

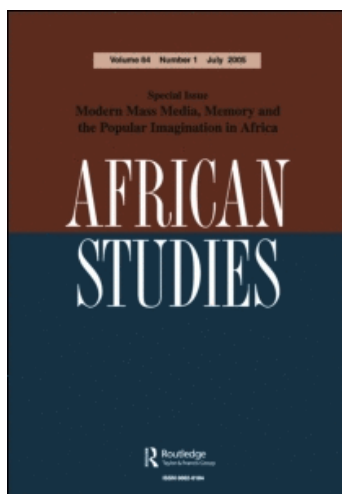
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### Remembering the Destruction of Muoroto: Slum Demolitions, Land and Democratisation in Kenya

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# Remembering the Destruction of Muoroto: Slum Demolitions, Land and Democratisation in Kenya

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*'Displacement is only a symptom of deeper causes ...'* (Francis Deng)

Since colonial times, violent urban displacements have been part of politics in Africa. As 'Operation Sweep up the Rubbish', the massive slum demolition in Zimbabwe, illustrates, large-scale violent urban displacements persist in many parts of the continent.<sup>1</sup> While often portrayed as mere exercises in urban planning by the instigators, such dramatic confrontations over urban space are deeply political and enmeshed in broader struggles over citizenship and democratisation. As Africa rapidly urbanises and struggles over democratisation continue, such confrontations are likely to intensify. A better understanding of the politics of urban displacement is thus critical for those concerned with the fate of Africa's growing urban underclass and the cities that they increasingly call home.

What is the relationship between slum demolitions and the struggle for democratic space? This article focuses on Kenya as a lens to view this larger question. What is striking in the Kenyan case is that in the early 1990s when the fight for multi-party elections started to intensify, slum demolitions were unusual in their scope and brutality.<sup>2</sup> As a reporter for the *Weekly Review* remarked:

For the hawkers and slum dwellers of Nairobi, 1990 is likely to be a year that will live long in their memories. It is the year that the Nairobi City Commission proceeded with hitherto unknown vigour and ruthlessness to clear the hawkers from their lucrative business sites in the city centre to hardly known areas outside of the city, and to evict the slum dwellers from the only homes some of them have known for the last 20 years.<sup>3</sup>

This article suggests that members of the ruling clique within the Kenya African National Union (KANU) intensified slum demolitions in the 1990s for two inter-related reasons. Firstly, slum clearance, as in colonial times, was a means of keeping in check urban popular dissent. In the 1990s, this dissent was linked to support for multi-partyism. Secondly, reflecting the inextricability of land and the exercise of power in Kenya, slum clearance was a way to punish insubordination by withdrawing access to land and, conversely, a way to reward loyalty by re-allocating vacated land to political supporters. Thus, a close look at urban

politics in the early 1990s reveals the simultaneous use of targeted displacement and 'land grabbing' as a political technique for closing political space.

To illustrate the inter-connections between slum demolition, urban land, and the politics of democratisation in Kenya, this article examines a well-known slum demolition: Muoroto village in Nairobi. The attack on Muoroto in 1990 occurred at the beginning of a series of demolitions at the time, but the drama of the event and the portrayal of the experience in music meant Muoroto has become a lasting part of Kenyan popular culture. Muoroto was also a watershed of sorts as it provoked the Kenyan press to break a long, timid silence and boldly articulate angry public opinion against the government's actions (Grignon 1994:7). Most critically, a closer look at the politics around Muoroto clearly illustrates how KANU operatives used violent displacement in an attempt to keep opposition politics in check.<sup>4</sup>

### **Background: demolitions and urban politics**

Cities are often seen as creative confluences of people, cauldrons of cosmopolitan citizenship and nuclei of trans-ethnic class consciousness (Furedi 1973:275–290; Amutabi 2005:213–242). Mamdani, for example, primarily locates 'citizens' and 'civil society' in urban areas (Mamdani 1996:283–301).<sup>5</sup> Other scholarship on urban life emphasises how ethnic enclaves are reproduced through social networks (Tamarkin 1973:257–274; Curtis 1995). These ethnic networks provide opportunities for the forces of ethnic-based patronage and state coercion to assert themselves in urban spaces, reinforced by class and gender oppression (Chege 1981:74–124; see also Robertson 1993:9–42).

Politics in Nairobi reflects the confrontation between a particularistic and fragmenting politics of patronage and attempts at expanding more universalistic citizenship rights, which are central to democratisation. Struggles by slum-dwellers to promote broader, more inclusive citizenship rights are often met by state actors who attempt to re-impose a colonial politics of control. This control keeps in place a more limited form of citizenship mediated by narrow ethnic and gender constructions and maintained by patronage and violence. By withdrawing access to land, displacing communities, disrupting commerce and social ties and deepening dependency on patronage, the slum demolition plays a key role in this disciplining of dissent.

This is not new: slum demolition is a well-established technique of political containment and social control. It was used during the colonial period when Africans, assigned to respective 'native reserves' were effectively considered temporary residents of urban areas and were barred from owning land (Kobiah 1978; Otisa 2005:73–97; Werlin 1981:194–214). The experience of shared repression and entrenched inequality by a growing number of low-wage workers, the unemployed, 'informal sector' artisans and hawkers among others, made them a key

constituency for nationalist and trans-ethnic organising against the colonial state. In response, the state turned to slum demolitions and forced removals as a form of counter-insurgency in the 1950s. For example, in 1953 Mathare shanties, seen as a key area of support for the Mau Mau rebellion were destroyed, rendering 7,000 people homeless (Furedi 1973:285). This was a warm-up for the notorious Operation Anvil in April 1954, in which 24,000 Kikuyu, Embu and Meru were rounded up and evicted from the city for sympathising with Mau Mau resistance to colonial rule.

