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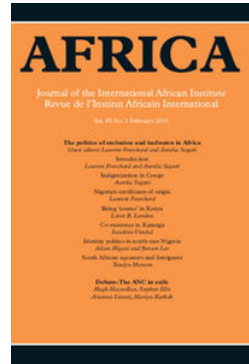
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## BECOMING 'COSMO': DISPLACEMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND DISGUISE IN ONGATA RONGAI

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# BECOMING ‘COSMO’: DISPLACEMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND DISGUISE IN ONGATA RONGAI

*Loren B. Landau*

## INTRODUCTION

People come from all over. They come here because of the peace and they will stand up and breach the dangers of tribalism. (Onyango, Rongai transplant from Luoland, author interview, 7 January 2014)

Discussions of ethnicity in contemporary Africa largely draw attention to conflicts and official strategies to mobilize or counter social divisions. In a literature dedicated to violent conflicts over land, politics and power, it comes as little surprise that spaces of self-organized peace and conviviality receive scant attention. This is a mistake. Relatively conflict-free communities are valuable counter-examples that can confirm or confront explanations for violence seen elsewhere. As this article argues, the appearance, preservation and production of conviviality are practically and analytically inseparable from proximate forms of violence and imaginations of ‘tribal’ rurality. Where conflict and exclusion are persistent possibilities, exceptional forms of accommodation will almost always be shaped in reaction to behaviours and values practised elsewhere. Such openness may be influenced by conscious state strategies but they are unlikely to take root if not reinforced by the coincidence of localized political, economic and social interests. While driven and maintained by instrumental calculations, this article focuses on an emergent discursive field whose convivial core works to discipline residents by stigmatizing and legitimizing ‘dangerous’ people and divisive practices.

Through an examination of Ongata Rongai, a rapidly transforming, multi-ethnic space on Nairobi’s urban periphery, this article illustrates the potential interconnections between conflict and conviviality. Having grown from a sparsely populated trading post in the early 1980s to a community of close to 45,000 people in 2009 (KNBS 2010: 178), and more since, one might expect overt and possibly violent competition as groups sought political and economic dominance over this increasingly valuable site. However, fortune’s smile together with the ongoing threat of ‘xenophobic’ violence elsewhere in the country (and displacement from conflicted areas) have helped generate a powerful and peaceful ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ (cf. Werbner 2006). Bolstered by a distinct set of political logics and social practices, the site’s multi-ethnic residents rhetorically reject the validity of ethnic violence and politics while promoting a kind of universal inclusiveness rarely seen in Kenya. Locally described as ‘being cosmo’, residents hold

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up their values as a bulwark against even the possibility of ethnic mobilization. Indeed, this way of being has been crafted almost double helix-like as a reaction to patterns of exclusion: a kind of co-evolution that not only has preserved peace (in Rongai) but serves the interests of political elites and established Kikuyu landowners.

Although fundamentally a description of an emergent discursive field and its historical and political origins, this article aims to make at least three modest theoretical contributions. First, it acts as a foil to a growing literature on the *ethnification* of space in response to heightening global flows of people and ideas in an era of declining state capacity (see, for example, Bauman 2000). In Africanist scholarship, these themes have bolstered the perennial academic preoccupations with ethnicity and violence, finding expression in vibrant discussions of autochthony and indigeneity (see Geschiere 2009; other articles in this issue). As one of the continent's paradoxes – an enduring regional economic power wracked by decades of ethnicized conflicts over land and political office – Kenya is often held to be exemplary of these trends. Precisely because ethnicity and indigeneity remain ever present in Kenyan politics and society, the meaning of 'being cosmo' has been shaped by a reverse demonstration effect whereby cooperation is overtly contrasted with the ever-present potential for inter-group conflict.

In drawing attention to a site – however exceptional – that expresses patterns and rhetoric of inclusive tolerance, the article makes two additional points, one substantive and one methodological. Substantively, it counters the presumption within the literature on ethnic conflict that the escalation and mobilization of exclusive discourses of ethnicity or indigeneity leave few options for peaceful intermingling without the coercion of lengthy processes of reconciliation. That may often be the case, but this article suggests that the mobilization of hostile discourses in particular places and circumstances can, through both the movements of people and their visibility, contribute to alternative and convivial subjectivities elsewhere.

Findings on the relationship between violence and conviviality lead to a final, more methodological point about the understanding of place and, particularly, urban space. Although much of the literature on indigenization and autochthony necessarily draws attention to the specific history and politics of land, this literature has often treated urban spaces in somewhat ambiguous ways. There are those who reveal indigeneity discourses within immensely heterogeneous cities; research on the Nubians in Kibera is one Kenyan example (see de Smedt 2011; Balaton-Chrimes 2013). Yet African urban space is often seen as being somewhat outside such claims. This article suggests that, as we focus on rural land struggles, we should seek to understand how conflicts beyond the city can shape urban neighbourhood rhetoric and subjectivity, however inclusive or exclusive. Such a position also challenges a growing body of literature on 'hyper-diverse' urban spaces, a literature that focuses almost exclusively on local planning and political processes for managing diversity (see Sandercock 1998). While global capitalism often appears in such discussions (see Harvey 2008), this article suggests that local processes and global economic forces matter, but that they must be understood within a broader socio-political universe. The histories of conflict and cooperation people carry with them provide rhetorical and practical resources that can be mobilized towards violence or against it. As Benjamin (1999: 3) notes, a relationship to the past is not dialectical nor is it linear: the past is always there and may be

mobilized or evoked and reimagined in multiple ways depending on immediate risks, opportunities and incentives.

