brought about by rural capitalism in the 1930s and 40s described in Chapter 1, family lineages in central Kenya - mbarĩ - broke their ties with non-kin, evicting tenants (ahoi), who tended to be young men or migrants that had sought opportunity by working for more successful lineages in Kiambu. As land became more and more valuable with over-population in Kikuyu populated reserves, dependent tenants were turfed-out by household heads who sought to secure their own claims to land on the basis of a purified understanding of lineage-based rights (see also Lonsdale 1992; Kitching 1980; Sorrenson 1967).

In dispensing with vertical relations of moral patronage and opportunity that defined mbarĩ in normal times, horizontal age-based loyalties were strengthened. Young men took to survival in mutual company, resorting to banditry. The term *Mau Mau* itself was derived from a

derogatory onomatopoeic moniker for such bandits: the greedy eaters (Lonsdale 1992: 349). Survival was secured through predatory accumulation.

Before the advent of these transformations, mbari had embodied gradual, moral accumulation whilst young men (anake) had taken to armed raids to accumulate large numbers of goats much quicker and through which they could pay bride price for wives, turning wealth won at speed into a normatively moral future at the site of the homestead. Observing the tendency towards ‘impatience’ in the 1950s, Catholic missionary Father Edmondo Cavicchi speculated that behind these practices was an aversion to *dependence*, and that young Kikuyu preferred instead to instantly acquire wealth that would move them rapidly up the social ladder:

It is interesting to note that the young-men at the time strongly disliked the idea of coming into property through long, hard work in peaceful occupations. They, admittedly, preferred to acquire it in the quick and direct way, - by violence and robbery, - and were prepared to face extinction in the case of failure, rather than drudge through their lives in work at limited profit. [...] I believe that behind the young-men's dislike in “spending their lives in digging elephants’ pits” [i.e. on the land of others] was the slowness of the process in coming into their own, more exactly the dislike of serving directly somebody else's purposes and only indirectly their own. (Cavicchi 1977 [1953]: 83-84)

Cavicchi's account suggests that in the mid-20th century, like today, young men preferred instant high yields rather than the slow gradual work their fathers advocated, knowing that vast inheritances lay in the future. The perception of others' achievement masked the work that had gone into it, spurring on desires to accede to wealth in the here and now. Cavicchi, curiously, appears to reject a culturalist or deterministically psychological account - that Kikuyu were ‘warlike by nature’ [*ibid.*] - embracing instead an emphasis on situated relationships between Kikuyu persons and wealth, which were, as well, relationships between themselves and desired and valued statuses.

But his account raises another important question: what happens when young men attempt to acquire wealth quickly, but cannot turn it into responsible patriarchy? What becomes of the reputations of those who acquire wealth ‘in a quick and direct way’ but remain on the social margins, always expending what is stolen on fun, ending up dazed and confused in police cells?

Before turning back to ethnography, further examples of historical comparison point in the direction of tarnished reputations difficult to recover. This returns my account to the second epigram with which I began the chapter, an excerpt from the writings of Henry Muoria, a Kikuyu intellectual, self-taught journalist and pamphleteer who wrote in the midst of the social and

economic transformations of the mid-20th century. His pamphlet, ‘What should we do, our people?’ (*Tungika atĩa, iya witũ?*), was a deliberate attempt to cultivate a specifically Kikuyu response to the changes brought about by modernity: wage-labour, migration to towns, and the temptations of urban life and consumption. ‘This book is addressed to adults who are concerned about what we can do to help ourselves’, he wrote in the introduction. ‘The writer has written the book in order to help people do the following as quickly as possible: to awaken the country, to fill people with happiness and strength, and to make them rich and praise God’ (2009 [1945]: 157). Written whilst he worked as a railway guard, the text is emblematic of the moralising tone with which the apparent ‘idling’ of men like Cash and Iregi is met today. Muoria had written his pamphlet after his disappointment with his ‘fellow Kikuyu’, that they spent their time ‘playing drafts or laying about idly doing nothing outside a café’ (Frederiksen 2006: 157). Muoria’s pamphlet was an exhortation for Africans, ‘black people’ (*andũ airũ*), to seize the opportunities that had been presented by white people (*athũngũ*), particularly education (*gĩthomo*), towards the ends of a specifically Kikuyu national rejuvenation (2009 [1945]: 218-222). The project of Muoria’s moralising was not anti-colonial revolution but domestic propriety and prosperity – expressed in the Anglican terms his mission school education had taught him – that imagined a nation of successful Christian householders (Lonsdale 2009: 30).

Muoria’s writing about thieves allows us to perceive further the sedimentation of a logic that associated poverty with crime, the total inversion of such an image of flourishing.

If you have no source of income you become poor, and worry makes you waste away. Also, if you are not very mature in mind you become a thief [...] If someone lacks something and is in dire need of it, he will strive to get it by any means [...] That’s why we say a thief is also a murderer. To find a good source of money therefore brings great joy [...] (2009 [1945]: 143)

To return to Cash, Iregi and Gaku, their reformation from their former criminal lives was self-narrated as a moral achievement. We saw a glimpse of this above in Cash and Iregi’s reappraisal of the morality of a well-earned wage, as meagre as it could be.

Reaching for wealth in other ways – distinction and the limits of dependence

If by the time I met Cash and Iregi, their lives of crime had been put behind them then desires

for *raba* had hardly faded as a result. Cash was still spending his income from his shop on drinking and hanging out with his friends, despite emphasising his plans to ‘get serious’ to me whenever possible. Cash, unlike Iregi, was always making plans for the future. One day in February 2018 I was passing through Banana when Cash arrived drunk from a nearby bar with a book of his rhymes and poems that he now declared he would record at a studio in a nearby town. Cash’s dreams were not always of fame, however. He assured me throughout my research that if I were to return to Banana in 10 years I would find him, Iregi and the rest of their friends ‘stable’, living in houses with wives and children. These were modest dreams for a more middle-class standard of wealth – one not merely encoded in consumption but in the production of children and households as moral entities. For the time being, one of the few ways to experience *raba* and be close to a desired life was through relationships with ‘well-up’ youth.

In January 2018, I returned to Banana Town for the first time after returning to the UK over Christmas. That day, I had planned to go and watch a game of football attended by my friends and neighbours who played for a local team named Star Boyz. Having taken the bus from Nairobi, more or less as soon as I disembarked in the centre of Banana I heard Cash call out to me from somewhere around the stage. It looked as though he had come from one of the nearby bars. He was with a friend of his I had never met before called Max. Our meeting, although happy, had a somewhat chaotic quality. Cash was on Max’s phone shouting loudly in Gikũyũ for someone to send him 1000 KES via mobile money transfer. Iregi soon arrived to say hello. It was only then that I realised Cash had been drinking. As he continued to argue over the phone, Iregi quizzed me about the ‘promise’ I had made him, to bring him a smartphone from the UK, though I could not recall having done so. It was Iregi’s style to claim I had promised him something, usually a small amount of money, so that I could not refuse to give it to him before he went on his way to an *mkabua* to take tea or a bar for some *keg*.

Cash encouraged me to accompany him to his friend Musa’s house, which was behind the stage. Musa was one of Cash’s ‘well up’ friends. His father had built a stone house before he had died in the mid-2010s. As we walked, Cash filled me in on what I had missed. He insisted that local construction had begun again and that many of the boys had now got work at local construction sites. Cash also told me that whilst I was away he had started at a local college learning how to repair mobile phones. He and Max were planning on going to Nairobi that afternoon and drink there. As we walked, Iregi followed, continuing to request a gift from me. ‘A promise is a promise, Petah’, he went on. I offered to buy Iregi a drink but Cash became irritated by his presence and told him to be quiet. Iregi returned a torrent of abuse at Cash. Iregi told Cash that since he was ‘well up’, he did not need to ask me for money. Iregi was defending his request on the basis of his

economic status. But Cash retorted, claiming he was not ‘well up’, and that it was only his family that possessed wealth, not himself. ‘If I’m gonna come up, I’ve got to do it by myself’. He turned to me. ‘Pete, you know I ain’t got nothing, but I can’t ask you – I have to make it myself.’

We found Musa digging in the grounds of his house, building the foundations for a new concrete wall funded by his elder sister who had married a German citizen and who was now living there. We greeted each other, chatted for a bit, but Cash was keen to continue towards a bar and we left soon after arriving.

After leaving Musa’s place, the tense situation between Iregi and Cash continued. Cash insisted I stay with him and Max before leaving to Star Boyz and drink some *keg* with them. Cash remonstrated with Iregi and his ongoing requests whilst I stood with Max who was starting to become concerned about the numbers of people he might have to buy drinks for beyond Cash. ‘I can’t sponsor all these guys’, he told me, as another of Cash’s friends arrived from a nearby street. It was a disparaging comment. Increasingly Iregi looked like a desperate hanger-on. Max, a taxi-driver, was an earning man, and I wondered if he had been roped into the day out by an enthusiastic Cash.

Eventually we settled at a nearby bar, a typically dingy place with painted concrete walls, one that sold *keg* as well as traditional Kikuyu spirits. Max bought a jug of *keg*, and I took a couple of glasses after buying some for Iregi. The situation calmed down. Soon Cash began to narrate his friendship with Iregi to me, emphasising that they had been together since they were young, that they ‘came up together in the street’. My doubts about such narratives grew, however, with the distinction between them made palpable by Cash’s desire to associate with better-off people. Eventually, I left, determined to watch my friends at Star Boyz with Iregi in tow.

We found the players at a pitch near the centre of town, lining up ready to start the game in their makeshift Borussia Dortmund kits. Somewhat drunk by that point, Iregi began asking the players for money including Kariuki, one of my friends who was waiting on the sidelines in a substitutes bib. But Iregi was greeted only with silence. ‘Peter, tell your captain to give me something’, Iregi insisted. As the scene unfolded, the players looked on Iregi with borderline amusement but generally remained silent. The team’s captain laughed at him openly. He was easily ignored. Kariuki eventually offered Iregi a 20 KES coin though his offer was angrily refused. Frustrated, Iregi gave up and walked off. The referee’s whistle blew and the game kicked off.

These two overlapping scenes brought together people who I, and my interlocutors, registered as having different types of status. Whilst for Cash, association with well-up persons allowed him to draw closer to the semblance of a life he desired, Iregi’s begging distinguished him as a person lacking value.

The episode speaks to themes discussed in Chapter 2 - the limits of aspiration and social advancement when pursued through relationships, a topic that has been rediscovered by Africanist anthropologists interested in questions of hierarchy, obligation and dependence in light of precisely such aforementioned contexts of 'surplus people' (Ferguson 2013; Englund 2015). Naomi Haynes' ethnography of Pentecostal Christians in Zambia's Copperbelt region provides a useful point of comparison for my purposes again here. In a context of aspiration and material lack amongst poor Pentecostals, Haynes argues that relationships that span economic difference are the most effective for realising 'moving'. Haynes' ethnography posits movement as a central value – a multivalent concept that encompasses notions of 'development', in terms of being a civilized modern person (see also Ferguson 1999; Smith 2008), but also aspiration for a better standard of material life, of owning nice furniture and a well organised kitchen (Haynes 2017: 37-47). Haynes argues that friendships across different socio-economic strata are useful in so far as patron-like figures allow less financially well-off dependants to pursue their own advancement within these relationships (cf. Ferguson 2013), either by borrowing money and household items or simply by partaking in their company, watching television in the houses of the better-off. I am sympathetic to Haynes' argument (see especially 2017: 46-7), and I agree that friendship that spans socio-economic strata has advantages for both parties.

Yet what I think we encounter here, with Cash and Iregi's friendship is a quite clear limit to the aspirations or desires that can be pursued through relationships when one has accrued a certain status already (see also Mains 2012). Iregi was seen as a beggar by other Banana Town youth. Even to Cash, he could be a troublesome companion. His practice of begging was scorned not only because it was degrading but because it appeared foolish, providing no 'forward movement' along the masculine teleology towards responsible adulthood. 'How could a man live well on such meagre hand-outs?', the thinking went. Cash wondered openly to me about Iregi's future, whether he would marry and where he was going in life.

Details from the life histories of the two men illuminate the difference between the men even further. Cash, I found out as our friendship grew, was from a family that other youth described as 'well up'. Unlike many of his friends who took work in construction or 'hustled' more generally in the peri-urban wage economy (carrying water and market goods in exchange for small sums of cash, for instance) Cash was able to benefit from his father's economic assistance in a variety of ways. Consider, for instance, that Cash was only able to open his kiosk because it was on inherited land owned by his father who had decided to waive the rent Cash would pay unlike practically every other shopkeeper. However, as we saw above, Cash was often unable to take advantage of the opportunities his father's money brought him. His kiosk soon shut down in late

2017 before eventually being reopened by his cousin and run much more successfully. Cash returned to a life of hanging out during the day and drinking before undertaking a course at a local college in mobile phone repair that he dropped out of in 2018. It began to dawn on me that Cash's projects and dreams for a better future rarely lasted long enough for him to see them through.

Unlike some of his age-mates Cash had fully completed secondary school to Form 4. He had begun boarding at a school in Kikuyu (in the western part of Kiambu) but half-way through his time there returned home. It was there that he found a different state of affairs from the one he had known whilst in primary school. Due to circumstances related to his father's alcoholism, Cash's mother had left his parental home, leaving Cash to care for his younger brother and cope with the regular fall-outs from his father's drinking habits. Arguments often flared up between him and his father, often leading to Cash leaving his home and staying with friends of his in the neighbourhood. In the absence of parental care, Cash began to rely on his friends in the neighbourhood, regularly staying at their houses rather than his father's, and in his late teens he began a life of petty crime. This is where his friend, the 24-year-old Iregi stepped in.

Iregi's story is more ambiguous than that of Cash. Like Cash, he was born in Banana. His father died when he was young, leaving his mother to care for him, his brother and older sister. According to his narrative, for three years he became a *chokora* (a street child, lit.: scavenger) 'in town', that is to say in Nairobi. He then returned to school in Banana but dropped out in Form 2 (at around 16 years-of-age) because his mother could not pay his school fees. Iregi later began a college course in Thika to become a mechanic (*fundi*) but dropped out of that too. On returning to Banana, Iregi's parents refused to support his education any further, and he came to the street to pass the time and search for work where he could find it.

This was how Cash found Iregi upon returning to Banana from Kikuyu. The two soon became acquainted since one of Cash's uncles had married into Iregi's family. The two began hanging around together, engaging in petty crime of a range of types. Iregi robbed people violently, whilst Cash's self-professed style was to con people. Henry had used a method described as *kupigia watu ngeta* – a type of mugging that involves coming up behind the victim and pressing a plank of wood (placed under one's sleeve) into their neck, choking them unconscious before stealing their valuables. All of them had spent time in local jail cells, and in government prisons too.

One of Iregi and Cash's joint tactics was to rob illegal breweries that sold *chang'aa* – a 'third generation' spirit that was cheaply bought and popular with day labourers. Since the breweries themselves were illegal, Iregi and Cash could steal from them knowing their proprietors would have the difficult decision of whether or not to involve the local police. One story involved Iregi

hiding for over 24-hours in Banana's sewage pipes to evade the police that a brewer had nonetheless decided to call in response to Iregi taking cash from him.

