Chapter 4

Bypassing the Bulldozer

The Materiality of State Violence on Religion in Kibera, Nairobi

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1 Introduction

It was before dawn on 23 July 2018 when the residents of Kibera were awoken by uproar and commotion; bulldozers had arrived in their neighborhood. As family members and neighbors helped each other to the nearest road for safety, a retinue of bulldozers began to file in Kibera and mow down any structure in its path. Prevented by police officers from salvaging their belongings, Kiberans watched helplessly from the sidelines as their homes, businesses, schools, and places of worship were razed to ruins. By ten o’clock that morning, approximately 30,000 residents of Kibera – the oldest and most diverse neighborhood of Nairobi – were left homeless, destitute, and religiously adrift (BBC News 2018; Golla 2018; Mwanza 2018). The bulldozing resumed construction of a bypass road designed to ease Nairobi’s notorious traffic congestion. The bypass road is intended to run through the heart of Kibera and for the first time, connect the two roads that historically bordered this neighborhood: Ngong Road to the north, and Lang’ata Road in the south. In this respect, although numerous demolitions have occurred in Kibera, the demolition which occurred on the 23rd of July 2018 was unprecedented as it fundamentally reconfigured the physical and material landscape of the neighborhood that constituted the material conditions for religious and interreligious life in Kibera.

In this chapter I examine the bypass road in Kibera as a symbol of state violence. I define state violence as the material, symbolic, and affective techniques that states deploy to render itself real in society and to render society legible (Aretxaga 2001, 2003). An examination of state violence, however,
requires a definition of ‘the state’. I follow the position of political anthropologists that the state is materialized not only through public works or the rules and regulations which later outline how the public makes use of – in the case of this chapter – the bypass road. The state is further manifested in society as a ‘feeling state’ of emotions, sentiments, and fears which emanate from, and together with the material and procedural qualities, renders the state an entity and plausible reality to those living there (Aretxaga 1999, 52; see also Wedeen 2003, 608). In this respect, as the state is simultaneously produced by and produces a reality of material effects and immaterial affects and the myriad of techniques used by the state to enact violence can similarly create a kind of ‘plu-reality’ to borrow van Alphen’s word (2012), whereby individuals experience state violence as enduring, elusive, and encompassing.

What makes the bypass road in Kibera noteworthy, as this chapter will show, is that Kiberans who were affected by the raze in July 2018 describe their experiences of state violence in temporally entangled ways. The bulldozing evoked both dense social histories and intensified present worries about how Kiberans have and remain forced to find ways to ‘bypass the bulldozer’ that is, to negotiate their land insecurity in Kenya. In this chapter, I explore these non-linear and materially affective ways of experiencing state violence through the religious life of a Kiberan woman whom I refer to as Bibi Jaina. Bibi Jaina (b. 1952) identifies as Nubian Muslim and traces her lineage to the first Nubian community who settled in Kibera as early as 1904. On the morning of the raze, Bibi Jaina lost several properties that she inherited from her paternal grandfather, a loss that has rendered her grandchildren possibly the first generation of propertyless Nubians in Kibera. Furthermore, in the hours following the bulldozing, Bibi Jaina witnessed her neighbors reclaim the ruins of her razed property, an act that may have radically reconfigured the material differences between Nubian and non-Nubian religious communities in Kibera.

By unpacking the challenges that Bibi Jaina faces to deal with her loss and rebuild her property, her experience and life history offers three important contributions for thinking about why and how religion matters for understanding state violence in Kibera and its effects. First, Bibi Jaina’s life history illuminates how the religiosity of Nubians in Kibera was formed and remains dependent on the material conditions provided to them by the Kenyan state of the day. This material dependency highlights what is at stake for the Nubian community when land is revoked, and property destroyed by the state and

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2 In the interests of confidentiality, all names in this chapter are pseudonyms. Bibi is a Swahili word for ‘grandmother’ and is commonly used to refer to senior women.
complicates how we understand state violence as both structural and personal. Second, the ways in which the raze destabilized Bibi Jaina’s tenure and claim to land exposes a longer history of the Nubian community’s struggle to obtain land rights in Kibera and political belonging to Kenya. In this respect, the circuits of material construction of the bypass road, and destruction of Bibi Jaina’s property, evoke and are entangled in this longstanding struggle for recognition. Third, both the destruction of Bibi Jaina’s property and the suspension on the construction of the bypass road creates blockages in the intergenerational transfer of property to her descendants, property that represents what it means to be Nubian in Kibera. I argue that taking seriously why property for Bibi Jaina sustains her religiosity and Nubian lineage may illuminate how and why religious matters – in this chapter, property and land – matter for understanding the nature of land conflict in Kibera. The final section of this chapter examines why and how deferment of the bypass road complicates the mediation of Nubian religiosity, materially and temporally.