At independence, the slum demolition remained part of the repertoire of politics. Powerful patrons were rewarded with political support by slum-dwellers, often both tenants and landlords, when they protected them from demolitions (Chege 1981). Other politicians used slum demolitions as a way to reward wealthy supporters with land or punish opponents. Displacing the poor merely meant that new settlements would pop up in other areas, spreading settlements to more marginal land. Through a relentless process of elite accumulation of land and the related persistence of authoritarian local institutions, the urban poor, most of whom were tenants, continued to find themselves subject to the power of influential landlords and reliant on the protection of political patrons, including their politicians.

### **Democratisation and the ‘urban crowd’**

This politics of mal-distribution of land, along with population growth, migration and poor policies, have led to expanding slums and accelerating urban poverty. Nairobi already has some of the densest slums in Africa, in some areas reaching over 2,300 people per square hectare.<sup>6</sup> Many slum-dwellers have found creative ways to survive and sometimes thrive by founding micro-enterprises in an ‘informal sector’ that now provides jobs to about one-third of the labour force and creates roughly thirteen per cent of the GDP.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, overall, conditions are wretched and poised to get worse as population, environmental stress and material scarcity increase (Davis 2006; Olima 2001; Weru 2004). Whether these conditions improve depends critically on democratising negotiations over land and hence making politically possible policies that will enhance living conditions for Kenya’s growing urban and peri-urban poor. This in turn depends on broader democratisation processes that create space for slum-dwellers to escape coercive relationships with state actors and enter negotiations over policy. It is thus important to explore more deeply how broader democratisation processes are experienced within the slums.

One way Nairobi’s slum-dwellers experienced the fight for democratic change was through an intensification of struggles over access to urban land. Many of these land struggles, which often culminated in slum demolitions, adversely impacted large numbers of the urban poor. Even though, as Berman has pointed out, such contests over land are ‘inseparable from debates over the legitimacy of political power and the definition of moral and political community ...’ (Berman

1998:323), these struggles largely escaped the notice of scholars concerned with democratisation who focused on national level politicians, elections and constitutional change.

Struggles over urban land in the 1990s were connected to acceleration of land accumulation by KANU's patronage base. This 'land grabbing mania' was linked in part to anticipation of fewer opportunities to accumulate in light of impending political change. It was also driven by the need for greater resources to solidify party loyalty in light of reduced aid and increased party competition (Klopp 2000:7–26). The spike in land grabbing prior to the multi-party elections in 1992, 1997 and 2002 reflects this dynamic.<sup>8</sup> In this accelerated process of accumulation, urban land near lucrative, commercial areas, precisely the areas where informal sector activity is also profitable, became targets. Slum demolitions became increasingly common, and some, like the attack on Muoroto village, were linked more directly to attempts at political control.

### **Resistance at Muoroto**

The village of Muoroto formed in the haphazard way of many informal settlements. The original residents were pushed into the city by land pressures at home. While residents are multi-ethnic, most were from Murang'a. A number of these residents came from Mau Mau families who were punished for their rebellion by losing land.<sup>9</sup> Survival in Nairobi meant hawking in the city, but the government was engaged in an unending effort to clear hawkers from the urban centre. In 1984, as part of this campaign, the government moved hawkers to various sites on the outskirts of the central business district where they were allowed to set up markets. It was in this way that stalls were permitted next to the bus stand in Nairobi called 'Machakos airport'.

Stores became homes and the village of Muoroto was born and grew rapidly around the economic opportunities the bus stand provided. Indeed, many residents were thriving. According to the village leaders, 'at Muoroto village everyone was busy working. Some sold clothes, others were hawkers and traders. Women's groups made *kiondos* [woven bags]. Earnings were at different levels but everyone could feed and educate their families. No one paid rent.' Indeed, well-established kiosk owners selling items such as household needs or cheap foodstuff made a respectable Ksh500 a day, while some, owners of bars and little restaurants, including one prominent woman leader, made much more.<sup>10</sup>

The trouble that would eventually lead to the whole-scale destruction of the village and displacement of approximately 2,500 people began in some small acts of resistance against the KANU government and the bus owners. The bus owners decided to reduce their costs by colluding with authorities to bring in cheap Maasai labour from Tanzania to work. The Kenyan 'touts'<sup>11</sup> who were doing this work resisted their replacement and Muoroto villagers supported them in this.

On top of this labour issue was the problematic presence of KANU youth wingers at the bus stand. These youth wingers, mostly poor local youth, collected levies and were KANU's eyes and ears on the ground. The Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) described them as 'an extra-legal instrument for intimidating and repressing pro-opposition sectors of society' (KHRC 1998:12). According to one resident, the local KANU office 'wanted to use the youth wingers for political purposes but couldn't pay them, so instead they wanted them to take over the stand and collect fees to support themselves.'<sup>12</sup>

As part of their political work, youth wingers started to demand that the touts wear KANU T-shirts as a form of advertising for the party. This was unpopular. Besides disliking the coercive aspect of this, many touts supported one of the main opposition candidates, Kenneth Matiba. When the touts resisted the youth wingers, skirmishes broke out between them. In this way the labour issue had political overtones. This was under-scored by the fact that President Moi himself intervened to support the bus owners in their drive to replace the pro-multi-party touts.

On 25 May 1990, after a series of anti-multi-party rallies by the president, hundreds of Nairobi City Commission askaris, or police who work for the local government, riot police, KANU youth wingers and bulldozers descended on Muoroto to begin what was widely perceived as one of 'the most violent evictions ever witnessed in Nairobi in the post-colonial period'.<sup>13</sup> When the City Inspectorate announced the eviction, the leader of Muoroto village, Eliziphan Njoroge, declared the intention of the village to stay. This set the signal for the beginning of a violent battle over the eviction with clear political overtones. As George Anyona wrote in a letter to *The Nation* on 31 May 1990:

During the pitched battle between commission askaris and later, Kamakunji police, and the hawkers, which lasted for seven hours and spread to Gikomba, Muthurwa, Pumwani, Eastleigh, River Road, and Tom Mboya street, the eviction victims whose numbers were swelled by many sympathizers, jeered their assailants with chants of 'multi-party'.

