NAIROBI TODAY

The Paradox of a Fragmented City
NAIROBI TODAY
The Paradox of a Fragmented City

Edited by
Deyssi Rodriguez-Torres

Mkuki na Nyota Publishers
French Institute for Research in Africa
# Contents

Preface, Hélène Charton-Bigot ................. ix

## Introduction

Town life in colonial Kenya
John Lonsdale ........................................... 1

## PART ONE

Public Policy and the Informal Town

City planning in Nairobi: the stakes, the people, the sidetracking
Claire Médard ........................................... 25

Public authorities and urban upgrading policies in Eastlands:
the example of ‘Mathare 4A Slum Upgrading Project’
Deyssi Rodriguez-Torres. ................................. 61

Management of garbage in Nairobi: perspectives
of restructuring public action
Mathieu Mérino ........................................... 97

Water and the poor in Nairobi: from water apartheid
to urban fragmentation, the case of Kibera
Anne Bousquet ........................................... 123
PART TWO

Urban Identities

Grey Nairobi: sketches of urban socialties
Danielle De Lame ....................................................... 167

A microcosmic minority: the Indo-Kenyans of Nairobi
Michel Adam .......................................................... 215

Muslims in Nairobi: from a feeling of marginalisation to a desire for political recognition
Anne Cussac And Nathalie Gomes .................................. 269

Pentecostalism in Nairobi
Yvan Droz ............................................................... 305

PART THREE

Areas Fragmented by Power

Local political system of Nairobi
Winnie V. Mitullah .................................................... 321

‘A city under siege’: formalised banditry and deconstruction of modes of accumulation in Nairobi, 1991–2004
Musambayi Katumanga .............................................. 343

Hidden $ Centz: rolling the wheels of Nairobi matatu
Mbugua Wa-Mungai .................................................... 367

Political activism in Nairobi: violence and resilience of Kenyan authoritarianism
Hervé Maupeu ........................................................... 381
Acknowledgements

This book is the result of a collective effort, which necessitated adaptability and understanding of each of the contributors. We are deeply grateful to each one of them. Our gratitude also goes to Deyssi Rodriguez-Torres and Hervé Maupeu, who initiated the project, and maintained their faith in it. Because of their tenacity, their efforts bore fruit. We also wish to thank Professor Bernard Charley de la Masselière, Director of IFRA, who, in 2000, had the idea of publishing the project results. The scientific and material support from IFRA brought this work to a successful conclusion. Thanks are also due to Helen Charton-Bigot, Judie-Lynn Rabar, Julie Damond, Paul Sullivan, Duncan Gumba and Patricia Karani, all of whom worked on the production process in various capacities.
Preface

Hélène Charton-Bigot

The joint draft publication on the city of Nairobi was initiated in June 2000 by a team of researchers working under the aegis of the French Research Institute in Africa (IFRA) on the institute’s projects. Nairobi Today adds to a collection on contemporary African states with a new series dedicated to East African cities. The publication of “Nairobi Today” completes this series. This type of publication gives quality information to French-speaking readers on the often little-known English-speaking East Africa.

This project took time to gestate and take shape. During its long gestation period it experienced a number of changes which have come to quite appropriately reflect the elusive nature of Nairobi, a city of complex and fluctuating identities.

Like other colonial cities, Nairobi is a product of British colonisation. It was created from scratch to meet first and foremost, the economic needs of colonial development to serve as a resting point during the construction of the Uganda Railway linking Mombasa and Lake Victoria. It later overtook Mombasa and its old town tradition to become the capital of the protectorate, then the colony.

It seems Nairobi, due to its beginnings and character, was a stopover and never really a final settlement for the majority of its inhabitants. Since its creation as a white city whose geography adhered to strict racial segregation, Nairobi served as a station for colonial civil servants on roving duty in various British Empire territories and a replenishment centre for the settlers living in the Highlands. Indian communities, settled in Nairobi from the beginning of the 20th century, were displaced from the city centre following a plague outbreak in the Indian bazaar. They resettled in the eastern part of the city. As for the Africans, the city was obviously not meant for them. They were tolerated for the city’s functional needs like domestic workers, casual employees in government and private companies like the Railways, but there was no residential area specifically dedicated to them. The Nairobi Africans could not own land pre-empted by the Crown. They therefore settled informally or illegally wherever they could in unoccupied parts of the city with an ever-present threat of expulsion hanging over their heads.