2 Roads as Ethnographies of State Violence

To examine roads as a symbol of state violence, we need to understand how scholars contend the function and meaning of roads in the state. On the one hand there is an exceptionally large body of literature which situates roads as sites where the state manifests itself to society and as objects used to achieve spatial order in, and legibility of society (Campbell 2012; Fairhead 1992; Jourde 2005; Scott 1998). For scholars who contribute to this literature, roads are valid ethnographic sites to observe the everyday ways in which people encounter the state, whether by obeying the rules of the road or by entering toll gates. The second body of literature examines how ordinary people ‘make’ and emplace the road and the state long after construction is finalized (Ciabarri 2017; Scott 1998). For these scholars, roads are the materiality of state-society negotiations and contestations and their meaning and function in society continues to change over time, which means that roads remain unfinished projects (Bize 2017; Cupers and Meier 2020; Lamont 2017).

In Kenya, however, roads mark both the presence and the absence of the state in society. Roads can ‘enchant’ the viewer into believing that the Kenyan state has invested in the progress of the nation when such public works remain geographically uneven between the city, the coast, and the countryside, for instance (Blunt 2019; Melnick 2018; see also Larkin 2013). Additionally, road-
works in Kenya often emerge from and conceal histories of colonial violence which endures in the post-independent era through nefarious bilateral state agreements or patrimonialism between local elites and political officials, both of which exclude ordinary people in making decisions about land use in Kenya (Blunt 2019; Klopp 2012; Kimari 2017, 2020; Manji 2014). In this respect, roads represent not only the material form of the state in society, but also a lasting materiality of the violent choices and actions taken by the state past and present to enact the road; choices and actions that societies are forced to live with long after the road has been implemented.

Taking a material approach to religion, these violent choices and actions that the colonial and post-independent governments have made which includes human settlement and displacement, land appropriation, cartographical erasure, slum clearance initiatives and urban development projects, have affected the religious lives of Kiberans and interreligious life in Kibera in ways that may contribute to new understandings of the interrelationship between materiality, religion, and violence.

3 Making Inroads to Religion

Established in 1904, less than five years after Nairobi was declared the new capital of the British East Africa Protectorate, Kibera is as old as the city itself. The area of land that became Kibera was annexed from the Kikuyu, Maasai, and Dorobo communities to provide a military base for soldiers of the King’s African Rifles (K.A.R). The K.A.R was a multi-battalion unit of African soldiers often forcibly conscripted from the various British territories in East Africa. The regiment of soldiers who settled in Kibera were classified by the British as ‘Soudanese’ or ‘Nubian’. Although ‘Nubian’ may conjure associations to the Nuba Mountains in present-day Sudan, those claim this identity and on whom this identity was placed, have origins in various geographies (Sarre 2018, 141).

Still, what these soldiers bound together was that their long military service and conversion to Islam meant that they either could not, or would not, return home. In this respect, Kibera was formed as ‘a home of last resort’ for the first Nubian soldiers and their families; a refuge from persecution back home but also as non-locals to Kenya, a place of ambiguous belonging nonetheless (Elfversson and Höglund 2018).

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4 Meyer et al. (2010, 209–210) defines the material approach to religion as the study of material forms and practices through which religions are manifested, coexist, and conflict in pluralised settings.
In 1918, the colonial government officially gazetted 4,198 acres “situated south of the Ngong Road” as a “Military Reserve” (The Official Gazette of the East African Protectorate, Notice No. 686, July 10, 1918. 577). The Nubian soldiers named this area ‘Kibra,’ a Kinubi word for ‘forest’ or ‘wilderness.’ The social career\(^5\) of the bypass road in Kibera can similarly be traced to this period of translocal human displacement and settlement from the ‘forest’. Formed as two parallel lines inked on the Key Plan of Nairobi Township Plan of 1916–1923, the bypass road is designed as an entryway into Kibera from the south and demarcates two areas: the residential premises of K.A.R to the east, and to the west, a golf course, K.A.R shooting range and K.A.R cemetery (The Key Plan of Nairobi Township 1916–1923, MPGG 1/101/2, The National Archives of the United Kingdom). Although the Plan does not appear to link the unnamed road entering Kibera from the south to Ngong Road in the north, a large swath of land perpendicular to these border roads is left blank, nonetheless.

