Anatomy of Exclusion in an African City: On Ambivalence

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Abstract: This paper draws on psychoanalytic concepts of incipient boundary formation to theorize the ambivalent nature of exclusionary socio-political practices in urban sub Saharan Africa, applying this to an analysis of the Mũngĩkĩ organization in Kenya. Using the notion of a 'return to nature', it concludes that the very ambivalence of exclusionary practices produces an inversion of power relations, as the excluded instrumentalise the very identity for which they have been excluded.

Keywords: social exclusion; ambivalence; object relations; Kenya; Mũngĩkĩ; nature

INTRODUCTION

Recent research on the subject is challenging established notions of exclusion.[1] Additionally, the applicability of such notions outside the context within which they have been developed is theoretically problematic.[2] For several years already, there has been an understanding among scholars of the urban condition in Africa that cities in Africa are not simply irrelevant undesirable perversions of an intended ideal but rather represent a legitimate form of sustainable urbanism and that the complexity of the city in Africa presents a fresh source of concepts for reflecting upon urban processes globally.[3] Implied is the need to re-interrogate seminal theoretical notions in order to 'make visible that which has not under the optics of (planning and urbanism) been visible previously' and thus enrich our understanding, and authenticate the platform for palliative enterprise.

This paper draws upon the psychoanalytic concepts of boundary formation to examine the shifting spectre of the Mũngĩkĩ.[4] The aim is to foreground exclusion as a multi-directional and multi-centred 'practice' and how this quality can be employed to counter exclusion from hegemonic positions. Ultimately it is hoped that such a perspective can be the basis for interrogating ambiguous spatial practices in many African cities.

ON AMBIVALENCE

Social exclusion is often defined and studied as a process or as the end result of a process or set of processes: the state or deliberate act of omission. Additionally, in fact by this very measure, exclusion can also be thought of as **a means to perceive processes and their results**. Exclusion as a lens, framework or mirror through which

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1   These studies suggest that population groups conventionally held to be the most vulnerable to social exclusion (the elderly, women, single parent families, low-income earners) suffer no significant disadvantage in activity spaces (Schönfelder & Axhausen 2003), access to urban opportunities (Scott & Horner 2004) and in integration of location (Vaughan 2005) compared to other population groups. That the access condition for people thought to be excluded does not vary much from that of people thought not to be excluded could indicate that either 'integratedness' is not an (accurate) indicator of exclusion, and/or that the concept of exclusion needs to be reformulated.

2   Gore (1994:2-3; Ch. 1, Sec. 1.1) argues that ideas on social exclusion which have largely been developed in Europe, North America and South Africa are unsuitable for the unique context of Sub-Saharan Africa.

3   While many examples could be cited, reference is made to Rem Koolhaas' work on Lagos. "Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos …" (Koolhaas 2002).

4   A subversive underground organisation which by alternately embracing and rejecting vilified identities have managed to find an enduring socio-political and spatial presence in Nairobi.

urban spatial practice may be examined is aptly summarised in the statement: 'the city is a product of exclusion'.[5]

In this paper 'On Ambivalence' the syllogism that exclusion is ambiguous in nature is developed – that in this ambiguity exclusion finds its greatest expression, that this uncertain nature of exclusion leads to a fundamental ambivalence between the vilified and vilifier, and finally that the ambiguity of exclusion and the ambivalence it engenders furnish the means to ameliorate the disadvantages of exclusion. Put another way, it is suggested that **both the forte and the Achilles' heel of exclusion is its inevitably ambiguous nature**.

Thus, exclusion as an ambiguous practice that engenders ambivalent means to 'perceive' underpins the notion of exclusion as a multi-directional practice (defined later as the 'reversibility of exclusion'). It is proposed that herein lies a key to interrogating 'alternative' spatial practices.[6]

THE EXCLUSION DIALECTIC: INCIPIENT BOUNDARY FORMATION

This section elaborates the concepts of 'self' and 'other' and is greatly inspired by David Sibley's object relations theory analysis presented in his seminal work 'Geographies of Exclusion'.