For their part, the City Inspectorate seemed to be unafraid of the television cameras, suggesting that this was not only a calculated eviction but also a public display of power aimed at deterring further challenges to KANU. As one reporter noted, assistant director of the City Inspectorate Johnson Wahome 'featured prominently on KTN [Kenya Television Network] seemingly playing to the cameras as he directed a bulldozer into the Muoroto shanties'.<sup>14</sup> Despite the brutality of the force used against them, Muoroto residents fought back with stones, broken bottles and poisoned arrows. As the fighting swelled to the surrounding area, some of the protestors formed a procession, which happened to pass the president who was touring a local institution. They boldly flashed the two finger multi-party salute and managed to make it to Nation House, home of the *Daily Nation* newspaper before being dispersed.

### **Political fallout, faction and a call for accountability**

The public display of the attack on Muoroto had unforeseen consequences. It provoked an unexpected outcry among Kenyans, deepened political factions among the KANU political class and provoked a debate about accountability between both factions and between political leaders and the 'urban crowd'. This unusual display of violence against Muoroto village appeared to violate a certain moral consensus within parts of Kenyan society about the limits of state repression, and it provoked an unusual degree of public condemnation among church figures, journalists, dissenting KANU politicians and ordinary Kenyans. In this way, the attack on Muoroto was the first government action to evoke widespread and overt criticism from the press. Further, the Muoroto residents themselves were in fact some of the first Kenyans to openly and directly challenge any presidential position.

Muoroto galvanised generally timid middle-class critics. Many middle-class Nairobi residents with shrinking salaries relied on the products and services provided by the urban crowd, interacting with artisans and hawkers often on a daily basis. Indeed one Member of Parliament (MP) was caught in the melee around Muoroto as he dropped his car off for repair at an open-air garage. Thus, the attack on Muoroto was perceived as an attack on the very fabric of social relations in the city. Maverick politician George Anyonya wrote to the *Daily Nation* calling the Muoroto affair 'a serious slur on the moral and political conscience of the nation' and a 'national scandal'.<sup>15</sup> A gender dimension existed to this sense of moral violation. While primarily male hawkers fought, women suffered severe consequences of the indiscriminate destruction of the village (Robertson 1997:268–269). Although women traders are regularly beaten and repressed, the unprovoked attack on an elderly woman, clearly enraged columnist, Wahome Mutahi:

I feel angry and any right thinking Kenyan does at the site of a well-fed city askari confronting a frail grandmother whose only crime is hawking vegetables from house to house. That askari, young enough to be a grandson of the mama, grabs the woman and her luggage and tosses them both into a City Commission vehicle as if they were refuse.<sup>16</sup>

This unprecedented outcry led to a public demand for an explanation and accountability for those responsible for the violence. When pushed to justify their actions, however, City Commission officials, clients of the Minister of Local Government, William ole Ntimama, who appointed them, shirked responsibility. Indeed Minister ole Ntimama defended the City Inspectorate saying, 'Mr. Keittany [director of the City Inspectorate] should not be singled out for blame because he had taken orders from his superiors'.<sup>17</sup> His superior, Fred Gumo, the Nairobi City Commission chairman denied knowledge of the attack.

One prominent critic of the attack was the Assistant Minister for Agriculture and MP for Kamakunji, Maina Wanjigi. Wanjigi was known as an establishment

politician who steered clear of controversies, but the Muoroto villagers were his constituents. Wanjigi was clearly infuriated by the actions of the commission, which occurred while he was out of the country. By violently attacking his constituents reliant on him for protection, the City Commission undermined his local support and status as a patron. Further, the move on his constituents broke an agreement that supposedly had been reached a few weeks earlier between the City Commission, KANU officials and MPs that the city would not make a move without first informing the MP and provincial administration officials concerned.

Wanjigi's anger pushed him to make two uncharacteristically impolitic statements: he called for the resignation of Gumo and he compared the attack on Muoroto to Operation Anvil, the brutal colonial eviction. The first statement violated a key rule of patronage politics. Lower in the patronage hierarchy than the Minister of Local Government, ole Ntimama, Wanjigi still dared to ask for the removal of Ntimama's appointee to the Nairobi City Commission. This galvanised a campaign against Wanjigi. Ntimama, Gumo, and other KANU stalwarts assailed the MP for being a tribalist and inciting his constituents against the government.

By comparing the eviction to Operation Anvil, Wanjigi was drawing parallels between the dissenters and Mau Mau. To understand the metaphor implied it is necessary to underscore that colonial officials singled out the Kikuyu, who tended to spearhead clandestine anti-colonial organising, as 'undesirables' and 'criminals' in ways that were echoed in the rhetoric of Minister ole Ntimama, a former official in the colonial regime who would later justify the evictions by portraying the victims as thieves. Wanjigi drew on KANU's legitimising ideology as an anti-colonial party, and reminded them of the Kikuyu contribution to the independence struggle. He drew on the Kikuyu suffering in the struggle for independence as an argument against state harassment of hawkers: 'some of those people fought for independence and should be left alone,' he told a reporter.<sup>18</sup> While intended to get sympathy, the MP's statement only gave fuel to his detractors, who would then suggest his focus on the Kikuyu in this way was evidence of his tribalism.