Drilling deep while scanning broadly is a difficult and time-consuming endeavour, but necessary to understand prevailing political formations on Africa's urban frontiers. In this case, it reveals an emerging rhetoric of conviviality that serves as a cognitive frame that valorizes tolerance while spatially stigmatizing indigeneity and exclusivity. In this way, the article follows Ferguson (1999), Meyers (2011), Bank (2011; 2002) and others who suggest that understanding African urbanity means breaking from dichotomies of rural and urban and their associated tribal versus modern identities. It also suggests that, while the specificities of space matter in the creation of new urban presents (see Robinson 2013), local expressions of identity can be explained only by the nature of residents' continued engagement with the 'multiple elsewheres' (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004) beyond their immediate surroundings.

The remainder of this article proceeds through four sections. The first briefly describes the data informing my findings and interpretation. The second outlines the primary facets of Ongata Rongai's (commonly 'Rongai') cosmo subjectivity. Doing so highlights the importance of a founding myth of 'terra incognita' to legitimize a spatialized socio-political configuration that is ethnically inclusive yet demonizes indigeneity as a risk to security and the principles of tolerance and hard work. The third, more substantial, section describes the dual origins of the cosmo subjectivity: the violent displacement of Kikuyus and others from the 1980s up to the 'post-election violence' of 2007, and the ambiguous 'half-caste' ethnicity of Rongai's political leadership. Embedded in an explanation of its origins is a discussion of the political and economic incentives for furthering and preserving the cosmo subjectivity: as a means of disguising and bolstering the dominance of long-term political elites and of Kikuyu land and business owners. The article ends with a further consideration of what these findings mean for the study of Kenyan politics, ethnicity and 'xenophobia' in Africa, and how we understand the emergence of spatialized urban subjectivities.

## DATA COLLECTION AND APPROACH

The data employed for this article stem from a series of projects considering the changing nature of African urbanism, governance and political identity. My first encounter with Rongai came in 2006 through a collaboration between the University of Nairobi, Tufts University and the University of the Witwatersrand to conduct new survey research on migrant livelihoods and politics in Nairobi (see Landau and Duponchel 2011; Madhavan and Landau 2011). Although Rongai was excluded from this initial study for falling just beyond the municipal boundaries, it attracted our attention as one of the most rapidly transforming spaces within the greater Nairobi area and one chock full of migrants from across the country.

Returning to Rongai in subsequent years, I conducted two studies explicitly exploring the people and institutions taking shape in the peri-urban space. The first was a further collaborative study with the University of Nairobi to consider the transforming governance structures and practices in neighbourhoods in and

around the city. This entailed visits to the sites and a series of initial interviews with officials in the Nairobi municipality, the Ministry of Nairobi (since disbanded) and in Rongai itself (for changes in the structure of Kenyan municipal authority, see Akech 2010). These efforts were supported by a review of planning documents and background information conducted by Michael Otieno (completed in 2011 and referenced in the paragraphs below; Otieno 2011). I later made two additional trips as part of a Xenophobic Politics in Africa (XenAfPol) project coordinated by the African Centre for Migration and Society at Wits University and African Studies at the University of Bordeaux. During these short visits I conducted close to twenty extended interviews with a broad range of residents, spent days in the area observing interactions and the site's social and physical geography, and participated in discussions – some orchestrated, some spontaneous – with residents in a variety of settings. These discussions, completed only in January 2014, were carried out in English or Swahili according to respondents' preference and I undertook any necessary translation.

Given the limitations of space, it is not possible to provide detailed histories of my respondents or to draw explicit connections between their unique histories and their words. Rather, I introduce them with a single name and a brief biographical comment. In light of Kenyan (particularly Kikuyu) naming regimes, a number of people had identical first names or surnames. To avoid confusion, I use a mix of the two. Given the data sources, this account should be seen as a kind of proto-ethnography that extrapolates from what is at once an extensive and a limited archive. It should be noted that in my intention to identify and describe the boundaries and content of an emergent social field, I flatten the narratives and smooth the edges of a complex and dynamic set of expressed values and norms. I do this in part to meet space limitations, but also to highlight elements that are distinctive and theoretically poignant. While the article form allows few alternatives, the approach is nonetheless dissatisfying. That said, the narratives collected in Rongai were remarkably consistent in their content and form. This is itself an important finding that provides evidence of the potential standardization and disciplining power of the social field described in the following pages.

## BEING COSMO

Rongai provides the conditions and space in which a remarkable form of vernacular cosmopolitanism has been crafted, preserved and promoted. In stark contrast to sites across urban and rural Kenya, there are remarkably high levels of ethnic mixing and peaceful conviviality. Apart from the Ole Kasasi neighbourhood, seemingly the preferred destination for Somali migrants (Kenyan and Somali nationals), people speak openly about how access to residential housing and business premises is largely determined by market mechanisms in ways that generate an extraordinary level of ethnic heterogeneity within residential buildings, restaurants and business areas. Even the most casual conversations about Rongai with its officials and residents reveal an almost chauvinistic pride about the settlement's success in staving off the fractious, ethnicized conflicts that have characterized so many of Kenya's diverse residential communities.

