

Cosmopolitanisms: Premise naming in Dagoretti and Nairobi West as a site for exercising Identity

Fredrick Mbogo

Technical University of Kenya

What happens when a space is at once seemingly ancestral but with ties to a brash city like Nairobi? How does its residences define themselves? What can populate some of its signage for business premises? This paper is interested in comparing the naming of business premises in Dagoretti, in an area known as Kawangware Market, and what obtains in Nairobi West's market area off Lang'ata road. The paper is interested in how names point to different kinds of cosmopolitanism, as well as the problematic idea of gentrification. In what ways has the kind of gentrification in Dagoretti as opposed to Nairobi West's suggest a marriage of ethnicities, where no one is unafraid of performing their own identity? What can this imply?

Did they ever have a name for Dagoretti?

Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale have a glossary in their book titled *Unhappy Valley: Violence and Ethnicity* that declares that “Gikuyu and Muumbi” is “The Kikuyu ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve.’” I find this problematic on many fronts: Firstly, that glossary entry suggests that the Kikuyu could not simply be understood in their own terms, and within their own myths of origin, without reference to foreign ideas, mostly as introduced via Christian missionaries on the origin of man. And, secondly, obviously from the implied idea that Adam and Eve are universal—that everyone has heard this story—and that whoever has not heard of it then becomes the “other”, possibly one who has not benefited from the “civilizing mission”, so often cited in the justification of colonialism.

The glossary entry above brings to the fore problems of “originality.” It questions ideas about whether the Kikuyu actually remember anything of their own; for if Gikuyu and Muumbi is indeed a version of “our” “Adam and Eve”, then what has the Kikuyu person, or African person for that matter, ever named for themselves without reference to the colonizers’ terminologies or mythologies. This is a good place then to start on the idea of “Dagoretti”. Historians fumble about for meanings of the word

“Dagoretti”, some say that it is a corruption of “The Great Corner”¹, an English reference to the area in which a fort was to be built, others say that it is a corruption of “Endia kurret” a Maa phrase that is in reference to “Place of a coward dog,” because apparently there was a white man in the area who had a big dog that only barked but was no action². With these ideas of “Dagoretti”, the word, seems to be a suggestion that either the place had no name, or that the area’s former name was simply ignored for a new one that exists only in reference to activities coming out of interaction with whiteness or the coloniser. Still, there is an argument that the Dagoretti area, first occupied by the Ndorobo, was either uninhabited or was occupied on a seasonal nomadic basis, and so, many people who came to the land would be referred to as “someone who has not bought it” which in Kikuyu should read “Ndagurite”, and so very close to “Dagoretti” in pronunciation.³

Dagoretti is in Nairobi, yet unlike Lang’ata or Makadara, or any other location within the city, it carries with it a rural feeling. Apparently, there are ancestral lands in the area⁴. Dagoretti appears to have become part of Nairobi only after some time, rather than organically like Makadara or Lang’ata⁵. In a sense, Dagoretti’s uniqueness is in its occupation of an in-between space psychologically, as a still-ancestral space, and also as part of the hustle and bustle that is Kenya’s thrifty capital. How can one living within Dagoretti reconcile its neither-nor-and sometimes-is status? Its history is replete with figures such as Waiyaki wa Hinga, who some historians say is of mixed Maasai and Kikuyu ethnic heritage.⁶ This furthers the problems of Dagoretti, for it defies any one known “tribe” as its owner in the sense of “ancestral” land. Yet, one must consider the question of what “tribe” means if one is to deal with the apparent mixed-heritage status of one of Dagoretti’s greater personalities. In the estimation of Mbugua wa Mungai;

¹From conversations in Dagoretti in our 2023 research in Dagoretti around the Kawangware Market area as well as in discussion groups with “Writing the Arts” etc

² Ibid, and also as gleaned from social media conversations, on Facebook, under “Muthui Mkenya”, 2018

³ This is from a conversation with Lydia Muthuma an art historian interested in the evolution of Nairobi.

