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Ngara: An Endangered 'Peace Bubble' in the Heart of 'Nairobbery'? Portrait of a Kenyan Neighborhood through the Eyes and the Rumors of its Informal Street-Vendors

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In 2008, Mwai Kibaki's government launched Kenya Vision 2030 (*Ruwaza ya Kenya 2030*), a national medium-term development program. This ambitious plan aims to transform Kenya into a "newly industrializing, middle-income country providing a high quality of life to all its citizens by 2030" (GoK 2014). It notably attends to create a "clean and secure environment" (Ibid) through the modernization of Nairobi. This plan has led to the multiplication of construction sites of various types all over Kenya's metropolis. Ngara, a district allocated for Indians under colonial rule, is nowadays particularly affected by the urban changes envisioned in Kenya Vision 2030. New roads, compounds and bridges have successively emerged in this commercial area bordering Nairobi's city center. As Ngara's urban landscape is getting dramatically transformed, the district's daily users and dwellers are growing expectations or are caught with anxieties.

In this paper, I look into citizens' perceptions and feelings about the urban landscape's changes in light of the daily activities and discourses from street vendors working in an informal market at the heart of Ngara (see red rhombus on the map below, illustration 2). I chose to focus on street-vendors or street-traders for two reasons. As we will see later, one of Ngara's central features is the prevalence of informal economic activities within a

dynamic area. Street-vendors – as mobile informal businessmen and women – are key actors in such practices. Since current projects are threatening informal markets area, I also anticipated that street-vendors would have a strong opinion and would likely share it and discuss with me. Moreover, their perceptions and feelings appear as a prism to capture citizens' support of and contest over state-led urban projects, and furthermore to understand citizens' relations to the state itself. Also, underpinned by direct interviews and observations and the study of one particular case, this paper sheds light on the Kenyan state's technique of city planning: forced evictions, violence, nepotism, etc. It will allow us to address Kenya's "authoritarian" rule at work, that is, in its local and daily making.



Illustration 1: An informal market on Ngara Main Road, with Nairobi CBD in the background. @Google Maps, 20/02/2018.

Firstly, I investigate the sellers' representations of Ngara in relation to other areas of Nairobi. Secondly, I shed light on and analyze practices through which sellers experience state's interventions in the city and in their lives. Finally, this paper analyses the role of actors that might appear as weak and powerless when it comes to space occupation and use. It indeed attempts to contribute to a reflection on the contentious use of space by different actors intertwined in power relationships.

A ghetto for some, a paradise for the others...

The inhabitants from other areas of Nairobi (as well as the police) regard Ngara as a dangerous place infested with night criminals. I was told by people living in Ngara that wealthy and middle-class city dwellers (notably former Indian inhabitants) progressively left the district as they started to consider it unsafe for them, calling it a "ghetto". However, even though Ngara is now deprived of its former privileged inhabitants, local dwellers stress the joy of an always dynamic neighborhood. Besides, the ghetto reputation with crimes at night, informal trading, prostitution, selling of stolen goods, etc. can be a resource for dwellers who benefit from these informal activities. Kenyans often say that "you can buy

anything from a stolen vehicle in Ngara”, yet the informal traders I interviewed depict Ngara as a peaceful place where people know one another, unlike in other parts of the city. First of all, street-vendors describe Ngara as preserved from the ethnic tensions seen in areas like Mathare or Kibera. These two informal settlements are reputed to be dangerous districts “where people are fighting”, particularly during election. People in Ngara regularly mention post-election times to differentiate their district. Whereas slums are considered to be torn apart by ethnic conflicts during electoral times, Ngara is cast as a place of tranquility, although it is regularly used by the police as a buffer zone against its poor-neighborhood’s contest during post-election violence (PEV). Indeed, being very close to Nairobi’s city center, Ngara literally represents a gate to the Central Business District (CBD) for demonstrators coming from other districts like Huruma or Mathare. During the 2007-2008 PEV, police forces prevented access to Ngara in order to protect the administrative and symbolic heart of the city. Being “boxed in” (as one of my informants put it) within their neighborhood for several weeks, Ngara’s inhabitants felt like living and/or being jailed in a bubble protected from electoral brutality – speaking of being “boxed in” conveys the idea of a confined, insulated place preserved from external threats during polls.

