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(832)

(a) UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI
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Working papers

RN. 324850

THE URBAN IMAGE -- STEREOTYPES
OF URBAN LIFE IN KENYA

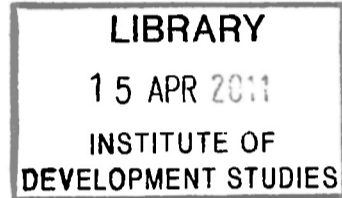
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WORKING PAPER NO.172



INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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P.O. Box 30197,

Nairobi, Kenya.

April 1974

Views expressed in this paper are those of the authors. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Institute for Development Studies or of the University of Nairobi.

IDS



096424

IDS/WP 172

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues the importance of the interplay of image and social reality in urban development in Kenya. The main body of the paper discusses one significant source of urban stereotypes — contemporary Kenyan fiction and especially the Kenyan urban novel. It is suggested that the use of this fictional material as sociological documents (and in association with other sociological materials) is useful. Further, it is hoped that the social scientist will be stimulated by exposure to this view of the city in fiction especially in terms of its convergence to and distortions of the social data with which he works.

INTRODUCTION - IMAGES AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Urbanization is more than a mere epiphenomenon of global political and economic processes; especially in the national and regional context, urban centres develop a force of their own which reacts on the developmental process and the general societal transformation which accompanies it. So it is that planners in Kenya have come to realize that the pace and the pattern of urban growth are crucial aspects of national development.¹

Urban growth is generally modeled in terms of dominant economic and locational factors (again as these may be modified by political decisions);² this is a very powerful but rather gross and quite limited model in the sense that it is not well-articulated with any model of the attendant social transformations. In discussing this latter problem one soon finds that one element which constantly crops up is the subtle interplay between image and reality, the effect of perceptions and misperceptions, of stereotypes on the direction of development (in the broad sense) in Kenya. What part do images play in development? In terms of urban growth one can discern images working on at least two levels — the first is how the image of the particular city affects it in competition with other cities for new investment, the siting of important headquarters, etc.; and the second, more general, is how the image of the city as opposed to the rural areas affects it in terms of attracting migrants with certain characteristics and skills.

One can introduce the first level at which image operates on urban development by way of a general example. Nairobi attracts industry and investment first and foremost because it offers relative advantages, in the regional context, in terms of a number of concrete economic factors. Investment decisions however are not made solely on the basis of rational economic (or economico-political) calculations (and not only in situations of perfect 'indifference') but for idiosyncratic reasons having to do with perceptions of aspects of the quality of life which Nairobi offers.³ So, for

1. See A.N. Ligale, "The Scale and Pace of Urbanization in Kenya". Paper presented at the Commonwealth Association of Planners, African Regional Conference, Nairobi, February, 1974, which enlarged on the presentation of this in the new 1974-78 Development Plan.

2. See for example the extensive discussion on Employment, Incomes and Equality, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1972.

3. Economic theory tries to deal with this problem in terms of various kinds of external economies for example. But though one can argue that the nature of the urban population is important both in terms of the market it forms and in terms of the kind of pool of skills and aptitudes it represents, this is only a part of the somewhat difficult notion of a city's image or 'personality' as a factor in investment decisions.

example, at the recent International Monetary Fund Meeting in Nairobi, the activities involving a cleanup of the city, suggested removal of 'unsightly' tea stands, food kiosks,⁴ the sweep of the central city clearing out suspected pick-pockets and con-artists, etc. were not only the city putting its best foot forward for influential guests as any good host would do but also and quite explicitly simple image-management⁵ designed to show that Nairobi is a desirable world convention centre; interesting, safe, clean and efficient. The impact of image in this sense is widely appreciated by politicians and public alike and as noted, it is subject to very conscious attempts at image management and control.

A second level at which image operates on urban growth is perhaps less widely appreciated and apparently less amenable to manipulation.⁵ It operates not only in competition among cities and towns but in terms of the relative growth of the urban vs. the rural sector. This then is a generalization of the first case. People decide to migrate to the city (and to a particular city) and to stay or not remain in the city not simply for rational economic considerations but also because of the quality of life they see the city as offering. Aspects that are important to people in their decision-making come to be embodied in popular stereotypes of the city. The main body of this paper is a discussion of one set of stereotypes of urban life which we feel are of significance for the social scientist: the view of the city portrayed in contemporary Kenyan fiction, and especially in the new "urban novels".

4. See for example the editorial, "Putting on our best face" in the Daily Nation 14 September 1973 which began:

Time was when Nairobi had an enviable reputation for being colourful and clean ... We were talked about all over the world ... but today the 'City in the Sun' often has a tatty appearance ... Every here and there are tea kiosks and mobile "eating houses" (the "Little Hiltons" and the "Little Thorn Trees" as some wananchi call them)... even quite close to the city centre.