President Moi, in what would be a consistent pattern through Kenya's violent 1990s feigned sympathy for the Muoroto victims, while protecting those responsible for the violence and persecuting those who dared speak out for the victims. It is thus important to examine this presidential response carefully, because it marks the beginning of a pattern that would emerge as the push for political liberalisation gained momentum. Firstly, he condemned the attack as inhuman, and the provincial administration denied that the government knew about it in advance, even though the Nairobi provincial commissioner is also on the City Commission. The president also issued a statement that a committee would be formed to investigate responsibility for the eviction and promised that no more evictions would be



allowed (although a spate of new demolitions would take place again at the end of the year).<sup>19</sup> Thus, he set himself up as a protector of the weak. Secondly, Moi criticised church leaders, Archbishop Kuria and Reverend Njenga, for 'telling the lies' in challenging the official version that no one died in the violence.<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, he attacked the dissenters within the party and protected his close political allies, ole Ntimama and Gumo.

By carefully attacking only Kikuyu dissenters, Wanjigi and even the assistant director of the City Inspectorate Wahome who supervised the demolition, the president purposefully ethnicised the Muoroto affair, diverted attention away from those responsible for the violence and reinforced the interpretation that the event was linked to 'subversives'.<sup>21</sup> Referring to Wanjigi's dissent he remarked ominously in light of subsequent large-scale violence, 'If there is tribalism of that kind, imagine what can happen if you have a multi-party system?'<sup>22</sup>

In this reaction to the dissent evoked by Muoroto from both within his party and the wider society the president linked 'tribalists' and hence violence to multi-party advocates. In his speech to the nation, he instructed the Nairobi KANU chairman, Mungai, to 'deal with tribalists in the city', a reference to Wanjigi. In the name of fighting tribalism, Moi was also clearly punishing Wanjigi for his dissent in the sensitive context of challenges to one-party rule. Wanjigi was suspended from the party for one year, Moi removed him from the ministry, but he retained his position as MP. This was punishment for his transgression of party hierarchies in his support of the Muoroto villagers and hence, for encouraging in the words of the Minister of Local Government 'civil disobedience' against the KANU appointed clients in the commission.<sup>23</sup> By putting Gumo in charge of a committee to look into who was responsible for Muoroto, the government signalled its intent to protect him, although he eventually stepped down in light of the blatant conflict of interest this represented. Eventually the director of the City Inspectorate Kaitany was suspended for a time and was eventually returned. A chastened Wanjigi apologised to the president for any 'miscommunication'.

### **Persisting resistance from below**

In contrast, after consultations, the Muoroto villagers reasserted their political agency by publicly refuting the president's ethnicised version of events. In a bold statement, Muoroto representative Elizaphan Njoroge emphasised that the villagers were from different tribes and 'if he (Wanjigi) was motivated by tribal interests, he could not have voiced the concern of all the residents'. Further, Njoroge insisted that Wahome did not incite the people to riot. 'Mr. Wahome is the greatest enemy of all hawkers in our area. He could not have incited us to riot since he is a big enemy.'<sup>24</sup> In a context of repression, the hawkers had dared to break a central tenet of patron-client politics: they openly contradicted the president. Further, they refused to ethnicise the affair.

At the same time, in early June reports of songs memorialising the struggle of Muoroto and overtly criticising the government began to circulate, alarming some MPs. Reporters for *The Nation* found ‘wananchi crowding music shops to listen to cassettes’ along River Road, Tom Mboya Street and Luthuli Avenue.<sup>25</sup> One such popular cassette *Thina wa Muoroto* (songs of Muoroto) was produced by ‘JJ’ Wanyeki (John Mugo Muoni) who was at Machakos bus stand hawking cassettes the day of the attack. In a song on the problems befalling Muoroto, the gospel singer links the City Commission oppressors to Satan, and then sings:

And as for Kenyans what do you want? We are asking for there to be multi-parties, so that people like hawkers can forward their grievances to the opposition, to fight for them to be licensed to sell their wares without being harassed by the police and the City Council askaris. So that we carry out our business without being asked for bribes, or having uncalled for beatings, like what happened to the people of Muoroto slum, where people had their shacks flattened by bulldozers.<sup>26</sup>

The popularity of the cassette provoked the government to pick up ‘JJ’ for questioning at the Central Intelligence Department headquarters. According to the musician there they questioned him on where the money for the cassette came from, assuming it was from the opposition leader and multi-party advocate Matiba. However, ‘JJ’ claimed he used his own resources and that of a friendly Asian Kenyan with a recording studio.<sup>27</sup> He told authorities that he was guided by the highest authority possible:

I was given a message by God to the people of Kenya, that the poor people are not getting adequate food and have supplicated to God; hence God has sent word that the message be conveyed to me to the authorities. The message I got simply says those poor people are oppressed, they are being harassed and are not given a chance to freely seek their daily bread.<sup>28</sup>

After paying a bribe from the proceeds of his cassette sales, ‘JJ’ was released. Official attempts at controlling this cultural manifestation of resistance was met by yet another cassette called *Patriotic Contributions*, which focused on class-based grievances and attacked the lack of freedom of expression. It also sold out rapidly.

### **The final destruction of Muoroto**

The public outrage that prompted the president’s feigned support for the Muoroto villagers created a temporary respite. The villagers used what savings they had to rebuild their homes and businesses. In June 1990, Minister ole Ntimama reminded Muoroto residents to be obedient, offering that ‘because of the mercy of the President Moi’ he would allow Muoroto residents to stay until an alternative site was found.<sup>29</sup> However, after this brief respite and with fading public attention, the City Commission and provincial administration, supported by the Ministry of Local Government, violently attacked Muoroto again. This would mark the beginning of what would be a series of violent evictions in Nairobi.