When it comes to security issues, street-traders also oppose Ngara to Tao, meaning “town”, that identifies the CBD in Sheng (a Kenyan urban slang). One of my informants who used to work in the CBD told me that “in town, security is very tight”. By referring to police harassment in the city center, he puts into contrast the tensed atmosphere in the CBD with the easier working conditions in Ngara, where the police presence is way lower. One could assume that this would make criminal activities easier and favor insecurity. According to one of my informants, the reason why insecurity is not so rampant in Ngara, despite police scarcity, is “because people know each other”. Interviewers indeed stressed how easy it is to build a stable sociability in the area. An inhabitant estimates that “slowly, you meet 30%, 50% of the people here”.

These elements are challenging the very idea of “Nairobbery”, a common expression used by Kenyans to portray Nairobi as a city where crime rules, a jungle megalopolis torn apart by violence. Such an idea somehow romanticizes but also homogenizes Nairobi as one single entity, while the city is in fact multiple, fragmented through high socio-spatial segregation. Going beyond the assumed insecurity of Ngara fantasized by richer inhabitants of the city and foreigners, I now would like to take a closer look at this so-called “bubble”, notably by studying the social relations setting within the neighborhood. What fosters this feeling of “living in a bubble” within the broader city of Nairobi? What are the elements that maintain social peace?

Trading as a means for peace and tranquility

The absolute centrality of trading activities within Ngara is one of the elements explaining such an atmosphere. I believe that the “tranquility” which street-traders are mentioning fosters economic exchanges and is being fostered by them in return. Indeed, street-vendors portray Ngara as a place of business and economic opportunities. Business is the most common lexical field mobilized by informants when talking with me about the area. As many street-traders put it, “Ngara is business, business, business”.

Ngara's geographical location enables a high supply and demand. Ngara is situated near Nairobi's biggest wholesale markets: Muthurwa (fruits and vegetables), Gikomba (textile), Kariokor I (food) and Kariokor II (local jewelry) ((In this study, I artificially extract such rumours from their actual enunciation situation, therefore eclipsing the enunciation modalities of these rumours, i.e. who says what to who, where and how (De Certeau 1990). My Kiswahili level did not allow me to capture these rumours in their actual context, which obviously impacts my analysis.)). Such a proximity mitigates transportation costs and allows street-vendors to renew their merchandise. Many buy their goods at low prices at those wholesalers before selling them at higher costs in Ngara. The short distances also enable the use of *mkokoteni* (a handcart in Kiswahili) in the area. Not only do they furnish Ngara's sellers with merchandise, but they also sell their own as wandering traders. When it comes to supply, let us not forget that being a multimodal platform connected both to the city center and major peripheral urban areas of Nairobi like Thika, Ngara concentrates many *matatu* (public transport) commuting to other districts of the city. The geographic position of Ngara, located close to the CBD and crossed by Thika superhighway, makes it a necessary step to access and leave from the city center, thus bringing many potential customers.

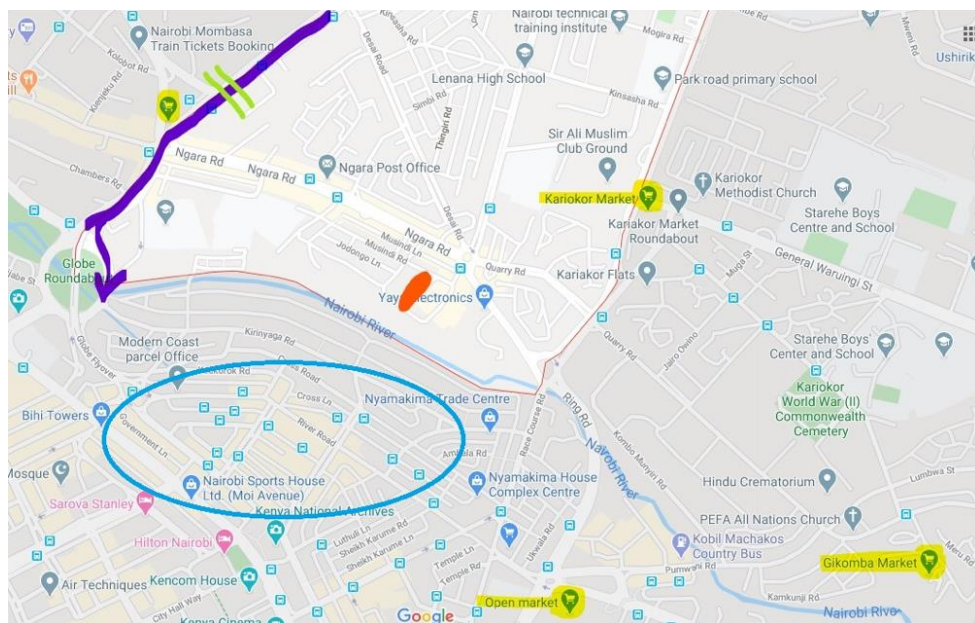


Illustration 2: Ngara's map @ V. Ole Sima, using Google Maps, April 2020.

