

Kibera's History

Considering its size, Nairobi has a very short history as an urban space; one which Ferraro (1978/9) argues, “owes its very existence to the forces of colonialism” (p. 1). The city was founded in 1899 when railway authorities determined that the area’s central location, flat landscape, and moderate climate made it an ideal setting for a colonial administrative center that could service the rural economies (Gatabaki-Kamau & Karirah-Gitau, 2004). The colonial administration chose not to establish an industrial base in Nairobi and intended to keep the city a home for non-Africans and temporary, male, African migrant workers (White, 1990). Therefore, many African laborers in Nairobi were brought in on short-term contracts to work in the service sector, while a second group of mission-educated, literate Africans filled lower-level administrative posts in the colonial government (Furedi, 1973). The government tried to limit the number of Africans living in the city, their movement, and their settlement by instituting pass laws and the 1922 Vagrancy Act, which decreed that “unauthorized huts” could be demolished and unemployed Africans were forcibly removed from the city (Macharia, 1992). Within Nairobi, Africans were assigned to live in “native reserves” at the edge of the city, where they were separated by ethnic group and provided temporary accommodations and minimal services (Mitullah & Kibwana, 1998). This segregated housing policy was justified as part of a strategy to separate “diseased” Africans from healthy Europeans (Achola, 2002). But as sanctioned African housing became scarce and a host of unauthorized African migrants moved to Nairobi in search of wage labor, informal settlements developed throughout the city (Macharia, 1992).

While this influx of African migrants greatly contributed to Kibera’s growth, the area’s first residents were retired Sudanese soldiers who had served in the British East African army, known as the King’s African Rifles (KAR). In 1904, KAR officials set up army barracks a few kilometers southwest of the city along Ngong Road (de Smedt, 2009a). The military was also

allocated a large forested area next to the barracks, which the Sudanese soldiers called “kibra,” or forest. This location was chosen so that soldiers would be available to the central government and could reach the city center on short notice (Parsons, 1997). The military established a shooting range near the barracks, but largely let the soldiers use the remainder of the land as they saw fit (de Smedt, 2009a). As these soldiers grew older and became unable to continue their military service, they began to set up more permanent residence on the land. Because these Sudanese soldiers were not native Kenyans, they had no preexisting local “native reserve” where they could go to retire, and most did not wish to return to their homeland. So in 1912, the KAR permitted nearly 300 Sudanese soldiers to settle in this area rent-free, as an “unofficial pension” for 12 years of military service (Parsons, 1997; Wangui & Darkoh, 1992). But Kibera quickly became a thorn in the side of government officials as they grew weary of increasing crime and declining living conditions on land they “deemed too valuable and too near European settlement to be left to Africans” (Parsons, 1997, p. 91).

During the remaining years of colonial control in Kenya, the government repeatedly tried, with little success, to either reorganize Kibera or demolish it entirely. After a 1919 attempt to relocate Kibera residents was deemed too expensive to implement, the KAR ordered for the withdrawal of original residency passes, announced that no more permits would be given, and transferred authority of Kibera to the civil administration (Parsons, 1997). The government attempted to force new settlers to prove their relationship to original permit owners, but it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between those the administration believed were entitled to the land and those who were not. The former KAR soldiers used their land permits as unofficial titles to rent out the land for residence and farming, in some cases adopting agricultural clients or registering them as personal servants (Parsons, 1997). In 1928, the military handed over control of the land to the civil administration, which led to an influx of new

residents as civil authorities exercised less control over Kibera (de Smedt, 2009a). By the early 1930s, the Carter Land Commission survey found that half of Kibera residents were women and two-thirds were Kenyan-born Africans (Parsons, 1997). Frustrated that so many unauthorized Kenyans had set up residence in Kibera, the civil administration again began to examine their options for demolishing the slum (Wangui & Darkoh, 1992). But every new plan to remove residents was eventually rejected as logistically or financially prohibitive (Parsons, 1997). These plans were further hampered by the rulings of a few powerful British leaders who expressed loyalty toward the first-generation KAR Sudanese (de Smedt, 2009a; Parsons, 1997). But their feelings of loyalty did not extend to all Kibera residents. As the Commissioner for Lands and Settlement in Kenya stated in 1931: “The old Nubian is a man to whom the colony owes much, but the second generation and the hybrids arising from mixed unions are degenerate” (qtd. in van Zwanenberg, 1972, p. 190).