5. See for example the article in the Sunday Nation 2 September 1973 headed "Police to rid city of 'undesirables' for VIP meetings" which said in part: "Commenting on recent police activities in Nairobi ... in which hundreds of people have been put into the dragnet... the Senior Superintendent of Police said ... the idea is to rid the city of vagrants and anyone wandering about the city streets without being able to account for his presence there ... and insure peaceful stay of the VIPs

6. Although some governments do try, for example Kenya with its "back to the land" call and Tanzania have attempted to moderate urban growth by public reaffirmation of the virtues of rural life. For one tack taken see the article in the Daily Nation 1 January 1974 titled "Don't stay in town doing nothing" and the intriguing proposal put forward in the letter to the Sunday Nation 25 November 1973 mistitled ("only) old people should go back to the land". This writer argued: "My proposal is that when the old responsible people have made farming attractive and respectable, many young people will probably see sense in it and follow suit. Also we shall avoid the risk of making Kenya poorer while we await for the youth to change their attitudes."

SOURCE MATERIAL - THE KENYAN URBAN NOVEL

Fiction dealing with the urban situation does not have as long a history in East as in West Africa; a not unnatural result of the lesser and more recent urbanization of East Africa. In West Africa, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Kwei Armah, Cyprian Ekwensi, to name only a few, have written vividly about life in the city.⁷

An author's first novel typically is autobiographical, written out of the author's personal experience, and this usually means harkening back to rural life (a great majority of present-day adult urbanites grew up in a village), describing and to some extent eulogizing it; then depicting the encounter and conflict between that lifestyle and the coming of church and colonial administrator. So, for example, Achebe does this (in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God) and in Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o does this (in The River Between and A Grain of Wheat).

The urban novel reflects the recent rapid urbanization in the country, especially the post-independence aspects. The Kenyan one is in the brash hands of Charles Mangua (Son of Woman, 1971), who was quickly imitated with varying success by George Kamau Maruah (Never Forgive Father, 1972), Mike Mwaura (The Renegade, 1972), Mwangi Ruheni (What a Life, 1972), and partially by Mangua himself (A Tail in the Mouth, 1972).⁸ This growing body of literature forms the basic source material for our discussion of the urban image. Before going on to extract the relevant material from this body of fiction, we need to consider its significance.

URBAN IMAGES - THE ROLE OF LITERATURE

Images of city life are created within Kenyan society by numerous agencies. The most direct is by experience in urban areas. While the number of actual urban dwellers is still small in Kenya, a much larger proportion of the population has in fact visited and spent time in town and city. A larger proportion still have gotten impressions of urban life from others with whatever degree of urban experience they might have. Less direct still but of great significance in image formation are the media, printed and electronic — all of which have an urban (although not necessarily pro-urban) bias.

7. No Longer at Ease and A Man of the People by Achebe; The Interpreters by Soyinka; The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born by Armah; People of the City by Ekwensi.

8. Leonard Kibera, Voices in the Dark (1970) is a slightly earlier Kenyan novel set in the city. A difficult book stylistically, it is without imitators. It will not be referred to here specifically, however the view of city life presented in it does not diverge from that of the other fiction from which material has been taken.

What role has printed fiction among these various image-creating agencies? We are not in a position to assess that precisely. The novel reading public is a growing but still a small group.⁹ On this quantitative basis it can be argued that the urban novel is not a significant image-propagating agent. Against that one must consider some points which possibly argue for the opposite view.

The first is that the novelists represent a particularly articulate group among those talking about city life. Moreover writers of fiction are generally less constrained in the kinds of material they can handle and in the treatment they give it than are for example the news media and radio upon which both public pressures and a certain amount of self-censorship act. Authors then are in a particularly good position to act as critics and commentators of the national scene.

A second point to consider is that while the novelist has a relatively small audience it is an important one. Within Kenya this audience, which is a highly literate one, consists of a group of people that is most likely to come (or have come) and live in the towns and cities. And insofar as education is correlated with prospects of social mobility, this group (which we will see below is also the one these novels are largely written about and aimed at) may have an opinion-leading function within the country out of proportion to its size. The other part of the novelist's audience is external to Kenya. This group, having few alternate sources of information, to some extent uses the novelist as a best reference in impression formation. This can react back on the Kenyan situation in that the Kenyan elite is quite sensitive to the images and impressions of Kenya created abroad.¹⁰ While we would not like to push this very indirect influence too far, it might be an interesting sort of speculation given the increasing attention being paid to African fiction in schools and universities especially in the United States.

9. Although if read and discussed over radio, novels reach a wider audience as was the case for example with some of Ngugi's work.