⁴ Ibid (from Writing the Arts group)

⁵ ibid

⁶ From conversations held with Dr. Lydia Muthuma, an art historian, with interests in research in the Dagoretti area.

The word ‘tribe’—to refer to a group of families related to each other by blood and common ancestry—is inappropriate as a description of the ethnic entities in Kenya. The reality is that people who speak the same language or dialect of it are not necessarily related. Formulated within colonial experience, tribe is an administrative term devised for purposes of policing rather than sociological formulations, a situation that was reinforced by colonial anthropology.⁷

This then throws us into even more confusion, or a somewhat difficult clarification; that before the coming of the colonizer, it was possible that Chief Waiyaki wa Hinga was simply a man who thrived without the cares of answering either to his Kikuyu or Maasai ancestry. Indeed, even in his battles against colonialism, he was driven more by being against the colonizer than by his ethnic—Kikuyu nor Maasai—affiliation. He simply fought an outsider based on his skin colour. In later years, after Kenya had become a colony, Dagoretti turned into a settlement for a displaced group of people during the Mau Mau period. The trend continued after the country’s independence, so that specific spaces in the area are occupied by people from other “ancestral” reserves. The Kikuyu refer to them as “andu a guuka” (people who came). The ethnic composition in places such as Dagoretti corner, Kawangware, Riruta Satellite, Uthiru, Mutuini, Waithaka is diverse. Housing in Dagoretti suggests the various classes that occupy its different areas. There are exclusive locales around Kianda School, for example. Golf courses, in many ways, announce opulence on the one hand, while, on the other, semi-permanent dwellings in places like Kawangware point to aspects of the lower middle class and poverty. This current situation lends Dagoretti a certain sense of cosmopolitanism in terms of class and financial status.

This sense of cosmopolitanism as practiced in Dagoretti differs from the way it is practiced elsewhere in Nairobi. This paper observes that in Dagoretti, especially as pronounced in the market areas of Kawangware (or the specific Ndunyu market) shops or business premises names tend to:

- a) Names like “Mkamba Butchery”, “Tharaka Cereals”, “Subukia Cereals”, “Kiambu stores”, “Narok Cereals” among others;

⁷ Mbugua wa Mungai, (2010) “Iconic Representations of Identities in Kenyan Cultures” IN Mungai, M and Gona, G., *Re-Membering Kenya Vol. 1: Identity, Culture and Freedom*. Nairobi: Twaweza Communications

clearly announce the parts of the country the proprietors hail from, or their ethnicity.

- b) Names like “Upendo Clinic”, “Baraka shop” or “Israel Cereals” announce the religious affiliation of their owners. They propose a certain sense of godliness, mostly bent towards Christianity – even though Dagoretti also has a significant Muslim population complete with its own specific residential area simply called Muslim.
- c) Few others like entertainment spots, such as a video shop named “Highbury Parlour”, after the Arsenal Highbury stadium recall major brand names, or the supermarket called “Wallmart” after the famous American “Wallmart” supermarket franchise –these point to aspirations that are foreign, and that belong to known brands.

This approach to naming business premises works within a need to appeal to the idea of belonging. In the first case, there is a strong sense of recall of the business owner’s, “place of origin”. It plies within the realm of nostalgia, a remembering of “where one comes from”, and sends signals that the individual is not culturally uprooted, and is aware of his origins – “home”, which is not here! It also hails those from the owner’s place of origin to the business. They can congregate at his/her shop to affirm their common identity and to deal with the logistics of communicating with those at “home”, in their said ancestral space—for example in Narok, or Tharaka or Subukia. In the face of threats such as the enforcement of City Council regulations, and its sometimes infamous askaris, or the ever-present problem of capital, security, as well as fears of being duped or threatened by landlords, these name identities create branding that grounds a business. It gives a sense of permanency, not as a mere make-shift outfit, but as a trustworthy entity that can be engaged with.