While Kibera residents largely won the right to remain on the land during colonial rule, their victory was partial. The colonial administration reluctantly agreed to abide by its obligation to tolerate Kibera but did nothing to develop it (Parsons, 1997). From the perspective of the government, two possible endgames for Kibera remained. The first was that conditions on the ground would become so unpleasant that residents would voluntarily choose to resettle elsewhere. In what Parsons terms “malicious neglect,” the government attempted “to force the Sudanese out by rendering Kibera unlivable” (p. 103). They refused to provide services, believing that doing so would only encourage others to settle on this land. The second possibility was that the permitted KAR Sudanese would eventually die, at which time the colonial administration could reclaim the land. But the government did not anticipate the complexity and diversity of living arrangements that came about through years of informal settlement. A 1945 survey of Kibera’s nearly 3,000 residents found that only ten households belonged to those who

were officially permitted residence, while others included their offspring, KAR veterans without passes, and those who had purchased or married into housing permits (Parsons, 1997). While the colonial administration never accepted the legality of Kibera, by the 1950s, plans for reorganizing or demolishing it had largely disappeared as the British became preoccupied with the Mau Mau Emergency and looming Kenyan independence (Parsons, 1997).

During the Mau Mau Emergency, many Kikuyus left the city by choice and by force, but they were replaced by a steady stream of new migrants, including many western Kenyans who settled in Kibera (Clark, 1979; Etherton, 1971; Wangui & Darkoh, 1992). The Sudanese, anticipating independence, saw this as their last opportunity to take advantage of their favored status with the British administration and again requested permanent land rights. But Nubians had slipped from their privileged position with the British, partially because Nubians were less interested in institutional education than other ethnic groups such as the Kikuyu (de Smedt, 2009a). Ultimately the Nubians were unsuccessful in gaining permanent land rights, as “the British government lacked the influence or the desire to convince African politicians to uphold colonial obligations to the Sudanese” (Parsons, 1997, p. 120). And after independence, as expected, the new Kenyan government had no intention of granting land rights to the Nubians and in 1969, they declared that the land comprising Kibera was state property (Clark, 1972)

From independence until the mid-1970s, the independent Kenyan government tried to eliminate slums throughout Nairobi by demolishing some and withholding basic municipal services from others (K’Akumu & Olima, 2007; Obudho & Aduwo, 1989; Syagga & Kiamba, 1992). Yet Nairobi’s population exploded following independence, as rural Kenyans felt more incentive to move into the city, and Kibera’s numbers increased by the thousands. Some reports estimate Kibera’s population grew from 3,000 in 1960 to 8,000 in 1968 and to 15,500-17,000 by

1972 (Amis 1988; Hake, 1977; Temple, 1974).¹ In the late 1960s, the Ministry of Lands and Settlement approached landlords in Kibera about demolishing the slum and offered them compensation and relocation assistance in response (Etherton, 1971). The landlords refused this offer, likely questioning the government's ability to forcibly evict them from Kibera and feeling a strong sense of ownership of the land. A 1972 housing survey of Kibera found that 95 percent of landlords had lived in Kibera 9 years or longer and 51 percent had lived there for over 27 years (Temple, 1974). This same survey found that 71 percent of owners were Nubians and 23 percent were Kikuyu, while only 4 percent of renters were Nubian and 16 percent were Kikuyu. But the late-1970s, this ratio of Nubian-to-Kikuyu owners was about to change, as was the government's policies toward Kibera.

When the government realized they could not clear all of Nairobi's slums, they changed their approach from hostile to tacit acceptance (K'Akumu & Olima, 2007). In fact, as Hake (1977) notes, residents of Nairobi's slums could no longer be considered squatters – most were paying rent for their accommodation – and they were not living in shanty towns – most of the residences were comparable to homes in upcountry Kenya and far more permanent than their “temporary” label implied. So the administration asserted their authority in this otherwise unauthorized housing sector by offering government permits to build in Kibera and threatening to demolish any new, non-permitted constructions (Amis, 1988). But critics point out that most of these permits went to members of the same ethnic group as President Jomo Kenyatta, the Kikuyu (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1989). Amis (1984) argues land allocation permits were granted as political patronage, “paying back favours, consolidating potential clients, rewarding friends or