10. In this regard it is much easier to find examples from the wider-impact media. A recent example was the broadcast on the BBC done by Lord Chalfont who was given a prohibited immigrant status because the viewpoint expressed struck Kenyan officials as both distorted and malicious. His criticisms however did provoke a good deal of discussion and debate here, forcing Kenyans to think through their defence of the way they regard these points.

Certainly the novelist sees his role as that of an image-maker in more than the literary sense. Kenyan writers tend to be self-conscious and quite concerned about their responsibilities as impression-leaders and critics both to Kenyans and their wider readership. For example, social irresponsibility, which, as we will argue more fully below, is a major theme and perhaps more than that, a fundamental element of the atmosphere of these urban novels, has resulted in a possible confusion between the irresponsibility of the characters in the novel and that of the authors themselves (who are accused of exploitation and sensationalism). This blur of the commitment of the protagonist and his author arises in an 'editorial' (by "Iconoclasts") in the January 1972 issue of Ghala:

Talking of commitment, there has been a rather disturbing trend in East Africa, with almost every writer trying to write on the slums, the beggars, the prostitutes, of our cities. Some people even made special trips to Mathare Valley in order to get inspiration.¹¹

He is worried that this is a literary fad and not a social concern. Echoing a complaint articulated against Zola and other late 19th century naturalists, he is afraid that "our enemies, and those who do not understand us, are likely to think that we are celebrating the seamy side of life without showing sufficient concern for the moral health of our countries." (p.3) The author and his characters may be dodging responsibility, caught in the hedonism and **corruption** of the city.¹²

11. Ghala A special literary issue of the East Africa Journal, vol. ix, no. 1, January 1972.

12. It is interesting, as a counterpoint to the discussion of the urban novel, to speculate why certain writers with the requisite experience haven't turned to the urban situation for material. A prime example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of the most serious Kenyan writers in terms of his use of the novel to make important social statements, has not written an urban-centred novel or stories. He is strongly committed to communal action -- it is his overriding purpose as is evidenced in his recently published volume of essays, Homecoming. His literary criteria are based on the extent to which an author endeavours to deal with communal problems and politics in terms of the 'creative struggle of the masses'. Thus Sembene Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood is elevated and Soyinka's The Interpreters cast in doubt. The first deals with the raising of people's consciousness, the welding of their communal purpose in the heat of a strike. Soyinka is a bit too artsy, intellectual, solutionless (by these criteria).

An intriguing notion which deserves some consideration is that fiction has a disproportionate impact on image-creation compared with most other inputs.¹³ One can argue that people reading fiction are in a particularly receptive frame of mind and that a skilled writer can personalize problems and embody them in images which are more vivid and memorable than the run of everyday experience or the more mundane presentations of other media and thus are more likely to become incorporated into impressions. This argument is not without support but much of the evidence is impressionistic. However, we believe that the study of urban stereotypes as portrayed in Kenyan fiction is significant irrespective of whether or not writers are important in image-formation *per se* either absolutely or relative to the effect of other media.

We would argue for the importance of fiction were it only a valuable reflector of stereotypes. That is, it is clear that the relative popularity of urban fiction shows it strikes a responsive chord in its audience. The fiction is in some measure at least mirroring some commonly-held perceptions of the evolving urban society and dealing with felt tensions and problems. Even if Kenyan writers then cannot be proven to be opinion-leaders, they do serve an important role in reflecting certain views and in confirming people in their opinions.

Our aim here is to extract from contemporary Kenyan writing some major themes concerning urban life. That is, we are using the material as social documents.¹⁴ The literary images and stereotypes drawn from this fiction will be counterpointed with views of the urban social reality ('fact') as described say in letters to the editor or in academic research.

MAJOR THEMES - SOCIAL IRRESPONSIBILITY AND ANOMIE

"Town life is good. Nobody cares about what everybody else does."¹⁵

13. This same sort of argument has been applied to the impact of film but in the Kenyan case the influence of this latter is complex and doesn't form a useful parallel here in that there is no local film industry.

14. This is of course hardly a new approach; it has been fruitfully employed in many branches of the social sciences and in historical discussion. We believe, however, that its potential here in Kenya has not been exploited sufficiently.