During the period between the two wars, demographic pressure in the African reserves and new economic constraints imposed by colonisation led to the influx of migrant Africans in the capital. In spite of the limitations, they came to try their luck in Nairobi in a bid to obtain employment and get the
financial resources they needed to pay taxes. The African city thus developed in the unoccupied spaces alongside the colonial city. The African city emerged more as a juxtaposition of residential areas created in accordance with colonial policy. Former Muslim Nubian soldiers settled in the Kibera area, the first informal African “village” of the city. The demobilised soldiers settled in Kariokor, while Railway workers, who were mainly the Luo from western Kenya, settled in Lhandies. Although Africans were the majority, they were peripheral second-class zone dwellers. Up to the Second World War, there was no public policy or urban department for Africans in the capital. As far as the colonial authorities were concerned, it would be tantamount to accepting and legitimising the presence of these people in Nairobi.

It seems, therefore, that insecurity was the very nature of African presence in Nairobi. It is upon this paradox that the city’s identity is based. The African population became so much part of the insecurity of urban life that it not only affected their status but primarily, their identity as well. Though this insecurity was a product of the colonial set-up, it persisted after the country’s independence. The city’s colonial past greatly influenced the contemporary urban landscape. Admittedly, racial segregation disappeared but it gave way to a more subtle form of social segregation. Today, just as it was during the colonial period, a large section of the city population still lives in informal residential areas, in some cases, inherited by several generations living under virtually illegal or insecure conditions. These people were seemingly diverse: migrants, whose families had been left behind in the village, women who had established themselves in the city as prostitutes, youths who had illegally returned to the city, as well as descendants of the first communities to settle in the city, Kibera Nubians, Indians and Pakistanis, etc. It is perhaps this piecemeal blend of residential areas and communities that makes the city what it is today and gives it its rather unique nature. Each of the residential areas and communities has over time emerged as a strong identity.

Consequently, it is not a unique identity that one should look for in Nairobi but a multi-identity or identities which correspond to various fragments that are part of the city and also to the differentiated dynamics that is observed at the level of each village, each residential area. In addition, Nairobi is by default shallowly seen through its urban policy deficiencies. It is often associated with its shantytowns and soaring crime, which bring the failure of urban policies into sharp focus. It is these shadowy slum areas that are paradoxically used to characterise the city. Nairobi today looks like a fragmented and highly paradoxical city since it is upon the city’s empty spaces and peripheries that urban dynamics are structured. It is a city whose identity remains shifty.

As shown by the thirteen papers that make up this publication, it is impossible to encompass the city’s complexity in one glance. It is a city that reveals itself when you touch it, fragment by fragment. This publication calls
upon us to go into the city’s residential areas, to frequent certain communities or familiarise ourselves with some of its formal or informal institutions in order to understand what constitutes the city of Nairobi today.

By endeavouring to identify and distinguish the urban dynamics unique to Nairobi, the three main parts of this publication make it possible to understand how the city’s space is structured. Nairobi has retained its profoundly hybrid nature which makes it a stop-over city more inclined towards the countryside than its own urban status. This characteristic is, however, essential in trying to understand this atypical city. Doubtlessly, it is from its peripheries, its unoccupied spaces and its historically marginalised population that one should look for the essence of a ‘Nairobian’ identity. The nature of Nairobi’s historical development has deeply affected its contemporary aspect—a “fragmented”, “compartmentalised” city—adjectives used in the various papers emphasise the city’s disjointed nature. This fragmentation is attached to the nature of urban policies, or to their absence, which have been behind the city’s development.

These aspects have been dealt with in the first part of the publication, which is dedicated to public policy. However, it is their limitations and failures that have been given prominence in the various papers notably giving the example of two informal residential areas: Mathare and Kibera. In her article, Claire Médard tackles the issue of land policy and urban planning. The issue of land policy is at the heart of Nairobi’s development. Apart from the classical functional zoning linked to a racial segregation policy, lack of city planning has led to the mushrooming of many informal residential areas in which the issue of land ownership has never been resolved. The shantytowns, which developed illegally in the city’s unoccupied spaces, are not part of any public policy. Yet these informal residential areas serve as reservoirs and leverage for the city’s political and economic actors, given that they are paradoxically at the centre of modern urban dynamics. This is highlighted by the three public policy examples that follow: the renovation of informal residential areas by Deyssi Rodriguez-Torres, giving Mathare 4A as an example; water policy tackled by Anne Bousquet, citing the case of Kibera; and finally waste management, discussed by Mathieu Mérino. Indeed, the failure of public policies in these areas explains the urban fragmentation process that characterises the city of Nairobi. This fragmentation, however, leads to strong identities as shown by D. Rodriguez-Torres in the case of Mathare 4A. Opposition to the policy of renovation indeed revealed a real Mathare identity that transcends traditional, ethnic and religious cleavages. The original initiatives that develop at the level of residential areas to make up for the absence of public policies cast light on the original urban dynamics.