At its core, exclusion entails identifying and then separating 'the self' from 'the other'. Here, 'the self' represents all that is included within the boundaries of the body that acts as the reference point from which 'the other' is vilified. Conversely, 'the other' is that which falls outside these boundaries and which is thus elided[7]. According to object relations theory, this bounding of the self is a normal and necessary part of human development. It acquires malevolence when 'the other' is defined as defiled, ugly and unworthy, whereupon the self responds by distancing itself from the defiled 'other' and erecting and policing boundaries that serve to ensure the purity of the self. According to Sibley (1995) the 'pure' and 'defiled' are culturally constructed categories which are often determined by stereotypes; and stereotypes, as deviant idealisations, are distortions of reality which by replacing 'the other' in the perceptual field of 'the self', prevent (authentic) interactions between 'the self' and 'the other'[8]. A negative stereotype thus acts not only as a distorting lens, but imprisons 'the other' in its physical configuration. While stereotypes are useful for maintaining a sense of stability and security about the world[9], the danger of exclusion lies in their abuse.

The defiled has been defined as that which does 'not conform to its class'.[10] Not surprisingly, for the self that is socialised to believe that the separation into discrete categories of pure self and defiled other is necessary, the liminal zone where one category merges into another is a source of anxiety related to losing control. However, it is utopian to try and describe the world as crisp sets of good and bad, pure and defiled; indeed, at inception, the very process of bounding the self during the construction of identity is fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity. For the new born infant still experiencing oneness with its mother,

> …she represents the whole of the external world...both good and bad come into (its) mind from her...leading to a twofold attitude toward the mother. (Klein 1959:292)

As this sense of oneness between the infant and the mother is lost, the incipient 'self' must abject the object that created it (consider the mother as vile) in order to construct its own identity. However, this separation causes an anxiety that is relieved by merging again with the mother. The mother is both a good and a bad object; an 'other' that must be abjected and distanced from and yet at the same time a source of comfort and pleasure (Sibley 1995:7). The pure self is desirous of merging with the vile. That the desire to define and purify the self is assailed

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5   This statement, often made by Prof. Bruno De Meulder, (Department of Architecture, Urbanism and Planning, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) roundly sums up the product, process and means of perceiving the partitioned city.

6   The heuristic is in the nuance. Ambivalence, linked as it is to liminality, easily finds spatial conceptualisation and is therefore appropriate for a subsequent spatial analysis. Further, Simone (2004:5-7) suggests that the African city is fraught with ambivalence as a means to cope with the extreme social and economic constraints. In this paper, I try to demonstrate that ambivalence is the very mode of existence in African urban life.

7   In this essay, the self and the other are not limited to individual entities, if a 'conscience collective' can be shown to exist within a group, the group can be considered as a 'self'.

8   Sibley (1995:18)

9   Gilman quoted in Sibley (1995:15).

10 Sibley (1999:37)

by separation anxiety triggering the desire to reunite, hints at the interdependence between the self and the other. The abject, Julia Kristeva says…

> …is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that the 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence…(the Other) keeps the subject from foundering by making (the abject) repugnant. (Kristeva 1982:9)

The abject as an ambiguous ever-presence…

> …does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it–on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger…because abjection itself is a composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning… (Kristeva 1982:9-10)

Anxiety results from the impossibility to separate from the vile: 'the other' as a 'second self' is indistinguishable from 'the self' except by means of the vile; 'the self' cannot exist as independent from 'the other' in the absence of the vile. This vile, a 'gift' bestowed upon 'the self' by 'the other', is an ambiguous boundary of desire and disgust; a lens through which 'the self' and 'the other' perceive each other and convince themselves of their divergence from each other. In other words, the pure self and the vile other are not (that) different from each other. Eventually, **'the self' and 'the other' are interchangeable**.

