Remapping Buru Buru

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MY YOUNGER BROTHER, James, tells me another Buru Buru Phase 5 story when I make my habitual Saturday phone call and ask him what’s happening in the old neighbourhood. My question is always “Habari ya ghetto?” at which he laughs. Buru Buru 5 is not really a ghetto – and no one would laugh at the question if they lived in a real ghetto. Also, ghetto here, we both understand, is not a physical description, rather the closest description to a sibling common past, relative to where we are now.

Like most of the stories my brother gives over the phone, this one is in a confident, lazy tone, all the more incendiary because its latent content (about what is happening in the old neighbourhood, now a jungle) is unbelievable, absurd, farcical and tragic. I ask about the Saiyankas, old childhood friends, to hear about their most recent failures. They are safer to the madness of the present. We laugh from the liver (a sound we’ve acquired from other grown men of my family) with relief that we got away from it all: from Buru Buru’s inertia, its self-deceptions, its inflammatory realities, its temptations of matatus, drink and drugs, and also from our childhood friends.

Of course, the fact that we went to school on the other side of town helped us not get trapped in Buru Buru. And by the time we were older, we felt immune to the realities of failure across Kenyan middle-class society more evident in the lives of relatives, friends and neighbours. We also acquired an existential snarl in the stomach, which was a fear of failure, a fear of not being something, of not being able to say that things were okay and that we were on our way.

All these things saved us from Buru Buru. But there was and still is much going on that tells a bigger story about Kenya’s urban landscape. For the longest time, the default description of Buru Buru was that it was a middle-class suburb, which declined slowly into a lower-middle-class area in the 1990s during an economic downturn that affected the whole country. By the time it was done, many of us realised that our brand of middle-classness meant nothing. This was just another Kenyan urban soup bowl of different values, incomes, worldviews – as ephemeral and baseless as the latest political fad.

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Our parents were villagers who were the first of their generation to wear shoes for a prolonged period of time, write on paper and go into a classroom without a glance and discard all the things that would have come before them for “better”, modern things. It would have probably saved them and places like Buru Buru if they had only realised that what they had was too new to be taken seriously. The anger and ugly love from my father that I experienced growing up was not old, I realise, but came from the pressures of mortgages, “good school” fees, the everyday stress of being ok in this new world. So, Buru Buru became a place of failed dreams because it could never overcome its initial promise.

The estate was built of white, uniform two-storey maisonettes, with orange-brick roofs, which smelled of cleanliness, industry and possibility. Later, some model of Toyota became a part of the estate’s look. The men dressed in similar suits, but were distant because of their perceived trajectories. The women met the demands of modern African motherhood in a confused no-man’s land of arbitrary dictums. Everyone who played in the courts in the green grass was young and a child. Bigger and older children stood out. When they came home from the secondary school holidays, they crept out in the evenings, lurked in corners and screwed the house-girls.

Old people were absent and lived up-country and every other Saturday everyone left the uniform streets and the green playgrounds and went to visit them. We called it oshago or shags, out there in the reserve. We came back as Buru Buru people in a muddy car with sacks of produce, bright red carrots, light green cabbages, lush peas and huge potatoes and the house-girl washed the car the same night, even if it was raining.

There were fewer other forms of life within the estate. When we escaped the gaze of our mothers to wander the swaths of savanna beyond its borders, we saw chameleons, storks, herons, tadpoles and stray dogs.

The week-day adult world was about clockwork and cars. All the men drove away at the same time in the morning, to presumably build the nation, and came back at 5.30pm to avoid the traffic jams. I was too young to see the drinking, the men coming back to fuck the house-girls at lunchtime, the women taking to their respective churches, their neighbourhood groups – not because they loved Jesus, but because they had been failed by love, their errant husbands, the hellions that their children were becoming as middle-class Kenya and Buru Buru grew older and retreated.

We played in huge groups, all the kids in the neighbourhood, but at some point I remember the boys started beating each other senseless, wanting to fight more than anything else. So, when not sneering and being cruel, we played with anger and competitive meaning as if life on the Kenyan hustle had already started. But an entitlement lurked that would ultimately lead to some of our playmates refusing to grow up, like blue-bloods or problem children who had peaked too early, and, because the future could never be as bright as childhood, shrugged themselves back into early Buru Buru.

Many of these became matatu touts, retail traders, hustlers of all shades – things that their parents dreaded – entering a weird kind of civil disobedience that scorned school, grades, trajectories through university and a “meaningful” place in Kenyan society. The systemic changes seem to have come in the mid-1980s. And that is the line beyond which memories of uniformity fade and everything moves into the Buru Buru present – always chaotic, never-ending, a continuing antithesis to childhood.