15. C.Mangua, A Tail in the Mouth. East African Publishing House, Modern African Library No. 23, Nairobi, 1972. All further references are from this edition. (p. 260)

Professor B.A. Ogot, in his Keynote Address to the "Colloquium on Black Aesthetics"¹⁶ delineated four major themes which emerge from African literature of the last ten years: 1) the disintegration of village life due to the arrival of the Europeans; 2) the torment of the 'been-to'; 3) the influence of the missionaries; and 4) life in the modern African city. All four themes have appeared in Kenyan writing as well. With respect to the last of these, Professor Ogot characterizes the depiction of city life as being "exciting, irresponsible and immoral." (p. 20)

It is this social irresponsibility and concomitant immorality which is a major theme -- perhaps the definitive characteristic -- of the Kenyan urban novel. So striking is the question of responsibility that it pops up in one form or another in virtually every discussion of contemporary writing. In another paper presented at the same conference, Professor David Dorsey writes that "the most salient feature of East African literature . . . is its commitment to communal social values." This was in 1971 when the urban novel had just barely reared its seductive head in Mangua's first book. Dorsey goes on to say "Son of Woman is unique in my reading." (p.12) That is, Son of Woman, the prototype for the Kenyan urban novel, deviates from, is in fact diametric to this commitment to the values of the community. It breaks away from its rural-based brothers and reflects the individualism of urban anomie.

The immorality of the city, its attractiveness as a means to evade social, especially family obligations is at the core of city life as seen in fiction. Still, escape into the anonymity of the city turns out not to be that simple, as contradictions emerge. In The Renegade, for example, Kujuga the 'hero' consciously rejects his family as he becomes a committed urbanite. He neglects to send money home, refrains from visits, shirks his duty to his father and siblings, as he actively throws himself into the city whirl of bars and girls. "None of them (he and his three friends) ever thought of going home. The town was their home and in the town they would live. There was no use visiting the dry countryside and have one's clean shirt soiled by dust."¹⁷ The absence

16. Part of the Festival of East African Writing, held at Nairobi University in June 1971. Published in P. Zirimu & A. Gurr, eds., Black Aesthetics, East African Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1973.

17. M. Mwaura, The Renegade. East Africa Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1972. All further references are from this edition. (p. 73)

of communal help is amply illustrated when Kujuga goes from 'friend' to 'friend' in search of money and a place to stay when he is down-and-out. A further test of traditional ties of given when upon arriving in the city (Thika) he goes first to his uncle for support. This is not a contradiction; rather a lesson or initiation in the urban way of life. For his uncle throws him out. Uncle complains that country relatives come to town and expect assistance and money; well, things cost more in the city. And he uses this fact to release himself of all obligation.¹⁸

The loss of community in the city is underlined by a tendency of these urbanites to reflect nostalgically on the village or rural life of their youth. None of these urban novels is without its flashback to the village and family life, a quality of living the characters don't find in the city.

In Never Forgive Father, despite the fact that he had an unhappy home life (as suggested by the title), Kariuki romanticizes his childhood relation with Njoki back in the village: they looked after sheep and goats together, and so on. Now she is a painted prostitute in Nairobi.¹⁹ In What a Life, Willie Wamae, our narrator, looks at his children and thinks they "will miss a lot of things in life that I enjoyed as a young boy."²⁰ He catalogues the boyhood games, the contact with nature, the friendships, the gossiping, and, moreover, the community: "Our poorer neighbours came to our house to beg for food. Mother used to give them boiled potatoes or half a cob of maize. This they would take home to distribute to the others." (p. 38)

To compensate for these deficiencies in the city, Wamae sends his children home to his parents for holidays, to rough it, but he realizes (sadly) that as city folk they will be different.

The flashbacks to youth, education, and Mau Mau of What a Life are even more extended in A Tail in the Mouth where these form the

18. This tension between family ties and individual social mobility in the town is discussed in numerous studies of the city. One particularly interesting treatment of this in the Kenyan context, both urban and rural, is found in P. Marris & A. Somerset, African Businessmen: A Study of Entrepreneurship and Development in Kenya. Nairobi, 1971.

19. This is a good example of the change in role of the woman as portrayed in the city versus the country. It forms perhaps the second definitive feature (after social irresponsibility) of the urban novel.

20. M. Ruheni, What a Life! Longman Kenya Ltd., Nairobi, 1972. All further references are from this edition. (p. 23)

bulk of the book. Like Dodge, in Son of Woman, Samson starts off as a sophisticated free-wheeling urbanite but then fills in his past with lengthy narrations of his youth, education, encounters with the Church and Mau Mau. In this sense it is not an urban novel at all. But the bread of the sandwich -- if not the filling -- is very much urban and a significant evaluation of life in the city. Samson moves from the Dodge-character (also Kujuga in The Renegade) as the committed urbanite:

I made up my mind a long time ago that I'd quit the country for the town and I ain't going back on that decision. I'm staying right here in Nairobi and I don't care how broke I get. (p. 256)

through the resigned urbanite (Wamac in What a Life) to a complete rejection of the city:

I am glad to leave it (the city) behind. I make a mental calculation that if ever, by some flock chance, I find myself in this blinking city again, I'll set it on fire. I am for the land, fresh air, green grass and the open fields. (p. 287)

Samson's rejection of the city is due roughly to the same kinds of things that produced nostalgia in those characters committed to the city. The security and loyalty of friends at 'home' (now or in the past) is contrasted with the competitive drive for jobs, money and women which characterizes life in the city, what Samson agrees is a 'dog's life', but which is glamorized in slick, ambivalent stories in Joe magazine, and even in the Swahili monthly Nyota.