These life histories illustrate the status distinction between Cash and Iregi. By the time I met him, Iregi lived his life, in Cash's somewhat denigrating terms, 'only thinking about tomorrow'. Iregi's description in his diary, presented above, of his 'finding' cash by asking friends and strangers in Banana belies his status as something of a beggar. Whilst he occasionally took odd jobs, his typical days involved drawing together small hand-outs of cash extracted from friends and peers who had work. He was scorned by more aspirant, middle-class figures in Banana. And as we will see below, Cash maintained that he was more 'serious' than Iregi about constituting a legitimate life in the eyes of social others. In this respect, and as we shall see below, Cash's ideology of wealth reflects that of aspirant middle-class people in the broader social milieu that see wealth as something gradually acquired through hard work and sensible investment.

But the limitations of aspiration in friendship in a general sense can be seen even more starkly if I turn to another situation where distinctions arose.

Towards the end of 2017 Cash admitted to me that he had been spending less time 'in the street' because of his new friends from 'well up' families. Others in the street had begun to remark to him that 'these days you're walking with rich people' (*siku hizi unatembea na mapunk*). For Cash, these friendships were more than just the instrumental appropriation of fun, however. As I mentioned above, they were relationships through which he could dwell in another aesthetic – through which he could imagine himself as wealthy, moving towards a better life. What was at stake was not only consumption but his being, his capacity to value himself as a person, and being with people that allowed himself to value himself as a person upon whom social worth could be conferred. To hang out with aspirational friends was to inhabit their world.

But as I soon learnt, there were limits to such aspiration or 'reaching' in relationships even for Cash.

I was out in Banana with Cash and two of his new friends, Njau (22) and Thomas (23) who I had met only briefly before. We had been drinking *keg* since the afternoon, when we watched Arsenal beat Watford 3-0 at a bar behind the *matatu* stage and then moved to another similar dive bar chatting where other youths were now huddling around TV screens watching Manchester United. It was at the previous bar that Martin, one of Cash's friends from 'the street' who I knew relatively well, had arrived in a state of drunkenness and begun arguing with Cash, Njau and Thomas – demanding that they share their alcohol with him or at least buy him his own jug of *keg* for 150 KES. Njau and Thomas refused, though Martin continued to drink from a jug the four of us had purchased. Arguments broke out, with shouts from Cash that Martin should 'stop' (*tiga*)

and ‘calm down’ (*hũrera*), his normally friendly tone switched into abrupt imperatives. Martin eventually passed out unconscious on the bench from which we watched the football match unfold. After the match, the four of us decided to leave him there to sleep, though I note here that when I saw him the next day Martin apologised profusely for his actions.

Back at the second bar I was now drunk and so was Njau who began taking it upon himself to elaborate something of the social context of Banana to me. ‘Who do you think are the ones robbing people?’, he asked, an implicit reference to the *majanas* of the town like Martin who had shown up earlier. ‘They aren’t cool guys’, Njau maintained before turning his attention to Cash. ‘When we found this guy...’. But Njau did not finish his sentence, not only because Cash was sitting next to him but also because he wanted me to derive his meaning. Njau’s paternalistic reference implication – that he and his brother Thomas had ‘found’ him in his previous situation and somehow improved him – was not lost on Cash who looked taken aback, almost hurt by the reminder of his background and how that appeared in his new friend’s eyes. Thomas moved to intervene: ‘Ok, ok, this is getting too personal now, let’s change the topic’. The episode was quickly forgotten and the four of us went to Thomas and Njau’s room at their grandmother’s house where we smoked *bhanga* and watched videos of Cash rapping in Sheng on Thomas’ computer.

Cash was usually the one telling me something of the lives of his friends in Banana, mediating their predicament and its contours. Suddenly he had been upstaged by someone who claimed the capacity to represent him to the anthropologist, and hardly in a positive light. Cash’s desire to reach for the lives of those to whom he compared himself appeared limited by his having absorbed the qualities of life ‘in the street’. Rather than transcending his background, he found in his friendship with Njau and Thomas a looming reminder of their distinction from him, and a life he might not reach.

The problem of recognition

Run-ins with the police were common for men like Cash, Iregi, Henry, Gaku, and Musa. Their lives ‘in the street’ made them easy targets and the police would usually extort them for small amounts of money or arrest them in order to extract cash from their parents in exchange for release. This sort of harassment by police, however, was seen by the men themselves as the result of local *mtiaji* (snitches) who judged them simply for being youths hanging around on street corners. There is a sense in which – to the gaze of strangers and malign authorities in Banana Town – they are all in the same boat, viewed as malign persons by social others. The practice of

‘greedy eating’, as I referred to short-term accumulation, stuck to men like Cash and Iregi, became how they were recognised and the basis upon which they could be judged by others and their reputations known. Through their diary entries and discursive formulations, Banana Town youth showed they understood that they were viewed as thieves (*aici*) or bandits (*wakora*) by better-off social others. Musa had a particular hatred of the ‘*nyumba ikumi*’ initiative, essentially a neighbourhood watch of ten local households, since they had once landed him in trouble with the police for spending time in the street late at night. By the same token, Banana Town youth created counter-discourses about the ‘Babylonians’ of Banana Town (*mabab*), ‘rich kids’ who had not earned their own money or the *mtiaji* that reported their apparent misdeeds to local police. Practically every Banana Town youth had a story of an unfortunate run-in with the police and saw it as a direct result of their criminalisation.⁷⁰

Anthropologists writing about the era of structural adjustment have appropriated the term ‘abjection’ to describe this feeling, on the part of young men, of social failure (see, e.g., Masquelier 2013: 473). James Ferguson (1999: 236) borrowed the term from Julia Kristeva to describe how Zambian mineworkers felt when mines were privatised, and they were forced to abandon their aims of becoming consciously modern persons in a globalising world of which they and Zambia would be a part. Returning to rural homes, mineworkers, Ferguson tells us, felt themselves ‘thrown aside’ or ‘discarded’ by the modern world which they had dreamt of being apart.

To anthropologists studying youth, ‘abjection’ aptly captures a sense of social failure and self-loathing brought about not merely from one’s apprehension of oneself but from knowledge that one is coded by social others – the external gaze weighing on one’s mind. Marco DiNunzio usefully reframes ‘abjection’ in terms of an awkward relationship between presence and exclusion (2019: 105). Young men in Banana were part of a social world in which they could dare to dream – to aspire to wealth – but their predicament and the normative weight of social expectation, that demanded they prove their value as persons by evidently working, meant that they were excluded. It was in narratives that they sought to recover their reputations, some of them given to the anthropologist, others absorbed in *genge* rap popular in Nairobi, in reggae music that objectified the ‘struggle’ of living in the streets, and in their own personal relationships with God. Cash often iterated to me his desire to believe, his personal doubts, but nonetheless underscored his personal relationship with God that took place outside of the church.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Kimani claimed to be a virtuous father through his proper moral obligation to his children. He knew he was doing what he believed to be right. But for men like Cash, the gaze of others weighed rather more heavily, the knowledge they were not

⁷⁰ The criminalisation of youth in Kenya is discussed at greater length by van Stapele (2015, 2016).

living up to 'moral' masculine lifestyles in an overt sense. Their virtue was civic, a moral state through which one came to apprehend oneself as a person through one's public life. What was at stake for men for Banana Town youth was not prestige but at a more basic existential level, recognition. Consider here, the words of Pierre Bourdieu:

The social world gives what is rarest, recognition, consideration, in other words, quite simply, reasons for being. It is capable of giving meaning to life... One of the most unequal of all distributions, and probably, in any case, the most cruel, is the distribution of symbolic capital, that is, of social importance and of reasons for living (Bourdieu 2000: 240-242)

Whilst Bourdieu here describes recognition as a more fundamental, possibly universal sociological process, I want to adopt the notion in so far as it is embedded in the moral landscape which I have been describing throughout this thesis. Simply put, one's appearance and actions are coded by social others according to existing, historically contingent notions about what is good, and what is not. Practices of accumulation figure highly in the formation of reputation, so too the appearance of idleness and abjection. Young men in Banana Town live with this situation of either anonymity or misrecognition whereby they are coded as criminals by social others. Getting a job becomes a problem. 'There's no one who can help you', Musa and Iregi both liked to remind me. Their status had rendered them beyond the rungs of obligation and assistance they believed middle-class Banana Town residents extended towards each other.

Conclusion

In his study of male unemployment in a Catholic community in Ireland, Leo Howe took a specific interest in 'how and why others attribute particular values and ideas to this category of the poor, and how they then appropriate them for their own ends' (1998: 77). Howe was able to show that mainstream opinion about the poor and unemployed was replicated amongst themselves as an internal division – in other words that even amongst men of similar backgrounds, moral distinctions were made about who deserved material assistance from the state and who did not. The poor argued over the divide between deserving hard-workers and the underserving apathetic.

If Cash could be patronised by his new friends for his origins in the street, he could at least positively distinguish himself from Iregi. Whilst Iregi was someone Cash genuinely cared for, and sought to look after as a brother, never to see starve, he remarked to me privately about Iregi's

lack of direction in life. ‘He’s just there’. Cash told me how Iregi had never observed contemporary fashions as he did, nor was he seen with a girlfriend. Cash could at least say that he had aspirations to a normative domestic life and a modicum of respectability from peers and *mapunk* (the flash young earners with whom he associated), incomplete as they were then. Iregi’s future was far more uncertain, an uncertainty that made him liable to be judged. As short-lived as Cash’s projects for fame, money and status often were, Iregi’s short-termism appeared more deeply embedded. He had no apparent desire to move forward in life (*gũthĩ na mbere*) or ‘to improve himself’ (*kujiimprove*). If lifestyles of banditry are ascribed to young men in Banana Town through their visibility in the street, some could contest them better than others.

Conventional virtues, mainstream moral teleologies of masculinity, structure the lives of Banana Town boys as they do patriarchs of the rural homesteads. Domestic propriety stands opposed to the consumption of wealth and its destruction. In the midst of this contrast between social continuity and generational destruction, lives are lived that accrue meaning in a network of relationships between persons of varying degrees of moral status both recognised and unrecognised. The unequal distribution of wealth and its structuring of practices of accumulation distinguishes the impatient, greedy eaters from the ‘trying’ and ‘suffering’ aspirant middle-class in a moral politics of wealth that fetishizes visible effort. A hegemonic morality has been inherited from the successful and their successful narrativization of work as the basis of their wealth, a product of Kenya’s history and unresolved contradictions between the moral and the material.

Inheritance and land disputes in central Kenya

When I returned to Mashambani in 2019, the neighbourhood had noticeably changed. Perambulating around with Mwaura once again, like we had in January 2017 upon my first arrival, I found that the distinctive orange of the dirt road that cut through the neighbourhood had been overlaid with stones in preparation for it to become asphalt. At the roadside we found a group of men, neighbours from Mashambani households, finishing their day's work filling ditches made during the road's construction. 'Peter! We've become an estate!' (*Tumekuuwa* estate), one of them remarked, surveying the new road.

The excitement about 'becoming an estate' evoked the wider transformations taking place on the outskirts of Nairobi – the construction of gated communities of fine houses springing up elsewhere on the city's periphery, not to mention the desire to dwell in such luxurious neighbourhoods. In 2019, I could not help but notice the rental 'plots' that had been constructed at many of the neighbourhood's homesteads.⁷¹ Back in 2017, only one or two homesteads played host to these one or two-storey rows of 'bedsitters' as they are often called – single rooms, primarily aimed at young men and women who have left their parental homes from nearby and further afield, seeking independence and opportunity in Nairobi and its urban environs. Mashambani looked noticeably less rural than it had, even in 2018 when the construction of these newer plots had begun. It really *was* beginning to look like an estate. Everyone, it seemed, was making plans for the future through investment in plots.

⁷¹ Though living in the rental accommodation built on the land of Kiambu residents does not involve accessing formal title nor demarcated plots (compare Elliot 2016: 116), the buildings themselves are often referred to as 'plots.'



Photograph 15: Completing Mashambani's new road.

*

If the wider neighbourhood was becoming 'more of Nairobi', as Mwaura once described this process of urbanisation, things in his family were not as I had left them either. The death of Kimani's elderly mother Leah Njoki at the astonishing age of 100 had reconfigured the strip of land that had been divided between him and his siblings. Dispute had ensued.

Recall that throughout 2017 and 2018 Kimani and his family were living in a temporary wooden house located on land that formally belonged to his mother. He was still constructing his

stone house on his own plot (to which he held a title deed) further down the hill at the end of the strip of his father’s land which had been divided amongst him and his siblings.⁷² Though now roofed with corrugated iron, Kimani’s house remained incomplete in 2019, as it had in 2018.

Throughout my fieldwork, Kimani’s mother’s land continued to provide a home for his youngest sister Wangui who had never married. Other than Kimani’s brother Murigi, who owned land further up the hill towards the aforementioned road, the rest of Kimani’s siblings had left Mashambani long before my arrival in the field. One of his sisters, Gathoni, was married in a nearby town, and his eldest brother Gikonyo had sold his plot to start a butchery business in Nakuru (an unsuccessful one according to Mwaura, who wondered if the ‘curse’ befalling those who sell land had begun to take effect).

Murigi's land	Land belonging to Kimani's mother (and the location of her stone house). Where Kimani's temporary house was located.	Kimani's inherited land where he was constructing his stone house
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Figure 1: The strip of land divided between Kimani, his brother Murigi and his elderly mother and youngest sister Wangui in 2017-2018.

Throughout 2017 and 2018, Murigi, Kimani and Wangui had lived together peaceably, even if their own relationships were not noticeably friendly, though Murigi regularly frequented Kimani’s homestead in his brother’s absence, checking on his nephew Mwaura’s status, giving him and me gifts of bananas and goat’s meat. To us he was nothing other than friendly, and Mwaura saw him as a dutiful uncle, ‘my very good friend’.

The dispute disturbed these relations.

The death of Kimani’s mother had prompted an informal redivision of her land by Kimani himself to aid the return of his elder sister Wangeci to her father’s land. In 2017-2018, the time of my original fieldwork, Wangeci had been living in Banana Town after a divorce. In the wake of his mother’s death, Kimani insisted that given his elder sister’s circumstances – her lack of a home, to be specific - she ought to be given a plot of her own. Informally, their late mother’s land was to be divided between Wangeci and Wangui, and when I arrived in 2019 Kimani, Mwaura and Catherine were happy to announce to me that Wangeci was returning to live with them. Mwaura

⁷² An adjacent strip of land was divided between the sons of Kimani’s father Gatheo’s second wife.

was proud to have helped Wangeci construct the foundations of a small stone house. Even if the plans had stalled, the brickwork barely a foot high, it was a sign of intent.

Jim Murigi's land	Wangui's land (Where Kimani still resided, temporarily)	Wangeci's land (where she was constructing her house)	Kimani's inherited plot (where his house was under construction)
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Figure 2: The strip of land re-divided between Kimani, Murigi and his sisters after the death of his mother Njoki in 2019.

But not everyone was happy with Wangeci's return from Banana, least of Murigi. Throughout 2017 and 2018 Murigi had regularly borrowed the space of farming land where Wangeci's house was now being constructed to plant his own crops. Murigi likely anticipated a loss of that extra farming potential, and the impact it would have on his household budget. It hardly helped that the maize on that patch of land grew unusually tall once it became Wangeci's, annoying Murigi even further.