Kristeva's description of the abject as a 'gift', implies that the ability of 'the self' to exist and distanciate, is granted by 'the other'. This conferring by 'the other' of the imperative to separate by taken together with the idea of the interchangeability of 'the self' and 'the other', leads to yet another notion: **the reversibility of exclusion**. The following incident in Wilbur Smith's 'When the Lion Feeds', aptly illustrates the point.

Sean Courtney, the protagonist, a wealthy mine owner and himself a working man not a long time past, desires the company of 'men who were clean inside, even if there was dirt under their nails and the armpits of their shirts were stained with sweat'. Despite efforts to dissuade him, he heads down accompanied by two of his workers to the 'Bright Angels', a bar patronised by roughnecks and miners, a place so loud and uncouth that they could hear its noise a block before they reached it. When they enter, a digger at the mines is standing on the counter, head thrown back draining a large bottle of Whiskey to loud encouragement from the others. Catching sight of Sean, the miners, subdued by his presence guiltily cease their loud jesting and 'spread out along the bar in silence' while Sean, oblivious to their discomfiture, steps to the counter, buys drinks for everyone and proceeds to have a jolly old time his voice 'loud with good fellowship and his face flushed with happiness'. However, when he enters into the washrooms to relieve his bladder, one of the men, liberated by his absence, shouts out loud enough for Sean to hear:

> …what's he want to come here for, hey? This isn't the mucking Rand Club...Who does he think he is, 'Drink up, boys, there's plenty more where that came from, I'm the boss, boys, do as you're told, boys, kiss my arse, boys!' …the big dandy bastard with his ten-guinea boots and gold cane. Let him go back where he belongs. (Smith 1964:234)

Stunned, Sean excuses himself and makes way to the Rand Club where 'they were pleased to see him' and 'three men nearly fight one another to buy him a drink'.

Numerous insights may be gleaned from this richly nuanced incident; pertinent to the argument presented here is that exclusion is not limited in direction to projection from commonly accepted hegemonic positions, rather it can be and often is multi-directional. The granting of existence to 'the self' by 'the other' mentioned above, is not done for the sake of 'the self' alone; to assure its own existence, 'the other' needs the frontier of the abject (the vile) as much as 'the self' does. The altruistic benevolence on the part of 'the other' is a verisimilitude, a device for the surreptitious acquisition of 'power' or less audaciously, for simply feeling comfortable in its own skin and in its own 'world'.

Amidst these ambivalences exclusion has its frontier, where the impetus to expand is strongest we find its antithesis, the imperative to include. Of significance to palliative enterprise is the latter imperative to, as it were, embrace the 'vile other' and its potential for dissolving the prisons of exclusion. It should be kept in mind that this embracing of the vilified is not the preserve of 'the self' alone. 'The other' is also at liberty to employ this same device in embracing a vilified identity. This seeking comfort by embracing difference, a process termed here as 'returning to nature' will now be expounded.

To illustrate this point, we take the example of the **Mũngĩkĩ** an 'underground' movement of rebellious youth in Kenya that has on several occasions since the early 1990's been in the spotlight of the media worldwide. Their

activities especially in connection with the last four general elections in Kenya (1992, 1997, 2002 and 2007) have 'touched upon Kenya's subversive consciousness and national phobia' like no other (Kanneworf 2008:116). The movement's underlying logic of resistance to exclusion coupled with their arguably enduring presence in the public mind makes their activities particularly appropriate to this discussion.

THE MŨNGĨKĨ IN KENYA: A SHIFTING SPECTRE

The Mũngĩkĩ organisation, with a claimed membership of 1.5 million, is comprised largely of disenfranchised young men and women in the 18-40yr age group drawn primarily from the Agĩkũyũ community.[11] Like many facets of Mũngĩkĩ existence, the origin of the movement is unclear and the existing literature gives conflicting accounts. The most original writing found traces the movement's roots to the 'Tent of the Living God' a registered religious sect founded by Ngonya wa Gakonya in 1987. According to Wamue (2001) Ngonya, disillusioned by Christianity, 'began a search for truth in the African (Kikuyu?) religious heritage by consulting the old people' and from 1960 began preaching doctrines based African religious beliefs, culminating in the 'Tent' 17 years later.

