Dagoretti: Claiming Land and Space in the City

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The essay examines Dagoretti's transformation in three key moments: Generational Land Ownership: After the Mau Mau uprising, African families, including Mr. N's, were allocated land in Dagoretti. Over three generations, the family's transition from squatters to legal landholders reflects increasing stability and permanence. The second is Rental Income and Demolitions: Informal rental housing has been crucial in Dagoretti, but these structures often face demolition for not meeting city building codes. Despite this, informal settlements persist, highlighting the struggle for space in Nairobi's growing urban landscape. The last moment is the Shift from Agriculture to Residential Use: As Dagoretti urbanized, land values rose, and pressure to sell increased. The tension between maintaining cultural heritage and adapting to urbanization reflects the area's ongoing transformation and identity struggle.

Introduction

Dagoretti is located in Western Nairobi and is an eclectic neighbourhood whose construction and creation is tied to the narrative of the making of the city of Nairobi. It sits at the edge of the plateau at the bottom of Ng'ong Hills and is located in what was the Kikuyu Reserve in Colonial Kenya (Chege, 1981). Situated on the edge of the White settled Westlands area of the city, and the colonial White Highlands, its people became the source of cheap labour for farms in the neighbouring countryside of the white highlands. Land here, has therefore been a subject of contention. By the 1920s, it featured in the social structure and social politics of the area, with mixed agitation for individual land tenure and protection of the native reserves from further annexation and delineation and demarcation of real boundaries. Proximity to the city made it a vibrant area for trade and easy access to rental houses made of mud and wattle (Chege, 1981). These two became avenues for Africans to participate in the colonial economy. Here, a mixture of peasants, smallholders and newly minted capitalists rubbed shoulders but the racially motivated legislation in the city and country at the time ensured equal measures of discrimination were meted out. The Emergency declaration led to mass relocations. In its aftermath, repatriated Kikuyu people from the Rift Valley and landless peasants returned to Kiambu and settled as squatters in various parts of the district mostly

working as labourers (Chege, 1981). Dagoretti received most of this population influx. The peasants joined poor land holders and squatters on contested land. The Emergency altered the economic dynamics of trade and rental housing.

This essay attempts to read Dagoretti as a place *becoming*. It examines the narratives that the people of Dagoretti have used to create their identities while claiming the place and the city as part of themselves. We situate a respondent's (Mr. N) family history in the space through conversations held in the field as the starting point to present people's occupation of space in the city, the moulding of their identity within it and the reinventing of themselves within that space. In doing so, people contest their right to belong in the city. This essay follows Wangui Kimari's sentiments that amidst the changing and often exclusionary planning landscape that is Nairobi, and the imperativeness to situate everyday encounters and experiences of its residents in a bid to understand the changes presents opportunity to connect these to broader issues beyond their locality (Kimari, 2023). The essay presents three moments-***the family's existence on the space over three generations amidst changes in the city and country and the uncertainty of what the future holds; rental housing in Dagoretti as a supplemental source of income over time; the changing uses of land from agricultural to residential uses; and the crisis of culture and identity produced and the future that it portends***.

Moment 1: Three Generations

Mr N. spoke of his grandfather's allocation of land in Dagoretti in 1968 where they have now lived for three generations following the land demarcation exercise and issuance of a freehold title deed under the Native Land Registration Ordinance of 1959 in the then colonial Kenya. The land allocation exercise came on the heels of the Mau Mau resistance, the State of Emergency, and the villagization scheme that displaced and forced vast numbers of people into encampments, separating them from their ancestral lands (Overton, 1988). The Native Land Registration Ordinance was the colonial government's attempt at addressing land grievances without actually returning ancestral lands to their rightful owners. In this process, the displaced and dispossessed people –mostly the Kikuyu–had found their way to Nairobi and specifically to Dagoretti, where they settled illegally as squatters until the land consolidation and allocation exercise that apportioned land to some of them. There were varying degrees of equity and justice in this exercise (Overton, 1988).