Orange rhombus: case study market / **Yellow:** wholesaler markets / **Blue arrow:** urban *matatu* fluxes from and to Thika / **Blue circle:** Town / Green lines: case study encroached bridge.

The prevalence of the business repertoire demonstrates the intensity of commercial activities in Ngara. Thereby, Ngara appears as a huge "open market", says one of my informants. On the one hand, this expression emphasizes the idea of Ngara being a large market in itself divided in specific units all specialized in selling certain goods. Indeed, people define sub-divisions in the area according to the types of commercial activities conducted in specific locations. Even though they argue that "business is at every corner",

they still clearly distinguish several areas depending on the types of goods offered and the framework within which they are being sold. People then make a difference between Old Ngara market, New Ngara market or Fig Tree market. On the other hand, the “open market metaphor” gives an idea of the high presence of commercial activities. Such an environment is very fertile for individuals who want to start their own businesses. Informal traders describe Ngara as a land of opportunities where one can come and seek economic independence. As a matter of fact, many informants had just started their activities a few months ago. Whereas some had interrupted their professional career (as a schoolteacher for instance), others had moved from other commercial areas of Nairobi. According to many street-vendors I interviewed, Ngara offers multiple possibilities of self-employment and perspectives of a bright and prosperous future. Such assertions translate the absence of barriers restraining commercial activities, therefore highlighting the easy circulation of both goods and people within the area. Mobility is indeed a key feature of informal commercial activities, as we shall see later. In a reciprocal movement, business fosters peace, and peace encourages business according to my informants.

Ngara's solidarity at the heart of devious and brutal Nairobi

The physical and geographic configuration of the informal vegetables market I studied encourages good relationships between traders. Not only are they all facing each other, but the absence of walls between kiosks makes it possible for each trader to communicate with the others, while remaining at their own stall. This spatial disposition favors discussions and debates among the vendors and the traders, which boosts contact and supports friendly sociability.

These social links foster solidarity and mutual assistance at work. I learnt during one of my interviews that “there is no need for competition” among traders or that “there is no need to steal someone else's customer”. If a client reaches a stall from which the entitled trader is absent, a neighboring trader usually comes and conducts the transaction. She/he would keep the money and return it later to her or his fellow trader. Some informants also said they could join forces during rush hours. For instance, one street-trader may go to the Equity Bank Roundabout flooded with customers arriving from Tao from 6.00 to 9.00 pm while his fellow trader may stay at the market and takes care of the merchandise of both of them. They then share benefits. Such practices corroborate Sylvain Racaud's analysis about street commerce and urban flows: they are highly intertwined (Racaud 2019).

One can say that commercial practices are highly intertwined within interpersonal networks in addition to embracing daily human mobilities in the city. Business dynamics fosters interpersonal ties and solidarity and are reinforced by them.

The historical roots of an urban bubble

The peaceful social relations observed in Ngara seem to be the legacy of a history of diversity. Individuals from different groups have been living together as many communities progressively settled down in the area since colonial times. Even though Ngara (and other areas such as Eastleigh) were strictly reserved for Indian communities under colonial rule according to urban segregationist policies, independence accelerated the Africanization of

the area (Médard 2010). This process pushed wealthier Indians to Westlands and Parklands who left what for them was becoming a multicultural “ghetto” (Adam 2010: 238-239). Despite this progressive and massive departure, Ngara still bears the signs of the Indian presence. It remains densely populated by residents of Indian origin (Ibid). The numerous sarees and spices shops located on Ngara Road and several religious edifices attest to their presence. Moreover, there are currently no less than 5 Indian schools located in the area (3 Hindu and 2 Muslim) (Ibid: 240).

Not only is Ngara populated by a diverse population but it is also surrounded by specific communities living in nearby neighborhoods (Eastleigh is populated by many Somalis, Parklands and Pangani by many Indians, etc.) who are familiar with the area. As Somalis cross Ngara in *matatu* to reach Tao, richer Indians come to the Fig Tree market on Sundays to buy their favorite spices and fruits. Even though diversity is not a synonym for peace, Ngara actually witnessed a long history of “African populations of various origins and Indians mixed together in a broader cosmopolitan ambiance” (De Lame 2010: 182). Nowadays, the consumption of khat (*miraa*) crystallizes such multicultural encounters and ties (Ibid). Indeed, on the weekends, people from different Kenyan ethnic groups or communities come together in broad car parking lots or within private yards to discuss about Kenyan politics as they chew *miraa*.