Therefore, by looking at area by area and within the various communities, one is able discern the city’s dynamics. The second part of the publication
NAIROBI TODAY

precisely aims at understanding the city through its variety of residential areas, communities and identities. The tour on which Danièle de Lame takes us underscores the diversity as well as the compartmentalisation of Nairobi, which makes it a decidedly pluralist city. Articles by Michel Adam, Anne Cussac and Nathalie Gomes, which concentrate on Indian, Pakistani and Muslim communities in Nairobi, enable us to improve our knowledge on these early dwellers of the city who have forged strong identities within their residential areas. Indians and Pakistanis play a major role in the city’s economic and social space while the Nairobi Muslims, who were the first African Nairobi dwellers, appear to be a marginalised community in perpetual quest for recognition. Religions also play a major role in the formation of the identity pattern in Nairobi. They are a reference point for new migrants looking for social identity. Yvan Droz takes an interest in the fervour for Pentecostal Churches, which has been noticeable in the last decade or so. Beyond the social identity and stability that they can offer in a fragmented space, these churches preach a message that enables the faithful to escape from material difficulties inherent in urban life, poverty, insecurity, etc., and help them to accept their often temporary situation as city dwellers. The city therefore produces its own identities that reflect the concerns of its inhabitants.

Does the juxtaposition of residential areas and identities bring about a specific urban culture? This is the question that the third part of the publication seeks to answer through the issue of Nairobi’s political culture. Winnie Mitullah delves into details of the city’s institutions and their limitations in terms of urban governance. However, it is in the blind spots of urban governance that one should look for a political culture that is unique to Nairobi. Musambayi Katumanga looks at the decomposition and re-composition processes that characterise urban management. He shows especially how failure of municipal institutions has given rise to forms of privatisation of the urban space and resources. The shortcomings of public organs and the loss of monopoly of violence have allowed urban banditry to flourish. Urban banditry now appears to be one of the forms of the city’s political culture insofar as it generates original re-compositions and behaviours. Indeed, the city produces its unique culture, which develops alongside the municipal powers. The case of matatu (private minibuses that provide passenger transport in the city) by Mbugua wa-Mungai offers a rich illustration of a form of specifically urban juvenile culture that is the product of one sector of activity. These matatu, which link the city’s fragmented space, convey a strong urban culture and identity. Finally, as shown by Hervé Maupeu, despite the fragmented nature of its space, the city of Nairobi has always been, since the colonial days, a high ground for political mobilisation. This analysis demonstrates the existence of a political culture unique to Nairobi embodied in its residents, and which fits into the city’s physical space across places that have, with time, become symbols of its identity.
Contributors

MICHEL ADAM, Anthropologist, Professor at Université de Tours.

ANNE BOUSQUET, Geographer at Université Paris I.

HÉLÈNE CHARTON-BIGOT, Historian, in-charge of research at CNRS (CEAN).

ANNE CUSSAC, Political Scientist at Université Paris I.

DANIELLE DE LAME, Anthropologist, researcher at Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, Tervuren, Belgique.

JOHN LONSDALE, Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge

YVAN DROZ, Anthropologist, lecturer–researcher at Institut universitaire d’études du développement, Genève.

NATHALIE GOMES, Researcher in Anthropology.

MUSAMBAYI KATUMANGA, Political scientist, lecturer –researcher at University of Nairobi.

HERVÉ MAUPEU, Political scientist, senior lecturer at Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, (CREPAO).

CLAIRE MÉDARD, Geographer, in-charge of research at IRD.

MATHIEU MÉRINO, Political scientist, researcher associated with CREPAO, Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour (CREPAO).

WINNIE V. MITULLAH, lecturer–researcher at University of Nairobi (Institute for Development Studies).

DEYSSI RODRIGUEZ-TORRES, Political scientist, senior lecturer at Facultés universitaires catholiques de Mons – FUCAM, Belgique.

MBUGUA WA-MUNGAI, Sociologist, lecturer–researcher at Kenyatta University.