Throughout its rule of Kenya, the British colonial government did not extend the road that led into Kibera. However, the residents of Kibera – who over time comprised both Nubian and non-Nubian identifying people – slowly occupied the ‘empty’ space on the Plan, space they indeed may not have

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\(^5\) The ‘social career’ of material objects is a term used by Meyer et al. (2010, 209).
known was plotted this way. Furthermore, the colonial government did not foresee – as they later confessed – that Kibera would provide later Nubian descendants with the material conditions to gradually emplace themselves and cultivate a distinct urban religiosity (Kenya Land Commission. 1934. *Evidence and Memorandum*. Vol. 1. H.M.S.O. 1158–1161). Since settling in Kibera, the Nubian community had formed a Council of Elders who negotiated with the colonial state, built mosques, madrassas, and private housing for their community, and argued that burying their dead had transformed Kibera into an ancestral home for Nubians (KLC Evidence and Memorandum, 1160–1; Parsons 1997, 104). This incremental process of religious instantiation through building sacred spaces and burying their dead, anchored Nubians' claim to Kibera and produced for later generations, an indigenous ontology of oneness with the land as conveyed in the 1948 phrase: “Kibra is in our blood” (Parsons 1997, 112). Thus, as each generation of Nubians buried their dead in Kibera, Kibera in turn sustained them, a process that reinforced their claim to Kibera and to autochthony. The point is not to suggest that the Plan authorized then, or should also be used as the material basis to authorize now to whom or for what means the ‘empty’ land was assigned. Indeed, the ways in which the residents of Kibera took up space in the neighborhood during this time forces us to rethink the extent to which colonial cartography, as a form of state violence, impeded on their ability to do so. Rather, this brief historical overview highlights the interlocking forms of state violence that ties the act of mapping empty space inextricably to the physical displacement and settlement of peoples in and across the British territories. In this way, we may also begin to comprehend the unstable grounds on which the Nubian community in Kibera emplaced, and over time expanded their religion on land that was appropriated by the colonial state and to which the Nubian community unfortunately held no title deed and where unbeknownst to them, a road was planned. Bearing this history in mind allows us to understand what is at stake for the religiosity of this community should the state (re)claim the land. This urges us to pay attention to the claims that Nubian identifying people make during periods of land insecurity to preserve their religiosity and way of life.

4 A Bilateral Bypass

When Kenya achieved independence in 1963, the Nubian community lost not only their occupation as soldiers and their military pension but also their

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6 I thank the anonymous reviewer who highlighted this point.
‘detribalized’ status, a status that barely secured their residency in Kibera during colonialism but nonetheless provided Nubians with a degree of autonomy in Kibera. The new Kenyan Republic under President Jomo Kenyatta regarded the detribalized status as incongruent to its nation building project that based citizenship on, and distributed land according to ethnicity (Moskowitz 2019). This position, which remains today, renders Nubians in post-independent Kenya stateless persons until they are formally vetted by the state and further rejects the community’s claim to Kibera as their homeland, given that Nubians are discounted as an indigenous ethnic community in Kenya (Adam 2009, 19–20; Balaton-Chrimes 2013, 339–340). As a final move to secure land, the Kenyan state declared Kibera public land in 1969 and commenced an extensive housing development project that resulted in the displacement of several Nubian families and the destruction of their property (The Nubian Community in Kenya v. The State of Kenya 2010, 16–21).

For Nubian families, property holds significant religious meaning. This does not mean that Nubians believe property to derive from or house the transcendent. Rather, property is imbued with histories, memories, and practices that Nubians consider crucial to their religiosity and which gets performed by owning and attending to one’s property. For instance, when the housing development project in Kibera was underway, the municipality of Nairobi granted Nubians priority to rent municipal housing which Nubian women rejected on account that the design of these homes neither represented the architectural aesthetics of the Nubian people nor accommodated the traditional needs of a Nubian family by including a *shamba* (Parsons 1997, 121). Additionally, those families whose homes were not demolished were nonetheless compelled to develop their *shamba* into rental properties to compensate for the loss of colonial military income and veteran pension and to support their unemployed children who could not obtain documentation to enter the labor market. The transformation of shamba into rental space proved briefly lucrative given the burgeoning demand in housing in Nairobi following the rural migration of Kenyans after independence. However, the loss of a family shamba eroded the longstanding cultural practices of herding and farming in the Nubian community, removed many families’ reliance on livestock as a form of capital in times of need and effaced the material culture of Nubian aesthetics (Amis 1984, 1988;

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7 For scholarship on the vetting that Kenyan Nubians must undergo, see Balaton-Chrimes (2015).
8 In line with how Nubian-identifying participants in my research describe property, I mean a compound of houses and a shamba on a plot of land.
9 Swahili term for a cultivated plot of land.
Taking seriously the religious and cultural significance that property holds for Nubians brings into sharp relief how the loss and destruction of property bears on their religiosity.

