RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ironies of accomplishment: negative aspiration, economic resentment and the myth of the middle class on Nairobi's new urban outskirts

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Abstract

Exploring the 'hollow' character of middle-class status in contemporary Kenya, this article shows how upwardly mobile young Kenyans struggle to cope with the expectations for distribution that their displays of achievement create. Focusing on the urbanizing peripheries of Nairobi, it shows how accusations of envy (*wivu*) made about poorer friends and relatives reflect their anxieties about failing to act as the providers they are expected to be. Anticipation of the disappointment and resentment of their would-be dependants encourages them to withdraw from friendships and kinship relations in their home neighbourhoods, and seek instead an impersonal life in new urban enclaves closer to Nairobi. The avoidance of obligation is justified through discourses of individual effort and achievement, while poorer peers and relations are criticized for looking to rely on others. The article shows how such tensions over obligation and desires for withdrawal illuminate the fragility of Kenya's emerging middle class and the 'ironies of accomplishment' – that their very precarity denies these Kenyans the respect and status they desire in their neighbourhood homes.

Résumé

En explorant le caractère « creux » du statut de classe moyenne dans le Kenya contemporain, cet article montre comment les jeunes kenyans en mobilité ascendante peinent à gérer les attentes de distribution que créent leurs démonstrations d'accomplissement. En se concentrant sur des périphéries en voie d'urbanisation de Nairobi, il montre comment les accusations d'envie par les « riches » en apparence reflètent leurs anxiétés concernant le fait de ne pas agir comme les soutiens que l'on attend qu'ils soient. En proie à ces anxiétés et anticipant le ressentiment de leurs charges potentielles, ils se mettent en retrait et s'isolent de leurs proches en préférant vivre de manière impersonnelle dans des enclaves urbaines de Nairobi, contraints d'adopter des tactiques « négatives » pour réaliser leurs aspirations. L'article montre comment ces désirs de mise en retrait mettent en lumière la fragilité de la classe moyenne kenyane émergente et les « ironies de l'accomplissement » ; le fait qu'en dépit de leur précarité, ces Kenyans continuent à désirer le respect dans leur voisinage.

Resumo

Explorando o carácter 'oco' do estatuto de classe média no Quénia contemporâneo, este artigo mostra como os jovens quenianos com mobilidade ascendente lutam para lidar com as expectativas de distribuição que as suas exibições de realização criam. Centrando-se nas periferias de Nairobi que se urbanizam, mostra-se como as acusações de inveja por parte dos aparentemente 'ricos' reflectem as suas ansiedades por não agirem como os provedores que se espera que sejam. As suas ansiedades e a antecipação de ressentimento da parte dos seus possíveis dependentes encorajam-nos a afastarem-se dessas relações, procurando uma vida impessoal em novos enclaves urbanos mais próximos de Nairobi, e obrigam-nos a adotar tácticas 'negativas' para alcançarem as suas aspirações. O artigo mostra como esses desejos de afastamento iluminam a fragilidade da classe média emergente do Quénia e as 'ironias da realização' – que, apesar da sua precariedade, estes quenianos continuam a desejar respeito nas suas casas de bairro.

A twenty-five-year-old man from a poor, peri-urban neighbourhood north of Nairobi could not enjoy a return trip to his former homestead.

A bank employee renting an apartment with his young family in Chungwa Town, just outside the city's boundary,[1] Lee Karani was a man who believed that he could be proud of his domestic achievements given his relatively young age. 'I can sit with married men,' he once told me with an air of pride. By contrast, most of his peers from the nearby towns and neighbourhoods had not yet started families of their own, lacking stable incomes in an era of mass unemployment, what anthropologists have described as a crisis of 'surplus people' (Li 2010; Ferguson 2015). While many of his former classmates and neighbours languished jobless and idle on their parents' homesteads, Lee put his success down to his own striving, the inner resolve he had used to extricate himself from his home and 'push' himself towards a better life. As Lee saw it, his efforts had largely won him respect in the eyes of new friends and associates in Nairobi. 'For me, the way I carry myself means people trust me a lot. I receive money even from Gulf states,' he told me.

But when he visited his rural home for the first time in a year for a distant relative's burial service, Lee felt the sting of his peers' and former neighbours' disdain. A common obligation, attending a burial (Gĩkũyũ: *mathiko*[2]) in central Kenya typically involves a gift of money to the bereaved who shoulder the hospital bills and funeral expenses for the departed. Well placed to intervene, Lee borrowed a car for his return from a work colleague, who, he explained, 'could see the life I'm pushing hard to get to'. Driving into the neighbourhood – the mourners arrayed on the backstreets outside the service, including many of his former male peers, now the neighbourhood's structurally unemployed – he found himself marked by what he took to be the threatening gazes of his contemporaries. 'You could see people looking at me very badly,' he told me.

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[1] All names and some specific locations are anonymized. Some biographical data has been changed to further protect anonymity.

[2] Terms are in Kiswahili unless specified as being in Gĩkũyũ.

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Knowingly or not, young Kenyans who are consciously aspiring to middle-class lives often create spectacles of their newfound economic success, just as Lee did, arriving by car to his neighbour's burial. That such one-off displays are seen to convey economic achievement, however, throws into relief their surface-level nature. As scholars have observed, Africa's nascent middle class remains not only economically precarious (Mercer and Lemanski 2020) but something of an illusion in the first place – an impression created by the increased visibility of urban styles of conspicuous consumption, which only serves to conceal its shallow economic basis all the more readily (Melber 2022: 211–12; see also, e.g., Spronk 2012; Gastrow 2020: 520; cf. Ferguson 1999: 82–6). Hannah Dawson's (2023) research in urban South Africa has shown how discourses about 'fake' wealth reflect the image of success made possible by conspicuous consumption – having a Mercedes-Benz car, for instance – and the way in which aspiration itself is thought of in terms of a material culture of display (cf. Newell 2012). Of course, and as Dawson shows, whether someone's success is genuine or not is a debated topic.