These competitive elements of city life, which break down the sense of community, are money, its pursuit through a job (leading to problems of promotion and status), and its loss through drink, women, violence and cars.

MONEY-MAKING AND THE COMPETITIVE LIFE

It is widely accepted that the prime motive for migrating to the city is dissatisfaction with the rural-urban wage disparities and comparative employment opportunities.²¹ The lure of urban opportunities attracts many kinds, but the educated man especially will consider himself constrained and limited up-country and will view the "action" as taking place in Nairobi. The protagonists of the books under study

21. See M.P. Todaro, "A Model of Labour Migration and Urban Unemployment in Less Developed Countries" in the American Economic Review, LIX, March 1969. and H. Rempel & M.P. Todaro, "Rural to Urban Labour Migration in Kenya" in S.H. Ominde & C.N. Ejogu, eds., Population Growth and Economic Development in Africa. Nairobi, 1972.

are all young, male, and well-educated (minimum Form IV). This group, though not a large one, is a sociologically crucial one. Rempel's analysis of factors associated with rural-urban migration in Kenya isolates male, young, educated as the three primary variables.²²

These young men are pictured as ambitious, much concerned with promotion (at which point there is usually a European figuring in the background), with the status their job confers and the concomitant threats from competitive co-workers. Competition is more severe in the '70s than it was in the early post-Independence days for an educated man. For example, studies such as the Tracer Project at the University of Nairobi show an increase between 1965 and 1969 from 2% to 16% of Form IV leavers unemployed one year after leaving school.²³ And the situation is considered to have deteriorated in the early 70s. This plight is illustrated in The Renegade where Kujuga walks the streets of Thika, looking for a job, is abused by employers, and wonders why "people in positions of responsibility liked mistreating school leavers." (p. 24) In August 1973 a small debate appeared in the daily newspapers concerning the return to Kenya of students trained abroad. Weighing the attractions overseas as against the duties and responsibilities towards home, one 'returned' student outlined the reception he met:

You proudly present yourself and your academic papers to several personnel officers --- your countrymen! And what do they instil into your raw mind, as if all discussed your case beforehand: "Well, I see you have extensive academic qualifications! But I must remind you--- gone are the days when one's competence depended upon the string of qualifications after his name! Things have changed, my friend!" My friend? Is this a quarrel? and he concludes, as he hands back to you your papers: "I've taken note of this. We'll notify you accordingly when a vacancy arises."
That turns you cold!²⁴

But despite the shrinking job market, the city is still the place where money is to be made. Wamae, in What a Life, explores the "eternal

22. H. Rempel, "Urban In-Migration and Urban Unemployment in Kenya". Paper presented to the Interdisciplinary Urban Seminar, Nairobi, and distributed through I.D.S., Feb. 1974 (It is of course to be noted that this focus on the educated young man reflects both the audience the novelist is writing for and the group most urban novelists are associated with.)

23. As reported in Sessional Paper on Employment No. 10 of 1973, Republic of Kenya, May 1973.

24. Sunday Nation, Letters to the Editor, 26 August 1973.

science of Grabiology" where MDs open penicillin bars, professors loaf, mechanics, school-uniform makers, supermarkets and barmen juggle prices and exploit and cheat people outright. It is hard in fiction to find situations as outrageous as those which appear in letters to the editor. Two examples should suffice.

I write to draw public attention to some private doctors who seem to be sheep among sheep but are really hyenas. They say they are disease fighters yet I say they rob citizens After two injections and some tablets I started for the door. Then he called to me. When I looked back he was holding his hands out for me Yes, he wanted more money for treatment The government should investigate. This is robbery without violence, fellow citizens.²⁵

and

Saturday, June 30, proved more than a solar eclipse to me After returning to our home at 8 p.m. we found our landlady waiting for us, demanding the rent. The moment she spoke to us I knew something was wrong. After remitting the house rent to her she refused it, saying that Kenya had gone metric, with the price of everything going up. As a result, our rent had been raised from 200/= per month to 320/=.

When we tried to complain about this she turned furious and threw our money at us. She went to a nearby shop and dialled 999. By this time I was asleep and my cousin was nursing his young baby boy when someone awakened me shouting in Kiswahili: Amka Tuende. When I asked what the matter was the answer was a heavy slap on my forehead and a sharp kick on my rear which still hurts. . . .