In 1990 Ngonya was arrested and the 'Tent' banned for involvement in the 'Saba Saba' demonstrations.[12] Around the same time, the Mũngĩkĩ appeared as a splinter (or sister?) movement founded by Maina Njenga, his cousin Ndura Waruingi and four other family members. Maina Njenga who later became the 'spiritual leader' of the movement claimed a revelation from the Kikuyu god Ngai in a dream when he was 16 years old (Wamue 2001:455; Kanneworf 2008:119). In line with Ngonya's theology, Maina preached a revivalist ideology as the means to religious, political, cultural and economic liberation for the masses.

> Mungiki revived new sets of cultural and religious practices, related to an idealized and re-traditionalized Kikuyu culture before colonialism and western education entered the community. These practices included initiation rituals into adulthood like circumcision, ritual cleansing, baptism ceremonies, praying facing Mount Kenya twice a day and oathing. (Kanneworf 2008:120)

Community building and social provisioning was a key project for the movement, the idea being to create goodwill by sharing resources among themselves and thus ameliorate the unfair and unjust practices in society:

> … every month they raise 4.5 million Kenyan shillings at the rate of 3 shillings per member, to finance their mission activities (and on) various Mungiki farms, … the spirit of harmony, hard work and unity is evident. (Wamue 2001:466)

This socialist ideology is reflected in the organisation's name 'Mũngĩkĩ' which is etymologically rooted in the Gĩkũyũ word for multitude (ngũkĩ or ĩrĩndĩ) that has a connotation of 'the public' (mũingĩ). According to Kanneworf, for the members, the name Mũngĩkĩ:

> …expresses a feeling of community and sharing, claiming 'we are the people … 'we are the public' and the … 'people are entitled to a particular place of their own in the ontological order' or 'seeking for recognition in society while being marginalized (Kanneworf 2008:120)

They were thus ardent and vociferous critics of discriminatory practices by the ruling elite: wealth accumulation by at the expense of the 'proletariat', the self-serving manipulation of tensions between ethnic communities to catalyse politically motivated ethnic cleansing and hypocrisy in worship. These practices they claim have sown division and disunity among the populace (Wamue 2001). To break this disunity caused by 'religious hypocrisy and European sponsored capitalism', the Mũngĩkĩ advocate a return to traditional forms of worship.

> Foreign culture and religion brought by Christianity and colonization have led Kenyans to continue suffering religious and political oppression as well as economic exploitation, in their view. Accordingly, the liberation of the masses from mental captivity must come through a return to indigenous ways of life, in particular culture and religion. All ethnic groups in Kenya should, therefore, denounce foreign faiths, especially Christianity, and revert to traditional beliefs and practices. (Wamue 2001:460)

Not surprisingly, the alternative life style and new moral order preached by the Mũngĩkĩ struck an immediate chord among the poor, low skilled, often unemployed and broken-hearted rural and urban youth and the

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11 The Agĩkũyũ (Kikuyu) is the largest ethnic community in Kenya making up slightly more that 22% of Kenya's total population in a country comprising at least 42 distinct ethnic groups.