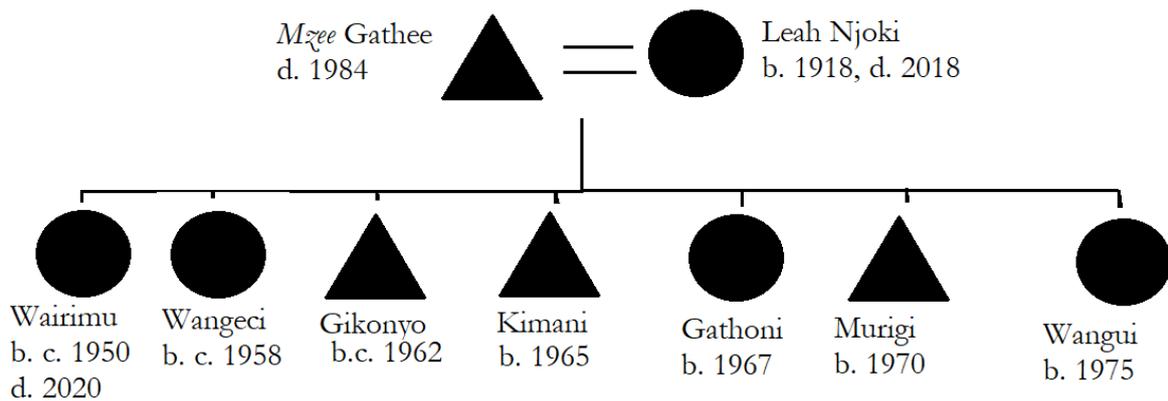


Figure 3: Family tree of Kimani's father, mother and siblings.

Whilst I was staying with Kimani's family in 2019, Murigi made his move. By teaming up with his sisters Gathoni and Wangui (the latter had remained living in her mother's stone house), Murigi pushed his own interests by proxy. Murigi claimed that his late mother's land ought to be re-divided once more, between all three sisters and not merely Wangui and Wangeci. Gathoni had been left out, or so he claimed. A new division of the late Leah Njoki's land would, Mwaura

speculated, likely lead to the destruction of the foundations of Wangeci’s stone house into which she had already put a great deal of effort. The boundaries of her own land would shift with a new subdivision, meaning Wangeci’s house would likely fall on a border or in one of her sister’s allocated plots. Wangeci cried when she found out the news of her brother and sisters’ dispute with her return and the prospect of losing her anticipated home.



Map 6: Image of the strip of land belonging to Gathe’s children as it stood in 2020.

What’s more, since Kimani had sided with Wangeci, Murigi told his elder brother in no uncertain terms that he was to vacate what he argued was surely soon to be Wangui and Gathoni’s land. Recall that it was there that Kimani’s temporary wooden house was located. In time, Murigi withdrew the container equipment from the family’s bore hole, located on his land, so that Wangeci would be unable to access water. Kimani was incensed when he found this out.

The hostility from Murigi appalled Mwaura and Catherine, who saw the claims of Kimani’s sisters as emanating from his accumulative desire. ‘There is something!’, Catherine speculated. Mwaura wondered if Murigi had plans to purchase the land from his sisters once they had acquired it in name through the new sub-division. ‘Maybe Murigi has agreed to buy the land from Gathoni, or maybe they both want to sell it’, he explained to me. Murigi was already seen as something of a successful farmer and had constructed a set of rental plots on his land already. His desire to increase his holdings seemed unreasonable, the unabashed manifestation of his self-interest palpable to Kimani’s family. Mwaura’s friendship with his uncle was over. The episode caused immense stress for Kimani and Catherine. Kimani desperately tried to raise 100,000 KES to finish

his stone house so that he could vacate the land, but to no avail. Murigi pursued his family's interests at the expense of his siblings, throwing their lives into disarray.

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On April 3, 2018 an article appeared in Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation* with the headline, 'Land disputes fuel killings in Central'. The article drew attention to the high number of murder cases across the counties of central Kenya – 64 in Kiambu in 2017, 111 in Meru. What's more, civil cases had been stacking up in the high courts of practically all of the central Kenyan counties. Across Nyeri, Murang'a, Kirinyaga, Laikipia, Meru, Tharaka Nithi, Embu, Nyandarua and Kiambu 9,899 civil cases were reported to be pending from 2017. When asked for comment, Irene Muthee, a High Court official from Nyeri, told the newspaper in no uncertain terms that intra-familial disputes were fuelling the civil cases and the murders to which they gave rise. 'Murder cases in this region are not about people meeting in the streets, fighting and one getting killed [...] If you look keenly, it goes down to land disputes,' she said, arguing that it was the failure of parents to write a will that would properly divide land and other assets between their children that provoked conflict. Somewhat coincidentally, only a few days after the headline appeared, the MP of Kiambaa, Paul Koinange, spoke in Banana Town to warn the public that land disputes over inheritance could tear families apart. 'It is very sad that people from the same family turn on each other in an inhumane way during subdivision of land and property', he lamented. Proper subdivision should be practiced, he argued, with all family members involved, to avoid disputes later.

In southern Kiambu's post-colonial geography people have reached what Tanya Murray Li has called (2014) 'land's end'. Landholdings shrink across generations with sub-division amongst multiple heirs, creating a patchwork of plots. In Mashambani, as with other such pockets of smallholders, a family may have barely half an acre on which to grow food, hardly enough to cover subsistence. Yet land remains more valuable than ever, a source of income, a place to live, and now, a place to develop rental accommodation and exploit the land in a new way – by becoming a rentier, extracting wealth from labour migrants seeking opportunity closer to Nairobi (provided one can afford, or generate the capital, to build rental 'plots' on one's inherited land). Commentators in Kenya talk about a 'gold rush' on land, provoked by a growing appreciation of its potential to generate future value, its 'capacity for development as yet unrealized' (Strathern 1996: 17).⁷³ Land values in Kiambu have risen rapidly in recent years with the northward expansion

⁷³ Elite accumulation of land is a major topic of discussion both within Kenya and in wider scholarship (see, e.g., Klopp 2000; Peters 2013). Moralising discourses speak of a 'hunger for land', a criticism usually aimed at elite families

of the city. The problem most Kenyans in Kiambu face is that because of low wages relative to the (rising) price of land, purchasing land is extremely difficult. The same can apply to different sorts of heritable property too – vehicles, animals and so forth. With wages generally low, spent on subsistence and other household commitments such as school fees for children, land acquired at the juncture of inheritance is a vital resource, inheritance itself a golden opportunity. With the stakes so high, arguments about who gets what at the window of inheritance evince a politics of inclusion and exclusion. Arguments coalesce around the question of who is in and who is out of the family, with implications for women in particular.

Catherine Boone's (2014) superb survey of land politics in Africa identifies precisely the same trend in western Kenya's old Kisii province. Since kinship remains the primary way of accessing land in places like central and western Kenya, '[s]truggles are internalized within extended families and are fought over attempts to narrow the boundaries of the family' (ibid.: 189). Land tenure reform that has fixed ownership in the name of individuals with title has only compounded the issue. The deaths of household heads who accessed title in the 1950s and 1960s has given way to a new politics of 'winners and losers' at the level of the family, with women often the losers (ibid: 62, 189).

Boone's identification of the wider historical situation fuelling intra-familial disputes in Kenya is a useful starting point. As she suggests, the 'hand of the state', not to mention Kenya's colonial history, is hidden in the lived experience of this scarcity via accusations of witchcraft and malign intent, giving rise to 'apparently apolitical or subpolitical forms of land conflict' (ibid.: 189). '[D]iscourses of loss are likely to be framed in terms of the interpersonal or family crimes of dishonesty and betrayal, rather than in terms of collective grievances of wider social and political scope' (ibid.). It is difficult to argue with Boone's analysis. The effects of land alienation in the colonial period and more recent trajectories of urbanisation have shaped a context where micro-politics of exclusion has become an essential form of survival – where private property has become a bastion of security, fixing land ownership in the name of families against immediate relatives, protecting what little one has. 'Although the family is surely an arena of land conflict in all agrarian societies', writes Boone, 'under the type of [land tenure regime] we see in old Kisii, the family is virtually the *only* arena' (ibid.: 126-7, my emphasis). In a similar vein, Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch and Tanya Murray Li (2011: 21, 166) have described the way kin members seek to exclude each other's access to land as practices of 'intimate exclusion' or 'enclosure from below'. In the context of

like that of President Uhuru Kenyatta, whose large land-holdings in areas of coastal Kenya are widely discussed in the media and by his critics as a symbol of his corruption – that he has appropriated land through his privileged access to the state.

Marsabit's Hannah Elliot calls this 'propertying' – 'material practices of claiming exclusive ownership to plots of land' (2016: 3).

This chapter returns to the immediate site of my fieldwork, a 'localised patriline' (Moore 1976) undergoing significant changes in order to observe how particular patterns of conflict and accusation of malign intent vary in relation to 'patterns of residence and animosities stemming from the exercise of power and the differential distribution of benefits derived from property and labour' (Colson 2000: 333 following Wilson 1951: 163). In the broadest sense, it underscores the significance of property relations in shaping the character of such intra-kin disputes, that by re-tethering an appreciation of local rivalries and ascriptions of greed (Dominguez 2014) to the material dimensions of kinship (Hann 1998: 34), we are in a better position to understand how economic and legal change is shaping kinship in an empirical sense.

At the same time, it aims to give greater weight to the lived experience of this material predicament, the moral arguments and strategies of inclusion and exclusion it generates. I aim to show how the history of land ownership in central Kenya is being lived as one of deepening 'negative reciprocity' in Marshall Sahlins' terms (1972: 195). I do not do this to dwell on local narratives of a 'runaway world' but to underscore how ascriptions of greed and betrayal – what Boone might indeed call a 'subpolitics' – evinces a moral and moralising politics through which central Kenyan families negotiate access to land and mediate dispute. It draws attention to attempts to *include* the vulnerable within the family, paving way for their inheritance, and the moral arguments made for doing so, as much as it does attempts to enclose and exclude others.

In particular, this chapter explores how women have been constructed in local misogynist discourse as ambiguous and threatening figures because of their capacity to both marry into wealth and simultaneously inherit land at their patrilineal homestead, which they can in turn go on to sell. For sons, such a possibility is an affront to them since their sisters gain *twice* and directly at their own expense. Land they could have inherited, goes to their sisters and then quite possibly out of the family. We have seen how important keeping land off the market was to projects of social reproduction in Chapter 3, but this chapter shows how keeping land in specifically male possession is seen to keep it off the market because of the historical association between social reproduction and patrilineal ideology (Gregory 1997: 75-8; Amanor 2010). By legal provision and now patriarchal obligation, women have been endowed with a capacity to dislodge land from patrilineal ownership. Insofar as men fear the capacity of women to commoditise land by turning it into saleable property, women inheritors provoke fears of a new type of person – a 'greedy eater' who stands for moral values of selfishness and predatory accumulation that are the total inverse of familial continuity.

Fathers, meanwhile, have begun to make provision for their unmarried daughters, even married ones, recognising the high rates of divorce make a woman's permanent transition into her husband's family less and less of a certainty.⁷⁴ Women have therefore been constructed variably (according to perspective) either as experiencing economic precarity, requiring care, or as problematic moral subjects, capable of frustrating male access to land. As fathers begin to pave the way for their daughters to inherit their land, being sewn into the fabric of family life is a deep tension between men and women, exacerbated by changing material conditions. Young men are ever more anxious to secure their inheritances because of their poor prospects in a saturated jobs market and precarious informal economy. Inheritance has become an ever more fraught window of dispute, provoking an intimate moral politics of inclusion and exclusion.

A short history of intimate exclusion

As we saw in Chapter 1, one of the defining legacies of the colonial period in central Kenya was the decimation of Kikuyu landholdings and the creation of widespread land poverty in central Kenya. Before the arrival of Europeans, Kikuyu settlement patterns reflected a tendency towards expansionist autonomy. Land cleared was land earned, a Lockean approach to ownership. Kiambu was settled by groups of migrants called mbarĩ, constituted of kin and non-kin, that established new sites of settlement in the southern forests on the northern borders of what today is Nairobi (Lonsdale 1992: 336). These southern mbarĩ were bolstered by the arrival of migrants from further north who settled on the land of established pioneers by becoming tenants (ahoi, lit. those who ask), exchanging their assistance in clearing land for use-rights in grazing and cultivation (Bullock 1974: 702-3). This land was called tha, a reference to the 'mercy' of its giver (Kershaw 1997: 14).

Such use-rights also coexisted with notions of genealogical ownership. Once land was settled, either through purchase or clearing, that Lockean approach gave way to descent-based patterns of inheritance. As Sorrenson notes (1967: 5, 9), before the advent of legal titling, property bought in Kiambu from Ndorobo became *de facto* common property of the buyer's male children, who cultivated separately on their own ithaka (sing. gĩthaka, an individual holding). In this way, sons held land via 'something less than full individual title', and patterns of agriculture remained remarkably separate with families cultivating on separate ithaka (*ibid.*).⁷⁵

The ideology of descent-based ownership was to become much more prominent in the

⁷⁴ Divorce rates in Kenya have steadily risen in recent years (Mungai 2017, May 27).

⁷⁵ See Chapter 1 note 26.

colonial period when land poverty in the Kikuyu reserves set in. The alienation of land to white settlers affected Kiambu, particularly its southern areas close to Nairobi, more thoroughly than any other area of Kenya. Alienation combined with migration to Kiambu – owing to its proximity to Nairobi – made it extremely densely populated. By the 1930s Kikuyu elites had begun to react to alienation, likely fearing further expropriation, by claiming that land ownership was exclusively patrilineal, tracing ownership through ancestry, denying in the process the claims of tenants (ahoi) who had previously dwelt temporarily on their lands in exchange for cattle (Iliffe 1987: 148; Berry 1983: 84, 117, 123; Kitching 1980: 34; Lonsdale 1992: 361-3). Successful families, particularly those of chiefs serving in the colonial administration, wrote out of history their obligations to non-kin (Lonsdale 1992: 438; Sorrenson 1967: 250). Land disputes were regularly resolved in their favour (Berry 1983: 117; Kitching 1980: 152). The narrowing process of defining kin as owners of the land began in this context of desperate enclosure.

With no formal recognition of ownership by the colonial government, land in the reserves continued to pass from the hands of the poor into those of the wealthy due to dire need (Clough 1990: 70; Sorrenson 1967: 44). Suspicion and enmity prevailed. Greet Kershaw's ethnography gives a valuable insight into the 'atmosphere of litigation' characteristic of this period, with court cases debating whether tenants possessed land as property or whether only use rights had been allotted. The anticipation of consolidation of landholdings for the growing of coffee created an even stronger desire to claim holdings as property rather than as tha, especially amongst larger landowners (ibid.: 109). 'Litigation pervaded relationships: events which normally would have been seen as unfortunate incidents, such as the death of a child in a bicycle accident, were now coloured by mutual suspicion' (ibid.: 111).

Formal land consolidation eventually began in earnest in the 1950s under the Swynnerton Plan, with the colonial government issuing freehold title deeds in a bid to formalise and consolidate land ownership (Thurston 1987; cf. Shipton 2009). The administration's plan was to create a class of wealthy enterprising peasants. Those frozen out of landholding by political expediency were to become labourers on the farms of the former. It was a plan concocted at the height of the *Mau Mau* Emergency, aimed at producing Kikuyu moderates with similar interests to European farmers (Branch 2007: 306). For poor Kikuyu who had fought in *Mau Mau* or staved-off poverty through whatever means they could, 'land registration and consolidation during the Emergency was the final, bitter, codification of mbari history' (Lonsdale 1992: 460). Wealthy Kikuyu with access to the state were able to freeze out the claims of tenants and absentee *Mau Mau* (Thurston 1987: 103). Lonsdale estimates that around a quarter of Kikuyu households in central Kenya were landless on the eve of independence in 1963. Many more had seen their holdings shrink with

encroachment by more powerful local figures.