The same questions are being raised in Kenya's public sphere too. 'Is the middle class broke or fake?'[3] The topic broached by Kenyan TV station K24 evokes the gap between surface-level performances of wealth and the deeper reality. The 'broke-ness' concealed by middle-class 'fakeness' finds comment in work such as artist Onyis Martin's 'A table for two', where he contrasts the luxury of Nairobi restaurants with the reality for many city-dwellers of eating at cheap *banda*s (kiosks), a meditation on the pressure for Nairobians to project their achievements in spite of their material circumstances (Fontein *et al.* 2023). The majority of Kenyans continue to derive their wages from the informal economy (KNBS 2022), and when economic success is read through external markers, genuine precarity is easily concealed. Such was the problem for Lee, who struggled with the gap between the impression his peers and relatives had of him and his economic situation. While he had begun to find a degree of economic stability, he continued to insist that he had not yet 'made it'.

Homing in on the topic of the illusory nature of middle-class status in contemporary Kenya, this article turns attention towards the problems that 'hollow' images of economic success create for those who project them – they often struggle with the consequences of their inauthenticity. Drawing on twenty months of fieldwork carried out in Lee's home neighbourhood of Ituura (January 2017–July 2018 and August 2019) and subsequent visits in 2022 (February–March and July–August), the article illustrates Lee's problems with the 'jealousy' he felt that his apparent success created.

His experience of 'bad looks' from his peers and neighbours recalls anthropological literature about the envy of the successful in rural and urban contexts across Africa and beyond, the idea that wealth accumulation's anti-social associations are thought to provoke revenge attacks of witchcraft (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1976; Geschiere 2013; Foster 1972).[4] However, instead of 'envy', and its suggestion of a type of

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[3] 'Is the Kenyan middle class broke and fake?', K24TV, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvAnoTVIHtg&t=103s> (accessed 26 September 2022).

[4] As Geoffrey Hughes (2020) has pointed out, such anthropological accounts often reproduce the perspective of those accusing others of envy, often the economically and politically powerful essentializing it as a quality of the weak and marginal.

covetousness of another's property, I draw on my fieldwork with Lee's poorer peers to describe a type of *economic resentment*, a term that better captures the feeling's origin in unmet expectations for distribution. As I will show, Lee's friends had genuine expectations for economic assistance – not only from him, but from other successful men from Ituura. A feeling that the 'well up' would not help them coloured a resentment towards the apparently successful.

But as we shall see, Lee struggled with the burden of expectation his apparent success created. Avoiding the neighbourhood became a strategy through which he tried to short-circuit these resentments entirely. He characterized the neighbourhood of Ituura itself as a place of 'jealousy' (*wivu* in Kiswahili, *ũiru* in Gĩkũyũ), a place where people wanted to harm his success through ambiguous and unseen means. My suggestion is that, while these affects of resentment are often glossed locally as 'jealousy', they index the anxieties of upwardly mobile Kenyans about their inability to act as the providers they claim they are mistaken for. In this account, while resentments are shown to exist, witchcraft appears less in actual practice and more as a fear held by aspiring Kenyans about what their neighbours 'might' do to them for not being seen to share their success (cf. Ferguson 1999: 118–20).[5] In short, while people like Lee struggle with the actual material expectations of others for economic assistance, envy discourse operates as a narrative about others' ill will that allows aspirant Kenyans to further justify their detachment from their natal homes (cf. Desplat 2018).

In light of these tensions, the article explores Lee's quite conscious attempts to distinguish himself economically by pursuing aspirations for a middle-class life beyond Ituura, and his changing relationship with his peers who continued to live there in varying states of unemployment and poverty. It examines his material 'boundary work' (Lentz 2020), his desire to withdraw from economic relations in his home neighbourhood, and the ideas he mobilized to justify this strategy.

The urbanizing environs of Nairobi in southern Kiambu County constitute a rather specific setting to observe these tensions because of its truncated terrain of uneven prosperity. The peri-urban landscape of Lee's home neighbourhood of Ituura, beyond Nairobi's northern borders and into rural central Kenya, is a place of mixed fortunes. While some are said to have 'progressed' to a more stable economic status, many of his peers in their twenties languished in their parents' homesteads, unemployed or with jobs too low-paying to make any substantial advancements with their lives, such as building a house or entering into a stable marriage. For young men, Ituura is a place of what anthropologists have described as a form of 'waithood' (Honwana 2012; cf. Hansen 2005; Mains 2012; Masquelier 2019; Jones 2020; Stasik *et al.* 2020; Mujere 2020), itself produced by the continent's wider problem of 'surplus people', of mass underemployment and unemployment (Li 2010). But Ituura's landscape of waithood borders on sites of genuine prosperity – the satellite town of Chungwa, where Lee had moved, and especially nearby Ruaka, a new type of urban setting that has emerged in the last two decades as a desirable place to live for middle-class Nairobians. A commuter town replete with large apartment blocks and gated estates, it embodies

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[5] James Ferguson (1999: 118) wrote in his ethnography of the Zambian Copperbelt that urban migrants returning home with wealth feared not only witchcraft but the possibility that their relatives might commit acts of actual violence against them.

what Morten Nielsen, Jason Sumich and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen (2021) characterize as the urban enclave's appeal as a hub of desire for global middle classes, one that operates both through its visible detachment from its immediate setting (of urban chaos) but also as a site of luxurious, private living.[6] This article reflects on the attraction of Nairobi's new satellite towns such as Ruaka and the desire for detachment and a more impersonal life free from the expectations of kin that such places are seen to enable. Yet across this urbanizing periphery, people like Lee *move*, and through these movements – as the opening vignette attests – the strains of fledgling success become legible.