After skirmishes between hawkers and askaris broke out once again on 12 October 1990, 430 hawkers were arrested and taken to court, charged with breaching the peace and throwing stones at police officers and sentenced to Ksh2,000 to 3,000 in fines or jail terms. No lawyer dared step forward to represent them.<sup>30</sup> Shortly afterwards, on 18 October 1990, without notice, city bulldozers finally destroyed Muoroto village. That morning Muoroto residents woke up to find closed streets and an overwhelming force of city policemen, which they claimed out-numbered them four to one. Faced with so much force, they offered no resistance. Most of their property was destroyed and some of the residents were dumped outside the Kenya Meat Packaging Plant, where they lived for three weeks 'camping' until some were finally bundled into City Commission trucks and deposited in a marshy Kayole slum.<sup>31</sup>

To emphasise that this was official policy, Minister ole Ntimama, announced that, 'all illegal structures in Nairobi and municipalities throughout the country would be demolished'.<sup>32</sup> While the stated purpose of the evictions was to keep the central business district at the core of the city 'clean', these cleansing operations started to encroach on shantytowns far from the city centre. On 2 November 1990 a village of 3,300 people called Kileleshwa Nyakinyua was attacked. On 5 November, a village of over 3,000 people called Gigiri was attacked. On 8 November, Kwambiu, a village of over 3,000 residents, located on Nairobi River was attacked. On 21 November a settlement of 1,500 people at Kaptagat Road was attacked. Particularly striking was the demolition of Kibagare slum between 20 and 23 November, which rendered over 30,000 people homeless. A National Council of Churches of Kenya study suggested that a total of 45,000 people were rendered homeless and lost Ksh75 million worth of property during this spate of evictions. The combined onslaught on markets and settlements destroyed 1,431 small businesses and rendered at least 4,293 people without their 'informal sector' job for subsistence.<sup>33</sup>

When asked once again by the press and MPs representing the evicted villagers to account for the violent slum clearances of October and November 1990, the two KANU operatives most responsible both made links between the 'urban crowd' and political dissent. Nairobi City Commission head Fred Gumo, in a press conference in Kitale, wondered why the Nairobi MPs who were protesting did not issue a joint statement condemning the riots that rocked the city on 7 July 1990. (On this day, even without leaders the Nairobi crowd came out en masse to support the opening of the political system, encountered police brutality and fought for three days in Nairobi's streets against the police and KANU youth wingers.) In this way, he was suggesting that those protesting the demolitions were multi-party supporters or political subversives.<sup>34</sup> Minister ole Ntimama responded by saying that Muoroto was a 'den of thieves and hooligans' who 'posed a security risk' and that the hawkers more generally were 'being used by people of ill intent towards the government'.<sup>35</sup>

## Slum clearance and land grabbing

As a form of punishment against political dissent, slum demolitions involved withdrawal of government-mediated access to land. Evictions also freed up land in prime commercial locations. This land then became useful as patronage to dole out to political supporters, solidifying their loyalty to the KANU government. In the case of Muoroto, at the heart of the struggle was a contested piece of land, central to the survival of slum-dwellers and allocated behind closed doors by KANU appointees.

In 1987, a half-acre of land near the bus station was allocated by City Commission to its own cooperative society, NACICO, which claimed it wanted to build offices there.<sup>36</sup> As Minister ole Ntimama appointed the unaccountable Nairobi City Commission, there was no locally elected civic leader to represent the interests of Muoroto residents. The Nairobi city council was dissolved in 1983 and replaced by a centrally appointed commission in order to 'clean up' corruption and nepotism. This was to be a temporary two-year measure. However, it was only in 1992 with political liberalisation that civic authorities were reinstated. Thus at the time, there was no elected civic official to represent the interests of the Muoroto residents at the commission and little possibility for public discussion about the best use of city land, as the law requires.<sup>37</sup>

While the City Commission claimed that the aim was to clear the slum-dwellers off this half-acre belonging to NACICO, the entire village area around the half-acre was demolished. Further, in contradiction to the NACICO claims, the assistant director of the City Inspectorate, Johnson Wahome, told the press at the time that 'the place being demolished was going to be used for the expansion of the bus stage and added that the commission was going to put up a shopping centre complex.'<sup>38</sup> To confuse the situation further, Minister ole Ntimama, suggested that all the property in question was not city land but in fact was *private* land. Justifying the actions against Muoroto, he said, 'We can not allow people to trespass on other people's property on the pretext that it was their land.'<sup>39</sup>

These contradictory claims reinforce to provoke the view of many of the Muoroto residents, as well as their church leaders, that land grabbing was also implicated in how their village became a target. While today a NACICO building exists on the land once occupied by the kiosks, a shopping complex and petrol station were also constructed on land extending beyond the initially allocated half-acre. In fact, the surrounding areas, Majengo and Machakos, which supported the Muoroto villagers, were also cleared. Former Muoroto residents implicated Zipporah Wandera from the town clerk's office, who has also been named in other land scandals by the Land Commission report (Republic of Kenya 1999:78). It was in fact the town clerk's office that was responsible for the City Inspectorate enforcement department, which in turn was directly responsible for the violence. Further, in 1994, it was revealed that even the land on which the bus stand stood was in

fact allocated to well-connected figures including the Machakos KANU branch chairman, Mulu Mutisya.<sup>40</sup>

This secret allocation was contested through a court struggle initiated by the Machakos Public Transporters Self-Help Group, who insisted that the land was still public and that revenues collected should go to the city council rather than Park Towers Ltd, which claims to have leased the land from Mutisya and associates.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Muoroto became a target for its early resistance to KANU rule and its multi-party sympathies; the punishment was loss of access to state-controlled land. The land that was cleared was then available to well-connected KANU operatives in local KANU branches and the office of the town clerk.