Such was the uncertainty of the preceding years that the titling process created an anxious clamour to secure land in central province, often at the immediate expense of kin. Derek Peterson's (2008) research on the lives of *Mau Mau* detainees in the 1950s gives a sense of the panic fermented amongst those who were incarcerated by the British. Peterson writes that in 1957, a detainee named Anderson Mureithi intended to return to his village but was denied parole by his area chief. Mureithi discovered that his brother had objected to his release and did not want him to receive land from his father. Mureithi's brother intervened to block his return and his claim. The writer Gakaara wa Wanjau, also detained by the colonial administration, wrote in the same year, 'I have heard a lot of complaints here in detention from the detainees because they are short-changed on land... even from people from the same clan, and others from their own brother' (ibid.: 77).

The 'end of the land' (Li 2014) produced by titling – the sheer inability to expand anywhere else due to its enclosure – has instituted a dynamic at the heart of Kimani and Wangeci's dispute with Murigi, Gathoni and Wangui: to expand one's landholdings laterally, one does so at the immediate expense of kin, inheritance being the critical window in which one might reconfigure the boundaries of ownership as it passes from a single figure to a multiplicity of inheritors. The zero-sum logic of such disputes is given by inheritance under conditions of material scarcity – where there are few places to look for property other than within the family. It is a logic given by this history, revealed in its subdivided landscape of patchwork plots. This situation is further compounded by ambiguity over claims to inherited land that is usually held in the name of a single person, sometimes the person who originally acquired the title deed in the 1950s or 1960s (Haugerud 1995: 160). In Kiambu, as in many other parts of Kenya, whilst freehold titles have been introduced, actual access to land continues to take place on a 'customary' or what observers have called an 'informal' basis. The sons and daughters of men who received titles in the 1950s have married and established farms on titled land that has been subdivided informally, in word rather than law (Haugerud 1989: 66), creating ambiguity over precisely who should inherit what when the original title holder passes away, a phenomenon that fuels competing claims.

If the institution of formal tenure gave security to some (Sorrenson 1967: 243) whilst depriving others, particularly tenants (Kershaw 1997: 334-5), in the years since new figures of mistrust have emerged to threaten the ostensible stability that land titling has achieved: greedy persons from within and without the family who stand to embrace the zero-sum logic of inheritance, pursuing their prosperity at the expense of others. Murigi was framed as one of these by kin who saw his pursuit of their land as nothing but an injustice.

I shall return to his situation below, but before doing so I want to clarify how contemporary disputes over land turn on patrilineage in a rather different sense. Amrik Heyer (1997) observed that one of the effects of titling was to ‘root’ men even more strongly to the land, and that men’s rootedness had made them more vulnerable to women, who had a newfound geographic mobility (cf. Peterson 2001). If the claims of tenants have been written out of history by tenure reform, contemporary land disputes play out on a gendered basis over the membership of women within the patriline, and their rights to inherit patrilineal land, a dynamic evinced by the dispute amongst Kimani’s siblings.

Fiona Mackenzie’s (1989) observed this gendered pattern of land conflict in central Kenya approximately three and a half decades ago: ‘Where pressure on the land is severe, the possibility of a sister obtaining land is likely to be the source of dispute’ (ibid.: 104). In her study of legal disputes over land in Murang’a during the mid-1980s, Mackenzie underscores the debate taking place over men and women’s authority over land and property caused by a contradiction between ‘customary’ norms of patrilineal inheritance and the introduction of freehold titles in the 1950s and 1960s that instituted individual ownership (ibid.: 104-5). Conflict typically broke out between widows and their brothers-in-law after the deaths of their husbands but used title deeds registered in their own names to combat the customary claims of the former, enshrining their ownership in law. Even so, male relatives could easily block a widow’s physical access to the land if she lacked the money to take them to court, pointing to the limits of state authority in local areas (ibid.: 103). Women’s inheritance as daughters was a particular point of contestation for male kin (ibid.).

Such debates are very much alive in Kenya today. In 2019, Justice Lucy Waithaka of the High Court in Nyeri ruled in a case that allowed married women to inherit property from their parents. The ruling, in a case brought by a woman seeking to inherit land from her father, kicked-off fierce debate about the status of women. Conservatives were quick to reiterate the liminal status of women inheritors – that they essentially did not belong on their father’s land since their fate was to marry into another family. They insisted that women were ‘in between’, to borrow Marilyn Strathern’s apt description of women’s liminal status in patriarchal Melpa (1972: 142; cf. Gregory 1997: 29). Wachira Kiago, chair of the Kikuyu Council of Elders, made the point thus:

When a woman gets married, she moves from her father’s clan to her husband’s clan, where she belongs henceforth. She can only be dependent on the clan of her husband. Coming to claim property from her father’s family is like her clan of marriage demanding property from where she came from (Ndunda 2019, February 11).

Kenya's Law of Succession, commenced in 1981, has provided a point of contention ever since its introduction since it made provision for 'dependents' (including wives and daughters) to inherit from their fathers. As Jack Goody (1998: 205, his emphasis) once wrote, 'Women *with* property are the opposite of women *as* property.' Women's inheritance promised an utter subversion of patrilineal ideology in which women moved between families in this way.

But things are changing in contemporary Kiambu, and not only in response to legal innovation. Fathers (and, in this case, a sibling with seniority) are beginning to recognise their obligations towards daughters, especially because of how common divorce has become. Common law 'come-we-stay' marriages are widely viewed as uncertain prospects (cf. Neumark 2017: 750), and women regularly return 'home' to the land of their fathers, requiring a place to stay. 'Things are not like the old days', one of my interlocutors put it. Some men like Kimani have embraced these obligations to provide women from the patrilineal family with land. Even Kiago argued that unmarried women should be able to inherit. Mackenzie (1989: 104) also noted back in the 1980s that the attitude of fathers and brothers was being reshaped by the insecurity of their daughters' access to land, though scarcity made their concerns for their own holdings rather more paramount.⁷⁶ Patrilineal arguments for women's inheritance are therefore highly qualified. Only when vulnerable and insecure do women require property. Meanwhile, the worst fears of men like Murigi is that sisters and daughters who inherit will marry elsewhere and take the opportunity to sell their inheritance whilst benefiting from residing with their husbands, letting wealth that could have been theirs pass to outsiders, an act of outright alienation.

'If I can't have it...': A dispute begins

In the course of my fieldwork, inheritance had barely reared its head until 2018. It was only walking back from the Anglican Church one morning in February 2018 with Jata and Feye that it finally hit home to me how significant the figure of a parent is in the lives of their children when it comes to land. 'When our father dies that's when all of this trouble starts,' said Jata. Jata, Feye and I had been walking back from church on the backstreets behind houses and farms that lead from Banana Town towards Mashambani. Whilst the church is situated in the town, it did not take long for our walk to put us back amongst the fields – though the sight of cheap concrete apartment blocks

⁷⁶ Mackenzie (1989: 99; cf. Maas 1986) also discussed the practice of wives buying extra plots of land for contingency in case of divorce. In general, this is not an option available to women in Kiambu because of the price of land. Many would prefer to rent privately near their places of work in the case of marital breakdown, as Wangeci had been doing before Kimani insisted she be apportioned land at her 'home' in Mashambani.

under construction served as a reminder of the ongoing process of urbanisation as Kiambu residents seek to abandon farming in favour of becoming rentiers, a far less laborious form of income, if one can generate the capital ‘to build’ (*gũaka*) in the first place, that is.

Prompted by a sign denoting a ‘plot for sale’ I had started talking to them about my interest in land sales, a question that had been spurred on by the exhortations of the father of my host family, Paul Kimani, that land inherited from one’s father should never be sold (Chapter 3). Jata and Feye were cousins, neighbours from families that lived on plots of land not too far from where I lived on Kimani’s homestead.⁷⁷ Jata was 23, a university student in Nakuru home for the holidays. Jata’s cousin Feye was 25 and worked in Nairobi for a hotel in the upmarket Westlands area. Compared to younger men of their age in the neighbourhood, they embodied the successful young womanhood to which the crisis of masculinity, or in local terms, the ‘neglect of the boy child’, was usually contrasted (Pike 2018).

‘If my dad says, no one should sell these lands, the person who does is cursed then if we sell something will happen, that money will not help us or you become ill and die’, said Jata in response to my questions about ‘curses’ (*irumi*) that befall those who sell the land. But quickly the conversation turned away from land sales and towards intra-familial dispute over inheritance. This turn in our conversation was prompted by my mention of a local land dispute that I had become aware of in another household nearby. I want to recount the initial details of this dispute in full, before returning to my walk with Jata and Feye at the end of this section.

The events in question concern Mama Nyambura, introduced in Chapter 2, and the death of her father.

⁷⁷ Neither Feye nor Jata were related to my hosts by blood, since they descended from a different local sub-clan.

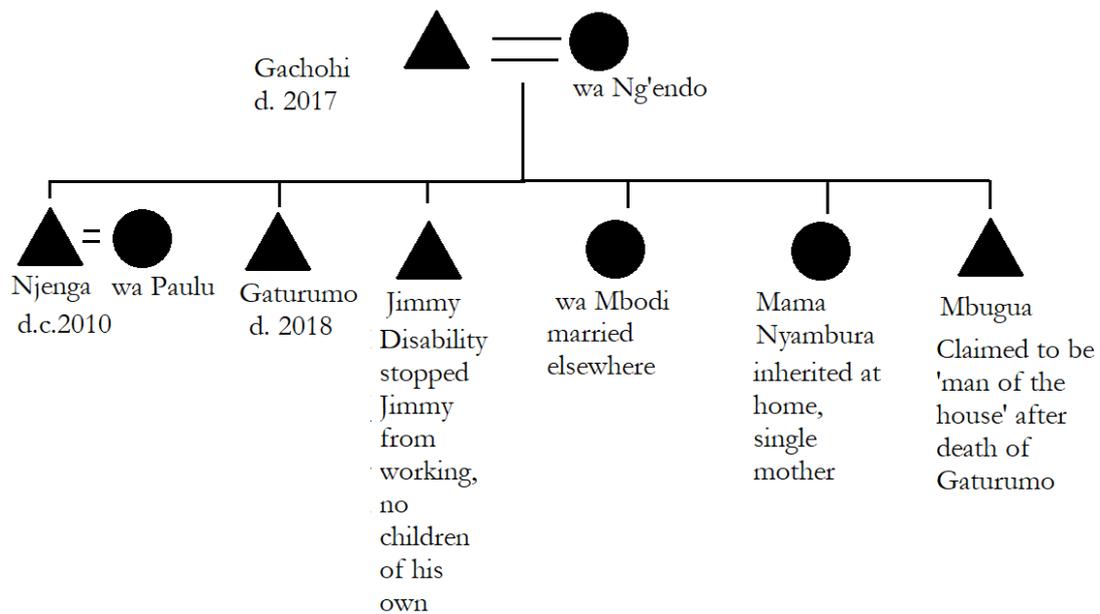


Figure 4: Gachohi's family

As the reader might recall, Mama Nyambura was a relatively prosperous figure in Mashambani who lived in a one-storey stone house on land her father had apportioned to her. She was unmarried but had a stable income and was in the process of building rental plots at the back of her home where she lived with her youngest daughter Shiko (18) whilst her other daughter Nyambura (25) was away working in China. The reader might also recall that Mama Nyambura's father, known locally as Gachohi after his role in the local alcohol trade, was something of a local notable, a man who had once sat on a regional land board under the KANU single-party state. Friends of mine from Banana Town told me that Gachohi had used his privileged position to 'grab' the land of a family in Kiambaa. Where his own domestic dealings were concerned, I found out that Gachohi had claimed a large portion of his own father's land, arguing that he had worked hard throughout his youth to accrue wages to spend on his brothers' educations. The suggestion made by Kimani was that this claim had been made unfairly, and that his family's more recent travails were a product of a curse (*kĩrumi*) triggered by that initial, now historic injustice.

Over Christmas 2017, Gachohi, had died. Soon after, in February 2018 Mama Nyambura's eldest living brother Gaturumo also passed away, leaving only her two brothers as surviving male kin - her youngest brother Mbugua (28), and Jimmy, her older brother in his late 40s whose impaired leg meant he moved around the neighbourhood with difficulty.

Immediately after Gaturumo's funeral, an argument had flared up between Mama Nyambura and Mbugua. The surviving male, as he saw it, Mbugua was now keen to take control of the family assets as 'the man of the house' (*mũndũ rĩme*). In particular, he had his sights set on

his father's pick-up truck, sitting idle on his old plot of land, but also a block of rental accommodation that his father had used to generate income specifically for his elderly wife, now widow, wa Ng'endo.

The story of the dispute, and even precise words exchanged, was narrated in our household by Catherine who had even mimicked Mbugua's demanding tone when telling the story. 'Ng'endo [Mama Nyambura's Gikũyũ name], you'll have brought all the documents here', she described Mbugua as saying in the aftermath of Gaturumo's funeral, demanding that his elder sister relinquish control over his father's estate to him.⁷⁸ The implication of Catherine's exaggerated and somewhat disgusted tone as she ventriloquised his words was clear enough to Mwaura and I – Mbugua was being utterly unreasonable.

As it happened, Mama Nyambura and her mother, wa Ng'endo, actually intended to sell the late Gachohi's pick-up truck to fund a neighbourhood shop for Jimmy. The shop would have allowed him to earn some income close to home. In the wider neighbourhood, Jimmy was seen as a good man in an unfortunate position, someone who deserved help from his family. Unlike Jimmy, however, Mbugua was seen as an irresponsible figure. He was known in the neighbourhood for his alcoholism. Mama Nyambura and her mother wa Ng'endo suspected that he wanted to sell the vehicle to generate cash to spend on drinking. In addition, Mbugua was also seen locally as something of a harsh figure, someone who belittled his disabled younger brother Jimmy, never seeing him as a 'full person' (mũndũ mũgima).

Mbugua felt that the truck was his, and according to Catherine's narrative responded to his sister and mother's refusals by resorting to the logic of patrilineal descent and its emphasis on male rights over women's: 'What? I'm the one who has been left the man of the house. I'm the one who will be overseeing dad's property'.⁷⁹

His elderly mother reasoned with him on a different basis, arguing that it was the authority of their eldest brother Njenga's (who died in the early 2010s) widowed wife, wa Paulu, to oversee the land and assets of their father. 'Wa Paulu is indeed Njenga, therefore there's no way you would be able to overtake her', Catherine quoted their mother as saying. Mbugua's elderly mother continued: 'Njenga is alive. Only if wa Paulu dies would you oversee the documents'.⁸⁰ In other words, the right to dispose with his father's assets lay with his elder brother's widow, now the living embodiment of patrilineal authority. Wa Paulu was a trusted family member, having been specifically allocated land to live at the family homestead after Njenga's death by Gachohi.

⁷⁸ Nawe Ng'endo ũkorwo ũrehethe madocuments mothe haha.

⁷⁹ 'Ati? Nĩ nĩ nĩ riu ndatigwo ndĩ mũndũ rũme. Nĩ nĩ ndĩrĩroraga indo cia baba.'

⁸⁰ 'Wa Paulu nĩwe Njenga kwoguo gũtirĩ hĩndĩ ũngĩmũhĩtũka. Njenga e muoyo. Wa Paulu angĩkua-rĩ, nĩ guo ũngĩcirora.'