Anthropologists of Africa have long remarked on the middle-class practice of 'breaking' networks with poorer kin (Meyer 1998; cf. Ferguson 1999: 117–18). As Deborah Durham (2020: 489–90) has noted, these accounts echo classic anthropological literature concerning the erosion of moral economies of solidarity and the emergence of new forms of individualism (see, e.g., Taussig 2010 [1980]; Shipton 1989; cf. Amanor 2010). What this article shows, however, is that desires to withdraw do not emerge from a new middle-class individualism (one associated with Pentecostal Christianity, for instance, as Birgit Meyer famously argued (1998)), but precisely because upwardly mobile persons like Lee experience the intense precarity of their status. It is because they have *not* 'made it' that they are keen to guard their budgets. Drawing on Marshall Sahlins' (1972: 214) characterization of 'negative reciprocity' – the contraction of circles of distribution that takes place when people are put under extreme pressure (cf. Seekings 2019) – I describe this process as the 'negativity' of aspiration, the idea that people like Lee have about the need to look after one's own fortunes above all others in order to 'make it' to middle-class status.

In this sense, this article is less about 'the middle class in Kenya' than about the difficulties of having conscious aspirations for a certain kind of material life, and the ambivalent ripple effects of these desires in wider social and economic life (cf. Hull 2020). What comes to the fore are not simple economic and geographic distances between the rural 'left behind' and young, urbane migrants made good, but the illusory nature of the economic gap between them in the first place. As the opening of the article illustrates, consciously aspirant persons like Lee carefully choreograph their success, making home visits at times of prosperity and withdrawing when they have too little to share. Lee's ambivalent experience of returning home speaks to what I have come to see as one of the ironies of experiencing a degree of economic achievement in contemporary Kenya – the display of wealth from a position of precarity and then, in seeking positive recognition and respect from one's former neighbours and peers, finding only resentment and scorn for failing to meet the expectations of distribution those displays create. The close of the article provides a final reflection on these ironies of accomplishment and the hollowness of middle-class status, showing how the Covid-19 pandemic – the curfews, lockdowns and grinding halt of economic activity in Nairobi – caused the façade of success to slip entirely. While urban migrants were forced to rely once again on their neighbourhood friends and relatives, the latter were made to realize that the

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[6] Desires to live in new urban enclaves inherit longer histories of desires for urban, modern futures in Africa (see, e.g., Ferguson 1999; Smith 2017).

former were not 'rich', but that they too were living in the same economic terrain, 'just trying'.

Mistaken for a provider

Once a fork in the road north-west out of Nairobi, a landscape of coffee farms owned by ethnic Kikuyu smallholders, Ruaka's transformation since the 1990s into an urban landscape of high-rise apartment blocks catering to an employed 'working class' has turned it into a beacon of desire for those who live in its poorer Kiambu hinterlands. The construction of Thika Road under Mwai Kibaki's National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government, and the Nairobi Outer Ring Road, created new opportunities for real-estate developers in sites precisely like Ruaka – close to Nairobi, where land was relatively cheap. Replete with bars and supermarkets, it embodies broader desires for middle-class achievement and conspicuous consumption. When poorer Kenyans from the nearby towns of Gachie and Banana Hill look at the high-rise apartment blocks, the SUV vehicles, and the culture of weekend drinking at grill lounges serving cooked goat meat (*nyama choma*), they see images of economic abundance they desire yet can hardly access (Lockwood 2020).

Ruaka's presence in the landscape, adjacent to both Nairobi and a poorer Kiambu hinterland, makes it a place of desire for young Kenyans moving there from further north around Mount Kenya. One could think of this demographic as a 'not yet middle class' – those who have clear aspirations of living better material lifestyles and have accessed them already to some degree, and yet still experience the precarity of the majority of Kenyans who work in the informal economy (KNBS 2022). Lee was one of them.

We met in Ruaka in July 2022, in one of its new bars. Since 2015, he had lived in a rental block in Chungwa, another urban satellite of Nairobi city, a move provoked by his father falling out with his uncles, a family conflict caused by what Lee saw as their envy of his father's successful taxi business. Lee had already felt the repercussions of these tensions in his youth. He believed that his aunts, the wives of these uncles, had done 'something' to prevent him 'growing': in other words, progressing in his education. Lee had always suspected that his KCSE exam results had been somehow spiked by the ill will he had received from his aunts.

Shifting to Chungwa, however, had taken him away from 'envious' family members and had brought him into a new era of success. It was then that he had found a job as a bank teller at a local mall while simultaneously running his own business selling imported clothes from Turkey. When I first met him in 2017, through playing for a local youth football team, Lee presented himself as a member of Nairobi's new middle class, always smartly dressed and wearing a silver wristwatch. It was not only his style that broadcast his aspirations, but his discourse and his demeanour. He projected his ardent belief that he was someone going on to bigger and better things than his peers.

But that day in Ruaka, Lee complained that now he faced a new problem: on the streets of Chungwa, his peers from poorer backgrounds were now regularly asking him for money. They had observed him travelling by *matatu* minivan in the direction of Nairobi every day, and, noticing his finer clothes, had identified him as someone with money.

They see you going to work and coming in the evening. And they will greet you
the first day, next day: 'Hi, hi!' They start like approaching you to be friends
because they see you have some fruits they want to pluck.

Lee resented that simply by becoming a familiar face he could be asked for money –
that even in Chungwa he could not live the impersonal existence he desired. His style
of dress led him to be coded as a wealthy person, a so-called '*sonko*', a 'sponsor', or
perhaps as one of the 'non-ghetto' rich kids, '*mapunk*'.[7] Bombarded with requests
every time he went to work, Lee complained about his struggle to keep his money
'together' when he was losing 'so much of it to handouts'. As much as the loss of
money itself, troublesome for a young father paying rent, it was the attitude of his
poorer agemates that he resented – that they expected him, a man with money, to
want to help them in the first place. 'You know it's very bad when people make you
feel like you are entitled to put away their problems or what,' he told me, sounding
somewhat tired. 'I am responsible for my life and so should they.' The problem, as Lee
saw it, was precisely this lack of responsibility he attributed to his jobless peers. He
encouraged me to think of my own observations, as someone who regularly passed
through Chungwa Town. 'You've seen in Chungwa the way they [youth] borrow
people['s] money. And not to eat food but for *bhang* [cannabis], or this one.' He
gestured at the bottle of Tusker beer he was drinking, although he no doubt knew that
Chungwa Town youth would be more likely to drink cheap jugs of keg or harsh spirits
such as Kenya Cane. 'They are idlers,' he insisted. 'It's good to give. But at least tell me
to give you money to buy you food. But don't tell me to give you money to buy
alcohol.'