### **The aftermath**

The people of Muoroto, like many other slum-dwellers in Kenya, paid a high price for their support for political change. Their attempts to claim basic rights of citizenship – freedom of expression, access to a space to live, protection from arbitrary violence and extraction of property and the right to vote freely – led to devastating consequences.<sup>42</sup> Today, many former residents still live in a Kayole slum. They were placed in this mosquito-infested marshland, far from commercial activity, to keep them under KANU surveillance and away from the public eye. While the government claimed that they would be allocated alternative land, according to Muoroto's former leaders, it took two years of pressure on the local chief and administration with the help of World Vision to get land and then only some received temporary allotment letters. They claim much of the land was allocated to Gumo, the local MP and the local chief. Further, when the Muoroto villagers were finally allotted land, they were deliberately dispersed. Even the harassment continued; the chief called them 'thieves' at local meetings and insisted that no two Muoroto people be seen at the same time.<sup>43</sup>

Further, many former Muoroto residents were disenfranchised through displacement. They were moved from Kamakunji to Embakasi constituency where they were not registered to vote. In 1992 and 1997 most did not cast a ballot. According to Njoroge, KANU MP Mwenje directly threatened them with loss of land if they voted.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it was likely that in the December 2002 election, many voted for KANU's Uhuru Kenyatta on the basis that he promised them a water connection, which he delivered. At least one of Muoroto's leaders known as 'Mama Uji [porridge]' ran as a KANU councillor.

Formerly independent and prosperous business people from Muoroto became truly poor and rendered highly dependent on patronage and charity. This does not mean that the former villagers were completely subordinated, rather they persist in a 'double-consciousness' described by EP Thompson, which

Can be seen to derive from two aspects of the same reality: on the one hand, the necessary conformity with the status quo if one is to survive, the need to get by in

the world as it is in fact ordered, and to play the game according to the rules imposed by employers, overseers of the poor, etc; on the other hand the 'common sense' derived from shared experience of fellow workers and with neighbours of exploitation, hardship and repression, which continually exposes the text of the paternalist theatre to ironic criticism and (less frequently) to rebellion. (Thompson 1993:11)

Muoroto villagers rebelled against their repression and struggled for new political space when opportunity seemed to arise for it. They have not forgotten their history of repression, rebellion and even more repression. For now, however, they have had to play the paternalist theatre of deference to survive.

For their part, high-level clients of the president such as Ntimama and Gumo felt no accountability to the primarily Kikuyu and Luo urban poor who are far from their base of support defined largely in ethnic terms. Indeed, by exploiting their state power and using violence against Muoroto residents, these politicians demonstrated loyalty to Moi's order, diminished opponents by targeting their base and accumulated resources through land. Later on this pattern of public threats, illicit accumulation of land and organised violence would help win elections; William ole Ntimama would go on in 1993, 1997 and 2007/08 to violently displace Kikuyu migrants in his Narok North constituency and this would help him 'win' elections (see Klopp 2001; Republic of Kenya 1999; and Kenya National Commission on Human Rights 2008:81).

The series of violent evictions that began with Muoroto continued into the 1990s, provoking widespread anger and anti-land grabbing organising. By 1996 the Nairobi Informal Settlement Coordination Committee (NISCC) formed a government-NGO [non-governmental organisation] collaboration that led to negotiations over evictions. The evictions also provoked the formation a year later of Muungano wa Wanavijiji, a federation of slum-dwellers united by their desire to protect informal settlements from arbitrary violence and land grabbing. The same year, when confronted with this mobilisation, the government through the NISCC agreed to a moratorium on evictions. Muungano wa Wanavijiji is still active and key partners like Pamoja Trust, Hakijamii Trust, and the Kenya Land Alliance, veterans of the struggle against slum demolitions in the nineties, now represent the best chance for 'slum upgrading' and policy reform in Kenya (see Weru 2004; and Alam *et al.* 2005). These groups continue to push for the government to create, recognise and respect guidelines on evictions.

### **Conclusions: change or more of the same?**

In 2002, the struggle for democratisation, of which Muoroto and similar struggles were a part, ushered in an historic change of government through peaceful elections. The National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) replaced KANU. The new government promised a different approach to Kenya's problems and vowed to fight the corruption, including the land grabbing which was endemic under the previous government. The NARC government also recognised the right to adequate

housing and enacted a new National Housing Policy, which promoted slum upgrading with minimal displacement of people (Government of Kenya 2007). The president's office put together (although failed to adequately fund) the Ndungu Commission, which investigated irregular/illegal allocation of land. The commission recommended that the government repossess much land that was in effect stolen from the people of Kenya through irregular privatisation, and it provided details on many such plots of land.<sup>45</sup> Finally, the internally displaced, numbering over 500,000, were promised redress.

Remembering Muoroto provokes us to ask: How much has this democratisation in Kenya transformed the current conditions of slum-dwellers, including the victims of past violence? How much has changed? Sadly, for the people of Muoroto their history has been largely forgotten, and they have given up on formal processes to find redress for their treatment. When the commission into the illegal acquisition of land opened up for public input, the people of Muoroto, like most of the urban displaced, did not even bother to submit their cases.