At the same time, a new regime of illegal land appropriation by the state was underway in Kibera. Particularly under Daniel arap Moi’s presidency (1978–2002), political officials were found to bestow land deeds to Christian clergymen in Kibera in exchange for electoral votes (Commission of Inquiry into the Illegal/Irregular Allocation of Public Land, 2003). The bypass road in Kibera was also revived in this period of land appropriation. In 1988 a feasibility test conducted by the Kenyan government and the Government of Japan determined that a bypass or “New Link Road” as suggested in the Report, is an effective solution to traffic congestion. However, details about when construction would commence and what would become of the residents who currently inhabited Kibera were absent from the Report (Republic of Kenya Ministry of Transport and Communication 1988. The Nairobi Bypass Construction Project Feasibility Test Final Report. Vol. 2. Section 3a, V-25). Alongside this dense network patrimonialism, the uncertainty of the future on account of the bypass road caused Nubian and non-Nubian Kiberans to turn on each in violent ways as each party believed the other to be more land secure. During this period of violent conflict, many Nubian homes were burnt which further exacerbated the community’s loss of property and livelihoods.10

The violent conflict between Nubians and their non-Nubian and predominantly Christian neighbors, especially how the media reported this conflict, obscured the role of the state and of state violence despite local, international, and academic calls to examine land grabbing and forced evictions as forms of state violence (Amnesty International Report 2009, Kenya; Klopp 2000). But demonstrating how state violence operates and holding the state accountable proved difficult for many Kiberans during President Mwai Kibaki’s administration (2002–2013). President Kibaki passed three major infrastructural and social initiatives – UN-Habitat Kenya Slum Upgrading Program (2004), the Kenya Vision 2030 (2008), and the Nairobi Metro 2030 Strategy (2008) – which collectively promoted roadworks in Kibera and other development projects as opportunities to work with bilateral states and non-governmental organizations to develop the lives and livelihoods of Kiberans. Under the guise of slum upgrading, these projects initiated a series of routine unannounced and

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10 The well-known and publicized violent conflict that took place in Kibera during Moi’s presidency occurred in October 1995 (Los Angeles Times, 17 October 1995; Reuters, 16 October 1995).
uncompensated demolitions across neighborhoods in Nairobi. In 2003, construction for the bypass recommenced yet again in Kibera which resulted in the destruction of 400 structures and another few hundred structures in 2004 (Vasagar 2004). The District Officer later confessed that the razes were an attempt by the state to free up land for a bypass road that would join Lang’ata Road to Ngong Road (Bodewes 2005, 174–176).

In 2015 a few Kibera residents reported that their dwellings were marked overnight with an ‘X’ in red paint, presumably earmarked for demolition or eviction (Dixon 2015). As reports of this occurrence increased in the neighborhood, so too did rumors emerge and circulate that the symbol marked the homes of people from a distinct ethnic or religious community which meant that neighbors were working with the state to ‘rid’ Kibera of particular groups of people (Kahura 2018). These rumors and suspicions were further heightened in 2017 when President Uhuru Kenyatta bestowed the Kenyan Nubian Council of Elders with a community title deed to 288 acres of land in Kibera (The Kenya Gazette, 7 May 2018, Chapter Four). Why would the Kenyan government bestow prime land in Nairobi to a religious community whom it continues to classify as ‘stateless’?

As this section has shown, this question can be addressed by returning to two concomitant points. First, the post-independent state is both strategically constituted by, and colludes with a network of local elites, states, and non-governmental organizations to secure control of land to the detriment of its citizens and non-citizen population alike. On the other hand, Nubian property owners have experienced throughout the post-independent era, the destruction of their property through state-sponsored urban development projects and through interreligious conflict in their neighborhood. These facts may have, according to opinions relayed to me by Nubians and non-Nubian Kibera residents alike, compelled the Kenyan Nubian Council of Elders to issue their support to President Kenyatta by way of electoral votes in exchange for land tenure. However, the title deed granted to the Kenyan Nubian Council of Elders was communal and did not therefore preclude individual Nubian property owners like Bibi Jaina from the razes in July 2018 (see also Sarre 2018). Instead, it shows that the politics and poetics of land in Kenya is determined by ‘big men’; a consortium of foreign organizations, Kenyan politicians, elders, and religious clergy that consolidate and maintain political power over land in Kenya (Blunt 2019; de Smedt 2009). As the next section will show, Bibi Jaina’s story offers a unique and personal account of how ordinary Nubian property owners operate outside ‘big men politics’ to protect her property, property she considers a part of her religiosity, identity, and lineage, as a Nubian Muslim.
Bulldozing for Bypasses