How do names carry meaning? Can they protect, summon, serve as charms of good luck? Can they transport one over the ocean to the lands of Coca-Cola and soccer? Or maybe empower and provide a needed shelter in the guise of one's hometown?

Walking through the *vichochoro* (alleyways) of the Kawangware Market, *duka* (shop) names can inscribe countless meanings. Some shops carry the names of places in Kenya, such as Subukia, Kitui, Nyahururu. Some shop owners have included words with religious connotations like Tumaini (hope), Salama (peace), Pendo (love). In a place familiar with 'football', a shop name spotlights "soccer" in capital white letters on the backdrop of a landscape boasting words like "Wallmart Centre" and "Young Brothers Movies and Soccer Arena", pointing towards a vocabulary borrowed from the movie screen.

These names, when combined, give rise to forms that go beyond mere business—weaving together meanings, aspirations, complex histories, and connections into built environments. "Graceland Textiles Centre", operated by A. derives its name from the sense of grace she attributes to the divine providence that enabled her to establish the business. This naming decision is intricately connected to religious aspirations, where the proprietor openly acknowledges the grace bestowed upon her by a higher power. A's choice is also influenced by her son being a pastor, emphasizing the spiritual significance of the enterprise, creating a narrative that enriches the essence of Graceland Textiles Centre.

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to our community collaborators Joseph and Antoni

By acknowledging religion through naming, business owners seem to be at once evangelizing, or as charismatic Christians might say, playing witness to the power of divine intervention or blessing. The use of names with religious connotations in business also shows a sense of belonging while suggesting that unlike others that are not “God-fearing”, this business is clean, and does not countenance corruption, selling of inferior products, overpricing—or many of the vices associated with similar businesses. Values such as “Grace” or “Upendo” (love), are employed to show affiliation to religious causes or persuasions. Some like “Israel”, or “Canaan”, are employed in reference to lands mentioned in religious texts such as the Bible.

Adopting names that are linked to brands known all over the world helps businesses attract customers. Customers are hardly concerned with the goods-value of the associated brands; in fact what they celebrate is the idea that “we can have our own Walmart.” In her unpublished PhD dissertation, Njeri Gatere, of the Technical University of Kenya, focuses on iconography related to trademark and copyright, it has been observed that sometimes business people celebrate the “fake” in circumstances that mirror the humoring of production at whatever level. The fake, rather than the real, sometimes profits the businessmen. In that light then, business premises in Dagoretti might be creating conversations about product and production in general – but they also suggest that they are “with it” and are “trendy” and that they have caught up with the world, possibly with a need to catch the eye of the youth! These ideas of the fake verses the real, have been well captured in Umberto Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality*, where arguments are made about whether the real is better than the fake, or whether people merely want to make do, and are happy to imitate the real. In the film *House of Gucci*, conversations about fake Gucci bags, give an interesting idea about brands cashing in on fakes, or even have a cunning rapprochement with their fake counterparts. In the case of Dagoretti, names such as Walmart come with ideas of ‘grand’ places like America, or England where the association is evoked by the name Highbury (after Arsenal Football Club’s stadium). These are the envy of young people who hope one day to “vuka border” (cross borders), as has been immortalized in the song *Natoka Mbali* by Jaguar, who epitomizes, in the persona of the song, the aspiration of many young Kenyans to go abroad where the standard of life is perceived to be better. But these references to international brands, even where fake, give a promise that even if the youth

cannot access the real Wallmarts, or Highburys, they can have versions of them in Dagoretti.

When one compares Dagoretti's naming approach, especially at the Kawangware Market, with what is available at Nairobi West, one can clearly see a difference. Where Dagoretti's business premises have tended to stake a claim to places where their proprietors hail from or point towards religious affiliation, at the Nairobi West market area, the names are completely different. First, the businesses around the fish area, for example, go by the single first names of the business owners, which more often than not are Christian or European (Maureen, Sarah, Deborah are some of them). At other times, the business premises go with names like "Morlins", or Jates, or even Kenya Meat Processors – these are names devoid of reference to ethnicity – they appear city friendly.