Although members of the Kikuyu ethnic group represent a plurality of residents, they by no means dominate the space or make exclusive claims to it. Indeed, no one does. Proudly advertising this distinction, residents' sentiments are well reflected in a categorical proclamation made by a local land developer who self-identified as a product of Kikuyu and Maasai parentage: 'There's no tribalism in this place; we're all mixed together' (Mungai, author interview, 5 January 2014). When describing the variegated and fluid community, people regularly speak of themselves as 'a people of peace' (Kiriaki, author interview, 21 November 2013). Nderitu, a Kikuyu priest who had recently moved to Rongai from an almost exclusively Maasai area near the Kenya–Tanzania border, concluded: 'I've never been somewhere where I feel like I'm so at ease. There's nowhere here where you go and you feel like you're out of place' (author interview, 6 January 2014). Throughout formal discussions and casual conversations, leaders and citizens almost universally reiterated the refrain of welcome, peace and tolerance.

The cosmopolitanism residents describe is not merely a passive, laissez-faire state of being. It is instead a carefully considered and articulated set of aspirations that valorize resistance to forms of ethnic political mobilization or exclusion, as the epigraph suggests. Having begun researching Rongai as Kenyans were coming to terms with the 2007 post-election violence, and continuing through the more peaceful yet tense 2013 elections, ethnic violence has remained a palpable spectre throughout much of Kenya. Rongai residents not only condemn the violence witnessed elsewhere, but deny the possibility of such violence ever surfacing among them. As one resident noted: 'If we have enemies, they would be just economic and not ethnic or political' (Mwangi, author interview, 3 January 2014). When asked if violence occurred after the 2007 elections, Kiriaki (author interview, 23 November 2012), an elder, quasi-official interviewed in his Rongai office, said: 'Not even a little. Only a few were around wanting to fight, but even if they had tried they would have been put down, possibly killed.' A few years later, Njoroge (author interview, 5 January 2014) described Rongai's anti-autochthonous ethos:

There were people here who tried tribalism in the last election, but it was not successful. We're now used to living together and there are too many connections ... of course, you can come with your money and try to mobilize and people won't refuse. They'll take your money and say they'll go attack this or that person, but they won't do it. This is because we are politically mature.

In this we see many critical characteristics of Rongai's cosmopolitanism: an assertion of residents' almost essential propensity to peacefulness and tolerance; clear distinctions between Rongai residents and other Kenyans – including family members and co-ethnics; and a moral condemnation of violence and the character of those straying from the community's convivial values.

In a remarkable twist for an era (and country) in which indigeneity has so often been elevated to the primary, naturalized basis for membership and morality, many of Rongai's residents remain deeply suspicious of those with even modest roots in the site. Although a number of respondents are children of early migrants, they have clung to their settler, outsider identity to distinguish themselves from those they deem to be too localized or too rooted to space. Although this kind

of self-alienation is common amongst even long-settled migrant communities (see Simmel 1964; Malauene 2004; Simone 2001; Landau 2006; Keith 2005), it is unusual in a country where ideas of home and rootedness are often exalted. Here, what one sees at once is the contrast between cosmopolitan modernist liberalism and modernism gone wrong, as reflected in a detribalized population that has sought to root itself outside its native territory.

The demonization of locality became most evident in discussions around Rongai's security conditions. Even while dismissing the faint possibility of ethno-political violence, most residents identify parts of Rongai as 'black spots', zones unsafe to traverse alone or after dark. These spots were clustered around Kware, the neighbourhood settled by those working in the eponymous quarry. Anyone caught there could be subject to 'gatoring', a practice in which assailants with boards tied to their arms approach victims from behind before holding the board against their neck. As the victim struggles for air, accomplices relieve them of their belongings. A number of respondents showed me scars from their encounters with Kware's locals.

Residents of Kware and other neighbourhoods quickly dismissed assertions that gatoring or other crimes were perpetrated by or targeted specific ethnic groups. One focus group participant (7 January 2014) agreed that there was a great deal of trouble in the area, but explicitly dissociated it from the Kikuyu-led Mungiki, the Luo-associated Taliban, or any of the other ethnically organized associations (for a summary of the groups, see IRIN 2008). 'There is nothing like that here. They simply can't be here. There may be people here who support them, but that is a secret and that's our secret, but they're not working here.' Another offered: 'All I can say is that ethnicity or tribe is not an issue here. The people doing the violence, they are from all the different tribes and they'll attack anyone.'

In distancing themselves from ethnicized explanations of violence and criminality, residents spoke of a kind of laziness and moral corruption that comes from being settled too comfortably. At a focus group discussion (7 January 2014) convened at an informal Kware bar, one participant explained that 'the people who have stayed here for a long time, they are all mixed up and all of their children are doing this'. Waweru (author interview, 9 January 2014), an aspiring Kikuyu business-owner running a small restaurant on his father's property across town, concurred. Going further, he contrasted the de-ethnicized local with the in-migrant's elevated moral status:

Those who grew up here don't want to work; they are just waiting for their parents to move on or to give them things ... The newcomers are always prepared to work. They know they don't have anyone helping. But those who grew up here, they're not like that ... They will just wait to liquidate what they inherit or are given and then blow their money.

Whereas Kenyan politics – and indeed Kenyans – are often suspicious of those without strong local roots, Rongai residents regularly denigrate settling or claims that one can find happiness only within 'home squared', the space where one is really from. While they do not deny the importance of having a homeland – and many speak powerfully about their connections elsewhere – the demonizing discourse largely serves to legitimate the arrival of outsiders and newcomers,



morally elevating them by extolling their work ethic, respect for law and general respect for others regardless of their origin.