12 Saba is the Swahili word for 'seven'; 'Saba Saba' was a citizen revolt on 07.07.1990 organised by forces opposed to the government to demand political freedom in the then single-party Kenyan state.

movement acquired a heavy concentration of supporters in the informal settlements of Kenya's cities. This cultural and religious revival is spatialised by association with indigenous and contemporary 'shrines'.[13]

In light of its cultural revivalist roots, the movement's subsequent evolution and current identity becomes of particular interest to a discussion on ambivalence. Although the fount of this resistance had a rural anchor, a clear urban rationality is now discerned. Thandika Mkandawire points to the urban logic of post-colonial rebel movements in Africa:

> ...a common feature of ... (rebel) movements is that they are driven by essentially urban issues, few of which have much resonance in the countryside. As a general proposition, one can state that 'urban crisis' (rather than agrarian crisis) is the source of rebel movements in Africa. It is the urban origins of these struggles that accounts for their 'national' character, since the ultimate purpose of the belligerents is not merely to liberate one area but to assume political power in the national capital. (Mkandawire 2002:191)

Towards the end of 1990's, the **Mũngĩkĩ** evolved into a highly organised 'urban militia', turning against the very public they claimed to represent by imposing illegal informal services upon them: security (vigilante night patrols), garbage collection, public transport and protection racketeering especially in the 'slums' (Kanneworff 2008:120). In the run up to the 2002 general elections, they emerged as subservients for hire first by opposition politicians as an informal means to de-stabilise the government and later by the state against the opposition through perpetrating anarchy (Kanneworff 2008:123; Ndeda 2008:34). Several acts of public disorder, carried out in urban space, were attributed to **Mũngĩkĩ**,[14] but the movement's leaders denounced these as the work of pseudo-**Mũngĩkĩ** gangs. At this point, it became difficult to discern who was doing what. The emerging hybrid identity of the movement crystallised when just before the elections, the movement's leaders came out in public support of the government they had previously been subverting and its presidential candidate, a man they had earlier termed a traitor. Additionally, in complete conflict with their original idea of a theocracy for the whole of Kenya, the two founders Maina Njenga and Ndura Waruingi converted to Islam, adopted Muslim names and later declared their candidacy in the parliamentary elections.[15]

Representing a complete abandonment of original ideology, these self-serving manipulations of the mystique surrounding the **Mũngĩkĩ** by the movement's leaders in constructing multiple identities for the movement (and for themselves), are thought not to be very different from those employed by the urban dweller in ordinary spatial practice albeit on a smaller scale. This use of constantly shifting identities which was suggested earlier is now reflected upon on the basis of the previous discussion on the ambivalence of exclusion.

EXCLUSION, AMBIVALENCE AND THE DIALECTIC OF NATURE

If memory serves well, in a 2007 lecture,[16] Prof. Alex Wall presaged a 'return to nature' when he stated that the logic of building the city will transform from that of capital to that of the environment. This reversal was to be precipitated by awareness of the appalling destruction of nature that we are guilty of and its threat to our existence.[17]

A 'return to nature' has in instances past been presented as a remedy for ills associated with modernity and modernisation. Adolf Just, in his book 'Return to Nature: Paradise Regained', proffers a holistic approach to youth, happiness and health by staying close to nature. The key is to avoid among other defilements, the polluting effects associated with pharmaceuticals and manufactured medication by employing naturopathic techniques such as botanical medicine, homeopathy, nutrition and acupuncture. In Filip de Boeck's phantasmagorical 'Dead Society in a Cemetery City', death is described as a 'model for collective social, political and religious (resistance)'. Describing Kinshasa's street children who have been abandoned by society

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13   On 12.12.1998, the **Mũngĩkĩ** held an inauguration ceremony at the historic **Mũkũrwe-wa-Gathanga** shrine, which is the mythical origin of the **Gĩkũyũ** people, where God (Ngai) placed the first man **Gĩkũyũ** and his wife Mumbi; in 2006, they held a protest march in Nairobi at the mausoleum of Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta.

14   During this period, Kenyan and international press reported several incidents of **Mũngĩkĩ** publicly stripping women deemed to be improperly dressed, forcing the circumcision of women and committing ritualised murder among other nefarious acts.