Lee felt he was trapped. If he gave up his cash, he would lose out on precious
shillings to be reinvested in his business. However, if he chose not to give, he faced
uncertain consequences, not least the potential that the same men would rob him on
his way home. Chungwa's transport terminus was known to be a hotspot for muggings
late at night, acts of petty crime associated with the large numbers of young men who
hung around its outskirts, sitting outside video parlours and bars, watching the
evening pass. 'If you don't give you have created an enmity,' he explained. Where that
enmity would lead was unknown, but the problem itself was a marker of the trouble
caused by the relationships his young peers had created with him, a problem he was
forced to acknowledge. Through proximity, Lee had become known, and now he faced
claims for assistance that, if refused, could sour his relationships.

But as Lee would later reflect, his attitude to these men was not only negative and
pejorative. He felt a degree of guilt about being unable to meet their expectations. 'It
feels bad,' he told me. 'Maybe you don't have that money that they think you do.'

Economic resentment

As Lee found out through returns to his home neighbourhood of Ituura, it became
clear that he was being coded as a member of Nairobi's 'middle' or 'working' class, the
name given in Nairobi and its environs to office workers whose jobs – and salaries –
are seen to confer upon them economic stability. Lee was seen as a potential provider,

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[7] See <https://www.sheng.co.ke/kamusi/index.php?word_id=1536> (accessed 22 June 2023).

someone who could 'help' others with small loans and gifts of cash. To outside observers from his neighbourhood of Ituura, a setting to which I am about to turn, he appeared to have 'made it' in life, experiencing economic 'success' as manifest in his new forms of consumption. And yet, to their frustration, he seemed unwilling to share it, increasing their resentments.

Ituura lies beyond the town of Chungwa, between Nairobi's growing sprawl and the tea plantations of rural Kenya beyond. The landscape is one of hedgerows, walls and fences enclosing what are often multi-generational homesteads, some with two or more houses. These homesteads are passed on through patrilineal inheritance, and the subdivision of land has created a problem of land poverty. The average size of a plot of land is less than an acre, and many own plots of only 50 x 100 square metres. Like many patches of smallholder farms in Kiambu, its topography has been produced by central Kenya's colonial history and its postcolonial inequalities (see Lockwood 2023a: 332). After independence, members of the nascent Kikuyu business and political elite acquired land from former white settler farmers in the region. Land restitution on a wider scale was avoided, and Kiambu's smallholders have become practically 'workers with plots', forced to generate cash wages to stave off selling land (Njonjo 1981: 37).

Ituura is also a place of mixed fortunes, where the wealth of some households is displayed visibly in their concrete houses, the poverty of others in their wooden and corrugated iron homes. Among the younger generations, a handful of men in their thirties and early forties are said to have 'progressed themselves' (Gĩkũyũ: *gũthiĩ na mbere*) to the point of becoming 'too young to be rich', as Mwaura, the nineteen-year-old son of my host family put it in 2018. Exploiting niches in the local economy, these men have become local notables of agribusiness, leasing land to grow crops on a large scale. Today, they are wheeler-dealers in Nairobi, acquiring tenders from new shopping malls, for instance. Some of them have moved to newly built middle-class houses in nearby gated communities, but they maintain a footprint in the neighbourhood.

More generally, however, Ituura is a site of male destitution (Lockwood 2021). While these few men advance themselves economically, younger men in their early to mid-twenties – Lee's peers – struggle to find work in the local peri-urban informal economy, mainly as construction workers. Consider, for instance, the predicament of James, a twenty-three-year-old youth who hailed from a poor family residing in Ituura. James had finished high school, but his family had lacked the money to send him to college, and he had quickly found himself working on building sites across Kiambu's urbanizing periphery. When I met him in 2017, James was working sporadically, a few days here and there, but generally spending long stretches at home or wandering idly around the neighbourhood waiting for football practice to begin at 4 p.m. James was a keen and talented football player, a utility player with the 'gas' (as people called it) to play across the pitch, and he could play for hours on end, moonlighting for other teams to pursue his passion, which he believed had kept him away from the alcohol addiction that afflicted others in Ituura.

After joining his football team, I often spoke to James about his life in the neighbourhood on the way to and from training. One of the themes that kept emerging in our conversations was his resentment towards these local big shots for their inability to provide him with a 'connection' to find employment. As he saw it, in

spite of their seemingly extravagant wealth and proximity to job opportunities, they would not extend such networks to young, unemployed men like himself. 'It's bullshit!' he said, visibly angry. 'This is the way it's been since I was a child. People won't help you. If they know of an opportunity or of work, they'll find someone from Nairobi or Ruaka.' James's claim was that such men carefully guarded their local status, seeking to keep others down. 'It's like they don't want to see you prosper.'

Such resentments evoke the arguments over distribution described in Peter Geschiere's (2013) notable account of witchcraft accusations in Cameroon's Grassfields region. Geschiere saw witchcraft accusations to be produced by the decline of practices of 'just redistribution' from the wealthy to the poor. Cameroon's *nouveaux riches*, who accumulated wealth in the city, returned to their natal homes to construct stone houses in which they separated themselves from neighbours and kin. As the latter saw it, these new accumulators failed to extend their newfound success, and witchcraft accusations operated as a type of moral sanction (cf. Englund 1996). As I have argued elsewhere, these types of resentments embody similar tensions but in a more mundane register. They are moralizing arguments about what the extents and limits of obligation ought to be (Lockwood 2023a: 336–8; cf. Martin 2013).

In 2018, Lee was being viewed in a similar light to these local big shots. It was not difficult to see the difference in means between Lee and his peers who played for Star Boyz when one day at football training he had arrived from his job with a satellite television decoder in his backpack, which he planned to install in his house. Most of the players were surprised and excited by the prospect of having satellite television, but it was another clear sign of Lee's relative success. At the same time, Lee was frequently chastised (in joking or sometimes scornful tones) by other team members for his inability to train frequently due to his job. He frequently arrived late to training, and his lack of fitness was always evident by how quickly he tired during practice games.