This ethos is founded on unwritten and diffuse rules strongly influenced by liberal market principles. Although free markets notoriously and effectively disguise inequality, power and other restrictions on freedoms, they nonetheless offer a kind of Simmelian, metropolitan liberation from deep-seated spatio-ethnic or nationalist exclusion (see Simmel 2002). By allowing people to retain ethnic, religious or other forms of extra-local loyalties – both religion and ethnicity remain highly visible in Rongai – residents may also inadvertently be generating a kind of radical multiculturalism, a 'pluralisation of possibilities of being on the same territory' (Campbell 1998: 162). Were he still alive, Levinas (1994) would undoubtedly be pleased by what is happening in Ongata Rongai: if all are sojourners, then on what basis might one justify exclusion? But as Bank (2011) notes in his work on urban South African identities, evocations of fluidity and ethno-territorial fixity often circulate simultaneously, potentially within the words of a single person.

Although conviviality is by no means exceptional in Kenya, the statements above reflect – in intention and interpretation – an affront to the prevailing academic and popular perceptions of African and Kenyan politics. Works by Geschiere (2009), Boas (2009), Dunn (2009), Green (2012) and others emphasize the heightened role of autochthony discourses and, especially, conflicts over the right to occupy land in the shaping of contemporary African politics. While recognizing that political debates allow for (and sometimes require) important redefinitions of nativity, Geschiere (2009: 33) nonetheless highlights the range of rites and rituals that evoke 'a visceral involvement of body and soil'. In these and others' accounts (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Conversi 1999; Mandaville 1999), the reassertion of territorially based ethnic identities is put forward as a kind of reaction to the steady advance of global capitalism and the precarity of flailing political orders. In Europe, this often manifests itself in nationalist language and mobilization. Across Africa, where nationalist tropes are less socially inscribed, it typically manifests itself in sub-national, ethnic or regional claims to space, although nationalist exclusion is also evident across the continent.

This thinking similarly informs much of the work on Kenyan ethnic mobilization. As Lynch (2011: 162) argues, 'in the case of Kenya's new indigenes, the principal terrain of struggle is access to land and resources in the context of uncertain property rights, competition, underdevelopment and state failures'. Such arguments are premised on an almost Polanyi-esque focus on claims to land as the perceived natural base for African society (Gemici 2008). With these communal struggles for land naturally comes conflict, often violent. Speaking almost universally, authors typically characterize Kenyan politics in much the same terms as the politics elsewhere on the continent, as fundamentally about ethnicized struggles over land and public institutions. Kanyinga (2009), for example, traces this process back to colonial dispossession and the consolidation of land under postcolonial political elites. Ajulu (2010) underscores the degree to which economic and political inequality in Kenya is spatialized, leading to conflicts over territory and land ownership that employ the most powerful resources available: ethnicity and violence. Marx *et al.* (2013) similarly demonstrate how ethnicized rural land conflicts have extended into the cities. Rather than address the source of such conflicts, leaders exacerbate them by capitalizing on their ability to



manipulate ethnicity in order to advance their economic and political interests (obtaining or preserving landholdings). The fact that the country's current president – son of its first postcolonial leader – belongs to one of the largest landholding families in the country (see Forbes 2011) lends considerable substance to such arguments.

Rongai provides a direct contrast to this almost deterministic perspective on Kenyan politics: not by denying the political utility of land or its links to ethno-political violence, but in demonstrating that the powerful ethnicization of land and associated debates over autochthony and ownership fail to represent the entirety of Kenyan political discourses and subjectivities. Rather, as explained below, the presence and power of exclusivist discourses have helped generate and entrench the counter-narratives described above. In this regard, my findings resonate with Klopp (2010), who, borrowing from Lonsdale (1994: 131), argues that ethnic identification can include moral, inclusivist tenets. In describing the Nandi – a subgroup of the often conflictual Kalenjin collective – she outlines forms of subjectivities that are not classically liberal (i.e. where everyone has a citizen's right to settle anywhere) but nor are they ethnically exclusive. Even if 'being cosmo' discursively resonates with Lockean liberalism, it remains significantly ethnicized: ethnicity remains a critical component of a person's political cosmology, with people remaining committed to ideas of indigenized spaces beyond Rongai while proclaiming Rongai a kind of ethnic-free zone. It nonetheless takes on an overtly ethical or moral character, as Rongai residents contrast themselves and their convivial coexistence with the conflicts elsewhere in Kenya. And, like the forms of Nandi tolerance Klopp describes, Rongai's cosmopolitanism stems from residents' recognition of the 'profound inter-dependence of Kenya's communities' and that alternative subjectivities offer 'one of the few protections against the ravages of nature and the shared experience of political despotism' (Klopp 2010: 286–7).

#### BECOMING COSMO: DISPLACEMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND THE BIRTH OF RONGAI

Rongai's unusual level of ethnic pluralism amidst an environment of ethnic competition over politics and land is puzzling and warrants explanation. Although a growing body of literature seeks to explicate conviviality in the midst of heightening ethno-linguistic diversity (Nowicka and Vertovec 2013), such attention has often been relatively ahistorical while focusing almost exclusively on the world's highly 'advanced' cities. It has also tended to tie explanations for peaceful or conflictual outcomes to global capital or specific local policies. Only a few cities in Africa have been explored in any other regard (see, for example, Diouf 2000; Götz and Simone 2003; Landau and Freemantle 2010), and Kenya has been almost totally overlooked. Moreover, few studies consider the highly localized mechanisms at play. Much can be learned through an embedded examination of the cosmo identity, for discussions not only of emerging African urbanism, but, and more importantly for our present purposes, about the unintentional and contingent by-products of violent, ethno-political conflicts over land and power.