By 2004, it was clear that the government had indeed wavered from its promised policy path. Besides the unveiling of a large-scale corruption scandal, the government also seemed to be ignoring the two land commissions and Judicial Commission of inquiry into 'tribal clashes' which made key recommendations for dealing with perpetrators like ole Ntimama, who had used violent displacement as a political tool. Instead, the NARC government appeared to be turning a politically selective eye to those among the political class who have accumulated large tracts of land irregularly and who have often violently displaced people to do so. Some, like Ntimama, were invited into the government as ministers. The internally displaced like the victims of Muoroto were largely forgotten (Klopp 2005) and eventually, new land scandals surfaced.<sup>46</sup> Further, some ministers continued with the colonial attitude that the slums are 'animal-like' and 'crawling with criminals' (Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions 2005:33). At an International Seminar on Housing and Research at Cape Town, the former Kenyan Minister of Lands, Amos Kimunya, supported the Zimbabwean position on its massive slum demolitions.<sup>47</sup>

It was hardly surprising then, that this backsliding in the reform agenda was also marked by renewed attempts at slum demolitions. In late January 2004, the ministries of Public Works, Roads and Housing, Energy and Local Government announced plans to evict approximately 330,000 to 400,000 people ostensibly to make way for infrastructural improvements including a by-pass, which, according to an old plan, is slated to go straight through Kibera, one of Africa's densest and largest slums. On Sunday 8 February 2004, while most people were in church, bulldozers demolished Raila village in Kibera rendering 2,000 people homeless. This demolition was conducted much like previous ones – there was no consultation with the community, evictees received no notice and lost their property in the demolition, and the government offered no

compensation, support, or alternatives to the evictees.<sup>48</sup> This eviction was to be followed by others in March 2005 and continue up to the present (Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions 2007).<sup>49</sup> Currently, a new plan for the capital 'Nairobi Metro 2030' is in the works.<sup>50</sup> It is unclear whether this will translate into a constructive engagement with slum-dwellers or once again lead to more evictions in the name of 'environmental management' or 'slum elimination'.

To add onto these struggles, the violence that followed a contested election in December 2007 has deepened and complicated the problems of the informal settlements. Besides the increase in poverty linked to the destruction of homes, livelihoods, and lives in Nairobi, Nakuru, Kisumu and smaller urban centres, the violence has pitted poor people against each other, divided them along ethnic/political lines and has thus eroded social networks and reinforced ethnic segregation. This makes issue-based organising more challenging. Further, already stressed communities are hosting internally displaced people who have been neglected by the government and humanitarian agencies. The government's failure to produce a proper policy towards internal displacement and reconciliation after mass violence means that as in other post-conflict regions in Africa, Kenya's slums are poised to expand, become more stressed and experience more violence if serious support and interventions are not forthcoming.

The one silver lining to this gloomy picture is that Kenya's hard won political space does allow for effective mobilisation against the urban evictions and for more constructive dialogues and policy on slum upgrading. In 2004, Kenya's urban civil society including the Network of Catholic Churches in the informal settlements, Kituo cha Sheria, Shelter Forum, Maji na Ufanisi, and Pamoja Trust joined together to resist evictions. Leveraging their links to transnational networks, including the Catholic Church, Kenyan civil society helped to draw in as critics, donors, the UN and even the Pope who had his emissary visit the president. This unwelcome attention led to a presidential order to suspend the urban evictions (Khalfan and Gomez 2004).<sup>51</sup> Such networks remain in place and suggest continued evictions and marginalisation of slum-dwellers will not occur without a struggle.

Broader democratisation of society has brought benefits to slum-dwellers. These include the presence of some genuine reformers in government, political freedom to organise and a supportive civil society (Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions 2005). Ideally as political space expands and more universalistic claims to citizenship get recognition, violent slum demolitions will end and negotiated transformations of slum areas through up-grading and participatory urban planning will take their place. However, old attitudes and politics persist and the recent violence has intensified the feeling of insecurity that plagues at least half of Nairobi's slum-dwellers.<sup>52</sup>

The Muoroto case reminds us that official discourses of urban planning, including those of relatively democratic governments, often mask a politics of illicit land



accumulation and politically motivated attacks on the citizenship rights of the poor. Democratic deepening demands more transparent and equitable governance over land and an end to such politics of displacement. Whether such deepening of democratisation occurs or not will help determine whether African urban centres will realise their potential for a new creative politics of change or slide into even deeper inequality, pollution, poverty and violence.

## Notes

1. For a breakdown of reported evictions in Africa between 2001 and 2005 see *Evictions Monitor* 1(3) August 2005 [www.habitants.org/filemanager/download/37/](http://www.habitants.org/filemanager/download/37/).
2. This trend of increasing scope and brutality was remarked on by human rights organisations (Human Rights Watch 1991; Kenya Human Rights Commission 1996), interview with Lawrence Opiyo of Kituo cha Sheria, Nairobi 2 July 1998), church organisations (National Council of Churches of Kenya 1991), scholars of the informal sector (King 1996:33–34; Macharia 1992; Otisa 2002) and the press.
3. 'Vigour, Ruthlessness and Savagery', *Weekly Review* 21 December 1990:16.
4. A year later and over the course of the decade, this would express itself in the 'ethnic clashes', one of the largest exercises in violence in Kenya since colonial times. This violence involved some of the same key actors as in the Nairobi slum demolitions, including in particular, the Minister for Local Government at the time, William ole Ntimama. Also see Médard 1996:62–74; Médard 1998:32–39; and Klopp 2001:473–516.
5. Note also the fascinating study by Liisa Malkki (1995) which demonstrated the fluidity of refugee identities in towns compared to rural camps. Authoritarian African governments have often seen urban areas as bastions of opposition and in fact, in many countries Kenya included, gerrymandering gives urban centres few parliamentary seats relative to their growing numbers.
6. UN Habitat, 'The Challenge of Slums' p 219.
7. UN Habitat, 'The Challenge of Slums' p 103.
8. Republic of Kenya, 'Report on Illegal/Irregular Allocation', p 83.
9. This information is based on a series of interviews with former Muoroto residents in July 2004 Nairobi. Werlin (1981:200) also notes the large influx of Kikuyu, many of them ex-detainees, who were punished by the colonial administration with loss of their land. Many went into 'hawking'.
10. Interviews with former kiosk owners, Peter Gichuki, Alex Kanyago and Julius Maina, Nairobi, 15 July 2004.
11. Matatus are the private vehicles that provide the vast majority of transportation for the urban poor. Touts are poor young men who earn their living by finding passengers and collecting fares.
12. Interview with Alex Kanyago, Nairobi, 15 July 2004.
13. Caleb Muchungu, 'Terror came', *Standard* 29 May 1990.
14. 'Muoroto Fall-Out', *The Weekly Review* 8 June 1990:5.
15. 'Muoroto fight a national scandal', *Daily Nation* 31 May 1990.
16. 'Mindless violence has no place in civilized society', *Daily Nation* 28 May 1990.
17. 'Wanjigi's views are tribalistic-Ntimama', *Standard* 2 June 1990.
18. 'Muoroto residents say there were no deaths', *Daily Nation* 31 May 1990.
19. To my knowledge, the commission, unsurprisingly, never issued a report. The former Muoroto leaders do not recall hearing about any report.
20. Although the exact number of casualties is unknown, the violence left at least five dead and forty people seriously injured. According to a number of reports by witnesses, one bulldozer driver was killed by poison arrow and a number of children were killed in their homes.