Perhaps, the differences lie in the histories of both places. Dagoretti has spaces whose identity points to ancestral ownership and a number of communities settled there. Nairobi West seems to be more urban in the sense that land is not ancestral, and that the residents are constantly changing. Nairobi West borders Madaraka Estate, a government established estate that has housed government workers for many years. It also borders universities such as Strathmore, Riara, AMREF, among other institutions of learning. It therefore has a youthful character with no hang-ups about ethnicity. This means that unlike Dagoretti, Nairobi West might not experience the urge to perform identity that suggests particulars in terms of ethnicity.

A more nuanced reading of Nairobi West can be arrived at with the thought of history at play. In the colonial period, Nairobi residential areas were divided along racial lines, and Nairobi West, in particular, was part of what were referred to as Asian quarters. Africans only come into Nairobi West after independence. Even then, such Africans could only do so after realistically meeting certain financial conditions. Nairobi West's proximity to the capital city's Central Business District gives it a certain advantage that necessarily makes its rents comparatively higher. But it also means that the Africans that were coming into Nairobi West after 1963 had to bear particular social factors in mind. For example, Madaraka Estate which is in the immediate neighborhood of Nairobi West, and which came into existence in the early 1970s, had houses that could accommodate only so many people. In an ancestral space, as can be argued about what

happens in some of the Dagoretti lands, one can live with the extended family within huge compounds, but in the newly built houses of Madaraka Estate (as established in 1973), there was space for the nuclear family only.

The gentrification of Nairobi West then is more in terms of breaking the definition of Asian quarters, or its demarcation, and letting in Africans in greater numbers so that certain aspects such as architecture, school and shopping amenities, change or are developed in greater numbers. This definitely changes the character of Nairobi West, yet because the ownership of many of the residential houses has taken time to change, there is still a distinct “Asian quarters” aesthetic, in the buildings, and character of amenities such as schools. What is changing, or has changed over time, is the coming up of hotels (or Inns), such as Summerdale, Rio, Highridge, as well as a growing market for hostels, such as Nairobi West Girls Hostel. Nairobi West has also become a space for the growth of hospitals, such as Nairobi West Hospital, Meridian Equator Hospital, as well as The Nairobi South Hospital.

Nairobi West is increasingly attracting high-rise construction of residential flats, so that much of the architectural landscape that existed previously is quietly being edged out. This also comes with a change in demography, and sometimes class issues. The Nairobi West market, just as the Kawangware Market in Dagoretti, is a space that attempts to attract, and keep a steady flow of customers from within its vicinity. What it manages to do, through its various business outlets, is to create the idea of an aspiring cosmopolitanism that is beyond race or ethnicity. Unlike the naming strategies at the Kawangware Market, the Nairobi West strategy appears to suggest a veneer of looking out to the world. The foreign names of enterprises acknowledging towns or cities outside Kenya, is an indication for a hungering for the international rather than the local – Rio, from Brazil Summerdale and Highridge, from England. This is also an indication of class, suggesting that the residents of Nairobi West are in touch with the outside world and that they possibly fly in and out of the country.

One key problem with this research is that sometimes what obtains in Dagoretti, at Kawangware Market, for example, in terms of naming, could also be said to be taking place in other spaces within Nairobi with similar class ideals. This means that it is possible to find aspects of Kawangware Market’s business outfit’s naming strategies in Dandora, as well as in

