MAISHA BORA, KWA NANI? A COOL LIFE, FOR WHOM? MEDIATIONS OF MASCULINITY, ETHNICITY, AND VIOLENCE IN A NAIROBI SLUM

Naomi van Stapele

Introduction

Wanaich looks at me with an intense look in his eyes:

They just took that man…. and cut him with a panga [machete in Kiswahili]. Then they come to me and ask for my I.D. It was like a checkpoint. They put kunji [firewood in Kiswahili] and stones on the road. There was no way you could pass them, and they want to know if you are PNU1 so they look at your I.D. I was scared but I saw a guy I was in school with, you know at Depot Field. So this guy come to me and say I am from Mtaa [ghetto neighbourhood in Sheng]2 and that I can pass. I never went back and stayed low for weeks. What if that guy had not been there? Eeeeh, I don’t want to think about that. [Interview 1]

The young men at the checkpoint would have interpreted Wanaich’s name on his identity card, Samuel Wainaina, as an indication of his Kikuyu identity and, thus, of his support of the Party of National Unity (PNU). These young men supported Raila Odinga who was the Luo presidential candidate of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and the main opponent of Mwai Kibaki, the Kikuyu presidential candidate of PNU. For reasons explained below, the dominant discourse on citizenship in Kenya interpreted the political divide that led to violence in the days following the General Elections, held on 27 December 2007, as ethnic, pitting so-called Luo against so-called Kikuyu. The tensions broke out into open violence in several impoverished rural

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1 PNU stands for Party of National Unity, the party from incumbent, and Kikuyu, President Kibaki during the 2007 General Elections in Kenya. Kibaki’s main competitor was Raila Odinga, the Luo leader and presidential candidate of ODM, the Orange Democratic Movement.

2 Sheng is a slang language that derived from many different languages such as Kiswahili, English and other languages spoken in Kenya. Sheng is mostly spoken in urban centres in Kenya and other cities in East Africa.
and urban localities, as soon as President Kibaki was inaugurated during a hurried swearing-in ceremony on 30 December 2007. In Rift Valley and Coast Provinces, other ethnic groups such as the Kalenjin and the Kissi were also involved in the violence, but that did not alter the leading perception in Kenya that this was about ‘Luo’ and ‘Kikuyu’.

In Mathare Valley, and in many other slum areas in Nairobi (De Smedt 2009), Mungiki gangs (which had a strong Kikuyu profile) and Taliban gangs (which had a strong Luo profile but are not related to the Taliban in Afghanistan) clashed in support of the opposing political parties. The ‘Luo’ men who took to the streets in Mathare Valley after the inaugural ceremony on 30 December 2007 shouted slogans accusing all Kikuyu of being Mungiki and PNU-supporters and, therefore, thieves. In their eyes, Kibaki had stolen the elections with the backing of the entire Kikuyu community. In the week that followed, many Kikuyu inhabitants were violently driven away, their houses occupied, their businesses and shops looted and burnt, and many women raped. Many young rioters spontaneously joined the Taliban gangs while groups of ‘Kikuyu’ men retaliated and were accompanied by Mungiki gangs from ghetto villages in the surrounding neighbourhood. The violence quickly spiralled out of control and, within days, Bondeni Village, the ghetto village in Mathare Valley at issue here, was turned into a ghost town of smouldering ruins. Later reports gave evidence of the organised nature of the violence that took place in these localities (Human Rights Watch 2008). Of interest here, however, is why so many poor young men from different ethnic groups became participants in the violence. Instead of viewing these men simply as ‘young men for hire’, I propose to take a closer look at their personal motivations and legitimisations that are, as I will show in this chapter, closely linked to processes of identity construction. In addition, I will show how dominant discourses on citizenship, fuelled by the political rhetoric of politicians that pitted ethnic groups against each other, acquired meaning in Bondeni Village in the run-up to, and during the 2007 General Elections, because of very specific local

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3 All localities where violence erupted after the General Elections of 2007 (such as Eldoret, Mombasa or the Nairobi slums) were home to poor communities with limited resources. See http://www.peaceinkenya.net/EVRI-REPORT.doc (accessed on 15 November 2008), http://ushahidi.com (accessed on 5 November 2008) and Human Rights Watch 2008.