Ultimately, Mbugua failed in the pursuit of his claim on his father's property. Catherine saw Mama Nyambura as being clever (*mūgi*) in her decision to keep essential paperwork such as her father's title deed to herself, rather than leave it in the house of Gaturumo's widow where Mbugua might have found it.

But what happened next confounded many of Mashambani's residents. In anger at his mother and elder sister's decision, Mbugua broke into the family compound at night and set alight to the pick-up truck and his mother's house (which is also home to Jimmy). Fortunately, the family woke up in time to ensure the house did not burn down, but the car was destroyed. Mbugua was taken to the police station, but eventually released. No charges were brought.

As I walked with Jata and Feye reflecting on these events, I remarked that Mbugua's logic had apparently been one of 'if I can't have it, no one can'. Feye chimed in with the 'no one can' to signal her agreement. 'But he's not a cool guy', she told me. 'The things people do for land', Jata lamented. '*Ngai*, it's serious', Feye agreed. 'Those jealousies,' were spurred on by inheritance, they told me.

Rivalry and Responsibility, Exclusion and Inclusion

Mbugua's attempt to kill his mother and brother, or at the very least destroy their assets, speaks to the frustration of what he thought was a valid claim to his father's land and pick-up truck. He had failed in his bid for what he saw as his right to patriarchal authority over his father's property as the 'man of the house'. Denied that, he took matters into his own hands. Like Murigi, Mbugua saw his own prosperity to be threatened by his female relatives – his mother, his sister and sisters-in-law – who had denied him what he saw as his rightful inheritance. Murigi likely felt the same way as Mbugua but pursued his interests in the land rather more surreptitiously, using his sister's claims as proxies for his own. Given the rising value of land and the long-standing primacy of patrilineal inheritance amongst only male heirs, Mbugua and Murigi's pursuit of their patrilineal inheritance, and their insistence on the primacy of their rights over that of their sisters, is hardly surprising.

But what interests me here is the way this history is being lived in more immediate moral and moralising tones by those experiencing that history. It is here that we find another iteration of the 'moral politics' with which this thesis has been concerned. In this instance, we find debate revolving around the moral norms and values that Kenyans argue ought to be upheld when inheritance calls them into question. After all, these were episodes in which normal kin relations

had been disrupted. If Kimani and Murigi's brotherly friendship had not exactly been warm, the latter's attempt to evict the former was utterly appalling. 'Even me, I'm shocked!', said Mwaura when he first told me of the situation in 2019. Mbugua's destruction of the pick-up was equally as disturbing for his family. 'Me? They wanted to burn me so they could eat my things when I'm not there? But they're not lucky',⁸¹ Catherine reported the elderly Ng'endo as saying when she realised what her son had tried to do the very evening he set alight to her house. Mwaura suggested that Mbugua should have been beaten 'until crippled' (*ũcio agĩĩrwo ahũrwo onje*).

I had only one vantage point on each of these respective disputes – from the side that saw itself as the wounded party. Murigi and Mbugua's acts provoked moral disgust amongst the respective victims of their advances precisely because they were claimed to be acting upon their unabashed interests, breaking the fragile arrangement of kin-based property relationships within their families. There can be little doubt that Murigi would have seen his brother's denial of his claims as self-interest of a similar sort, Mbugua likewise when his sister denied him his inheritance. And I shall return to these claims below. It is notable that Murigi attempted to mobilise his sister's rights to inherit as proxies for his own interests. The rights of Gathoni to inherit patrilineal land whilst married were dismissed by Kimani and Mwaura as merely the product of her intent to deprive Wangeci of a home. Mine is inevitably a partial perspective on the intimate politics of inclusion and exclusion.

It is in the specificity of these partial vantage points, however, that we can glimpse the narrativisation of greed as a means of vilifying others whilst investing one's own projects and actions with moral value. In a central Kenya defined by economic uncertainty, Kimani's family saw his brother's attempts to undercut his and his sister's land security not merely as bad, but as transgressive (Munn 1987: 227). It is here that we encounter argument about the wrongness of creating exclusivity in access to land, recalling what Hall, Hirsch and Li (2011: 21, 166) call its 'double edge', or what Elliot (2018) calls its 'propertying' dynamic - the establishment of *exclusive* access to a piece of land, creating security for some at the expense of others. By contrast, Kimani and Mama Nyambura were seen as acting fairly, prioritising the inclusivity of vulnerable kin-members, ensuring all kin had a right to dwell in security at the patrilineal home. What was moral was the kinship relation and its maintenance, something which, it was claimed, Murigi and Mbugua had failed to recognise. The moral failing of the two men lay in their neglect of relationships. Kimani and Mama Nyambura insisted that kinship's moral bond was to be prioritised over and above particularistic interests.

⁸¹ 'Nĩĩ? Marendaga gũcina nĩĩ marĩe indo ciakwa itarĩ ho? Matirĩ na mũnyaka'.

Crucial to this debate – and the capacity to view the two men as greedy - was how their reputations had been gauged in the ongoing process of everyday life before these events transpired. As we saw in Chapter 2, Mama Nyambura embodied qualities of responsibility and success through her well-paying job and educated, employed children. Mbugua was seen as a social failure by comparison. As Jata and Feye’s words suggest, he was seen in the neighbourhood as ‘not responsible’. His alcoholism was known and discussed. Although Mama Nyambura and her relatives appealed to patrilineal logic – that the deceased Njenga’s authority as the eldest brother was invested in his widow – what underlay it was an understanding that Mbugua would only squander his father’s wealth. It was better to purpose Gachohi’s property towards the family, rather than see Mbugua ‘drink the money’, which they suspected he would. Denying Mbugua his rights was an act of protection, guaranteeing their land and property would be used within the family and for its future flourishing, particularly if they sold the pick-up to fund a kiosk for their disabled brother Jimmy. Mbugua was viewed as a risk to the family’s future, not only because of his wayward behaviour but also because he neglected to care for his brother Jimmy. Mbugua was said to have banned Jimmy from picking avocados from his garden to sell in order to generate something of an income.

Murigi, on the other hand, was seen as already having had reasons to covet the land of his sister. When Gathe’s land was originally divided between Kimani and his siblings, they drew lots to see who would get which parcel of land. This was a crucial event, since some parcels of the land were far closer to the main road – and would thus become more valuable and conducive to the construction of rental plots. Kimani had drawn one such lot, and Murigi a lot that placed him further up the hill away from the road. Mwaura told me that when this took place, Murigi was far from happy with his lot. Mwaura also speculated that what had provoked Murigi to deny his sister her land at the family homestead was her very status as a family member to begin with. Unlike Wangui or Gathoni, Wangui and Wairimu, Kimani’s two eldest sisters, had ‘arrived with Shosh’, as Mwaura put it. In other words, they were not Gathe’s daughters by blood, but had been incorporated into the family after Gathe and Leah Njoki had married in the 1950s. Nonetheless, Mwaura insisted his aunts were family, and always referred to them as such. ‘I mean, they have his names which means he took them as his’. Murigi’s actions, Mwaura told me, suggested he had rejected their membership of the family. This appalled Mwaura.

Kimani and Mama Nyambura’s families argued that they were upholding a more fundamental standard of moral behaviour – the commitment to kinship itself that the other parties had threatened. As Catherine put it to me, recounting the nature of the dispute, ‘Kimani said [Wangeci] should be given her land, Murigi didn’t want to’ (Kimani *alisema apewe*, Murigi *hataki*).

Catherine, who had been badly ill with a chest infection during 2018 before eventually recovering in hospital, put her own spin on the situation, one informed not only by her own brush with mortality but with the recent death of Joyce Laboso, the governor of Bomet County at the age of 58 due to cancer. We had been watching the burial broadcast on television together earlier that day, prompting her further reflection. ‘When you die you leave all these things behind, *shamba*, what what [i.e. ‘this and that’]. See Laboso has left everything. Land is not important’. In this respect, Catherine suggested that the dispute was not merely Wangeci’s right to land pitted against that of Murigi’s, but about a broader moral question of fairness, of how the family ought to provision its most vulnerable kin-members with land at the patrilineal homestead.

Maintaining civility by mutual enclosure

Kimani’s defence of Wangeci’s interests viewed alongside Mama Nyambura and her family’s defence of their right to control their fathers’ assets, directs us to consider the role of consensus-making in the apportioning of land after the death of a parent or senior kin member (compare Cooper 2012). In a social world defined by land poverty, and amongst siblings whose lands verge on each-others, inheritance disputes (aided by the legal change that has given women equal power to inherit) implicate siblings as agents who have the capacity to fracture social relationships simply by pursuing their own interests. The situation of inheritance becomes so high stakes that even claims are problematic, acts of self-interest that have to be headed-off. This is a context wherein the balance of harmony is easily tipped.

It is here that we observe the fragility of patrilineal authority in making provision for inheritance. In general, agreements between kin about inheritance rarely outlast the lifetime of parents who fix these agreements in place with their authority. Oral wills are ambiguous, and are treated as such under Kenyan law where they require two witnesses, and are only valid if the testator dies within three months of it having been made in to avoid the danger of details being forgotten or misreported over a longer period (Law of Succession Act 2012). In Kimani’s case, when his father Gathee died in 1984, Wangeci was married and residing in Banana. No provision was made for her, and his death pre-dated the *de facto* introduction of the Land Succession Act in the mid-1980s (cf. Maas 1986: 17). At that point, all of Kimani’s sisters were married and residing elsewhere, save for Wangui, the youngest, who continued living in her mother’s house. Nothing in his family had been revised since. But by the time Kimani’s mother Leah Njoki died she had become senile, unable to make a will, oral or otherwise (she had hit the grand old age of 100!). It

fell to Kimani and his elder brother Gikonyo to intervene on Wangeci's behalf and apportion her land at her father's homestead. Kimani's insistence on Wangeci inheriting land was thus something of a novelty for the family – a sister who had married elsewhere *returning* to claim inheritance. If Murigi contested Wangeci's capacity to inherit, he did so because it did not appear so much as his father's wish, but rather Kimani's. Why should his brother deprive him of land he otherwise would have used?

If Kimani's case reveals the difficulties of creating consensus between siblings where no higher authority is recognised, then the changing events of Mama Nyambura's case also show us the fragility of patriarchal instruction on who should be apportioned what land once they have died.

Mama Nyambura's travails upon her father's death did not end with her brother's destruction of the pick-up he had been denied. In the weeks that followed, I found out through conversations with Catherine that one of Mama Nyambura's sisters, wa Mbodi, who had married a man who lived elsewhere in our broader Banana Town area, had decided to bring a case to the local chief that the land of their father ought to be subdivided again. In short, this sister was never given a portion of her father's land under the Law of Succession Act. The deaths of her father and elder brother had apparently renewed this sister's impetus to stake a claim on what she saw as her inheritance. Recall that Mama Nyambura had inherited land from her father, that she was unmarried, and had constructed her stone house on her father's land. In other words, she had invested in the place of her father in a way that, normatively speaking, followed the life pattern of sons rather than daughters.

According to Catherine, Mama Nyambura's resolute friend, the 'case' had been brought not out of the sister's desire for justice but from a place of jealousy. Catherine, usually one to laugh at the misfortune of others, was appalled that Mama Nyambura had been reduced to calling at her house in a state of tears because of her sister's threats. Catherine saw them as brought about by jealousy (*wivu*) latent in the distinction between Mama Nyambura's stone house and her sister's corrugated iron dwelling where she lived with her husband. '*Ako na nyumba ya mabati, lazima ukume na wivu!*', Catherine told me – 'She has a house made of corrugated iron, of course you'd be jealous!'.

But it was also wa Mbodi's alleged pernicious attitude that incensed Catherine, provoking her to wax lyrical at home about Mama Nyambura's misfortune. As it turned out, the anticipated subdivision was likely to affect Mama Nyambura's newly built rental accommodation, and possibly her own house. The sister was quoted by Catherine as saying that she wanted the rentals 'torn down', a sheer product of wa Mbodi's jealousy and the direct destruction of a major financial investment undertaken by Mama Nyambura. The legal ambiguity surrounding Mama Nyambura's

land tenure created the conditions for her sister to make a claim that the land ought to be re-divided in her favour.

Catherine's reflections on Mama Nyambura's predicament are illuminating.

Us, we were alert. They're the ones who refused to be alert to be given the inheritance... [in English:] they relaxed. When they were given the land, that land, they should have taken the title deeds. Now [i.e., at the time] they were given the inheritance and they did nothing. They thought they'd arrived [i.e. the situation was fine and no problems would arise]. Us, we were portioned [already, a long time ago]. [...] And I told Mama Nyambura because you're sitting on the *shamba*, request [from the government] the title deed. Ah! "It is not necessary" [she said]. [...] "My dad has said where to build the house". Title, it is very important! Now she's running when things are what [i.e. the whole situation is chaotic and she's running around trying to sort it out]? [...] And that's why even wa Mbodi [the sister claiming a portion of the land] can beat them. Now, if they had the title deed!

(Ithuĩ twacanũkire. O nĩo maregire gũcanũka magaiĩrwo. They relaxed. *Saa zĩle waliganĩwa biyo shamba ndiyo wangechukuwa matitles now waliganĩwa na wakanyama za tu.* Wakafikiria wamefika. *Sisi tuliganĩwa.* [...] *Na nikamwambia* Mama Nyambura *juu umelalia shamba, itisha* title deed. Ah! "It is not necessary". [...] "My dad has said where to build the house". Title, it is very important! *Sasa anakĩmbia saa zĩle kume nini? Na nĩ kĩo nginya* wa Mbodi angĩmahota. No thaa ici ko me na title deed!) (Fieldnotes, 8th April 2018).

Not only did Catherine contrast her 'alertness' with Mama Nyambura's reliance on her father's words but she also identified the risk of not being so - the threat of covetous relatives who might wish to encroach on one's land. For Catherine, title deeds were utterly necessary fixes to the problem of competing claims on land between kin, the solution to ambiguity created by an informal or customary tenurial system made through transient words and claims.

The formalisation afforded by legal texts, writes Jane Guyer (2004: 155), creates 'a permanent reduction to a particular system logic' rather than a more ambiguous 'performative moment to be re-created at every transaction'. It offers the semblance of legal permanence where before there was none. But as Guyer notes, formality's history in African states has been an ambiguous and piecemeal one. 'Formality is experienced by the population in its plural and concrete forms, as "papers;" rather than as an enduring generalizable principle' (ibid.: 158; cf. Hutchinson 1996: 285-8). This much was evident in Mbugua's attempt to seize his father's

documents, frustrated though he was in his efforts. Likewise, Catherine recognised the transient nature of words, quoting Mama Nyambura's insistence that her father had shown her where to build her house and that official title was not necessary. Siblings could not be trusted to respect such ephemeral instructions.

Mama Nyambura's father's words were little help to her, and as we have seen, even to the extent that fathers plan for events after their death, inheritance disputes promise to rear their head because of the possibility that not all siblings will play along. The weakness of patriarchal authority, and its incapacity to contain distinct interests can be underscored via comparison. Consider, for instance, Max Gluckman's (1955) writing on Barotse (Lozi) judges as they attempted to resolve disputes between kin in what is today western Zambia. Gluckman's wider project was to explore how Lozi judges used notions of customary obligation and conduct in a rather flexible way to gauge the conduct of persons disputing cases in court. Gluckman talks about a particular dispute in which members of a family had quarrelled, and two men had had their gardens seized by a cousin. In resolving the case, Gluckman showed how judges appealed to 'ultimate values' and 'norms' characteristic of how the social relationships between the parties in question ought to be – that children and cousins ought to love and help their parents, for instance, and each other – iterating these norms to those involved (*ibid.*: 49). Gluckman writes of the success of the judges in this case. 'Nine years later I heard by letter that these disputants were living in amity' (*ibid.*).