On that morning of 23 July 2018, when the bulldozers tore through Kibera, Bibi Jaina recalls that she and her ninety-four-year-old mother had just finished their prayers and were preparing breakfast when her grandson, Abdul, informed them that bulldozers were presently destroying structures in Kibera where the family's property is located. None of the eight family members with whom Bibi Jaina lives heard the demolitions occurring at the time. In fact, Abdul was notified of the raze via a text message sent by one of the tenants and his close friend, Hakim, that bulldozers were razing schools, homes, and places of worship indiscriminately. Upon notifying his grand- and great grand- mothers of the news, Abdul left home to assist Hakim and the other tenants who rented from his grandmother. Although it felt much longer, Abdul returned two hours later with grave news; the ten one-bedroom dwellings that Bibi Jaina inherited from her grandfather were all demolished.

I was introduced to Bibi Jaina by Hakim, my research assistant. Hakim and his brother rented one of the ten houses from Bibi Jaina for several years before they became subsequently homeless on the morning of the raze. When his brother left a week later to seek employment in the agricultural town of Nakuru, Hakim found himself without family in Kibera and Bibi Jaina 'adopted' him as her grandson. Opening her home as a place of belonging and safety to Hakim was part of being Nubian, according to Bibi Jaina; that is, to welcome and provide shelter to all Muslims in their time of need. Bibi Jaina was born and raised in Kibera. Although the eldest daughter amongst five siblings, Bibi Jaina explains that her parents did not want her to become "a traditional Nubian housewife" and insisted that she would receive a secular education before marriage. When Bibi Jaina began primary school in 1961, she was amongst the first cohort of Nubian girls in Kibera to enter and complete a secular education in English. After high school, Bibi Jaina was trained as a nurse and advanced to midwifery. She retired in 1998 to care for her husband who passed away in 2000.

Because Bibi Jaina is the eldest daughter to her parents, the sole caregiver to her elderly mother, and the only sibling in her family who lives permanently in Kibera, the family granted her custodianship of the property around 2002, according to her recollection, with the agreement that the property be bequeathed to the next generation, including Bibi Jaina's grandsons. The rents generated funded her mother's medication, the grandchildren's school fees,

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11 Interview, February 2019.
and daily living expenses. As I came to understand and indeed what interested me about Bibi Jaina’s claim and her story overall, is how she described property as more than a source of much-needed revenue. Like most Nubian identifying people who agreed to participate in my research, Bibi Jaina maintains that the descendants of the K.A.R soldiers are the rightful owners of land in Kibera. During our conversations, Bibi Jaina would exhume photographs of her paternal grandfather and father from between the pages of dusty books. One photograph depicts her grandfather bearing a stern expression, dressed handsomely in his military attire, and standing erect in his shamba. In another photograph, Bibi Jaina’s father is dressed similarly in his military uniform but positioned in an empty courtyard enclosed by four squat mud and wattle dwellings. These four dwellings are where Bibi Jaina and her family lives and the only property that remains of her inheritance.

Bibi Jaina stressed that property is barakat (blessing) whereby Nubians inherit not only the physical property from their forebearers, but also the moral practice that allows Nubians to attend every day to a “worldly thing” – property – without becoming “greedy, boastful, or haughty” as property-owners. She explains that although neither her grandfather nor father possessed an official title deed to land in Kibera, they “worked the land” with reverence and honor, a practice that each man undertook throughout his lifetime and one that instilled a sense of proprietorship beyond the legal definition of property rights. ‘Working the land’, whether cultivating the shamba like her grandfather, building property like her father, or maintaining the property as Bibi Jaina does and passing it on to her grandchildren, illustrated to me that Nubians in Kibera ‘perform property’ through a moral ethic of barakat and simultaneously emplace and imbibe this moral ethic in their property and land (Blomley 2013, 25; Smith 2019, 81). Alongside burying their family in the cemetery, performing property this way generates over time the sense that Kibera belongs to them, and they to it.

This way of emplacing oneself materially to a place and people past and present, and the claim-making possibilities it affords land insecure Nubians has over the years undermined the state’s position that Kibera is state land and has caused friction between Nubians and their equally land insecure neighbors. The tension between neighbors was particularly played out in the aftermath of the raze when residents either mistakenly or purposefully appropriated the ruined materials that hours before constituted Bibi Jaina’s property:

Abdul and Jabril [brothers] they helped Hakim and his brother get their things together. But skirmishes happened. Those who helped was [sic]
not people we know. They came with bad thoughts to loot. I made the boys just get the things and bring it here [her home] so it can be safe. They even took the mabati [corrugated metal sheets] and materials to sell (...). Everything, it was all gone.