The explanations for Rongai's cosmo subjectivity are so universal as to be almost banal, while also deeply contextual. Indeed, the standardization of the rhetorical content is among its most notable attributes. As Waweru (author interview, 9 January 2014), the businessman cited earlier, suggests: 'For many, Rongai is just a place to make money. It's just a place to get somewhere. Only a few of the indigenous remain, for the others they are renting and are just in and out ... That's part of what makes it cosmopolitan.' Indeed, its status as a relatively prosperous business centre has infused much of Rongai with a kind of market-oriented, functional and liberal ethos. Onyango (author interview, 7 January 2014) remarked:

You know, all the Kikuyus who are here trying to do business, if the Mungiki come in and start trouble, it's going to disrupt all of their work and they'll end up losing out. So there may be Mungiki who are living here but they're not going to do anything here.

Like other trading centres around the world, people's interactions are in part shaped by the need to lower risk and just get on with their lives. Such patterns have long been the subject of academic inquiry (see Simmel 2002; Weber 1966), yet the market alone cannot explain Rongai's distinctive cosmopolitanism or its standardization across an emergent discursive field. Nor can it account for the emergence of that cosmopolitanism, as trading centres elsewhere in Kenya have regularly seen efforts to expel or exclude on the basis of ethnicity and/or political affiliation (Gettleman 2008; Yusuf 2013).

A more thorough understanding of the site reveals three factors beyond market imperatives that facilitate and fortify Rongai's cosmo subjectivity. The first surrounds foundational myths of 'terra incognita' and Maasai hospitality: Rongai's modern occupation is presented as both just and almost total. Consequently, no ethnic group can now make an exclusive claim to the territory. The remaining two points are products of and reactions to the country's history of ethno-political exclusion and violence. The most important in shaping the specific language of mediating difference is that Rongai's rapid population growth is a direct consequence of displacements elsewhere in the country. As people fled violence and exclusion in the Rift Valley and even central Nairobi (Kibera in particular), they brought with them a determination to prevent further violence and the counter-narrative of peace. Third, the area has long been characterized by what I term – borrowing from common Kenyan nomenclature that may offend elsewhere – a kind of 'half-caste politics': because the area's powerful political leadership unusually claimed mixed ethnicity, they have actively worked to de-ethnicize politics in order to preserve their own legitimacy and power. Such instrumentalism draws attention to a final sub-point regarding the compelling economic interests of local elites to preserve the peaceful status quo. The following sections address each of these points in turn.

### *Origin as terra incognita*

Based on a mix of fact and myth about the settlement's indigenous population, residents have come to accept Rongai as a relatively de-ethnicized space that effectively belongs to no people or tribe. Rongai's modern history can trace its origins to the 1940s and 1950s, when a quarry was dug to provide construction material for houses and offices serving Nairobi's rapidly expanding population. Current

inhabitants' accounts indicate that the earliest in-migrants were the Luos and Luhyas, who worked the quarries and later settled permanently in the area now known as Kware (see above). Despite their presence, Rongai remained a relatively unpopulated trading post on Nairobi's urban periphery until the 1980s. Set just outside the city's boundaries, it housed a few farmers irrigating from streams flowing from the nearby Ngong Hills. Most inhabitants were relatively itinerant Maasai who congregated in the area to sell cattle to each other or to those living in more established settlements nearby.

In the 1980s, the population of Rongai exploded. As most of this growth took place largely beyond official plans and outside careful observation by scholars or officials, there is little documentation on the settlement's transforming morphology and composition. For present purposes, three aspects of this growth are important. First, over the course of just a few years, almost all property near the roads and rivers was sold to non-Maasai. Most of the buyers were Kikuyus moving down from the central highlands or from elsewhere in greater Nairobi. Some of the property was occupied immediately and converted into farmland. Other plots were left undeveloped by absentee owners. Second, and more significantly, due to these massive land transfers, almost all of the 'indigenous' Maasai population decamped from the area, many moving south towards Tanzania. As the census does not include information on ethnicity, it is difficult to know the exact percentage of Maasai remaining in the area. However, everyone with whom I spoke – including people claiming Maasai origins – agreed that they are now a relatively small minority in Rongai. Whether or not this is empirically true, the perception of the population's current composition and the understanding of past land transfers are what matter most in the contemporary discourse. It is the element of perception – particularly Rongai's foundational myth – to which I now turn.

Throughout the interviews and discussions, people remembered the birth of Rongai as a kind of *terra incognita*. Although once belonging to the Maasai, residents remember and regularly describe the Maasai's willingness to sell and effectively evacuate the space. Such acquiescence made Rongai an open playing field where anyone with money could come in and acquire land fairly. Mungai (author interview, 5 January 2014), the mixed-Maasai property developer quoted earlier, speaks nonchalantly about this history: 'Many Maasai were willing to sell, they were happy to get the money especially since they were able to just move elsewhere and keep doing what they were doing.' Although partially responsible for these displacements, the non-Maasai population speaks of them with a somewhat peculiar respect for their perceived honourable yet primitive traits: hospitality and honesty. Nderitu (author interview, 6 January 2014) described the Maasai as 'welcoming in nature. They are not the kind of people that will chase you away.' As such, even if they are unhappy about the loss of communally held land, they would never consider challenging existing occupants who bought it fairly. Indeed, current landowners regularly speak about how the Maasai lacked notions of commodified land. As such, they were happy to leave it in exchange for a short-term payment.