In central Kenya, few trusted authorities can mete out justice of this sort that can permanently resolve or fix social relationships, particularly where land is concerned. Local authorities are manipulated or viewed as 'corrupt', offering little in the way of reconciliation. Mama Nyambura was ultimately forced to pay money to the local chief to support her dispute against wa Mbodi. Wa Mbodi had, it turned out, been given 1 million KES by her father as a loan. Wa Mbodi had her debts cancelled, in exchange for dropping her 'case' against Mama Nyambura. Kenyans remain able to manipulate state authority, undermining or supporting customary arrangements depending on their situation.

The challenge inheritors face, to follow Gluckman (*ibid.*), is to fix land claims when inheritance creates uncertainty about them. In central Kenya, this remains a temporary and uncertain business. Where local consensus can be made, wider processes interrupt and disturb it – not least the growing value of inherited land due to Nairobi's expansion. In the process of everyday life, there are few permanent fixes to the problem of landholding, but some are clearly more durable than others. Title was the ultimate answer, but even faith in this may be misplaced in the long-run due to the widespread practice in Kenya of grabbing land through manipulating

documents.⁸² For Catherine, the achievement of a mutually agreed enclosure was at least preferable to tenurial ambiguity.

The history of land poverty in central Kenya has created enormous anxieties over the land one stands to gain or lose via inheritance. It is this precarity that manifests in attempts to secure one's own future at the expense of others – a logic of 'negative reciprocity' (Sahlins 1972: 196) that recognises the gendered opposition of sibling interests in the acquisition of patrilineal land. To recall my argument in Chapter 2, 'civility' (Whyte and Siu 2015) might be a better word to use in this context than Gluckman's notion of 'amity' restored by a judicial process. What we observe in central Kenya is the avoidance of open confrontation rather than its permanent and peaceable resolution. Even when consensus is achieved, situated interests continue to simmer below the surface.

Consider, for instance, how the dispute amongst Kimani's siblings was resolved. Eventually, Kimani's eldest sister, Wairimu, condemned Murigi and Gathoni's actions. Mwaura explained to me, after my return to Cambridge, how Wairimu had died feeling 'very bitter' about Murigi and Gathoni's attempt to deprive Wangeci of her land, and to throw Paul Kimani out of his temporary residence. Her death, amidst those bitter feelings, had apparently led to the end of the dispute, and Wangeci was continuing to build her house in 2020. 'Things have been quiet since', was how Mwaura described the situation. Their interest in Wangeci's land had not gone anywhere, merely its outward expression.

Hyenas hiding in your house

If this chapter has thus far dwelt on the inclusive ethos of senior kin caring for more vulnerable family members, it makes sense at this stage to circle back to the sense of threat experienced by inheriting sons from their sisters. The effects of anxiety that women's inheritance provokes ought to be viewed in terms of wider, misogynist discourses in Kiambu, Nairobi and contemporary Kenya writ large that constructs women as a particular type of threatening and ambiguous moral subject.

Throughout 2017 and 2018, discussion was taking place across Kenya's public sphere about the phenomenon of the 'slay queen', a new category of woman who was described as chasing a better material life through cultivating relationships with members of Nairobi's business and

⁸² This is not to say that title deeds are effective guarantees of land security. Land grabs are common in Nairobi, and often involve elite figures manipulating land registries to produce fake title documents (Klopp 2000).

political elite. For some young women, particularly students at Nairobi universities, men from this category act as their ‘sponsors’, exchanging wealth for sex, maintaining their lifestyles through money sent to their mobile phones. As Oyunga Pala (2018, November 1) has recently written in Kenya’s *The Elephant* newspaper, Nairobi ‘socialites’ were initially ‘shamed as personalities with questionable morals’, but eventually ‘turned their notoriety into savvy personal brands that are now mainstream media staples’. Pala notes that popular ‘socialites’ were cited by younger women in a recent BBC feature on the sponsor phenomenon as inspirations for their lifestyles. The implication is that such styles have awakened male fears of female desires contradictory to their own – that women do not want to partake in the creation of patriarchal and patrilineal households, preferring instead short-term fun and frivolity. The ascription of self-interest echoes arguments we saw in Chapter 4 about consumption and fun (*raba*).

In Mashambani, and Banana Town more broadly, male fears carried this inflection in a rather more specific way. Men articulated fears (and stories) that women could marry into families only to expropriate their wealth, particularly land. Numerous stories circulated about their various attempts to murder their husbands. Cash once told me a story he had heard from friends about a woman who had murdered her husband via a conspiracy with her young lover to pin it on local youth, hiding tissues stained with blood into the pit latrine. The police had searched the latrine and found the tissues. Her intent, Cash told me, had been to take control of her husband’s property. Kiambu women in general were regularly described by men as ‘deadly’, ‘people whose eyes have been licked by a cat’ (*andũ acone maitho nĩ mbaka*), a proverbial comment describing their apparent capacity to ‘see far’, to surreptitiously plan ahead, in other words. A land broker friend of mine put it thus, ‘They want what you [or he] have [...] Not what is in his heart.’ Women could not be known, it was suggested. They were ‘hyenas hiding in your house’.

The spectrum and gravity of these stories varied, but all evinced a loss of confidence in the wider ideal of a patriarchal homestead, undermined by wives’ ambitions that ran counter to those of their husbands. At the close of Chapter 3, we saw one of the manifestations of the effect of this perspective on the part of men: disillusionment with continuity. Chege advised his peers not leave wealth to ungrateful wives. If women were looking after their own interests, so should men. Consumption and enjoyment in the present were the only logical response.

That women’s mobility threatens patriarchal households is no original observation. Social scientists of farming families in Europe have noted that ‘suspicion now pervades attitudes towards women in the patriarchal ideology of the farming way of life’ (Price and Evans 2006). Women who are ‘good as gold’ do not pursue their legal rights and ‘remain silent partners in the farm economy’ (ibid.: 289), providing farm labour but without gaining legal ownership to the farms of their

husbands nor taking farming decisions independently. By contrast, a new generation of younger women prepared to divorce was shown to constitute a threat to patrilineal succession and the passing of the farm to the next generation (ibid.: 290-1). ‘Too many women coming into farming are gold diggers now’, stated one Welsh farmer in a recent study (ibid.)

Nyita Rao (2018) has shown in her ethnography of Santal women in Jharkhand, India, that women face similar reputational dilemmas in their pursuit of heritable land (see also, 737-8). Usually women are encouraged not to inherit and allow land to pass into the hands of male agnates (2018: 248). Local discourse emphasises that ‘a good woman’ is supposed to do precisely this (ibid.). By contrast there is the figure of the *dain*, a witch or witch-like figure, ‘presented in opposition to this image of a “good woman” - one who is assertive and sexually free, not a good mother or a good wife, and a threat to processes of both production and reproduction’ (ibid.: 300).

Rao insists that growing levels of conflict over land in Jharkhand are a sign of women asserting their rights to own land. The ascription of the ‘*dain*’ label to such women is used by men to police their increasing assertiveness. Underlying this growing tension, Rao notes, is the economic precarity faced by both genders. Men feel women should give way to their land claims in the context of dwindling landholdings, sub-divided over generations.⁸³ ‘While both sides are now in a precarious position, struggling to survive, neither side is prepared to give in’ (2018: 248).

In Kiambu, the same tension persists, fuelled by male perceptions of women’s spatial, social and sexual mobility – that women can obtain wealthy ‘sponsors’, if not husbands and vacate the peri-urban lifestyles of piecemeal ‘hustling’ to which they are consigned. As one of my young female Kikuyu friends from Nairobi put it, arguing with her male age-mates: ‘Before a shamba to work on was enough. [Now] we live in a modern time where a woman is hustling for herself!’. Her age-mates responded in mocking disgust: ‘For herself! Whereas the man is hustling for everyone [in the family]!’. Whilst women can marry, young men feel the burden of needing to ‘make it’ in order to sustain households of their own on low wages and meagre landholdings. In this context, sons fear that their sisters might be manipulating their fathers – that they are appearing simultaneously ‘good as gold’ whilst waiting to become ‘gold diggers’ once their fathers have passed away. Women’s capacity to benefit twice from familial and affinal wealth compounds a situation they see as utterly unfair.

As should be clear by now, in my hosts’ household, the debacle surrounding Mama Nyambura’s inheritance had provoked their own reflections on the problem of inheritance. At home one evening, Mwaura had asked his mother why land was fought over in such a manner.

⁸³ Goody (1998: 205) called this the ‘heirloom factor’, the idea that prioritising a single inheritor’s rights would ensure the integrity of a farm against its fragmentation, for instance.

‘Hey! Lands are not a joke!’, Catherine responded (Weee! Mĩgũnda ndĩrĩ itherũ). Mwaura then began to complain in a half-joking style about the land his father had allocated his sister Njoki. ‘Do you hear the place she's been allocated? That land is huge like a dog!’ (nĩ ũraigua nginya harĩa aragaĩrwo. Mũgũnda ũcio ũkĩrĩ mũnene ta ngui), he told his mother in an alarmist tone. Responding bluntly, Catherine told Mwaura that he had been told ‘nicely’ (wega) what land he would inherit. In other words, he should not try and push his luck. Their conversation soon began to shift, towards a discussion of where Njoki’s land would ‘reach’ (gũkinya). Mwaura’s father Kimani had already shown him where he should ‘build’, and to his liking Njoki’s portion reached too close to his and taken far too large a portion. Telling his mother precisely where Njoki’s land encompassed, Mwaura annoyedly announced the unfairness he saw in the situation. ‘The whole land! It’s like the Devil’ (Mũgũnda ũcio wothe. Nĩ ta ngoma). Catherine told Mwaura to stop with his ‘devil talk’, maintaining a defence of Njoki that had stopped sounding like joking talk by this point. ‘I’m the eldest’ (Atĩ na nĩ nĩ mũkũrũ), said Mwaura. ‘It’s a must that we revisit [the matter of inheritance]’ (Hau no nginya tũkarevist).

It was at this point that I began to question whether Mwaura was really doing what I had come to know was characteristic of him – exaggerating a state of alarm or despondency to make a point.

And the way Njoki loves money! I know she can give it away! She has no brains.

(Nĩguo Njoki endete mbeca. Na Njeri no kũneane. Gitĩrĩ hakiri.) (Fieldnotes, 28th March 2018).

Rather unlike Wangeci, a Kikuyu farming woman in her middle age, Mwaura wondered if Njoki embodied precisely the sort of mobile new Kikuyu womanhood evoked by the ‘slay queen’ epithet. Mwaura sensed the danger this would pose. It was imperative to secure as much land in his own name as possible.

However, despite his extreme language, Catherine had begun laughing at her son’s frustrations, seeing them as precisely that, rather than intentions to encroach upon Njoki’s land. Mwaura was recalling a time in which his father had been ill and become ‘serious’ about the need to allocate land to his children, to pre-empt conflict before his death. Catherine continued to laugh, but Mwaura was bullish:

God! It's a waste! How do you think she does her calculation? That land is big like that. She'll get married. You and Dad I'll lock you inside here. The rest, I'll have a field day.

(Ngai! Kaiĩ gĩteaga ũguo-ĩ. Ūreciria ekaga mathabu mahana atĩa? Mũgũnda ũcio ũkĩrĩ mũnene ta kĩa. Njeri ahike. Inyuĩ ndimũhingĩrie haha mwakĩte. Kũria ndigang'are.)

Mwaura imagined a day in which his mother would be elderly and his sister powerless, and he would be able 'to really enjoy himself' (*kũigang'ara*). The land would be his to monetise in the way he imagined in our conversations – building real estate that would facilitate a better life, one far removed from the one in which he was when he spoke. The rains of 2018 had badly affected his mother's health, and his father's work. The wooden home in which the family dwelt was regularly flooding with the heavy rains due to its location at the bottom of a slope. Moreover, his university education was in jeopardy, and it looked as though he might have to finish his studies at a later date if his father's wages failed to transpire. His words trailed off as he wished his family had money so that they could have bought land being sold in the local area.

The prospect of Njoki inheriting a large portion of land, crystallised the fears of a young son who knew the land was limited – that his sister might simply sell what could have been his. But against his patrilineal claims, it was fatherly love that ensured everyone would get something. Kimani would not make Gachohi's mistake, leaving no will and only ambiguous instructions over his children's inheritance.

Yes, even Njoki, her land is there, I will give her, she is mine of course, aren't they all my children? Yes, and the government wants even girls to be getting land.

(Eeb! Hata Njoki, shamba yake iko tu nitampatia, si ni wangu, si ni watoto wangu wote? Eeb! Na ndiyo serikali inataka hata msichana awe akipewa shamba.)

If fatherly love for daughters created the conditions for the jealousy of sons in a context where land is scarce, then it was also a functional solution. As Kimani saw it, Njoki's inheritance did not so much externalise wealth, but signified her membership of the family. It anticipated a domestic role for her, not unlike the one Mama Nyambura had taken in her broader family by remaining at her family home as a single mother, or as Wangeci did in 2019. Patriarchal authority to turn patrilineality into 'diverging devolution' (Goody 1969) was the moral thing to do as Kimani

saw it, his words keeping a lid on the conflict at which Mwaura's words hinted, recognising as he did that one day soon his sister's interests would be at odds with his own.

Conclusion

In his recent book, *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust* (2013), Peter Geschiere raises the prospect of resurrecting Jack Goody's (1977) emphasis on comparisons between Eurasian and African kinship organisations based on the articulation between material circumstances and kinship organisation. Goody's famous contrast was between a proprietorial Europe, defined by class distinctions made possible by the technological innovation of the plough and the surplus it afforded, and a far less socially differentiated Africa. Kojo Sebastian Amanor (2010) amongst others has challenged such evolutionist perspectives and their assumptions of a transition to an 'unproblematic family farm', showing how commodification of property has played out in family-level contestation, much as this chapter leads us to expect.

Whatever the merits of Goody's specific arguments, they continue to provoke for their Polanyian emphasis on the embedded relationship between kinship, property and gender in their historical circumstance (Hann 2008; cf. MacFarlane 1997). Following this vein of thought, Geschiere continues,

It might be worthwhile to pursue to what extent such divergences can help to explain specificities in people's conceptions of "the house," particularly in relation to the scope of occult dangers. The striking elasticity of the house, and kinship relations in general, that continues to mark patterns of social organization in many parts of the African continent, still bridging new inequalities and new distances, fits in very well with the old "wealth-in-people" concept (2013: xxiv).

As this chapter has shown, the elasticity of the house is far from a reality in central Kenya where arguments take place about precisely how to bound it – inclusively around female inheritors, or exclusively around male ones. This ethnography is a reminder that 'wealth in people' in central Kenya has primarily been a patrilineal pursuit – based on the continuity of patrilineal households over generations rather than a generalised intimacy between kin. Kin relationships in central Kenya have been narrowing around a patrilineal ideology of access to land since the colonial period and have older roots than that. The articulation of wealth-in-people as the flourishing of specific

households requires, and is not opposed to, notions of private property. The history of central Kenya has made land title a bastion of security. Families require exclusive access to land in order to maintain themselves and their futures.