The term ‘looting’ was used to describe the actions of Kiberans following the 2003 and 2004 razes as well (Bowedes 2005, 18–19). Consistent in these reports is that ‘looting’ is loaded with overt expectations and undue responsibilities that the observer placed on Kiberans to conduct themselves virtuously in the aftermath of the raze. These expectations of others are evident in Bibi Jaina’s retelling above in that she anticipated that her fellow Kiberans would maintain the norms of material possession and ownership that preceded the raze, norms which preserved longstanding material differences between Nubians and non-Nubians in Kibera. Expounding on the extract above is not to lambast Bibi Jaina. To be sure, those whom Bibi Jaina defined as looters may have neither known the significance of their actions nor have looted at all. Rather, Bibi Jaina’s retelling illustrates two points for understanding how the Kenyan state, via the raze, fundamentally reconfigured the materiality of Nubian religiosity and the material dynamics between Nubians and non-Nubians in Kibera.

First, we see that ‘looting’ is more than a moral determination of actions committed, but a pivotal moment when the state, by way of the bulldozers, retreats from Kibera and the residents of Kibera are left to reassemble their neighborhood. Bibi Jaina’s retelling suggests that she assumed her neighbors would rebuild through the social and material infrastructures that before the raze constituted and organized religious differences in Kibera; that is, Nubian property as constructed from mud, wattle, and sometimes stone. From this perspective, it may be said that for Bibi Jaina, the reappropriation of her ruined property was also a radical exercise in reconstructing the history of and social hierarchies in Kibera in ways that erased and disadvantaged Nubians.

Second, Bibi Jaina’s determination that her fellow Kiberans “came with bad thoughts to loot” requires on the part of the listener and reader, an empathic understanding of the conditions under which the experience took place and the kinds of emotions the retelling of this experience evokes. Consider that the relatively short period between destruction and appropriation may have deprived Bibi Jaina the opportunity to comprehend and/or mourn the loss of her property. As Irene Stengs (2018, 268) reminds us, in the wake of a catastrophic event, mourning and commemoration over ruins are necessary rituals to “mediate and organize grief, anger, sadness and retaliation”. In this respect, the inability to mourn her loss may explain why the role of the state and the
road of the state does not feature in Bibi Jaina’s recollection of the morning of the raze while the assumed motives and intentions of her fellow Kiberans overwhelms her recollection.

As bulldozers gave way to road flattening machines which smoothed the earth and gave shape to the bypass road, Kiberans gradually began to reconstruct their mosques and churches. In the ensuing months, the entangled circuits of material ruination and revitalization and the incremental construction of the bypass road, shifted from the bulldozed site in Kibera to the courts in Kenya. In 2019, the Nubian Rights Forum filed a temporary injunction with the Environmental and Land Court of Nairobi to restrain the defendant and their former rentee – the Full Gospel Church of Kibera – from constructing “a permanent church building” on their parcel of land. The Full Gospel Church of Kibera (FGCK) formally occupied an “impermanent” church constructed from mabati on the land owned by trustees of the Kibra Nubian Community whom the Nubian Rights Forum represented. Following the bulldozing in July 2018, the structure that housed the FGCK was demolished and “the land on which the church building was hitherto situated became smaller” (ELC Suit No. 268 of 2019, 2).

Whereas before the raze, the Full Gospel Church of Kibera was previously constructed entirely with mabati, their senior clergy decided that “for the purpose of durability, structural stability and safety of the defendant’s members”, they would approach their landlords and request “to construct stone pillars from the foundation of the building to the first floor of the new church structure” (2). However, the Kibra Nubian Community denied the FGCK request and filed suit for the demolition of the church. According to Nubian Rights Forum, the use of materials including “stone pillars and the lintel" indicated to the Kibra Nubian community “that the defendant is constructing a permanent church building” and was therefore in breach of the rental agreement that prohibited the erection of structures that were “inharmonious to the Community’s use of land”.

The judge ruled in favor of the Full Gospel Church of Kibera and awarded their claim to damages. He found that “[w]hat the defendant is putting up is a building. The new church building is being put up where the defendant’s old church building stood”. The ruling was indeed advantageous for the Kenyan government. In addition to the bulldozing, this judgement further erased the materiality and aesthetics of what counts as a church or any place of worship in Kibera. For the Kibra Nubian Community and for individuals like Bibi Jaina who intended to rebuild, the ruling raised the question that if property deemed religiously significant to those who use it cannot be defined, set apart, and protected by its material assemblage, then how will the private property
which Bibi Jaina considers to be religiously meaningful, be safeguarded in the future?