In the shared myth of fair foundations on what was essentially unoccupied land, current residents find an explanation for their peaceful coexistence. Onyango (author interview, 7 January 2014) explained:

This was their land but they have left to leave us all as visitors here. As a result of this, everyone can say we are brothers. None of us can say we are on someone else's place

or that they're on ours ... we are all visitors, we are all foreigners ... Once you buy land here, you are a member of the community.

So while the Kikuyu – who most agree comprise the largest group of landowners – could not consider welcoming others to their ancestral lands on Mount Kenya's slopes, Rongai offers a different story. In Nderitu's words: 'Kikuyus here can't be hostile: it's not their space. If you go up to Thika [in Central Province], people won't buy or live there unless they're a Kikuyu. But on this side here it is everyone's take. So, anyone can come here.' Njoroge (author interview, 5 January 2014) concurs: 'Here the natives are the Maasai, but the language that everyone speaks is Swahili. People have just come in and they can't fight.'

As the literature on Kenyan politics makes abundantly clear, exclusive, indigenous claims to land are a hallmark of the country and a continual source of friction. They also serve as the foundation for an ethnicized political system in which people's political legitimacy is typically about representing a space and the particular ethnicity that occupies it rather than a geographic space and the people who occupy it. Yet, in Rongai, the origin myth of a population that voluntarily ceded its territory to a welcomed and diverse 'other' does considerable work in helping to rhetorically create a valuable urban space that belongs to no one.

### *Baptism by fire*

The myth of an ownerless land is a remarkable finding that confounds the empirical norm and general scholarly presumptions about the nature of Kenyan political life. While distinct, it cannot be understood as causally isolated from the rise of autochthonous discourses and conflicts elsewhere. In particular, when asked to explain Rongai's rapid growth, respondents point to a series of factors including not only the proximity to central Nairobi, but also the appeal of a de-ethnicized landscape for those fleeing discrimination, violence and persecution elsewhere. Speaking together, Njoroge and Mungai offered an account (author interview, 5 January 2014) typical of many others: 'The growth really started in the early 1990s after the ethnic clashes in the Rift Valley ... Most of these were Kikuyu who had been displaced but you also had other groups who moved due to the violence: Luhyas, Kisii, Kamba and others.' The population continued to expand through the 1990s and early 2000s, but the growth rate again peaked following another election and subsequent ethnicized violence. 'In fact,' Onyango reports, 'the price of land has almost doubled after the 2007 election because of the violence and all the people who are coming here ... they come here and won't go somewhere else because they know that whoever they are, they can be safe and comfortable here.' Most of those coming were Kikuyu whose livelihoods were under threat (or destroyed), who arrived not only from their ancestral homes in the central highlands but also from Eldoret, Nakuru and other places where they had been attacked.

Throughout the interviews, people referred to these origins in the fires and fears of conflict as the reason for fervently ensuring Rongai's continued peace and conviviality. As one focus group member suggested, 'When you are oppressed for a long time you become interested in learning and people here have figured things out. We've seen what happens if you don't and have learned how to manage things.' This kind of reverse demonstration effect serves as an important

motivation for many people and adds necessity and important moral weight to the kind of market-based, fluid and de-ethnicized material and social exchanges that take place in the area. It is also a constant reminder to landowners and other investors of their financial vulnerability should anyone manage to make an effective claim to more widespread land ownership.

*Half-caste politics and instrumentality*

The mixed quest for security and self-preservation hinted at above points to what is perhaps the most significant explanation for the evolution and presentation of Rongai's unique, convivial character. Here, too, the presence of violence elsewhere and threats of it reaching Rongai serve as a valuable resource. In this case, such patterns work not for small-scale landowners and investors, but for the political elite who represented Rongai during its formative period. Particularly notable here is the degree to which prominent individuals belonged to inter-ethnic or trans-ethnic families. Such mixed origins necessitated the development of a (somewhat) de-ethnicized politics. This stems in part from the organic and historical mixing of local groups, especially the Maasai and the Kikuyu. 'You will see that there were lots of women marrying Maasai men. Then this is how you could come in. They can't resist because we're part of the family' (Nderitu, author interview, 6 January 2014). More importantly, the civic leaning of Rongai's ethos was driven by the political elite – particularly John Keen and George Saitoti – whose very survival depended on marshalling an alternative, non-ethnic basis for political mobilization and legitimization.

Across almost all the interviews, people mentioned the importance of Saitoti and Keen in establishing the unique, cosmopolitan politics that characterize Rongai. Saitoti, a major power broker and long-time minister under President Daniel Arap Moi (president from 1978 to 2002) and his successor, Mwai Kibaki (2002–13), somehow stood up against the widespread ethnicization of politics that led to ethnic clashes in the Rift Valley and elsewhere (see Bratton and Kimenyi 2008). (When the research started, Saitoti was Kenya's minister for internal security. He died during the course of the research (10 June 2012) under curious circumstances (Howden 2012).) Although operating more locally, the powerful parliamentarian John Keen is also widely credited with promoting relatively civic (i.e. non-ethnic) forms of political participation and mobilization.