Bursting the bubble: are urban sociabilities endangered by state-led urban politics?

Although residents depict Ngara as a bubble in the middle of a brutal and inhospitable city, ongoing urban state-led changes appear to be a threat to Ngara’s balance of populations. Urban planning erases informal markets and evicts street-traders, which destabilizes the business ecology of the neighborhood and eventually jeopardizes street-vendors’ survival. What sorts of urban modifications can we observe in Ngara? And how do street-vendors experience them?

Urban politics: predicting the unpredictable through rumors

As Ngara’s urban landscape is getting transformed, Ngara’s informal sellers are growing worried with construction sites blossoming everywhere without notice. One of the main discursive repertoires of street-vendors who articulate urban change testifies to it: rumors. In a context of information scarcity regarding road and building constructions, rumors becomes a practical tool for capturing urban evolution. They enable individuals to produce predictability in a context of high uncertainty. The absence of public information about construction is a source of high anxiety among my informants. They do not know for how long they will stay nor where roads will be built or when. Such a threatening situation for their survival obviously causes alarm. As street-vendors put it, “everybody is afraid [...] because we don’t know”. “People talk a lot about it”, said one informant. This information is shared among social networks such as the Ngara Vijana Facebook page, and through resident associations meetings held to discuss the situation (notably the destruction of the

Old and New Ngara estates). The regular mention of how residents are kept ignorant of the situation is proof of their concern, even anxiety.

According to Philippe Aldrin, rumors are a way of discussing politics for individuals excluded from the hegemonic political sphere (Aldrin 2005). Despite their relative understanding of contemporary Kenyan political life and city council activities, the position of these individuals outside of the hegemonic field deprive them of the access to certain knowledge. In our case, in a situation of complete absence of information regarding city planning, rumors enable individuals to make sense of urban change and of the Kenya Vision 2030 planning. Using gossips, they progressively draw out likely maps of what Nairobi could be after road constructions take off. Through rumors and gossips, street-vendors assess and estimate the situation, thus creating a sense of predictability that is essential for business.

Gossiping as political criticism

The genre of rumor is about decrypting politics as it mobilizes repertoires and categories actively used by street-vendors to make sense of their experience (Aldrin 2005). As they talk about city landscape evolutions, street-vendors also give their opinion about those responsible for urban changes: the state and its decentralized avatars. I understand rumors as narratives that reveal common representations of postcolonial politics. They allow me to access everyday views on institutions and power ((These markets are highlighted in yellow on the map. "Open market" stands for Muthurwa market.)) and therefore to explore ordinary citizens' relations to the state.

To start with, rumors portray state and city authorities as being particularly brutal. The following quotations express this view: "the state is veery strong", "they're very hard", "City council mistreat people". Street-vendors regularly confessed to me that they feel powerless in the face of the state that looks like a strong apparatus no one can challenge. Street-traders perceive state agents as external threats to their bubble since they pursue activities that might destabilize their own. Indeed, as rumors suggest, state authorities are likely to disturb Ngara's favorable business ecology. For instance, the re-arrangement of Musindi lane and Musindi road already constrained local street-traders to leave. Moreover, as rumors suggest, the construction of a new road between Musindi Road and Jodongo Road may include the destruction of the informal market.

Such rumors feed on a great history of street-vendors evictions in Nairobi. With a resurgence in the 1980s and the 1990s, examples abound of slum destructions and street-vendors expulsions in Nairobi (Médard 2010). For instance, in 1975, Gikomba slum was erased and left 10,000 people homeless (Ibid). More recently, in 2002, the eradication of Galole Village in Eastleigh left 2,000 citizens with no roof over their head (Ibid). Pictures of bulldozers and violent evictions spread by rumors are actually echoing a "tradition of territorial control where the poor are the first to suffer" (Ibid: 47).