6 Bypassing Material Blockage

After the road flatteners smoothed the stretch of earth between Lang’ata and Ngong Road, construction of the bypass road was suspended, and a row of immobile machines were parked on the dusty road. A few Kiberans with whom I spoke during my fieldwork in 2019, stated that stalled road works usually meant that “the government ate the monies” or was engaged in corruption. Until the state resumed construction of the bypass road, the idle construction machines, they said, functioned as a sort of placeholder of power to signal to Kiberans that the land belonged to the state. A question that preoccupied this group of Kiberans was when and how a neighborhood rebuilds itself amidst such uncertainty.

Overall, most residents expressed their frustration at the government who not only upended the lives of Kiberans only to pause construction of the bypass road, but also refused to compensate residents for their loss. Their frustrations at the government’s irresponsibility, ineptitude and greed were embroiled on the one hand in fears of being existentially, emotionally, and financially ‘stuck’ in this liminal period of destruction and reconstruction and on the other hand, worries about ‘going backwards’. As the period of inactivity continued and anxiety about the future loomed in Kibera, it seemed to me that the ‘thingness’ of the bypass road – those irreducible qualities of affect and influence that shapes the ways in which humans, in this case Kiberans, are presently restricted from organizing their futures – became increasingly pronounced (Terzidou 2020).

For Bibi Jaina in particular, the suspension of the bypass road obstructed her ability to rebuild her property; property that would allow her to honor her father and grandfather and provide her grandsons with a connection to their religion and ancestors as well as an income. Individuals like Bibi Jaina who lost their property on 23 July 2018 are perhaps the first generation of Nubians in Kibera to grapple with what is at stake for the Nubian community if they are no longer able to perform and sustain their religiosity through their property. How does she evoke a connection to her forebearers, and how will her grandsons be able to achieve this connection if they remain propertyless in Kibera? In the extract below, Bibi Jaina grapples with this question by voicing her fears that the Nubian cemetery might also be destroyed by the state in the near future:
T: So, the bypass is meant to be completed in 2020?

B: Yes, that’s what they say.

T: So, what will Kibera be like in the future?

B: That is a difficult one. Even if we remain in Kibera it will not be the same Kibera (...). For Nubians it [Kibera] is a home. That is what it was meant to be. The rest of their tribes they have their homeland, where they come from. The Kikuyu come from central [Kenya], the Luos and the Luhya come from western [Kenya] and the Kamba come from Eastern. They have their home. They have a place to bury. They have a place where their tribe makes sense. Kibra [using the Kinubi word, tw] is our ancestral place. Here is where we make sense of who we are. Out there we have nothing to ground us, firm. My fear is if we leave, they will remove our loved ones buried in the cemetery. But what is stopping them?

The extract above illuminates what it presently means for Bibi Jaina that Nubians remain in Kibera. Not only have grandsons become the first generation of propertyless Nubians at least in the family, but should the destruction of the Nubian cemetery occur, Bibi Jaina and perhaps her mother will be the first Nubians to be buried outside Kibera. Additionally, Bibi Jaina expresses a fear that if Nubians flee Kibera to ‘bypass the bulldozer’ or avoid a possible raze, the state might destroy their cemetery in their absence. That Bibi Jaina is beset by an event that has not yet happened but influences no less how she presently evaluates the religious future of Nubians in Kibera, illuminates the effect, as well as the enduring and elusive affects, of state violence. Her worry illustrates the ambiguity, and perhaps insidious nature of the things of violence as that against which Nubians both compete and at once depend on to ensure a place for themselves in an uncertain future.

At the same time, what is noteworthy is the logic and categorical speak she employs to articulate her fear that appears to enforce the separation between religion and tribe through land and property rights when she says: “They have their home. They have a place to bury. They have a place where their tribe makes sense”. However, by defining home as a place where one is buried with one’s ancestors and classifying Kibera as her ancestral home, Bibi Jaina also appears to engage in the politics of ethnicity. It could be argued that given the destruction of her property months prior, and the uncertainty whether the place where her father and grandfather are buried will be destroyed in the future, Bibi Jaina is not ‘making’ Nubians into an ethnic group but working
through whether the state will respect the burial site of a community whom it
discounts as citizens based on their non-ethnicity? In this respect, we see how
the remains of the past – the unfinished road, unprocessed ruins of the bull-
dozing, and the dead – are active in and activated for, articulating in dichoto-
mosous religion-tribe terms, to whom Kibera belongs and who belongs in it.