When pushed to explain the means and motivations for Saitoti's and Keen's ethnically inclusive politics, respondents immediately stressed Saitoti's mixed ethnic background. Although some debate his specific ethnic origin, Saitoti claimed links to both the Maasai and Kikuyu, with few challenging those claims. As such, he could never be embraced as an unalloyed representative of either ethnicity and consequently required an alternative basis of legitimacy. Moreover, while not a full member of either group, he could straddle the two, mediating potential conflicts as communal land was commodified and sold to people – largely Kikuyu – from outside the area. This in turn was useful personally, in politically legitimizing himself and in negotiating land deals for himself and his cronies between his Maasai kin and incoming Kikuyu migrants. Other respondents pointed to John Keen's similar trajectory, highlighting his half-caste (Maasai and Caucasian) heritage. Although his powers never matched Saitoti's – Keen was an assistant minister in the governments of Jomo Kenyatta

and his successor, Daniel Arap Moi – along with Stanley Oloitipitip, a Maasai leader and cabinet minister, he was frequently identified as one of the true powers in Kajiado, the administrative district in which Rongai is based. As with Saitoti, Keen's mixed blood meant that he had to straddle groups and legitimize his rule without relying on or mobilizing ethnicity alone. In both cases, the politicians countered their muddled ethnic origins by helping to generate a localized rhetoric of ethnic inclusivity complemented by ethnically cross-cutting material interests.

The legacy of this 'half-caste' politics is clear. 'Even now, the governor here is a Maasai, but his father is a Maasai and his mother is a Kikuyu. The same holds for our senator. This couldn't happen anywhere else in Kenya' (Njoroge, author interview, 5 January 2014). Others spoke about how voters purposely split their elected representatives along ethnic lines to avoid hegemony by any one group.

Two factors are important in explaining this 'half-caste' politics for both practical and descriptive reasons: (1) the instrumentality of this mobilization; and (2) the degree to which this narrative's power stemmed from the violence occurring elsewhere. Just as we speak about political entrepreneurs using exclusivist rhetoric to further their individual and collective ambitions (see Lake and Rothschild 1998), both Keen and Saitoti drew on available resources to advance their careers. Elsewhere in Kenya, one of the most powerful and readily mobilized discourses centred on land and tribe. Yet such options were effectively off the table for these would-be leaders of mixed origin. In Waweru's words: 'They were selfish men, but their interests were in line with peace so they made sure there was no violence' (author interview, 9 January 2014). Importantly, neither man's interests were limited exclusively to political office. Using their positions within the community and in government, both became landowners of note in and around Rongai. Keen's landholdings remain so extensive that in 2011 he could donate 100 acres of prime property to help expand the adjacent Nairobi National Park.

That Keen and Saitoti could so effectively use this narrative was due in part to the history of land transfers and displacement within the area (the lack of a mobilized 'indigenous' population) and in-migrants keen to avoid the kind of conflictual ethnicization of land and politics experienced or witnessed elsewhere. But it is not only violence that local residents wish to avoid. Joireman and Vanderpoel (2010: 2) speak about the various informal mechanisms people use to protect their property in the central Nairobi slum of Kibera (for comparative reference see Napier *et al.* 2014). These include co-opting state officials, community organization and ethnic gangs. Anderson (2002), too, speaks of the imbrication of vigilante groups or ethnic gangs with local political structures, which together collaborate with economic elites (see also Katumanga 2005; Kagwanja 2003). In Rongai, ethnic gangs are not a viable option given the population's diversity and the economic necessity of renting to non-co-ethnics. Moreover, given the area's unique politics, particularly Saitoti's long-time anti-ethnicist stance, using gangsters would be popularly illegitimate. Instead, landowners – political elite, property developers, and small-scale landowners – all reinforce discourses of terra incognita. Moreover, they actively work to stave off any kind of ethnicization of land and politics that would call into question their rights to settle, live and profit from Rongai's material resources and proximity to the city.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnicity and conflicts over land and political power remain ever present in Kenya. The 2007–08 post-election violence alone killed approximately 1,300 people and displaced up to 600,000 (Waki Commission 2008). In reviewing the contentious 2007 elections, Bratton and Kimenyi (2008: 273) surprisingly conclude that Kenyans, writ large, are developing a political subjectivity that goes beyond ethnicity. Indeed, 'ethnic voting contradicts Kenyans' views of themselves as adherents of a national (Kenyan) identity'. This suggests an alternative, if yet underdeveloped, form of national identification and discourse that can be, and indeed has been, mobilized by politicians and other elites. However, as Bratton and Kimenyi (2008: 287) also suggest, such perspectives have yet to proliferate to a point where they frame political participation. Instead, 'although Kenyans resist defining themselves in ethnic terms, their actions in making electoral choices show a country where voting patterns hew largely to ethnic lines' (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008: 14). Moreover, Kenyans generally remain remarkably distrustful of other groups and presume that political actions are motivated by individual or ethnic interests. In Rongai, however, elite and popular interests have – through a combination of fluke and design – become aligned in ways that foreground community in the form of a spatialized cosmo discursive field.