Yet, gossiping also casts the state as a mercantile organization handled by opportunist politicians. As my informants put it, "in Kenya, everything is corruption", "City councils are thieves", "they steal money". These words echo a history of scandals related to illegal land acquisition and corruption (Rodrigues-Torres 2010). More than merely producing

predictability, rumors thereby appear as a means for people to break the codes of politics, as observed in other African contexts (Ondo 2009). They enable people to expose power in its birthday suit: in our case, they reveal the authoritarian practices of a corrupt elite. Nairobi street-vendors deconstruct state-led urban politics as they tell, through rumors, how “patronage is [...] at the heart of the production and structuring of the urban space” and context they live in (Rodriguez-Torres 2010: 92). These rumors seem to perfectly fall within Achille Mbembe’s notion of postcolonial relations of intimacy as they both deride and reify power through the same episteme of strength and vulgarity (Mbembe 1991). Similarly, as Joost Fontein explains in a study about Zimbabwe, “rumors that seek to subvert or reveal the truth behind official representations actually duplicitously and treacherously reify the omnipotent presence they seek to undermine” (Fontein 2009: 390). In Ngara, hatred and distrust rubs shoulder with fascination and fear. After all, as one informant puts it, “if you are a politician, you’re very lucky”. These rumors therefore give access to street-trader’s perceptions as well as distrustful and fearful relations to the state.

An adaptable bubble? Encroaching New Ngara’s buildings and roads

Finally, street-vendors experience urban change as a quiet encroachment. This tactic is defined by Asef Bayat as the “quietly impinging on the propertied and powerful”, pointing to the progressive appropriation by individuals of the public space (Bayat 2009: 15). The sociologist adds that “these practices also move beyond simple acts of everyday resistance, for they engage in surreptitious and incremental encroachments to further their claims” (Bayat 2009: 16). Indeed, as one walks through Ngara, one can see how street-vending techniques embrace urban modifications as they keep infringing newly built urban facilities.

Footstep bridges on Thika superhighway are good illustrations of this phenomena. As shown by the pictures, urban improvements witness street-vending evolutions too. The bridge embodies state control over urban mobility. Nevertheless, its construction did not prevent improvisation and appropriation from street-vendors who turned the very structure of the bridge at their advantage. What could have been a mere obstacle was progressively converted into an air stall. They encroached it. As sellers increase the height of their kiosk to reach customers climbing the stairs, beggars invest the bridge’s deck. Clothes shops flourish under and at the foot of the bridge, benefiting from the metal structure to build resistant waterproof shops. Eventually, at night, thieves organize racket operations as passengers are being taxed if they want to walk across the bridge.



Illustration 3: Encroached bridge at rush hour (represented by a green color on the map, illustration 1) @ Google Maps 20/02/2018.

This bridge is a power configuration between city authorities and street-vendors. It materializes a symbiotic power relation. As the state attempts to control human flows in Ngara, street-vending techniques evolve and change shape to capture fluxes growing through these new state-imposed paths (i.e. the bridge). Space is indeed not a mere background witnessing human encroachment, as Bayat's theory suggests. As it creates geographical constraints (relief, location, etc.) on social agents, space is also a matrix within which power relationships operate. The state imposes paths and ways for human fluxes in addition to a set of rules on how to properly use space, while the street-traders develop their own (collective) spatial strategies in order to survive. The subversive dimension of the quiet encroachment lies in the sellers' capacity to change the symbolic sense inscribed in the bridge and its supposed use and utility (Hmed 2008). From a mere high pathway, the Ngara bridge is becoming a crowded air market and an unsecure crosswalk at night.

Space thereby materializes peculiar power configurations and presents both a constraining and habilitating dimension (Hmed 2008). Urban change is therefore not merely about top-down implementation but is daily negotiated between the many actors that seek access to public space. This bridge is a good example of the ways in which domination patterns are spatially organized and how urban practices, beyond an oppression/resistance model, are actually symbiotic relations.

Conclusion

Although Ngara is described as a dangerous impoverished neighborhood, most residents and particularly street-traders depict it as a peaceful commercial area. The recurring use of the business lexicon in interviews not only stresses the intensity of fluxes and flows of all kinds (goods, people, transport, etc.), but also their centrality in people's life. However, current state-led urban projects that imply a broad redesigning of the district are destabilizing Ngara's ordinary balance. As they plan to destroy informal commercial areas, they are likely to destroy the lively places of sociability that are central to street-vendors' survival – this dynamic has already been observed elsewhere in Nairobi as a consequence of slum upgrading initiatives. Despite the arbitrary management of the city, street-traders do not remain passive. On the contrary, their polymorph practices contribute to appropriating space in many ways. As their discourses enlighten their anxious mistrust to the state, the way vendors encroach public areas showed how multiple unequal actors negotiate space by engaging in conflict or by building alliances. A question remains: what will become of Ngara? A further study would benefit from a closer look at all the different actors involved and from an assessment of the Kenya Vision 2030 plans when fully implemented in the neighborhood. It would usefully go beyond the binary perspective between citizens and the state – a dichotomy which this paper partially fell in as it mainly rendered the voices of informal street-vendors opposing the Kenyan state.

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