Since the raze, Bibi Jaina fears as well for the future of her grandsons to
whom she intended to bestow the property. Indeed, the property would ordi-
narily be divided amongst her six children but as Bibi Jaina explained, the
'stateless' status of her grandsons excludes them from applying for employ-
ment opportunities and tertiary education in Kenya. Since 2004, Bibi Jaina
has accompanied her grandsons to their ‘vetting’ interview, the formal and
often discriminatory process Nubians undergo at eighteen to obtain a Kenyan
identity document and passport. She has both witnessed and experienced the
discrimination that her grandsons faced by local officials who required official
documentation to verify that the family has lineage in Kenya but often claimed
that Bibi Jaina’s nursing degree is fraudulent. If the applications of her grand-
sons would be rejected, she intended to make a comfortable living in Kibera as
landlords for them. Since the raze, however, Bibi Jaina worries that her grand-
sons will have to seek employment outside Kibera where they will continue to
endure prejudice. What, then, would it mean to be Nubian if more people felt
impressed to not only work and reside outside Kibera, but attend a different
place of worship and possibly be buried elsewhere? Will these non-Kiberan
Nubians still maintain autochthonously that Kibera is in their blood? What
are the ontological implications for future generations who cannot reproduce
the material aspects of their religious community in Kibera? Or, as Bibi Jaina
rhetorically asks during our conversation: “[w]hat is the Kenyan Nubian out-
side of Kibera where no one understands him?”

These fears and concerns about the future of Nubians in Kibera illuminates
how state violence functions on a continuum of normalized discrimination
and prejudices about the illegal destruction of their property. This section
shows that state violence is also intimate, emotive, embodied, and is built up
and is stored in the body. The painful experiences that Bibi Jaina encountered
and the feelings she conveys, prevents her from engaging with the Nubian bur-
ial site with the gratitude and reverence for her predecessors that I observed
when she presented the photographs of her grandfather and father, as she
fears it may be destroyed. Rather, the Nubian cemetery appears to be the next
and final scene of state violence against the Nubian community. In this sense,
it is not only her grandsons who cannot mediate through the material and
temporal dynamics of their religiosity following the destruction of the family
property and suspension on the construction of the bypass road; Bibi Jaina is
similarly and presently entrapped in a state of grief and loss of the past, concerns for the future of Nubians, and whether she will be buried in her home or not.

7 Conclusion

As I exited Bibi Jaina’s home on my final day of fieldwork in Kibera, I wondered which of the dwellings may contain the materials of Bibi Jaina’s former property and what might these materials mean and mediate now that they constitute the homes, shops, and daycares of her neighbors? While the social life of the ruined matter continued in new ways in Kibera, the social career of the bypass road remained at the time, deferred but exerted nonetheless, a considerable influence over the material possibilities for the formation and continuation of religion in Kibera in the present and future as well. In this chapter, I have focused on the dynamics of material destruction of property deemed both religiously significant in the case of Bibi Jaina, and a place of worship in the case of the Full Gospel Church. These properties were traced alongside the material construction of the bypass road to illustrate how state violence in Kibera manifests and functions on the one hand, and how it shapes and impedes the material conditions and possibilities of religion, on the other. The bypass road, its cartographic beginnings and post-independent becoming, allowed me to illustrate the evolution and continuum of state violence and its effects on the Nubian community in Kibera. By studying state violence ethnographically and through the lived experiences of Bibi Jaina, this chapter has also shown how state violence becomes manifest in embodied and emotive ways which affects multiple generations of Bibi Jaina’s family.

Bibi Jaina occupies a distinct socio-economic position in Kibera. Unlike many Kiberans, she is a property owner but exists outside the status quo of land politics organized and managed by ‘big men’ in Kenya. As a result, and as Nubian Muslim living in a country that fails to recognize her as citizen or her claim to Kibera as a homeland, Bibi has to ‘bypass the bulldozer’ by emphasizing how her relationship to Kibera and her duty as a property owner are intrinsic to the preservation and continuation of her religiosity. This is not to say that her claims are invented or untrue. Rather, as this chapter has shown, these claims rely on and enforce material differences between Nubians and non-Nubians, which, as I hoped to have demonstrated, requires on our part.

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12 Fieldnotes, April 2019.
ethical sensitivity to comprehend what is at stake for Bibi Jaina, should she lose the last of her property or witness the destruction of the Nubian cemetery. In this respect, the future construction of the bypass road in Kibera will force Nubians to continue to find ways of bypassing the bulldozer and may hold considerable risk for the future of Nubian religiosity and the vitality of interreligious coexistence in Kibera.

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