. . . . The following day our landlady hired some thugs to force us out of the house I was forced to sign a note saying that I would without fail leave the house...

Can any good mwananchi be kind enough to offer me a house before I am skinned alive in this evil plot?²⁶

To a man with enterprise, the "options" for money-making are great indeed. Wamco, quite nobly, considers himself above or removed from these schemes (even while speculating about them, he is more the brains-man than the perpetrator).

The respectable road to advancement and success is deemed to be via a white-collar job.²⁷ Although Samson (in A Tail in the Mouth) is a

25. Daily Nation, Letters to the Editor, 19 September 1973.

26. Daily Nation, Letter to the Editor, 21 July, 1973.

27. The prestige of the white collar job especially in the governmental bureaucracy is an important theme of the sociological literature on independent Africa. The perpetuation of this bias in the face of constricting opportunities has been tied to the educational system which has a generally academic, i.e., non-technical, urban white collar orientation. Two papers on the Kenyan case which are interesting in looking at the tensions which might eventually erode this bias are: J.L. Mook, "Pragmatism and the Primary School: the case of a non-rural village", I.D.S. Disc. Paper 135, March 1972, and E. M. Godfrey & G.C.M. Mutiso, "The Political Economy of Self-Help: Kenya's Harambee Institutes of Technology", I.D.S. W.P. 107, June, 1973.

taxi driver, he is ashamed of this and plans to quit when he marries Faith. Playboy heroes of stories in Joe magazine are pictured in prestige offices, surrounded by secretaries, telephones, and sycophantic employees.²⁸

URBAN TENSIONS AND TEMPTATIONS - DRINK, WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND THE CAR

The means of losing money once acquired feature as a more popular and well-documented subject than even its gain. And the city figures as a still more effective centre for emptying one's pockets than filling them. It is a place where one is ensnared by temptations, where reason is clouded and the senses take over. Wamuo's mother (in What a Life) used to tell him stories, by the fireside, of people living in towns. Her terse summary: "some of them drink chang'aa and go mad. Others smoke bhang and their brains go soft. Still others go with prostitutes and their minds ^{change into} small children, unable to judge simple things or react correctly to ordinary situations." (p. 120) (This latter is what happens in these books: it is a plot outline.)

Drink is seen as the major source of the river to ruin. In fact this is hardly an exclusively urban phenomenon. As has been pointed out in several far-reaching papers by Dr. Gachuhi, the bar is the centre of life in the rural as well as urban areas.²⁹ He traces this to a prevailing national boredom, a lack of alternate recreational opportunities, and the mere fact that the bar is the only thing open at night in the country, the only place to socialize.

This picture is underlined in The Renegade. "The bar was the one and only hub of life as far as most men in Gitombo village were concerned. In fact, the classification of men in the village was done on the basis of attendance at the bars." (p.5) Those who never went were regarded as effeminate non-regulars were called "hyenas" and so on. A man's status, and moreover his manliness is directly correlated with his consumption of beer -- in the village as well as in the city. Kariuki (in Never Forgive Father) is teased as being hen-pecked because he went straight home after work instead of going to a bar. He "liberates" himself by increasingly frequenting a bar, coming home later and later or not at all.

28. This same imagery can be seen in highly concentrated form in the filmed cinema ads for some popular cigarette brands for example, wherein all the status accoutrements of a successful middle class businessman are juxtaposed in a one minute sequence.

29. This pattern is delineated in J.M. Gachuhi, "Anatomy of prostitutes and Prostitution in Kenya" I.D.S. WP No. 113, July 1973, and "Venereal Disease and Society" I.D.S. Discussion Paper No. 178, September 1973, among others.

Yet drinking and bars are more vividly associated with the sins of the city. This is perhaps because of the multiplicity of bars available and also because of all that money floating through the city. My Dear Bottle, as its title suggests, is devoted to the problems of drink. A long, prosaic poem by George Mailli, it deals with his job in a garage, his girlfriends, and his drinking to forget that he is unsuccessful.

Wamae (in What a Life) is fully aware of the destructive effects of drink, yet it forms an integral part of his life. Looking around a crowded post-payday bar, he speculates "You would not have imagined that they came here to relieve themselves of their money in exchange for headaches and hangovers." (p. 10) At the same time he sings the praises of drink: "A beer or two brings about a sort of mellow peace in the mind. One just wants to look and listen. I think after two beers one should go home. But not today. There is money and the bar is full of people. What would a man go home to do at this time? Cook for his wife?" (p.13) Here is another instance of the equation between drink and manliness. Further a man's status and position in life is related to the kind of drink he chooses.³⁰ Wamae starts off praising beer, and condemns hard drinks, "gin is made by the kerosene people" (p. 13). After returning from a course in U.K., now promoted and a big man, he states "My mind was becoming more and more clear with more gin. That is why I like Beefeater." (p.91) Earlier he had scoffed at people who could distinguish between brands of hard liquor. Then when he finds himself really drunk, he curses gin and wishes he had stayed on beer.