¹ Because of this sudden population growth, statistics about Kibera started to become less and less reliable. For example, for 1970, Amis (1988) estimates Kibera's population was 11,000, while Lamba (1994) reports it was 20,000. Here, I include only those figures I have deemed to be most reliable, but these population statistics should be understood as approximations rather than indisputable facts.

fellow tribesmen by informally giving out free land for urban development” (p. 90). While the Kikuyu were the most aggressive in acquiring land permits and building up housing during this time, Nubians also participated in the rental economy. As a result, “Kibera filled up very fast” (de Smedt, 2009a, p. 218). But Nubians’ initial hesitancy to build and rent homes in Kibera cost them their dominant position in Kibera; by 1984, 66 percent of Kibera landlords were Kikuyu while only 22 percent were Nubian (Amis, 1984). Most of these new homes were single-block rooms, rather than the multi-room residences or U-shaped Swahili homes previously found in Kibera, as these cheap constructions were the most profitable (Amis, 1984). Even if a bribe was required to obtain a land permit, building a home in Kibera and renting it out was a very lucrative venture, one offered a return on investment in two years or less (Kunguru & Mwiraria, 1991). And so between 1974 and 1979, Kibera experienced what Amis (1984) calls “a real estate bonanza” that led to a three-fold population growth in five years, with Kibera reaching an estimated 62,000 residents by 1979. While Kikuyus and Nubians dominated the rental industry, much of the growing tenant population came from Luo and Luhya ethnic groups from western Kenya. For example, of the 179 tenants Clark (1972) interviewed, two-thirds of them were Luo or Luhya.

At the same time this real estate growth filled Kibera with cheaply constructed homes, the government was also encouraging low-cost formal housing developments on the edge of the city through a site-and-services program (de Kruijff & Chana, 1980; Muwonge, 1980; Obudho & Aduwo, 1989). Through this program, “plots of land on the periphery of the city with access to water supply, roads, and other social services [were] made available through low-cost loans to encourage private development” (Muwonge, 1980, p. 596). In exchange for these low-cost loans, homes built on these lands would have to meet government regulations for housing standards. While the government envisioned this housing scheme would lead to private sectors solutions for

the city's low-income housing issues, it did little to curb the growth of slums like Kibera. One issue was that most of the site-and-services developments were located on Nairobi's periphery, which was an unattractive solution for Kenya's poor who desired to be close to employment opportunities. Also, the majority of low-income Kenyans were too poor to participate in this program, so much of the land was sold to the middle class instead (Obudho & Aduwo, 1989). As a result, some formal housing estates on the northern border of Kibera became settled by middle-class Kenyans. For example, the housing development that became Ayany Estate was originally "intended for the low income population of Kibera" (Kaszner, 1976, p. 4). But even in the initial report on this development, the author estimated these homes would only be affordable to 20 percent of the target population, which was those making between 300 and 800 KSH a month, a salary much higher than the average Kibera resident. Planners hoped that more residents could acquire this housing by subletting plots to supplement their monthly expenses. Still the author of this report argued the government's site-and-services scheme "should thus be seen as one possible solution to the urban housing problem, rather than the solution" (Kaszner, 1976, p. 16, emphasis in original). Another neighborhood constructed during this period was Olympic Estate, which was completed in 1975 (Muraya, 2006).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Kibera continued to grow in population as more rural Kenyans and immigrants from nearby countries migrated to Nairobi in search of work. While conditions in Nairobi's slums were less than ideal, a 1971 survey of the city's slum residents found that respondents had more pressing concerns than acquiring better housing, including paying school fees and contributing money to extended family members (Muwonge, 1980). And as the commercial housing sector became more institutionalized in Kibera, conflicts between the government and slum residents became less important than the growing tension between tenants and landlords (Amis, 1984; Lamba, 1994). Tenants became less concerned with the possibility of

slum clearance and more worried about eviction from failure to pay their rent (Amis, 1984). Housing conditions continued to deteriorate as tenants blamed landlords for failing to maintain proper housing and services, and landlords blamed tenants for the poor conditions of their rental properties (Kunguru & Mwiraria, 1991).