Consider in this regard Lee's friendship with Kamau, another youth of the same age from a neighbouring Ituura family. The two men played for the same football team and often walked to and from training in each other's company. Unlike Lee, Kamau had no formal employment and worked sporadically on construction sites for around 500 Kenyan shillings (KES) per day, less than US$5. Like James, he often spent weeks at home in Ituura, hanging out on the backstreets without being called to work.

During fieldwork in 2017, I often walked with them to and from football training, and I could not help but notice a degree of tension between the two men. Kamau later told me privately that Lee 'acted differently' with him due to his nascent success, that he had grown distant and proud. Kamau became a lead figure in chastising Lee for his perceived lack of effort at training. Kamau clearly expected the history of their friendship to open up possibilities of asking for economic assistance. Lee clearly felt burdened by these expectations and did not wish to meet them.

Speaking to Lee on the walk home from training in 2018, he remarked how he preferred to 'live privately' in Chungwa, staying at home rather than perambulating around the town or the neighbourhood of Ituura, as Kamau often did when he lacked work. 'I don't tell people about myself, where I work, what I do. I lie to people. I lie a lot.' Lee's words evoked the requests for material assistance he anticipated from peers such as Kamau, and a fear that he would have to disappoint them. Rather than do so, he preferred to hide.

Fear and withdrawal: 'to live privately' in Ruaka

Lee's presence in Chungwa was a new manifestation of a familiar issue of unwanted familiarity. He explained that the trouble he experienced becoming known to once unknown others in Chungwa was comparable to his wider experience of being 'guilt tripped', as he called it, by family members and peers from his home neighbourhood of Ituura, which he had left in 2015, especially those who he felt continued to lay claim to his contingent prosperity:

> They will tell you pride comes before a fall. They tell you that when you get richer and richer and wealthier, it is us who will bury you. They are hurting you to feel guilty so that you be closer to them.

On the surface, such a narrative is suggestive of parallels with the ethnographic literature on witchcraft, and the tendency for accumulation to draw the ire of others in one's milieu. For instance, in his ethnographic work on Madagascar, David Graeber (2007) characterized envy as an 'underside to communal solidarity', a levelling mechanism designed to rein in would-be accumulators (Woodburn 1982). Evans-Pritchard (1976: 45, 47) made similar observations in his classic work on witchcraft among the Azande, placing feelings of envy at the root of witchcraft practice, writing that 'a Zande in misfortune at once considers who is likely to hate him' and 'is well aware that others take pleasure in his troubles and pain and are displeased at his good fortune'. These accounts broadly follow George Foster's (1972) characterization of envy as emerging in relatively closed rural contexts where notions of a 'limited good' turn success and failure into a zero-sum game.

But as Geoffrey Hughes (2020) has recently pointed out, such accounts amount to little more than anthropologists such as Foster transforming accusations – made by the envied – into broader models of envy operating at a society-wide scale. Envy thus appears not only as a narrative 'used by the socially dominant to essentialize envy as a quality of the weak and the marginal', but it also forecloses the question of what the very *accusations* themselves suggest about the position of the accusers, the very 'politics of accusation' through which morality is ascribed (Hughes *et al.* 2019).

Lee's reference to 'guilt tripping' evoked his indignation at the claims made by his relatives and peers when he himself had hardly achieved the economic success that would enable such distribution. In his research on modes of masculine obligation and breadwinner identity, Mario Schmidt (forthcoming 2024) has characterized this problem as one of 'pressure', where the qualitative nature of economic requests is recognized as legitimate by would-be male providers, but their quantitative degree outweighs the possibility of fulfilling them, amplifying anxieties about failing to live up to expectations. In a similar way, Lee recognized that the claims themselves may not have been unjustified, but their sheer magnitude – the number of people who seemed to want help, the almost ubiquitous anticipation that he felt about others' desires for his assistance – made them difficult, if not impossible, to meet.

With this in mind, I want to suggest that *envy* discourse ought to be refigured as something more like 'economic resentment' in certain cases. Lee's words reflect middle-class anxieties about their own precarious status, blending guilt about their failed distribution into a story of blame: that others in their homes hate them because

of their success and thus desire to 'bring them down'. Here, envy discourse is a sort of displaced anxiety about the intent of others in relation to one's newfound success when distribution does not follow. In turn, the upwardly mobile come to characterize 'the village' (*ushago*) itself as a place of envy, sharpening their justifications for leaving.

In Ituura, young people on the way to a better life actively feared the 'rumours' that others in the neighbourhood, especially older women, would spread about them. On an evening towards the end of my fieldwork in June 2018, I ran into a young man from Lee's extended family called Thomas. Thomas was in his mid-twenties, and I had rarely seen him around in the area, except for a few times on the backstreets of the neighbourhood when Mwaura and I collected farmyard waste from other families to feed to the family pigs. Thomas explained that the reason I had rarely seen him was not only because of his work, but also because he deliberately kept a low profile. There were those in Ituura, he suggested, who wanted to stop others like himself 'coming up', and he returned from work late so that he would not be seen. Thomas explained that his aim was to avoid being talked about at all and pointed to the power of rumour spread by older women. 'If you listen to them too much you can lose your mind.'

In these ethnically Kikuyu neighbourhoods that border northern Nairobi, successful persons fear the envy of their kin. A common epithet is that 'Not everyone prays good prayers for you' (Gĩkũyũ: *Ti mũndũ wothe akũhoyagĩra mahoya mega*). People speak of local rivals who attempt to 'block one's blessings' (Gĩkũyũ: *higithia kĩrathimo*) by speaking 'bad words' (*ciugo ciũru*) that cause another person to fail.[8]

The source of these affects is seen to be ambiguous, but they reflect what Patrick Desplat (2018) has described in his work on envy discourse in urban Madagascar – that these narratives constitute something like a genre of struggle through which young aspirant persons articulate their difficulties achieving success, and through which they can point to the dangers that beset them. While the sources of this blocking of success might be ambiguous, they inform a desire to withdraw (*ibid*.: S113). In Desplat's account, young Madagascans are drawn further into a web of tension. But in my findings from peri-urban Kenya, envy discourse constitutes a way in which young Kenyans justify their withdrawal from home neighbourhoods and other settings. In these narratives, home neighbourhoods become sites of what Lars Højer (2004: 60) has called 'generalised witchcraft', places where anyone is an enemy, informing a generalized disposition of suspicion and mistrust (see also Archambault 2017).