As Geschiere suggests, however, this wider material situation combined with ethnography tells us much about how ‘occult dangers’ manifest in Kenya – as threats to these familial futures, to social reproduction itself, particularly in the new category of women persons who male discourse marks as threatening. These threats are less occult than real and material, pursued through legal challenges to inheritance, and, it is often suggested, murder – even if they do tend to manifest in rumour. Such narratives of evil intent, as we have seen, depend on one’s perspective and one’s power to make these perspectives count. Greed is also attributed to male kin by the male defenders of women’s inheritance. Nonetheless, the acts of men like Mbugua and Murigi are not exactly ‘treacherous attacks from the inside’ *per se* (ibid.: 25), but rather the product of the developmental cycle of a patrilineal household that constantly produces new and threatening interests from within that stand to become external and opposing. The liminal position of women remains a critical fulcrum of conflict. Wider processes of material lack and legal innovation continue to shape these local kin relations and debates. But misogynist narratives about personal greed and destructive individualism also remind us that the history of rural capitalism and enclosure has been lived primarily in moral terms. Land’s commoditization is lived, experienced and debated with reference to covetous figures who appear to put their accumulation and flourishing ahead of others since they stand to expropriate wealth from the family. Though this chapter has generally focused on misogynist discourses about women, it is notable that irresponsible men are just as easily tarred with this brush, as Mbugua was by his female relatives, since they suspected he would sell his land to fund his alcoholism, and as we saw throughout Chapter 3.

In general, Kikuyu and their neighbours in Kenya appear rather similar to ‘farming families’ studied in other contexts (see, e.g., Abrahams 2009; Amanor 2010; Barnes 1957), experiencing issues and dilemmas recognisable from other patrilineal contexts, articulating with local and state-level dynamics (e.g., women’s mobility, legal change, fluctuating material circumstances over the *longue durée*). All of this is to say that the old kinship studies with their emphasis on inheritance, succession and the micro-politics of kinship organisation may have more relevance for the contemporary anthropology of Africa than is often understood (Kuper 2018), not least with its emphasis on rivalries and contestation, on competing interests (see, e.g., Turner 1957; Goody 1962). As this chapter has shown, notions of patriarchal responsibility toward female kin sow the seeds for conflict between them and their brothers, frustrated by their dwindling holdings, a

frustration provoked in no small part by the wider material constraints in making home on Nairobi's peri-urban outskirts.

Conclusion

Long ago there were creatures known as dinosaurs
That feasted on each other and never got enough of it
Almighty God was angered and punished them
He reduced them in size
I have heard they are now the modern day lizards
Oppressors must pay attention to what I'm saying
You that take advantage of people's resources,
Your final case will be determined by God

– The clan of oppressors (mbari ya kimendero), Mwigai wa Njoroge

Before he was President, I was a taxi driver. Now he's President, and I'm still a taxi driver.
Uhuru has done nothing for me. But I want a peaceful environment so I can work.

- Taxi Driver, Kiambu, February 2018.

Kuumira kuumira (Come out, come out)

- Slogan used to mobilise voters for Uhuru Kenyatta in the re-run election, November
2018

From every direction people spilled into the street, whooping and cheering. Uhuru had won the election and five more years (*tano tena*) of Jubilee Party government was confirmed. Crowds of women wearing red Jubilee T-shirts took to the road by foot, singing the party's campaign song as they walked. 'Ndani! Ndani! Ndaaaa-ni!', the refrain went, iterating what was at stake: to be 'inside' the halls of power. Uhuru was going to the State House. Youths gripped on to *matatu* mini-buses and piled into pick-up trucks hurtling towards Ruaka Town with raucous abandon in a bid to partake in the celebrations. Motorcycles (*boda-boda*) sped past, one carrying a young man blowing frantically on a *vuvuzela*. In central Ruaka, groups of men set car tyres alight, creating spectacular fires with pungent fumes. Crowds of women chanted the words that Uhuru had been greeted with when he had arrived at the IEBC headquarters hours earlier to receive the official result of his re-election as President - '*si uchawi, ni maombi*'. It was not the witchcraft (*uchawi*) so regularly associated with Uhuru's Luo opponent Raila Odinga that had won victory, but prayers (*maombi*). Uhuru himself had thanked people who had come out to vote for him 'despite violence, intimidation and witchcraft' and the Almighty himself: 'He will give us victory over darkness.'

These were the scenes that I watched transpire on the peri-urban outskirts of Nairobi in southern Kiambu County in late October 2017. Uhuru Kenyatta's re-election as President – so his co-ethnic Kikuyu voters in his Kiambu heartlands believed – would block his Luo opponent Raila Odinga from achieving power and guarantee their political and economic security and prosperity for another five years. The celebrations surrounding Kenyatta's victory were a relief for Kikuyu householders and their concern, spurred by their leaders and the hosts of vernacular radio stations, to retain 'rulership' or 'power' (*ũthamaki*) over the country. Such a privilege, a 'tyranny of the majority' as one pundit called it - a nod to Kikuyu status as the most populous group in Kenya - was thought to be the key to prosperity felt, imagined, or some way still in the future. The election awakened fears of losing that advantage. Back in January that year, when voter registration was taking place, *Kameme FM*, the Kikuyu vernacular language radio station, had warned its listeners of the consequences of not signing up to vote:

In this country we always want a good business environment, freedom to worship, having freedom of movement. But if we fail to cast our votes, and re-elect Uhuru and [Deputy President William] Ruto, I can tell without a shadow of a doubt, we will sing

Psalms 137, which says, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, when we remembered Zion [lit. our country].”

(Būrūri ūyũ ithuĩ twendaga o rīera rīega rīa biacara, na kūhoya Ngai, gũthiĩ harĩa ūkwenda būrūri-inĩ. No tūaga kūhūra kura, tūcokie Uhuru na Ruto, ūma, ūma ngūmwīra itarĩ na ngaja, nĩ tūkaina Thaburi igana rīmwe rīa mīrongo ĩtatũ na mūgwanja, ĩrĩa yugaga atĩ, “Ngurumo-inĩ cia Babuloni nĩkuo twaikaire tũkirĩra twaririkana būrūri witũ.”)⁸⁴

In the process, the narrator objectified Kikuyu values at a national scale – that more than any of Kenya’s ethnic groups they had migrated to other areas, started businesses, and won their rightful success via their own efforts. ‘Kikuyu me na indo’ – Kikuyu have property, Catherine, the mother of my host family, had shouted at the television only a week earlier as she watched fires erupting in Nairobi’s Karangware settlement amidst skirmishes between gangs apparently hired by opposition and Kikuyu shop-owners and their own protectors. Like the broadcast, it was a remark that encapsulated the stereotype, and the self-stereotype, amongst Kikuyu that they have benefitted from that rulership. Not only had Uhuru followed another Kikuyu president, Mwai Kibaki, but he was himself the son of Kenya’s first post-independence head of state, *Mzee* Jomo Kenyatta. This was the same Jomo Kenyatta that had taken recourse to oathing amongst co-ethnic Kikuyu, Meru and Embu to secure his leadership in the aftermath of independence, in a sense beginning a politics of ethnicity whereby leaders would rely on the support they drew from their ‘home’ areas. The Kenyatta family hailed from the Kiambu town of Gatundu. This was a victory in a long line of victories celebrated on home turf.

Perceptions of privilege had awakened anxieties about vengeful opponents in 2017. Odinga and his ethnic Luo followers, it was feared, would violently expropriate Kikuyu property if they won. Talk of ‘getting finished’ (gũathira) by the opposition abounded in the household in which I resided throughout my fieldwork. Mwaura would later describe the win as feeling like being ‘born again’, such was the relief. The *Kameme FM* broadcast had played on the same fears, mediating them to the Kikuyu nation: ‘If you’ve not gotten richer in those 5 years Uhuru has been president, do you think you will get richer or poorer in those 2 days [after the election]?’ (Angĩkorwo nduonete mbia mĩaka ĩyo itano Uhuru akoretwo e mūnene-rĩ, thikũ icio igĩrĩ nĩcio ūkuona kana wage?). The message was clear: vote Uhuru or suffer an economic collapse at the hands of vengeful Raila and his Luo supporters.

⁸⁴ Source: <http://nairobewire.com/2017/01/audio-lets-defend-our-uthamaki-the-inciteful-propaganda-ad-running-on-kameme-fm-translated.html>.

The celebrations were also all *deja vu*. Tyres had been burnt and songs had been sung celebrating the re-election of Uhuru Kenyatta as Kenya's President just over two months earlier. In mid-August, as in late October, people had flocked to the streets on foot and in cars, honking wildly and blasting victory songs at full volume. Uhuru had been forced 'to go back to the people' once more in October after his victory was annulled by the Supreme Court following an appeal from the opposition coalition's lawyers. Incensed, Uhuru had threatened the judiciary, claiming that after his second re-election he would 'deal with' those members of the Supreme Court he branded as 'criminals' (*wakora*) who had threatened his victory. Jubilee Party onlookers cheered in response.

*

On August 11th 2017, the day the original, cancelled victory was announced, I had been drinking in a bar in the small town of Raini with Mwaura. Raini is something of a final urban outpost, a hill town that looks out onto the tea plantations that lead on northwards towards the towns of Limuru and Tigoni. It is home to labourers who work on the local tea farms and host to a number of bars where local men go to drink cheap alcohol.

Mwaura and I had gone to watch the first game of the Premier League football season between Arsenal and Leicester. But soon enough we were caught up in the celebrations, the game turned off in favour of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) chairman Wafula Chebukati reading out results of each sub-county in slow suspense. To our minds, victory for Jubilee was never in doubt. Mwaura and I had watched on television at his family's small house earlier that day, as initial results came through giving Uhuru 54 per cent of the vote in key battleground areas. The suspicious replication of Uhuru's lead as 54 per cent across several counties ultimately paved the way for widespread allegations of rigging from the opposition, one of the bases of the appeal they later successfully filed.

We stood looking out from the bar's balcony at the people who had begun to celebrate in the street below. Mwaura struck a bemused tone. 'It's not like it's a surprise?'. Next to us in the bar, the drunk women bartenders began singing along to a popular gospel song that handily declared, 'this victory is ours' (*ūhotani ūyū nī witū*). As we watched townsfolk gather below us in the darkness of the evening, Mwaura began to reflect on what the next five years would hold for him and his parents under the Jubilee government that he had cast his ballot for only days earlier. He was uncertain. 'Now what will Jubilee do to us?'. He speculated that food prices would skyrocket, as they had throughout 2017. 'But we shouldn't have voted for Uhuru' he announced

before tutting several times. Then why, I asked him, perplexed as ever at the capacity of people like himself to vote for someone who they doubted could guarantee their material living standards despite promises to the otherwise. As he always did, Mwaura relied on the tribal logic that he could not vote for Raila for fear of him ‘ending us’ – a fear that if the opposition were to take office, they would take economic and possibly violent revenge on Kikuyu. Mwaura returned to the point that there was ‘no otherwise’ than Uhuru. Better the Devil you know.⁸⁵

On both occasions when the results were announced, Mwaura's father Paul Kimani had stayed at home, as did many other senior men from the neighbourhood where I lived. These were established men who spent their weeks working away in Nairobi and elsewhere, returning only on weekends and now, during the election period out of fears that election-related violence might take place where they conducted their labour. These were men whose lives are defined by responsibility for wealth accumulation – for the long-term social reproduction of their households. Their reticence about celebrating came from the knowledge that nothing good would come of Uhuru's victory. Promises of re-distribution of resources from the government (or even of improved economic opportunities) seemed to them as hollow as ever. That evening, a disparaging voice of a middle-aged *matatu* minivan driver summed up that criticism: ‘we are celebrating like Luos’, the Luo being in Kikuyu opinion stereotypically mindless in their support of their political heroes, deemed not as critical and discerning as themselves. In other words, there was nothing to celebrate. Reasonable people would not, knowing this was not one's own victory, merely Uhuru's.

In October, as in August, Kimani had refused to vote for Uhuru out of a deepening disappointment with the economic malaise that had intensified earlier in 2017. In contrast to his wife Catherine, he could not even feign interest in the victory of his co-ethnic Kenyatta. On the contrary, Kimani believed that Uhuru and his government were responsible for embezzling money that ought to have been put to better use assisting people by paying for their children's education costs. ‘This government of Uhuru's, it's with an enormous amount of corruption. They've eaten a lot of money’ (*Hii serikali ya Uhuru, iko na corruption kubwa sana. Wamekula pesa mingi sana*). From his perspective, and the perspective of other men like him, Uhuru was failing at his most basic task: creating an environment in which parents could pursue the reproduction of their families across generations. In 2017 and 2018 lack of work through which these ends could be pursued was put down to Uhuru. Instead of ‘the economy’, evidence of malaise, of extortionate school fees or economic decline would be met with the words, ‘*Ngai, Uhuru!*’ (Gosh, Uhuru!). Like patriarchs in

⁸⁵ ‘What if the voters see a “banditstan” in which tribal chiefs and warlords are fighting it out to monopolize plunder?’, asks Kenyan economist and writer David Ndi (2018, May 26). ‘The voters’ calculus might be [...] better the devil you know.’

their households, it was Uhuru's responsibility to facilitate social reproduction for the 'house of Mumbi' – the Kikuyu people.

As the malaise deepened over 2018 and 2019, neighbours stopped visiting each other's houses, increasingly wary of being seen as a burden by others. Whilst the campaign period of 2017 had offered countless women and youths the opportunity to make quick amounts of cash, the former stayed at home and the latter idled on street corners waiting for another opportunity to come their way. Gospel singer Muigai wa Njoroge articulated the sense of disquiet brewing in central Kenya about the 'spoiled fruits' of the election, calling politicians *mbari ya kimendero*, 'the clan of oppressors'. Njoroge evoked the spirit of *Mau Mau* via its veterans. 'The God of Kimathi, Mathenge and Kagia will deliver us from the hands of these inhumane people', he sang. Meanwhile, on the streets of Nairobi, Kikuyu business owners decried the sorry state of the economy, the lack of customers visiting their shops. They protested in the streets with the slogan '*matunda ya tano tena ni gutee*', a mixture of Kiswahili and Kikuyu: 'the fruits of "five years again" [the campaign slogan for Uhuru's re-election] are rubbish'.

The protestors were ridiculed on Twitter as gullible 'potatoes' (*warus*), a staple throughout central Kenya and a reference to their Kikuyu ethnicity. They had been conned and deserved no sympathy. 'They have now known the meaning of choices have consequences....', wrote one Twitter user. Back in Mashambani, economic malaise was being felt in household budgets. Kimani was at home again, his journeys stopped by a lack of demand. 'Money is scarce!' (*Pesa inakosekana*), he insisted. 'Work – there's nothing!' (*Kazi hakuna*). Elsewhere in Kiambu, Kikuyu wondered about how life had grown even harder after voting for Uhuru. 'Will we ever make it and the way our problems seem to multiply?' (Kahura 2018, July 6).

The promise of prosperity that the government had made drew upon desires for better lives held by many, but the failure to keep that promise illuminated what really made such prosperity – or a modicum of it – possible: the persistence of families to pursue social reproduction and material advancement themselves. The consumption of elites went on at their expense, a reminder of the perils of relying on anyone but one's own.

The politics of social reproduction

The xenophobic sentiments towards Raila and ethnic Luo conjured during the 2017 elections stand at odds with the enormous ambivalence Kikuyu voters felt towards their own leadership. On the one hand, Kikuyu objectified their labour theory of value as the basis for political power.