While most housing issues in Kibera were resolved by the local chief or the courts, Kibera has experienced two notable clashes between tenants and landlords in the past two decades. In 1992, Raila Odinga, the son of Kenya's first vice president, ran for a seat in Kenyan Parliament representing the Langata Constituency, a district that includes Kibera. Prior to the election, several members of Odinga's ethnic group, the Luo, moved from Nyanza province to Kibera to help ensure his victory (de Smedt, 2009b). At this time, and likely as a result of the growing number of Luo migrants to Kibera, a few major conflicts arose between Luo tenants and Nubian landlords over rent prices. While Kikuyu landlords were not directly involved in the fighting, some had properties destroyed in the fighting and others were chased away from Kibera entirely (de Smedt, 2009b).

Ten years later, violence again broke out between Luo tenants and Nubian landlords. In October 2001, then-President Daniel arap Moi attended a fundraising event for Odinga, at which he declared that rents in Kibera should be lowered by half (Gaitho, 2001). In the following weeks, a number of Kibera tenants took Moi at his word and refused to pay their landlords until the government brokered a deal for decreased rents. Over the next two months, tensions increased until fighting ultimately led to the death of at least 25 people, the destruction of a number of homes, and the displacement of thousands of Kibera residents ("Deaths in Landlords," 2007; "Thousands Flee," 2001). After the violence settled, some landlords agreed to lower their rents, but the event continued to be a source of great tension between tenants and landlords

(Neuwirth, 2006; “Raila Wants,” 2003). While income inequalities separate Kibera and other slums from the rest of Nairobi, there are also significant distinctions within Kibera.

In the last few decades, Kibera residents also have become less reliant and trusting of the state. The slum’s informal economy has grown, providing more employment opportunities as well as goods and services available at low costs to Kibera residents (Hake, 1977; Muraya, 2006). At the same time, community and international organizations have become the main providers of health care and community development in the area (Lamba, 1994). As one 1991 report claims, “in the absence of strong Government involvement, NGOs are the primary agencies involved in the development of Kibera” (Kunguru & Mwiraria, 1991, p. 1).

Residents also have grown weary of the government’s efforts to upgrade slum housing, which they have found to be either corrupt or ineffective. For example, in the 1990s, the National Housing Corporation constructed the Kibera Highrise² on the southeast corner in order to provide quality housing for slum residents. But upon completion, the government changed its tune, deciding to grant and sell these units to middle-class Kenyans instead (Huchzermeyer, 2008). More recently, the government has partnered with UN-HABITAT on another slum-upgrading project in Kibera. While some residents moved to these new housing developments in 2009, the process has been slow and many residents are hesitant to relocate their homes and businesses. These upgrades are typically more expensive, less hospitable to informal economic activities, and also are received with great caution by Kibera residents who have known the government to deceive them in the past. Ultimately, as Huchzermeyer (2008) argues, “instead of improving the lives of slum dwellers by enabling access to adequate housing, poorly targeted slum upgrading improves the lives of the better-off and displaces the original residents into expanding or newly forming slums” (p. 25). While it is too early to assess the success of the UN-

² Kibera Highrise is now known as Nyayo Highrise, named after the “Nyayo” nickname of then-President Moi.

HABITAT slum-upgrading program, there is little indication that it has stemmed population growth in Kibera.

In early 2008, Kibera experienced perhaps the darkest chapter in its 100-year history. Leading up to the December 2007 presidential elections, Raila Odinga was entrenched in a hotly contested campaign against incumbent Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu. Most polling experts predicted Odinga would defeat Kibaki, and early election results indicated Odinga was on his way to winning the presidency. But after the Electoral Commission tallied the final votes behind closed doors, they reemerged to announce Kibaki had won reelection. This announcement triggered intense fighting throughout Kenya carried out by supporters of both parties. According to the *Waki Report*, Kenya's comprehensive account of the post-election violence, more than 1,000 Kenyans died during the two-month period following the election, including at least 700 from the Rift Valley and another 125 from Nairobi (*Commission of Inquiry*, 2008).