Rongai's spatialized field is not only curious in a country so broadly characterized by the ethnicization of land and politics – its character is shaped by it. The confluence of displaced people from elsewhere in the country and political elites' needs to work against ethnic chauvinism have helped generate a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism which offers a de-ethnicized cognitive frame through which people's actions and interactions are condemned or legitimized. Robinson (2013: 660) notes that the study of cities is typically informed by 'the idea that the city creates new possibilities for social life'. Yet while cities and spaces such as Rongai continue to create opportunities for new social formation, we increasingly recognize that there is no inherent shift towards the modern. Indeed, although Rongai's cosmo identity first appears as a kind of Hegelian reaction to deep ethnicization, it is less of a clean break than a spatialized set of roles enacted both consciously and subconsciously. When interviewed, people regularly decry the ethnicized violence and exclusive practices seen elsewhere, but rarely do they challenge the naturalness or necessity of them. Rather, many accept a generalized cosmology categorizing people in ethnicities and tribes rooted to homelands over which they have primary or even absolute authority. Indeed, many of Rongai's landowners and residents continue to remain rooted in such spaces and ethnicities beyond Rongai's boundaries. However, ethnic hostilities and exclusive discourses must be checked in at the city gates.

The emergence of Rongai's particular set of cosmopolitan practices is a result of economic and political interests shaped to a considerable degree by chance and historical reinvention, which forms a powerful foundation myth. As with all membership discourses – inclusive or otherwise – these are driven and mobilized by specific, often elite interests (see Haas 2000). In this case, the oft-repeated story of the commodification of communal Maasai land, its fair transfer to immigrant landowners and the voluntary evacuation of the 'honest if primitive' Maasai population helps legitimize outsiders' presence in Rongai while preventing any group from making exclusive claims to the space. That the area's political



leadership and Kikuyu landowners shared an interest in disguising their dominance over the land and in resisting any form of indigenous uprising furthered and maintained the myth of a terra incognita.

So while nothing in this paper challenges fundamental causal models of xenophobia, ethnic chauvinism or other forms of exclusive, identity-based discourses, it suggests at least two things about how we study them. First, that these practices are widely productive in deeply spatialized ways. Whatever their origins, they help to demarcate space. Most of the literature focuses on how ethnicity and 'outsiderness' are mobilized to exclude or shelter individual groups from the vagaries and precarity of globalization or national elites. If nothing else, the account above illustrates how such exclusion in one space can help generate conviviality and a kind of civic cosmopolitanism elsewhere. It also points to the importance of randomness in the emergence of specific political subjectivities. No one set out to build a cosmo identity. Rather, circulating discourses, circumstances and interests were combined in ways that have forged a foundation myth and a set of practices and subjectivities that distinguish Rongai and its politics from those elsewhere in Kenya. We therefore need to think more carefully about the nature of African politics and identities, drawing attention to those that work against the grain, that demonstrate a means of accommodation and conviviality even in an era of national and ethnic exclusion.

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## ABSTRACT

Ongata Rongai, a rapidly growing, ethnically heterogeneous community on Nairobi's urban periphery, has remained remarkably convivial in a country so frequently defined by conflicts over land and belonging. Bolstered by a distinct set of political logics and social practices, many of the site's multi-ethnic residents overtly reject the validity of ethnic violence and politics with reference to an explicitly articulated universalist inclusivity rarely seen in Kenya. Locally described as 'being cosmo', this distinct political rhetoric and emerging subjectivity has its roots in the mixed ethnic origins of its leaders, the history of land acquisition, and xenophobic persecution and displacements elsewhere in the country. More specifically, the evolution of this conviviality in the shadow of conflict has been driven by the interests of 'half-caste' political elites and increasingly established Kikuyu landowners. Together they draw on and reinforce a foundation myth of fair land transfers to promote peace and their own economic and electoral ambitions. The result is a vernacular and spatialized cosmopolitanism that fosters localized ethnic blindness. Its success depends on demonizing discourses of indigeneity while embracing ideas of ethnic homelands beyond the city. By acting as a foil to a growing literature on the *ethnicization* of land and space in Africa, this article demonstrates the need to understand spatially constructed subjectivities as responses to supra-local social and political practice.

## RÉSUMÉ

Ongata Rongai, une communauté ethniquement hétérogène qui connaît une croissance rapide à la périphérie urbaine de Nairobi, est restée remarquablement conviviale dans un pays si fréquemment défini par des conflits liés à la terre et à l'appartenance. Soutenus par un ensemble distinct de logiques politiques et de pratiques sociales, un grand nombre des résidents appartenant à des groupes ethniques multiples rejettent ouvertement violence et politique ethniques et promeuvent au contraire des pratiques inclusives larges rarement observées au Kenya. « Etre cosmo » comme elle est décrite localement, est une subjectivité politique distincte qui trouve ses origines dans les origines pluriethniques de ses dirigeants, dans l'histoire de l'acquisition des terres, et dans les persécutions xénophobes et les déplacements ailleurs dans le pays. De manière plus spécifique, l'évolution de cette convivialité au milieu des conflits a été dessinée par les intérêts d'élites politiques « métisses » et des propriétaires kikuyu bien établis. Ensemble, ils utilisent et renforcent un mythe fondateur d'un transfert équitable de terres pour promouvoir la paix et leurs propres ambitions économiques et électorales. Il en résulte un cosmopolitisme vernaculaire et spatialisé qui dépasse les affiliations ethniques localisées endiabolisant les discours d'indigénité tout en tolérant les affiliations ethniques en dehors de la ville. En tant que contre point à une littérature croissante consacrée à l'*ethnicisation* en Afrique, cet article démontre la nécessité de comprendre les subjectivités spatialement construites comme des réactions à une pratique sociale et politique plus large.