Kasarani, in places like Mirema Drive, or such spaces as Githurai off Thika road, or even in Umoja estate and Kayole. So what marks out Kawangware Market, and Dagoretti in general, from these other spaces? One could point at the history of the growth or development of Dagoretti vis a viz these other urban spaces. As pointed out at the beginning of this paper, it can be argued that Dagoretti occupies a city-within-a-rural space kind of imagery. Unlike other urban suburbs, Dagoretti still has burial sites on people's lands where relatives are buried as happens in rural Kenya's freehold land ownership. This is subject to review as Dagoretti has now become part of Nairobi City and is subject to the city's bylaws which include laws on land use. Yet, given its space as one that has had some ancestral bearing, and the settlement of people from other ancestral lands, there is bound to be anxiety about the self, and this then becomes explored, in part, through the self-identity strategies of naming business premises in ways that attempt at diffusing underlying discomfort. On the other hand, Nairobi West has a fair share of issues to do with the economy, so that it bears the face of impermanence. The nature of its residents, given their status as students and civil servants who can easily be moved from one work station to another such as from one county to another, as well as service providers such as mechanics, hotel workers, supermarket attendants and the like, suggests a high turnover in terms of demography. These, coupled with the high rents, gives Nairobi West a certain element of constant change or shift, and therefore a restlessness that robs it of any claim to home! Business owners are less likely to be interested in creating homes in what appears to be temporary accommodation.

Conclusion

This paper has compared the strategies of naming business premises at Kawangware Market, with what transpires at Nairobi West Market, off Lang'ata road. It has argued that the historical factors making Dagoretti a neither city nor rural outfield, or an in-between, difficult to identify space, is an important factor in the way in which naming occurs for business outlets. That is, that there is a hungering for a display, or performance of identity in order to extinguish anxieties to do with belonging in a space dominated by people who claim the space as ancestral. One could use naming to coalesce a group of people that feel like outsiders, as well as to perform difference, perhaps even pointing at the quality of products. On the other hand, identity becomes vital to show spiritual affiliation and connection. In Nairobi West, the history of the urban space as part of a residential area that was specific for Asians in colonial times continues to

have an effect on how it is perceived. Firstly, as a place people come to, as well as one that receives a certain element of gentrification from a reestablishment of architectural tastes, and the growth of highrise buildings. This comes with the question of rising rents, given its proximity to Nairobi's Central Business District. These states of circumstances have made Nairobi West seem an impermanent place of transitions especially with its high number of students and civil servants and in establishments that are constantly changing. Hence the naming strategies that look out to foreignness, internationalization, or branding that suggest companies far removed from Kenya's everyday experiences. In comparison to Kawangware Market, Nairobi West seems to avoid any suggestion to ethnic affiliation.

References

- Berman, B and Lonsdale, J. *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa – Book Two*. London: James Currey. 1992
- Eco, U. (Trans. Weaver, W.). *Travels in Hyperreality*. New York: Harvest Books. 1990
- Gatere, N. "Intellectual Property: A critical Evaluation of the Prevalence of Piracy Among Designers in Nairobi, Kenya". Unpublished PhD Thesis. Technical University of Kenya, Nairobi
- Ng'weno, B. (2018). "'Betting is Part and Parcel of Someone who is Cultured": Ballroom Dancing and the Spaces of Urban Identity in 1950s Nairobi." In: Kiiru, K and Mutonya, M. *Music and Dance in Eastern Africa*. Nairobi: Twaweza Communications. (pp. 32-47)
- Rahbaran, S and Hertz, M. *Nairobi Kenya Migration: Shaping the City* Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers. 2014
- Wa-Mungai, M. (2010). "Iconic Representations of Identities in Kenyan Cultures" In: wa Mungai and Gona, G (Eds) *(Re)Membering Kenya: Identity, Culture and Freedom. Vol. 1* (pp. 72-95)

Filmography

Scott, Ridley, Director. *The House of Gucci*. 2021

Discography

Jaguar, (featuring) *AY Imetoka Mbali*. 2010

Fredrick Mbogo, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer at The Technical University of Kenya's Department of Music and Performing Arts. He is also a researcher with a number of paper publications in various peer reviewed journals as well as in books as a chapter contributor. Mbogo is also an actor for the stage, as well as for film and television with a number of projects to his name. His plays, as a playwright, have been staged in various cities and towns in East Africa. One of his written plays staged at The Kenya National Theatre (2023/2024) titled *They That Have Missing Marks Shall not Graduate* made him a winner of the Kenya Theatre Award's prize for Kenya's Best Playwright for 2023.