Within Nairobi, Kibera was a major site of death, injury, destruction of property, displacement, and sexual violence (*Commission of Inquiry*, 2008). While violent conflicts largely fell along ethnic and political lines, hostilities between Odinga and Kibaki supporters in Kibera were intensified by existing tensions between Luo tenants and Kikuyu landlords. Many Kikuyu residents were chased out of Kibera, and a great number of them never returned (*Commission of Inquiry*, 2008; de Smedt, 2009b). Both Human Rights Watch and Kenya's internal investigation assign responsibility for the post-election violence to major political actors in both parties for mobilizing ethnicity before and after the election. Yet in Kibera, it was the residents who were left to deal with a fractured community suffering from loss of life and property. During my fieldwork, it was clear that memories of the post-election violence were still very present in the minds of Kibera residents. Several NGOs sponsored projects and events meant to promote peace

among Kibera's many ethnic groups, and many residents expressed sorrow over what became of their community during those few months.

Today, Kibera sits approximately four miles west of Nairobi's city center, surrounded by the Royal Nairobi Golf Club to the northeast, the Nairobi Dam to the southeast, and the Ngong Forest to the southwest. Kibera is broken into 13 villages whose borders are not always clearly defined but mostly consist of natural boundary markers such as walking paths, railroad tracks, and streams. Each village houses people from different ethnic and national backgrounds, although most villages have a dominant ethnic group (de Smedt, 2009b). Just outside the 13 villages are a handful of estates, including Olympic, Karanja, and Ayany to the northwest and Ngumo to the northeast. There is no absolute agreement on whether the estates should be included as part of Kibera, because estate homes are officially sanctioned by the government and therefore are made with permanent materials like concrete and stone. In contrast, homes in the villages are largely made of wood, metal sheeting, mud, and some semi-permanent materials (Akatch & Kasuku, 2002). Village homes rent for between 400 and 1200 Kenya shillings (KSH)³ a month depending on their quality and location, while estate homes are considerably more expensive, costing 10,000 to 14,000 KSH for a single bedroom and more for a multi-room home. Therefore, the estates are not considered part of the slum. At the same time, I met a number of youth from the northwestern estates who strongly identify with Kibera. They consider themselves Kibera residents, are friends with youth from the villages, and participate in organizations based in the villages. But some village residents are very aware of the income gap between the villages and estates and see these middle-class estates as separate from the rest of Kibera.

³ During my time in Kenya, the conversion rate was \$1 USD for 75–80 KSH. Calculated at 75 KSH, the cost of rent in the villages is between \$5–16 a month.

One of Kibera's most distinctive features is the Kenya-Uganda Railway that winds through the middle of the slum. While Kibera has a railway station, few residents use the train to commute to work downtown, although some hang on to the outside to avoid paying the fare. Most residents walk to their place of employment or take one of the *matatu* or bus routes that service the slum via Kibera Drive and Mbagathi Road. Still, the railway line has become an iconic fixture in Kibera, especially following the recent post-election violence. During the protests in January 2008, Odinga supporters uprooted the railway tracks, temporarily rendering the line useless (Gettleman, 2008). In 2009, residents again tore up the railway line to express their anger over a land dispute between Uganda and Kenya (Kuria, 2009). Following these two events, the uprooted railway has become emblematic of lawlessness and mob retaliation in news coverage of Kibera (Makeni, 2009).

Although it is tempting to blame the government for Kibera's present challenges, single-adversary explanations are incomplete. While the colonial government initially granted the land to retiring Nubian soldiers, they eventually withheld municipal services and development as Kibera's population grew and diversified. And the independent Kenyan government continued this policy of "malicious neglect" while also failing to provide low-income housing through private enterprise. This lack of low-income housing resulted in large population growth in the slums as rural Kenyans migrated to the city in droves in search of employment. Then again, it was the real estate boom during the 1970s and 1980s that largely led to Kibera's high population density and drop in housing quality. Home conditions further deteriorated as tensions between landlords and tenants grew. The profit motive encouraged landlords to construct inexpensive rental rooms in greater numbers and diminishing size, while the fear of demolition discouraged landlords from further investing in these properties (Kunguru & Mwiraria, 1991). In recent years,

the Kenyan government and NGOs have made earnest, although arguably misguided, attempts to provide more secure and sanitary housing for Kibera residents, but the government's track record of corruption and deceit has made residents less than eager to participate. Therefore, colonialism, the prospect of urban employment, corruption, and unregulated capitalism are all key contributors to the Kibera's current living conditions and culture. Their roots run deep through Kibera, driving the slum's future as much as they account for its past.

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