These concerns had encouraged Lee to move away, seeking a more alienated and impersonal existence in Chungwa, beyond the peri-urban landscape of Ituura and towards Nairobi. But by 2022, Chungwa too had become a place where he found himself 'guilt tripped' into giving away his money in small handouts – finding his 'fruits plucked', as he put it. The feeling that even unknown men of a similar age working at the transport terminus could make requests of him – requests borne of sheer proximity rather than any sort of historical claims to friendship – informed his desire to move to an even more anonymous setting: the town of Ruaka, a place where he welcomed the anonymous status he hoped to acquire.

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[8] For a contemporary account of the power of language and emotion in envy accusation, see Zidaru-Bărbulescu (2019).

Indeed, on that day we met in Ruaka in 2022, Lee looked up at the high-rise buildings around us, having already told me about his aim to 'shift this way'. His self-stated goal was to 'live privately', in a community of Nairobi's aspirant middle class. As we sat on the balcony of a café, he gestured towards a young man having his Prado car washed at the mechanic's next door.

> Yes! You see all these people you see here. They can afford land. [Gestures at man with Prado.] You'll find him, he lives in a 10k, 20,000 per month house. You ask him why he can't buy a land? He'll tell you he'll build later at the rural home. Ask him the reason, he'll say it feels good to live privately, without people knowing the kind of life that you live. [Author: Who tries to get money from you?] It's not even trying to get money from you, it's using you.

His words evoked a desire to be separate, and he spoke to me that day about the advantages of living in Ruaka, a town associated with Nairobi's upwardly mobile 'working class', an epithet used to describe the city's white-collar office workers with stable salaries. 'At least you know there are rich people,' he said of the town. 'You know in Ruaka, most people are working.' I asked him if he could ever avoid the large numbers of unemployed youth who might ask him for handouts, since they were hardly absent from Ruaka either. 'Maybe by the time I'm coming here, I'll have my own car,' he ventured.

Negative aspiration

Lee's evident frustration with being perceived as a potential provider manifested in his indignant insistence that instead of looking to him, his peers ought to work for themselves. Rather than 'guilt tripping' him, he felt they ought to become self-reliant adult men, just as he claimed to have become. 'I am responsible for my life and so should they,' he had exclaimed. Lee's sense of indignation at the degree of expectation placed on him shaped his desire not only to enclose himself in the privacy of an impersonal urban satellite, but also to shed his obligations with recourse to notions about individual responsibility.

Lee valorized this apparent absence of dependence in the lives of men like the Prado owner he pointed out that day in Ruaka. When Lee pointed to other 'rich' people living there, he emphasized his admiration for their work ethic and suggested that, by moving to Ruaka, he would join a community of hard-working peers from whom he could generate even more energy and effort to find success for himself. 'They've not hit 0.1 per cent of that,' he said of his peers in Ituura. 'People here are living very largely. It challenges me very much when I see a twenty-three-year-old driving his or her own car.' He claimed that there could be no resentment on his side. The wealth of others was mere encouragement for himself.

> It makes me feel now it's very possible for even me to buy myself my own car. So what should I do about that? But not to try to start bringing them down, but to try to start bringing myself towards them.

In central Kenya more generally, the withdrawal from networks of obligation – especially those associated with the extended family – is powerfully supported by wider discourses that stress the importance of individual effort and striving as the key to economic success, a blend of Protestant self-reliance, US-inherited 'hustle' discourse, and actual experience of the preciousness of cash in a world of low incomes. During my research, I saw pastors from the local Anglican church in Kenya encouraging congregants to focus on one's own efforts, advising them not to resent others for their poverty, especially parents. 'You have to change your point of view,' the local Anglican pastor insisted at a service in 2017. 'Why is my brother richer than I am?,' he continued, adopting what he took to be his audience's anxieties. 'Why don't I have money?' Leaving these voices behind, he resumed his own moral position, and spoke with authority: 'You can't think about others. You have to change *your* point of view.' These are prominent themes in radio preaching, which often features well-known, celebrity pastors telling Kenyans to pursue their own prosperity rather than looking to rely on others.

Such ideas, however, are hardly the preserve of the church. They are emblematic of a far more general orientation towards careful economization through judicious use of one's 'head'. Self-help and self-improvement books have flooded the market of paperbacks in Kenya. Books such as *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* (2017 [1997]) by Robert T. Kiyosaki are read by aspirant Kenyans, who look to their pages to find advice on how to economize in their everyday lives, and how to make sensible investments. A critical part of this culture of reading is the exclusivity of such new knowledge – those without access to this wisdom are the unenlightened economically illiterate who struggle to reproduce their households.

This literature chimes with a much broader narrative in neoliberal Kenya about the morality of work and individual striving as a route to prosperity. Inherited from north America, a 'hustler' narrative has long been used in Nairobi, especially by its poorest, to describe the day-to-day existence of saving and spending close to the breadline. Tatiane Thieme, Meghan Ference and Naomi van Stapele (2021: 2) have attempted to elaborate discourses of 'hustling' among Nairobi's poorest informal economy workers into a concept capable of describing the existential precarity and temporal recursivity of life lived in the short term, a trope of survival that articulates how the urban poor 'position themselves as very much alive despite the odds stacked against them'. In their usage, the language of 'hustling' is associated with the resistance of the urban poor to the economic and political constraints that characterize life in the city's informal settlements. That members of Kenya's business and political elite can style themselves as successful 'hustlers', celebrating their wealth as the product of individual achievement (rather than proximity to the state), shows how such concepts are prone to capture, easily capable of functioning as a tool of moral punishment delivered against the structurally poor.