Drink is bound up with the other means of losing money in the city, through women, violence and cars. Women in particular are associated with and blamed for drunkenness and its concomitant losses. The bar is the main venue for meeting women. Both Kariuki and Wamae meet former girlfriends-cum-prostitutes at a bar. And in fact as in fiction, there is a good deal of writing about women one finds in bars.³¹

30. This is not unusual. In North America, the college student and worker drink beer; the businessman graduates to scotch and martinis.

31. One analysis of the hierarchy of bars and night clubs and associated types of girls is to be found in W.K. Rutasitara, Mombasa Bar Girls: A Study of Prostitution and Venereal Disease in a Kenya Seaport. Diploma thesis-in public health, Makerere University, March, 1970.

Women are held responsible for the consequences of drunkenness, if not the drunkenness itself. "You gave me too much to drink. Ah, my life is in a mess." (p. 108 What a Life) Wamoo manages to straighten himself out; Kariuki (Never Forgive Father) is less lucky: his drinking- and -woman (Njoki) leads to his literal destruction. Women are damned throughout they are blood-suckers (A Tail in the Mouth); the first girl Kujuga dances with steals his 200/- (The Renegade). The urban woman personifies the evils of the city: superficiality, western, seductive, corrupting - a test of virility; ultimately a draining of energy. Woman embodies the contrast of rural and urban life, tradition and modernity (see Song of Lawino), good and evil.

I am not like the woman of town
The woman of emancipation,
I am not the woman of town love
Who celebrates the latest abortion, with the
Alcohol of machines from Chemists,
On the laps of the abortion's father!

- Okello Oculi: Orphan

All city women are without virtue. No distinction is made between a prostitute (a "good-time" girl) and any other woman who happens to live in the city. This view is very lop-sided, a fact which has been commented on in the sociological literature by several social researchers³² and by a small number of city women speaking through the letters to the editors columns, but these latter have been drowned in waves of letters expressing the 'wicked city-woman' point of view.³³

An instance of this blue is pointed out in a short story in Joe magazine. Two friends, John and James, see an attractive woman whom they recognize as a former fellow secondary schoolmate. Without speaking to her they comment on her good looks, concluding "What do you expect from her type? . . . No husband, no children, no responsibilities. All they do is powder their noses."³⁴ They speculate on their chances with her: "What's the worry? She is on the common stock market. We can both have a go. Anyone can have a go." (p.19) Upon meeting her at a party, they are shocked to discover that she is respectably married, with children. It is no coincidence that this story was written by a woman.

32. See for example, J.M. Gachuhi, op. cit. July 1973.

33. One of the best discussions of this is to be found in A. Wipper, "African Women, Fashion and Scapegoating" in Canadian Journal of African Studies, VI, No. 2, 1972.

34. Miriam Were, "For Old Times' Sake!" Joe Magazine, Oct. 1973.

In most instances the city woman is not redeemed, the assumptions are not challenged.³⁵

An essay by a secondary school student³⁶ as to how he spent his Christmas holiday this year told of his trip to Nairobi to visit his brother. At his arrival at the railroad station in Nairobi he was robbed of his suitcase and all his belongings. He concluded that he didn't have an enjoyable time because his presents were stolen, as was his blanket.

This is the classic paradigm of the wicked city: the country lad goes to town and meets with violence. Nor is the townsman himself safe. Letters to the editors of newspapers complain of urban insecurity: "We in Thika live in fear of our lives" is the title of one such. It continues:

The work starts at nine o'clock at night. One is likely to see a group of people resting on the rocks at night. It baffles everyone, leaving you with only one thought in mind, and the obvious one -- robbers.

Recently I was held up at knifepoint by these vagabonds at around 10.30 p.m. They ruled that unless I give them cash, they would knife me. I tried to plead that I had nothing, but to no avail. I was compelled to give away the 20/* I had to secure my life.³⁷

A regular feature in Joe magazine is the one-page pictorial "Gitau E. On City Life." This portrayal of city life is one of unrelieved corruption and violence, with titles like "pickpockets New Trick", "Crooks from Shantyvillage", (about a farm worker in the city who is lured to a shanty bar, given buzaa, accused of rape, and finally beaten and robbed -- which is fast work for a 7 - frame comic), "The Night Spot Whore", "Sweet Nothings Corner", and so on. The usual pattern is the naive man taken for a ride by a craven woman with a few male accomplices.