There was a protracted battle between the president and the clergymen who refused to retract their claim.

21. The speech is reproduced in the article 'Moi names Muoroto inciter, attacks Wanjigi', *Daily Nation* 2 June 1990.
22. 'Moi names inciter', *Daily Nation* 2 June 1990.
23. 'Wanjigi's views', *Standard* 2 June 1990.
24. 'Kanu officials tell Wanjigi to resign', *Daily Nation* 4 June 1990. In an interview on 7 July 2004, Njoroge said that he was motivated by a deep anger because 'they had destroyed my property, my strength'. He also claimed that the security apparatus tried to trace him at the market but no one cooperated and he remained safely hidden.
25. 'Cassette gains popularity', *Daily Nation* 13 June 1990.
26. I am grateful to 'JJ' Wanyeki for making a copy of his song available to me and to Njoroge wa Wanguthi for translating it from Kikuyu.
27. Interview with 'JJ' Wanyeki, Nairobi, 30 June 2004.
28. 'Cassette gains popularity', *Daily Nation* 13 June 1990.
29. 'Ntimama: Minister inciting disobedience', *Daily Nation* 2 June 1990.
30. '430 hawkers charged with stoning police', *Standard* 13 October 1990.
31. Interviews with Muoroto village leaders, Pastor Gichangi Macharia, Eliziphan Njoroge, Githongo Maina, Gladys Wanjiru and Kuruga, Kayole, 7 July 2004. See also Okumba Miruka, 'The wretched of Kayole', *Daily Nation* 1 May 1992.
32. 'Demolition of kiosks spreads', *Standard*, 24 October 1990.
33. For more details on these demolitions see NCKK 1991.
34. 'David and Goliath', *Weekly Review* 18 January 1991.
35. 'Brutality and inhumanity', *Weekly Review* 30 November 1990. Compare with Officer in Charge of Nairobi, I Ryland, in 1954: 'It was evident that the whole weight of the Kikuyu tribe in Nairobi was over-balancing the scale in favour of anarchy and contempt of the law and regulations and that the resources of the Security Forces and well-intentioned citizens were at the time insufficient to wrest the city from the stranglehold imposed upon it by the forces of subversion. Large-scale operations proved ineffective against the weight of number and the City was permeated by gangsters and other undesirables . . .' Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1954:173.
36. 'Muoroto Fallout', *Weekly Review* June 8 1990.
37. Even when civic authorities were restored, the town clerk's office and the City Inspectorate were still very powerful. In the aftermath of yet another set of demolitions in 1994, the elected mayor complained angrily about 'the City Inspectorate – which he branded a terror gang – as well as the top officers in the council, whom he accused of sabotage. These officers, Mwangi reckoned, were so rich and powerful that the council cannot discipline them since "they give handouts to councillors in order to stop discussions on how they can be disciplined"', 'Mayor Mwangi on the spot', *Weekly Review* 18 February 1994. Much of the wealth was accumulated through the appropriation of public land and other resources such as water.
38. 'Scores injured in eviction fracas', *Standard* 26 May 1990.
39. 'Kuria condemns kiosk demolitions', *Standard* 28 May 1990.
40. Southall and Wood (1996:522) also discuss such land scandals and the involvement of Mulu Mutisya and a company associated with ole Ntimama's daughter.
41. 'King'ori's evidence' and 'Just another day of grabbing', *Weekly Review* 2 December 1994, *Economic Review* 28 April to 4 May 1997.
42. These consequences are gendered. Women have fewer economic opportunities than men. When they lose everything, they become susceptible to the sex trade and HIV. This was mentioned to me by Muoroto villagers and is also documented in Kamungi 2002.
43. Interview with leaders, Kayole, 7 July 2004.
44. Interview with Eliziphan Njoroge, Nairobi, 4 July 2004.

45. Republic of Kenya, 'Report on Illegal/Irregular Allocation'.
46. Bob Odalo, 'Firm's bid to use Kibaki name in land scandal', *Daily Nation* 20 February 2005.
47. See the 'Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to Assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe', 2005, New York: UN, for the implications of this.
48. *Ibid* p 40.
49. See also Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions and Hakijamii Trust 'Rights groups condemn wave of evictions in Nairobi', Press Release, 29 August 2007 ([http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/5896.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/5896.html)). COHRE and Hakijamii Trust, 'Kenya Housing Rights Update January 2008-July 2008'. This report suggests that 114,570 people and 3,830 structures near the Nairobi, Ngong, and Mathare rivers are slated for removal as part of a clean-up operation aiming to create a 100-metre buffer zone between people and the rivers.
50. Available at [www.KIPPRA.org](http://www.KIPPRA.org)
51. Also see John Mbaria, 'Pope stopped Kenya slum demolitions', *The East African* 15 March 2004.
52. 'Inside Informality: Poverty, Jobs, Housing and Services in Nairobi's Slums', 31 May 2006, World Bank).

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