Such discourses have even older antecedents, recalling what Tom Cunningham (2018) has described as the 'muscular' Christianity of the early missions present in central Kenya in the early decades of the twentieth century. Christian missions worked within a racist imaginary of African psychological inferiority (*ibid.*: 114–15) yet sought to harness the labour power of 'the able-bodied male' through technologies of discipline consonant with Foucault's notion of 'bio-power' (*ibid.*:

109–11). But as historians of mission Christianity have long shown, conversion was not a one-way process of top-down inculcation; it was also an emerging field of debate in which young Kikuyu converts took forward Christian moral language into their own political struggles (see, e.g., Peterson 2004a). Known as 'readers' (Gĩkũyũ: *athomi*) after their new literacy, young converts set out to break with what were cast as the 'traditions' of their forefathers (Lonsdale 1999; Peterson 2004b). In the writing they produced, they followed Anglican and Presbyterian values of hard work as a means to prosperity (see, e.g., Muoria 2009 [1945]: 141–5). Their labour ethic shaped the ambient landscape of Christianity in central Kenya for generations, and it is in their wake that contemporary ideas of prosperity can be understood as contiguous with these older moral themes of self-discipline and work as the route to economic prosperity and righteousness.

Himself a product of this intellectual atmosphere, it is worth briefly recalling the moralizing terms on which Kenya's first prime minister (later president) Jomo Kenyatta embraced the market economy. While he borrowed from the African socialism popular at the time, advocating for people to 'pull together' (*harambee*) to fund local development such as school building, his overarching ideology for a newly independent Kenya was one of the self-made man. In the wake of the Mau Mau rebellion that had rocked Kenya under British colonial rule in the 1950s, a military movement mobilized in pursuit of land redistribution, but that redistribution never took place on any significant scale. Owing to the negotiated nature of decolonization, and Kenya's inheritance by an ethnic Kikuyu political elite from the region of Mount Kenya, the majority of the old white-owned tea plantations were transferred to the ownership of this very elite under the leadership of Kenyatta. Instead of 'freedom through land' (Gĩkũyũ: *ithaka na wĩathi*), and its implication of redistribution, Kenyatta preached 'freedom through work' (*uhuru na kazi*), his political speeches often valorizing 'hard-working' Kenyans who embraced his slogan at the expense of further political struggle (Kenyatta 1968). Kenyatta himself is regularly quoted as attacking Bildad Kaggia, a Mau Mau veteran and champion of the poor in those early post-independence years, for not relying on his own ingenuity and effort. Criticizing Kaggia for his advocacy of the Mau Mau veterans who had survived the war only to linger landless in the slums of Nairobi, he turned the tables on the former soldier. 'What have you done for yourself?' Kenyatta famously asked Kaggia (Maloba 2018: 261). After independence, the idea of 'working for yourself' would allow Kikuyu gerontocrats to valorize their wealth (accessed via proximity to the state) while encouraging Kenya's poor to work for their own futures (Lonsdale 1992).

While these Christian and neoliberal narratives of personal striving play a role in shaping a broader context in which negative attitudes towards the poor – like Lee's – can be articulated, it would be heavy-handed to draw too straight a line between these ideas and a person's conduct. Lee's ideas were no straightforward inheritance of hegemonic discourse. Personal experiences matter, and in Lee's case actual neighbourhood social relationships – situations of envy and resentment with known others – were what caused him to withdraw, to seek prosperity on a more individual basis. Lee knew that what others might see as his success was, in fact, barely that. The money that his peers from Chungwa Town anticipated he possessed was evidence only of his fledgling status as a socially mobile member of his wider peri-urban

context. As we shall see in the final section of this article, Lee's moralizing betrayed his own anxiety about his precarious status, his desire to seek respect from his peers and their families, and the ongoing problem of managing expectations for the distribution of economic goods.

Ironies of accomplishment

While aspirant young Kenyans from Nairobi's new urban outskirts might break away from their natal neighbourhoods to live separately and somewhat more anonymously in the approaching city's new enclaves, they continue to desire a degree of respect from the very people they have tried to leave behind. Consider, for instance, how Lee told me of the satisfaction he felt in being praised by the mother of one of his neighbourhood friends for 'progressing himself'. This woman had once compared Lee to her own son when he was in a rebellious phase in high school, encouraging him to be good like her own son. 'When I changed, she noticed, and she said I had done a very good job. She told me I am a responsible person now.' Lee also showed me a text from one of his wife's former school friends, a vague acquaintance, who had praised him for his efforts in business. She had told him: 'I believe deep down you going far coz you are very committed to what you do, plus you got a supportive partner who has so much faith in you.' Lee was proud to show me this message, explaining that even those who hardly knew him could identify his desire to better himself.

But his awkward arrival at the burial discussed at the opening of the article betrays the consequences of seeking this sort of respect, one borne of economic success, when one is on a low, precarious budget. Lee's salary was around 20,000 KES per month, and he relied on his 'side hustle' selling imported clothes to supplement it towards 50,000 KES and above.[9] This was an already tight budget. Lee paid for his younger sister's school fees, which ran into the low tens of thousands of shillings per term, and regularly provided money for his elderly parents. His income was put to further test by the deepening cost-of-living crisis experienced in Kenya throughout 2022, driven by rising food and fuel prices.[10] As a result, Lee's finances were affected by a slowdown of sales as customers tightened their belts. By arriving in a car, Lee had stirred the imaginations of his peers in Ituura about the privileges of 'working-class' lifestyles. He could – it appeared to them – afford a car, and therefore also potentially provide them with cash gifts. But while Lee aimed to become successful in precisely these terms, he insisted that it was a mistake for people to look to him as someone who could provide in this way. He claimed that his refusal to help his poorer peers was not simply because he had 'made it' and was now selfishly guarding his status, but, indeed, precisely because he *had not yet* become successful in a lasting or entrenched way. 'The salary is small,' he insisted. 'I am grateful to God I can afford basic needs and also afford to have some savings,' he explained, emphasizing the modesty of his income. He argued that he needed to guard his money carefully. His attempts to delimit what was his were justified, in his view, by tangible concerns that opening himself up to too

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[9] In 2022, gross national income (GNI) per capita was estimated at 20,123 KES per month by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS 2022: 44).