15   A core component of original **Mũngĩkĩ** idea to unite all Kenyans was the establishment of community based kingdoms throughout Kenya which would be governed by the traditional god of the **Agĩkũyũ** and on whom they would rely for guidance and sustenance. (Wamue 2001:460)

16   Prof. Wall is professor of Urban Design at the University of Karlsruhe, Germany. The lecture was part of the 'Landscape Urbanism lecture series' at the department of Architecture, Urbanism and Planning, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Spring 2006-2007.

17   Reference is made to the topical debates on climate change, sustainable architecture, green technologies, and ecological urbanism.

(who have abandoned society?) and who now live among the dead in Kintambo cemetery, he says that 'these young urban actors reintroduce other aspects of much older pre-urban ritual dynamics' in their contestations with traditional role models (adults and priests) for urban space.[18] In another example from pre-independent Kenya, young Gĩkũyũ men in the 1950's described their recruitment into the Mau Mau resistance movement, the precursor to the modern day Mũngĩkĩ, as 'going into the forest'.[19] This idea is mirrored in the Mũngĩkĩ's attempt to fight political, social and economic exclusion by 'returning to indigenous shrines'.

At the other end of the spectrum David Sibley, in Chapter two of 'Geographies of Exclusion', delves into the role of nature in negative stereotyping. Grouping the role of 'Nature' together with that of 'Colour' and 'Disease' in the Western construction of difference, he shows how people deemed closest to nature are considered primitive and in need of a civilising mission to distance them from nature.[20] In other words, as opposed to being a fortress of purity salvation, here proximity to nature is a defiling encumbrance. Interestingly, John Githongo in 'Why Won't the State Clip Them Dreadlocks?', describes the Mũngĩkĩ as an 'alarming other'.[21]

This ambivalence of defilements and purifications stems from the discordant associations between the concept of **purity in nature** and the imperative of **distancing from the disgust associated with nature**. Thus, the Mũngĩkĩ who from inception called for a purification of Kenyan society, in particular the ruling and religious elite through a 'return to nature', are later denounced by these very leaders and the Kenyan public, as a defiling other for their animistic identity. This identity, particularly its mystical spectral quality allows the Mũngĩkĩ to continue existing and to hold Kenyan society 'in a grip of terror'.

CONCLUSION

This ambivalence can be theorised in terms of the reversibility of exclusion or the interchangeability of the self and the other. In urban spatial contestations, the Mũngĩkĩ and by extension, the informal as an 'other' start from a position of disadvantage; the elite class as a 'pure self', in an effort to secure the mileage gained in successfully distancing itself from nature, brands the 'other' as defiled because of its proximity to nature. The 'other' on the other hand, (sub)consciously recognises that this very proximity to nature and its association with defilement is its bastion and turns to it readily. In this contestations against what are often insurmountable hegemonic forces in the hands of the 'self', the 'other' needs the frontier of the abject, the vile, as much as the 'self' does. The 'other' gladly adopts a vile identity – thus 'bestowing the abject as a gift to the self' – by, as demonstrated by the Mũngĩkĩ, actively seeking out its own folk-devilling. This vileness becomes not only a lens through which the two observe one another, but more importantly it is a shield for the 'other', an instrument for the surreptitious acquisition of a brand of 'power' by the 'other' that guarantees its survival.

Consequently, without in any way trying to deny the disadvantages incidental to the inability to participate in social, political and economic processes, it is suggested here that rather than trying to close the gap opened by an elite bent on distanciation, palliative enterprise can better address the question of exclusion by turning towards that which the elite is distancing from. If the identity of the African city is constructed through the ambivalent interplay between formal and informal practices under conditions where the informal with its spectral qualities dominates, and where the allegiance of many actors is split between the two, an African understanding of exclusion could best be arrived at by thus deconstructing this relationship.

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18 De Boeck (2008:298, 301, 306); Text in brackets inserted.

19 The Mau Mau revolt was instrumental in Kenya's fight for independence from Britain. Mau Mau guerrillas operated from the safety of the Aberdare forest, striking key British positions at night and retreating into the forest during the day.

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