There is the violence of crime, violence of bars and drunkenness, all part of the danger and excitement as well as the sordidness of the city. A major symbol of this ambivalent glamour of the/city is the automobile,³⁸

35. The depiction of women in Kenyan literature will be enlarged upon in a forthcoming paper.

36. Collected from student essays, Menengai High School, Nakuru.

37. Daily Nation Letter to the Editor, 22 November 1973.

38. One recent robbery which caught the imagination of Kenyans involved robbers "dressed like gentlemen" who used an appropriately fancy car as the getaway vehicle.

both a powerful extension of the ego and an instrument often of accidental and sometimes self-inflicted violence.

Following an emotional argument with his girlfriend, Samson Moira (in *A Tail in the Mouth*) gets into his car and smashes into a truck at 60 m.p.h., 'totaling' his Ford Zephyr taxi. He survives, but later his girlfriend, Faith, is run over and killed by a bus. Samson resolves never to ride a bus again, but after losing his Faith (and his faith?) he sinks into degradation, contemplates robbery, and ultimately rejects the city (as referred to above).

In Never Forgive Father Kariuki and his wife have separate cars, indicative of their mutual isolation. Hers is a small boat-up car and his is a big, conspicuous one that is left parked in front of the bar he frequents. His 'mistress', Njoki, tries to ensnare him at one of their early meetings by hiding his car keys, immobilizing him, controlling the key to his (identity?) car. In the end, Kariuki crashes his car and kills himself, after stabbing his wife and her uncle (in a rather easy resolution of the book's plot).

Less tragically, Willie Wamae (What a Life) merely crashes his car and lands in jail. But it follows the sequence outlined above: he goes to bar, stays with girlfriend-prostitute, she "makes" him drunk, he gets into his car and goes off the road, into an electric pole. As a result he almost loses his job and certainly a promotion. Further, apart from the large fine, the penalty (which he finds himself unable to obey so dependent is he on his car) is the suspension of his driver's license for one year.

Despite all these accidents and violent death³⁹ (and most people in Kenya can tell you of someone they knew personally who was injured if not killed in a car accident), the car remains a symbol of affluence, westernization, power, independence (the "freedom machine"), of having arrived.⁴⁰ These fantasies identified with the car are illustrated in a short story in Joe magazine. An executive asks his clerk to park his Mercedes for him. The young clerk "gets behind the

39. Aside from the usual road accident bulletins which are a feature on radio stations everywhere, the V.O.K. has police notices occasionally, especially from the Nairobi police, asking for anyone who can identify the body of someone wearing such and such struck down on the city streets.

40. A whole elite class was styled the Wa-Benzi, after this make of prestige automobile.

in the Kipenda Roho Bar and Restaurant (Kariuki's hangout in Never Forgive Father). The connection between women and bars is built into the architecture. Here also there is the question of the glass door. The Kipenda now has an askari at the entrance to see that no one breaks the door again and to screen the clientele. The proliferation of bars and the variety of types is an indication of opportunity, choice provided by the city, but also, behind its glass doors, visibly revealing the conspicuous consumption of others, available perhaps only to others.

There are similar contrasts in terms of housing. Kariuki lives in "Whitehouse residential estate", a high status, snobbish, cold, boring place. His friend Mwangi lives in a slum area, in a house with no furniture. He says it is temporary (his wife is back in the rural area), but he has already lived in this condition for 2-3 years.

These places are symbols but complex ones, not direct but ambiguous. 'Slums' may have life but they are wretched too; international hotels may be posh and glamorous but they are also cold and artificial. Fancy clubs may be an exercise in role-playing but they are not unenjoyable.

On the whole, however, one is struck by the relatively small number of types of locales that are commonly described: some street life, the office perhaps, some housing estates, hotels and bars, and maybe the police station; not a rounded picture of the cityscape but rather a focused one, arenas of conflict and conquest, of status display, of public pleasures and private vices.

CONCLUSION

The picture of urban life that has emerged from recent Kenyan fiction is of interest to the social scientist in terms of its focus on certain tensions in the social fabric of the nation. As in many respects the city represents the leading edge of social change, as the city is, by its nature, open to a greater diversity of life styles and tolerant of a wider range of norms -- it is the most dramatic and extreme, the most effective setting for any discussion of the directions and impact of these changes. The tension between social responsibility (and the values of community in all their expressions) and individualism (with the ramifications that come of limited opportunity and cruel competition) is the core of the urban novel today. The novelist personalizes this tension. His writing contributes to the definition of social reality. And since it is that social reality that the social scientist tries in his own way to grasp, it is useful for him to consider the fictional city and its fictional society by way of getting at the real one.

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