[10] See Lockwood (2023b: 216–19) for a discussion of how households in central Kenya were affected by the 2022 cost-of-living crisis.

many claims would jeopardize his nascent prosperity.[11] 'I am not yet to the middle-class level,' he answered when I suggested that I might describe his economic challenges as definitively 'middle-class' ones.

It was on this basis that he often expressed an anger and disappointment towards his peers for not 'pushing themselves', as he put it. He told me how he had encouraged one of his friends to take a job as a cleaner in one of Nairobi's new shopping malls but he had refused. For Lee, this was confirmation of his own determination – others lacked the will he had to work, because, as he described it, they were 'choosy about jobs'. But it was also because he held a vision of society in which such men would rely on themselves rather than look to him. His admonishments had a practical and pragmatic aspect: he hoped his peers would look to their own fortunes, rather than consume his. This is the crux of the negativity of aspiration that Lee saw himself as being forced towards – its requirement for economic calculations on obligations that err towards the delimitation of self-interest (cf. Sahlins 1972: 214). The irony of this was that, in failing to 'back up', as it were, his displays of wealth with actual distribution, his precarious, sometimes illusory accomplishments often produced resentment rather than the respect he desired.

The difficulty of maintaining the façade of economic success was powerfully illuminated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Government lockdowns and curfews in Nairobi caused city-dwellers to return to their rural homes (*ushago*, often colloquially referred to as '*shags*'), either due to lack of work in the informal sector (with markets shut down and the transport industry in suspended animation) or because they had lost their white-collar jobs outright. As Cash, one of my friends from Chungwa Town, explained to me, the confrontation between jobless returnees and those who had remained was practically a cultural encounter. Twenty-five years old in 2022, Cash (or Cassius) had lived his youth 'in the street', as he put it, spending time in the alleyways of Chungwa Town, dabbling in drugs and petty crime before leaving behind his 'bad life'. Since then, Cash had reformed himself as a shopkeeper while still maintaining plenty of time to drink at local bars at the weekend and smoke weed with his less well-off friends who still eked out a living as beggars. In 2022, however, Cash described to me how he had got to know one of his male cousins of a similar age, a man who usually spent most of his time working in an office in Nairobi, rarely having time to hang out in the street like he did. Striking up a new friendship, Cash told me how he had shown his cousin how much the neighbourhood had changed, introducing him to a world he hardly knew. Cash joked that the pandemic had put paid to the face-saving performances of Nairobi-dwellers returning to their home villages and neighbourhoods:

> Normally in December, you've got to save for like one week before you back to *shags* [the village]. Giving 1k [1,000 KES or US$8 in 2022] for that burial and all that. Then back in Nairobi you're saving 200, 200 [i.e. scrimping and saving in anticipation of returning home]. They [those in *shags*] don't know! Now [since the pandemic] it's not that fake thing. Your mother will be knowing you've not got money and everything.

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[11] Lena Kroeker (2018) has written of similar anxieties of downward mobility among Kenya's middle class.

As he described it, the pandemic had shifted the illusion of success that people like his cousin tried with great difficulty to maintain. 'So it wasn't like there's people up here and people down there [*kuna watu hapa chini na watu kuna hapo juu*],' he explained, raising one fist and lowering the other to evoke the different levels of economic achievement before putting them back together. 'Now we're all the same.' For him, this was hardly a new perspective. Despite having lived his life in the streets of Chungwa, he had enough friends like Lee to know that economic success was hardly what it looked like from the outside, nor in people's own narratives of achievement. 'They're not rich! They're just trying.'

Conclusion

The upwardly mobile feel the strain of social relations in a world of cash shortages, shaping mundane enmities and rivalries, themselves grounded in expectations that the wealthy ought to share. But as we have seen, this success is, in fact, rather illusory: a careful illusion projected by men like Lee when they are looking for respect. When asked for help, they draw back, anxious to protect their newfound wealth. The urban enclave's impersonal space was attractive for precisely this reason, and Lee looked forward to joining what he imagined to be a moral community of the socially mobile, pursuing success without the burden of obligation and guilt. From the safety of the enclave, he could venture out into Ituura on his own terms, when he felt he had the money to share with his peers.

These tensions around revealing wealth are a reminder that underlying these ironies of accomplishment, these contradictory experiences of moderate success, is a contemporary Kenya where even the upwardly mobile are not free from economic anxiety (Mercer and Lemanski 2020), enforcing an anxious curtailment of obligations that I have described under the rubric of a 'negative aspiration'. The weaknesses of Lee's 'bluff' (Newell 2012) of middle-class status speak to the predicament of an anxious middle class, not an 'Africa Rising'. From this perspective, the idea of a nascent middle class on a unilinear trajectory looks too optimistic (cf. Melber 2022). We are looking at a finer gradient (Guyer 2004: 132) that conceals a much greater degree of proximity between the new middle class of Nairobi's high-rise communities and the peri-urban 'left behind'.

'Is the middle-class broke or fake?'[12] This is the question being asked about the illusory nature of social mobility in Kenya's public sphere – and while it might be going too far to suggest that the moderate success of men like Lee is 'fake', it continues to point towards their proximity to economic precarity and the need for the careful protection of their money. Proximity to precarity and proximity to social relationships with those who continued to *dwell in* precarity – their former peers from the neighbourhood – informed the cutting of ties at the heart of this article, the broken friendships and neighbourhood enmities. The experience of alienation from one's home will be a fruitful ground for further research as ethnographers of Africa continue to prise apart the contradictions of heightened aspirations within economies of uncertainty.

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[12] 'Is the Kenyan middle class broke and fake?', K24TV, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvAnoTVIHtg&t=103s> (accessed 26 September 2022).

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