The city government, in conjunction with the colonial government, in the aftermath of the State of Emergency introduced policies to calm the masses and quell independence calls from the Mau Mau. Land consolidation was one such reaction and it led to the creation of an emergent African middle class. In Dagoretti this was composed of freehold land owners, those for whom the land consolidation had allowed property holding. Land consolidation stratified the community and produced three distinct classes: the educated and wealthy; the landlords-who sold labour in the city; the poor and peasants uprooted by the Mau Mau rebellion, who were landless and squatters (Chege, 1981). The apportioning of plots following consolidation efforts of supposedly small and largely unproductive parcels of land encouraged the Africans who could afford it, to take up these larger plots of land.

Mr. N recalls how land in Gathungu, the village in Dagoretti he calls home, was allocated to different families unequally as influential families received larger portions. Even with the injustices of this allocation, having a title deed assigned rights to a people who had lived precariously in the city's periphery. They could now build and live assured of their legal occupation rights. When Mr. N's grandfather passed away, he followed Kikuyu tradition and divided his property among his sons. N's father followed the same tradition upon his passing, leaving N and his sibling's the land. The current subdivision of this land reflects the existence and permanence of the family over time and space. Mr. N's father's land was divided into 12 pieces of half acre plots, from the road to the river. Of the 12 plots, two were registered in their mother's name while the remaining 10 were distributed to the siblings each assigned two plots. Deviating from tradition here, the girls were also given land. This family land history over generations went on in the backdrop of governance and administrative changes in the city and country. From the colonial Native Land Registration Ordinance of 1959 that assigned them legal rights, to the Registered Land Act cap 300 of 2002 (now repealed) that registered the subdivision to 12 plots and allocated Mr. N his two plots in 2003.

Our land is our meeting point. We hold all of our family gatherings here. Any of us can farm the land whenever they want. Our mother wanted us to make sure we plant trees. We farm maize, beans, cassava, and sweet potatoes. All of our ancestors lie here.

In Dagoretti, some families were displaced and those who were lucky received a portion of land that ran from the Nairobi River to the main road. This household land has remained undivided and is a source of connection for the family, far and wide.

We tell, through these truths, a past to be unforgotten.

The title deed has, over time, assured the family's right and claim over the land. Within the same period, residents of Dagoretti who had no legal claim to land have been continuously evicted and displaced. Notably, the city led evictions from the 1970s following the inclusion of Dagoretti into Nairobi City boundaries. Similarly, the materiality of construction and buildings on the family land and in the neighbourhood has changed over time from mud and wattle to wooden structures and finally to stone, bricks and cement. Mr. N's father's house was made of wood but in 1987 when Mr. N built his own house, he used stone, bricks and cement reflecting the certainty of his occupation and his family's growing economic status. This change of materiality continuously reflects the solidity of their claim over space in the city. On the other hand, the slums and informal settlements within Dagoretti that exist on land of contested legal claims, are built of

mud and wattle, iron sheets or wood, reflecting their temporality despite some of these settlements having existed since the 1960s and 1970s. The choice of these building materials according to the Nairobi Building Codes of 1968 denotes them as temporary structures of unapproved materials, meaning they are subject to demolition by the City Government for not meeting the city's building standards; additionally, some of the settlements are located on public land.

Moment 2: Rental Income in Precarity and Demolition as Governmentality

Demolitions as a means of regularizing development and maintaining the image of the city and its planning standards has been constant practice since the founding of Nairobi. As early as 1902, hygiene and sanitation narratives were used to justify the demolition of the Indian Bazaar along present day Moi Avenue following outbreaks of plague. Later on, with the legal support of the 1922 Vagrancy Act, African settlements deemed unfit and illegal were constantly demolished (Kimari & Cap, 2022). But Informal settlement dwellers attempted to survive even within the constant threat of eviction. They are still considered illegal by successive regimes. They are unwanted, unseen and under threat of erasure by the state (Rocco & van Ballegooijen, 2018). They therefore build and exist on the margins. By their everyday lived experiences, of building and occupying space, they boldly claim space in the city. They contest for infrastructure and services and call for security of tenure. Imperceptibly, these informal settlements dwellers, resist and endure the various attempts to remove and erase them from the city's space.