Ostensibly ‘lazy’ and ‘uncivilized’ Luo did not deserve to run the country. Paul Kimani remarked on his stay at home during the election (which had led to the closure of many businesses, and a pause to his driving) that Luo children ‘don’t go to school like Kikuyu children’. Mwaura showed me a video of Kiambu’s former governor, William Kabogo, insulting Luo at a public rally in 2015. ‘They are mannerless’, Kabogo began in Kiswahili (*hawana adabu*). The crowd cheered, as Kabogo switched to Kikuyu, playing on a common stereotype: that Kikuyu practices of circumcision made them more ‘civilised’:

I always tell you that thing is not good. A person should go and get it cut. Because it makes the thinking ability go down. It goes down. Are we in agreement?

(No ndĩmwĩraga kĩnyamũ kũu ti kĩega. Mundu agathiaga arenga. Tondũ nĩ gĩtumaga hakiri ĩcoke thĩ. ĩcoke na thĩ. Tũrĩ hamwe?)

The video showed the crowd baying with laughter.

Kabogo’s insults were matched in 2017 by images circulating on Kikuyu social media pages of Luo protestors stripping in the streets of Nairobi, an act of transgression. Comments condemned them as a ‘Backward tribe’. ‘Canaan can’t be entered by uncircumcised people’, said one, playing on Raila’s promise to his supporters that he would take them to ‘the promised land’ if he won.

But more than simply undeserving and uncivilized, Raila and his Luo followers were seen as vengeful, desiring to appropriate Kikuyu success. ‘If they win, they’ll be out here on the streets saying, “This is mine, this business is mine”’, a shopkeeper in Banana Town claimed. ‘They are so rough’. The anticipation of vengeance intensified after the Presidential elections were annulled by the Supreme Court in September, much to the shock of all Kenyans. No one had expected the Supreme Court to overturn an election result. In the 2013 election, then Chief Justice Willy Mutunga had said the result was ‘unverifiable’ but refrained from such a course of action. In Mashambani, it heightened anxieties about the future and what Raila might do if he took power. ‘If this one rules, we’re finished’ (*ũyũ athana nĩ twathira*), Mwaura remarked to his mother whilst watching television shortly afterwards. The tone was one of exaggerated concern. ‘But they’ll vote like crazy this time’, Catherine assured him (*No magathurana kũgũrũka riita rĩrĩ*). ‘We’ll come out, come out’ (*Ithuĩ kuumĩra kuumĩra*), Mwaura responded, taking up a popular slogan for mobilising the vote in the re-run. Kikuyu should do so, it was argued, to ‘show Raila’ they had the majority. A depleted turn-out from almost 80 per cent to less than 50 on October 26 put a significant dent

in Uhuru's tally, more evidence for Raila that the government had massaged the numbers the first time around.

Raila, however, ultimately boycotted the election, launching what he called a National Resistance Movement (NRM). He extended the boycott to the Safaricom telecommunications company, with the government a prominent shareholder, claiming it had played a role in his defeat (Lang'at 2020, March 18). Safaricom had transmitted information from polling stations to the headquarters of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) who oversaw the poll and made the final count. 'Resist' (*Kataa*), became the opposition's new slogan.

In early 2018, plans were made for Raila to be sworn-in as 'People's President' at Uhuru Park. To even some of his supporters it looked like posturing. One of my friends, a 56-year-old Luhya office worker from Nairobi, a die-hard Raila supporter, suggested that Raila 'should finish his thing' (*amalize na kitu yake*). In Mashambani, opinion was, as one might expect, far more vociferous. Jimmy Thotho anticipated the plan Uhuru had to shock Raila, to 'drop a bombshell on him'. Jim Murigi said that Raila could die for all he cared, along with his 'team'. Smallholders reliant on wages from Nairobi had been badly affected by the closure of businesses.

But for all the hatred of Raila and his followers, events after the election revealed the fault-lines between Kikuyu politicians and voters, less a moral community than a contingent alliance. Kikuyu politicians, so voters argued, merely wanted to continue 'eating money' at the heart of the state. Voters had supported Uhuru to avoid any political turbulence associated with Raila's victory. The fear of the other had trumped what was now a more pressing concern to those who had woken up on August 8th - the ongoing neglect of their lives and livelihoods by an uncaring political elite, one that continued to feast at their expense. On 12th December 2017, Kenya's *Jamburi* (Independence) Day, Uhuru addressed the nation with a thinly veiled attack on the opposition, attacking those who that 'believed that politics matters more than economic development':

There is a different thinking that has been evolving, a thinking that offends the principles the founding fathers laid down for us. This thinking promotes the belief that we strengthen the weak by weakening the strong; it wants us to believe that a Kenyan can climb the ladder of prosperity only if he brings down a fellow Kenyan. This thinking has cost us lives and property, in these last few months (President, Republic of Kenya 2017, December 12).

For onlookers in central Kenya, that same logic now applied to Uhuru as much as Raila. 'Uhuru is doing nothing' was a common theme when I returned to Mashambani in 2019. Criticism of Jubilee Party 'corruption' (*ũgumania*) continued to grow in newsprint and everyday talk.

When voting for Uhuru in 2017, Kikuyu feared losing the power they felt they possessed via Uhuru or at the very least the destabilisation of the economy. They feared the covetousness of Raila and his Luo supporters. Their precarity forced a conservatism. But this conservatism was not blind nor uncritical. Kikuyu voters knew that little assistance could be expected from their own politicians. They register the inequality of means between themselves and their elite. As one of my friends from the Star Boyz football team put it,

Of course I voted Uhuru. I must vote for my guy. But I don't like him [PL: Why?]. Because he took a lot of lands from the colonial time. In Kiambu everyone has small lands except one person. (Fieldnotes, 31st January 2018).

Young men and women, graduates like Mwaura, wondered where the jobs would come from. Uhuru's promises seemed as hollow as ever.

In central Kenya, a household-based conservatism formed in the vagaries of economic uncertainty, sedimented over the last two generations, begets a 'better the devil you know' attitude, one that seeks to limit risk. Threats to the reproduction of the household were always gauged. With the elections over, normal complaints about corrupt and uncaring politicians resumed, people who consumed at their direct expense (cf. Haugerud 1995: 181-2).

The greedy eaters

In a recent volume, Francis Nyamnjoh develops the notion of 'cannibalism' as a challenge to Eurocentric notions of bounded individualism. Cannibalism, like consumption, he argues, is conventionally viewed as 'essentially negative indulgence that diminishes the humanity of both the eater and the eaten' (2018: 1). For Nyamnjoh, however, cannibalism is no deviation but rather a 'normal way of being human' if humans are viewed as 'open-ended composites' that are ultimately incomplete (ibid.: 2). The implications for Nyamnjoh are ultimately normative and morally positive. Recognising 'incompleteness' (ibid.: 3) would make 'inclusiveness' possible, recognising as it does 'interconnections' between persons and the obligations they owe each other.

Much of this thesis has observed the precise opposite, that under conditions of material scarcity aspirant Kenyans condemn others who eat themselves and their immediate relatives through overconsumption. Consumption is not so much a normal way of being, but a tendency to be kept in check, a discourse on the material conditions of scarcity that makes social

reproduction such a fraught task. Kenyans fear ‘the risk of being eaten’ (ibid.: 2) by others who appear as ‘cannibals’ in Nyamnjoh’s terms – those who want too much of what one has. We have seen how households and their members tend to avoid relying on others, just as they seek to stop others relying on them. Such enclosures recognise the burden of social relationships, and their potentially destructive logic in precisely such cannibalistic terms. Greedy eaters from other families might ruin one’s own, whether through jealous violence or by extinguishing one’s budget. At the same time, Kenyans work to control ‘the possibility of eating *oneself* up into bare existence and, ultimately, extinction’ through proper economic investment and self-discipline (ibid., my emphasis).

The events of 2017 and early 2018 offer a further iteration of this central theme: that fears of anti-social modes of accumulation and consumption have shaped economic life, social relations, and moral projects in central Kenya since the colonial period. Kenyans on the outskirts of Nairobi live material change as a moral reorientation towards predatory individualism rather than a merely possessive one, a change embodied in the greedy eaters they observe in the peri-urban milieu around them. As we have seen throughout this thesis, aspirant rural households in central Kenya narrativise their fears about the social forces that threaten social reproduction – alcoholism, sale of inherited land (in some cases to fund consumption), dependence, and greed – through the vilification of others who put their desires to consume ahead of their obligations. Throughout 2017 and 2018, the same critiques were levelled at politicians.

In Chapter 1 we observed how these moral debates and arguments emerged from the tumult of the colonial period, the concentration of rural capitalism in central Kenya, and the production of a scarcity of land and cash for the generations that have inherited its geography. Kenya’s colonial history also produced new moralising discourses about the irresponsibility of consumption, and the importance of meeting obligations to family, and its continuity through children.

Chapter 2 homed in on a localised patriline within central Kenya’s postcolonial geography. Within this milieu, it explored the fraught social relationships between families and friends. Unlike other African contexts where qualities of mutuality, entrustment and dependence are seen as characteristic of such relationships, we saw that reliance is denigrated as a personal failing. Wealthy families and persons distanced themselves from poorer ones to avoid becoming overburdened by requests for material assistance. At the same time, poorer families attempt to keep social relationships with wealthier families open by practicing ‘civility’ – an anticipatory form of sociality that is more self-interested than the aforementioned categories of mutuality, entrustment and dependence can accommodate.

In Chapter 3 we began to explore the problems of irresponsible consumption through the prism of patriarchal obligation. Amongst rural households, the most scorn is reserved for older men, fathers who renege on their duties to sons by selling land that the latter would inherit. This is consumption out of place, an over-consumption, a destruction of wealth – inalienable assets – that make the social continuity of households across generations possible in the first place. Patriarchal responsibility for social reproduction was underscored by such acts of neglect. The neglect by Kikuyu politicians looked rather similar, the economic malaise evidence of their failure to safeguard the livelihoods of those who had ‘given’ Uhuru their votes.

But as we saw at the close of Chapter 3 and more fully in Chapter 4, from the perspective of those that embraced consumption through drinking alcohol, other possibilities not encoded in the lifestyle of the rural patriarchal household were realised – that of ‘fun’ (*raba*), of *feeling* wealthier than one truly is by living a short-term life of conspicuous consumption. Younger men suggested that social relations were secondary to the self, to one’s own enjoyment of life in alcohol and weekend fun. Such social relations, they suggested, were a burden. Marriages seemed unworkable because of the ‘ungratefulness’ of wives.

However, as we saw in Chapter 4, even former petty criminals, young men who still live lives defined by consumption at the expense of continuity (for material lack more than moral failure, though nonetheless coded as such) define themselves in relation to the hegemonic values of the household. They know they have tarnished their reputations in adopting criminality and desperately perceive their distance from the normative lifestyles they nonetheless claim to desire. They recognise that their lives of crime had involved dispossessing others, acts that awaken fears on the part of conservative households that social others might stop at nothing to momentarily enjoy life. They know how their moral status has changed in the eyes of others as a result.

In so far as consumption implies the eating of something – whether money or a substance – that is not necessarily one’s own – it implicates desire’s depravity in the eyes of those who cast themselves as dutiful household sustainers. Men that sell land to fund more ‘comfortable’ lives sell the hard work of their fathers, and the futures of their children. But consumption is lateral as well as lineal. Chapter 5 showed how inheritance disputes in central Kenya recall a history in which Kikuyu accumulated land at the expense of their relatives using land litigation – a type of lateral predatory accumulation. Morally ‘good’ wealth production was threatened not only by one’s own proclivities for consumption but fears about social others: morally corrupt persons that have succumbed to desire, putting their own prosperity ahead of that of their immediate social relations. Women especially have come to embody greed in misogynist discourse, owing to their capacity to deprive brothers of what the latter deem to be their rightful inheritance.

That greedy eaters might seek to consume the wealth of peri-urban households, pursuing social reproduction in order to facilitate their own flourishing and enjoyment, raises fears that consumption and selfishness is the new norm. Moral narratives about ‘bad desires’ (*mĩrĩria moru*) point to middle-class fears of a runaway world embodied in the actions of people who consume value rather than produce it, cannibalising their own futures and those of others. Immoralities (*waganu*) brought about by Kiambu’s urbanisation are read in the persons it produces. In central Kenyan moral thought, these greedy eaters consume not only wealth itself but, through eating valued things, destroy the moral value those things embody: continuity in kinship, the social future lived in others. Consumption itself looks set to become an encompassing moral value, one that eats other, more virtuous orientations. For peri-urban families, normatively understood goods of establishing families, investing in children, appear under threat not by material change itself but by the moral corruption it engenders.

In light of ethnographic insights into social change from across Africa (e.g., Amanor 2010; Blunt 2019; Colson 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; D. J. Smith 2006; J. H. Smith 2008), it is difficult not to view such narratives as anything other than the outcome of a wider process of commodification – of the breakthrough of a new type of individualism exemplified by predatory accumulation and self-oriented consumption. But in contrast to the Comaroffs (1999: 291), who saw ‘the creeping commodification of life itself’ in proliferating witchcraft beliefs, the ‘mysterious malevolents’ who herald changing moral norms in central Kenya are not organ thieves or necromancers, but persons closer to home who increasingly appear to put themselves ahead of their kin (Geschiere 2013; Chapter 5). Kenyans have experienced the effects of scarcity brought about in the colonial period as a deepening ‘negative reciprocity’ (Sahlins 1972: 195) over the *longue durée* – that under conditions of prolonged economic stress and material scarcity, persons have retreated to ‘the innermost sphere of solidarity’ (ibid.: 214) of the self. Kenya’s material history weighs heavily, and new moral orientations necessarily emerge from experience (Guyer 2004: 6). Kenya’s great transformation over the course of the 20th century (cf. Hann 1998: 34; Polanyi 1944) has given rise not to a possessive individual who accumulates private property, but the greedy eater who stands outside social relationships, destroying them for their own gain. Those who have been disembedded from social relations by Kenya’s colonial history, legal change, and urban upheaval carry the most threat of becoming such persons: liminal women, vagrant youth, and greedy relatives who have attuned their desires to the possibilities for gleaning wealth in the nefarious ways typical of town life.

But peri-urban families continue to insist that proper moral relations between kin can be maintained. Greedy eaters are vilified because Kenyans insist moral community is still possible,

the flourishing of the family a moral project to be realised if the former are kept in check, the vulnerable cared for and included rather than cast out. Continuing to make a home on the periphery of Nairobi, as the city swallows it, appears as an act of defiance to the immoralities that come with it, underscoring the obduracy of 'wealth in people' and the hard work of those who continue to live by its morality, continuing to find in its horizons a modicum of honour and self-respect.

To shed light on such debates is to underscore the need for an anthropology attuned to the divergent perspectives our interlocutors hold on the issues that define their social worlds. Ethnographies of moral politics draw attention to how moral standards are the subject of contestation as well as evaluation, of fierce argument and disciplining criticism within much wider social arenas, and how such debates are shaped by changing material circumstances from which they can never be divorced. Ethnographies of moral politics mark a wholesale disavowal of any pretence to anthropological holism, identifying debate, dissent and non-conformity about moral norms as anthropology's proper terrain of inquiry. To show what is at stake in emic moral discourse is to track the changing moral norms that underpin social life, never necessarily agreed upon, and the direction in which our interlocutors think, for better or for worse, the world is changing.

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