It has lasted ever since, through the failures of many like the Saiyankas and now the latest fuck-ups, the new breed of crazies, mutants who will do anything for cheap alcohol and drugs, including beating up their old mothers and date-raping high school girls. Buru Buru was a pre-cursor to Kenya’s ambitious push for urban housing for the emerging new African middle-class. With Buru Buru’s success followed...
Langata, Southlands, Ngei, Ngumo and South B’s Golden Gates and Plainsview – new middling and modernist extensions of the Kenyan state, straddling once-colonial and formerly white suburbs, such as Muthaiga and Karen, and African servant-quarters spaces, such as Jericho and Jerusalem. The estates were all funded by Housing Finance Corporation of Kenya, HFCK. Every pipe and water marker in Buru Buru was stamped with the acronym. We did not know what it meant and when bored we made up monikers for it.

Buru Buru and Langata’s decline were a long-ignored social phenomenon because they were less exciting than Kibera/Mathare, had little prospect for UN Habitat sympathy, and lacked the numbers to affect electoral outcomes and the ambitions of politicians (5,000 houses in Buru Buru, 10,000 voters max). These hubs of increasingly middle-class pretension and political non-participation emerged as spaces of little power and their lights dimmed without much ado in the late 1980s.

Some people living in Buru Buru and Langata eye wealthier estates and suburbs with a greedy gaze, while at the same time displaying disdain about all non-estate (read slum and low-income) spaces. Their aspirations and penchant for hype ignore the hubs of youth unemployment, alcoholism, increasing criminality, family breakdown, insanity and social dysfunction that places of middle-class normality such as Buru Buru have become.

It is said that nothing creates inequality like the perception of stability and the creation of surplus wealth, or the emergence of a new political force, for that matter. The Kenyan state changed under the leadership of Daniel Arap Moi: allegiances shifted from the civil service to party politics, and socio-economic priorities focused away from the emerging middle-class to rural populations.

I remember these changes, through a woman, a family friend, who I will call Mrs K. It was because of what happened to Mrs K, when I was still at an impressionable age, that I understood that Buru Buru was really in trouble. I had grown up and played with Mrs K’s kids. Her husband, a senior Central Bank of Kenya official, was more than a passing acquaintance of my father and before her “crack”, Mrs K was very good friends with my mum.

Mrs K, once an immaculately dressed woman, quiet and beautiful and a teacher at a private school, became a harridan who walked the estate pavements day and night muttering to herself and picking papers off the ground. It was worrying that a woman, a mother, could change so drastically and almost take her family down with her without much ado.

Under normal circumstances something would have been done about Mrs K. In an earlier time, she would have been institutionalised; middle class neighbours would have met and reinforced each other and their values would have embraced and smothered her madness. But not in 1990s Kenya. In a time of serious economic downturn, 200 per cent inflation, rampant corruption among small-time crooks, white-collar thieves, policemen and politicians, and in which the bribe became the most common currency in contemporary life, Mrs K became another symptom or, rather, a symbol of the general decline of the estate, the city and the country as a whole. In fact, many other people went crazy in their small ways, but not as evidently as Mrs K.

I’ve been fictionalising Buru Buru for at least 10 years and my default character is Mrs K. Short stories, short short stories, bar tales, diaspora exchanges – all variations of her context. Buru Buru is the stuff of urban legend, not history. Our way of talking about it is through the register of ‘fiction’. It is always narrative, not social fact.
The most recent story my brother tells is way beyond the notoriety of the Sayianka brothers of our childhood. The new Buru mutants he tells me are even more spectacular fuckups – a true criminal class, psychotic and dangerous. They still live at home with their parents; the luckier ones whose parents live in more affluent retirement homes have been handed their elders’ houses. They basically drink, spoil high school neighbourhood girls and move in and out of jobs. Possibly the most infamous are the Maitas, whose patriarch is a businessman and a failed politician. The eldest Maita is in his mid-30s and is somehow still attending university, trying to finish undergraduate degrees he began 13 years ago. When he is not pretending to be a scholar, he visits nearby Makadara, on the edges of slumhood, drinks “bombs” and goes home to unleash hell on his siblings.

There are variations of this kind of fuckedness. And so my brother and I laugh with some relief because we are not any of these families. We lack the wealth and recklessnesses, and possibly the daring and imagination, as a result of my mother’s heavy Protestant hand. Buru Buru gives people the connections but at the same time lacks the real economic or political forces and interests that serve as a deterrent to entropy.

A few months ago I got into an argument about my old neighbourhood. It started when someone made a passing remark about post-election violence and a comparison of Buru Buru to a middle class estate in Nakuru. I found myself getting completely and irrationally angry – arguing that Buru Buru lacks ethnic hotspots at the level that many other places hold, and that it has never had a defining voting conscience to endanger its own comforts for the sake of a political agenda.
I realise now that it does not matter. Buru Buru does not need national narratives to expose that there were, and are, other battles going on in places like it that indicate the general downturn of urban Kenya. Buru Buru long ago began exhibiting the worst symptoms of urban breakdown – those that would give a sense of things to come.

By arguing the way I did, I was, in fact, perpetuating the myth of Buru Buru. Without stories of places such as these, we continue to “remove” history, narrative and the idea of self. And we continue to laugh, to pretend and to refuse to live in the real world. I have just sent my brother this version of Buru Buru’s story – as a beginning, so that we can stop laughing, or at least think before we laugh.