The use of unapproved materials is one such survival tactic used by informal settlement dwellers. The materials are cheap and the building process is fast. Since the colonial period, cheap housing has been a source of income for landowners in Dagoretti. First for the squatters from the annexed White Highlands and later the displaced persons from the Mau Mau uprising and Emergency period displacement (Chege, 1981). The initial houses, made of mud and wattle, were constructed using cheaply available material in order to solve the rising need for housing. This was essential as the city and country laws, in the colonial period, restricted Africans to living outside the city. The exception was provision of bachelor housing in the African quarter of the city for those registered and permitted to work within the city (Kimari & Cap, 2022). The unregistered, lived in the city's periphery such as in Dagoretti. They built or rented these houses.

In the post-independence context, Dagoretti land owners continued this practice of building small rental units within their property. These houses were either made of mud and wattle, iron sheets or wood/timber. These structures did not adhere to the city's building standards as enshrined in the 1968 Building Codes and were therefore continuously demolished by the authorities who required that they conform to the varying planning frameworks of 1948, 1978 and later 2013.

In the post-independence period, restrictions on Africans living in the city were lifted. Urban populations grew and so did the demand for housing. Housing and service provision by the city and national governments could not meet this increasing demand so low-income immigrants from rural areas were forced to either construct or rent shacks as houses. Informal settlements grew in unoccupied land, majorly public land as a majority of the urban population lived in such settlements (Lines & Makau, 2018).

The biblical verse from Ephesians 5:28 is prominently displayed on a ceramic plaque in N's family living room. Surrounding this inscription, a collection of keys line the four walls, each a spare key for the family's forty-four rental houses. Upon our arrival, the elderly wife graciously welcomed us into her home, introducing herself and proudly presenting her husband. This biblical reference underscores a family dynamic that extends beyond religious connections. Notably, the grandmother -- the matriarchal figure, orchestrates and influences family dynamics from behind the scenes. The abundance of keys, strategically placed within the home for maximum visibility, serve as a tangible manifestation of her authority. She eloquently elucidates the significance of each key, gesturing with pride. While the men's names may appear on official documents related to the apartments, the household functions as a testament to the dual partnership between the men and women within the family and by extension, in the community.

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The population of Dagoretti was about 63,700 in 1974. 87% of this population was made up of tenants. Renting houses was a lucrative business. Putting up a basic structure in the 1970's cost about 1,467 shillings and they were rented out for 70-100 shillings a month (Chege, 1981). Most did not purchase land but squatted on it. But the city government had other ideas and demolished any new unauthorised buildings, supposedly to prevent the rise and emergence of slums (Chege, 1981). As part of the city, Dagoretti was now subjected to new administration and governance conditionalities. There were new planning regulations in relation to typology and housing materiality as well as land ownership, prompted by the valuation process and the expected payment of land rates. The city government used demolition as a means of governing and structuring the image of the city to align with its planning frameworks and standards.

Muthiora, an aspiring politician and resident of Dagoretti, and his supporters protested against the 1970s demolition decision by the city authorities. For Muthiora it was personal. In 1974 he vied for MP and won and since then, houses and rooms for rent have continued to mushroom. This was his legacy for Dagoretti (Chege, 1981). Such are the houses that Mr. N has built, wooden structures following a row-housing typology. They are just next to the road, with shared sanitary facilities, acting as a frontage to his property. The houses all open to a common 'hallway'. The rent they fetch supplements his income and is more important now that Mr. N has retired. Additionally, at the back of his house, he has also built a 3-floor rental flat. Here the structure meets the material requirements

specified in the city's building codes, but not the required development permission from the Nairobi County Government, now that Dagoretti is part of the city. This building has not been approved -- a constant irregularity in Nairobi, where developmental approvals and entrenched corruption processes make it difficult.

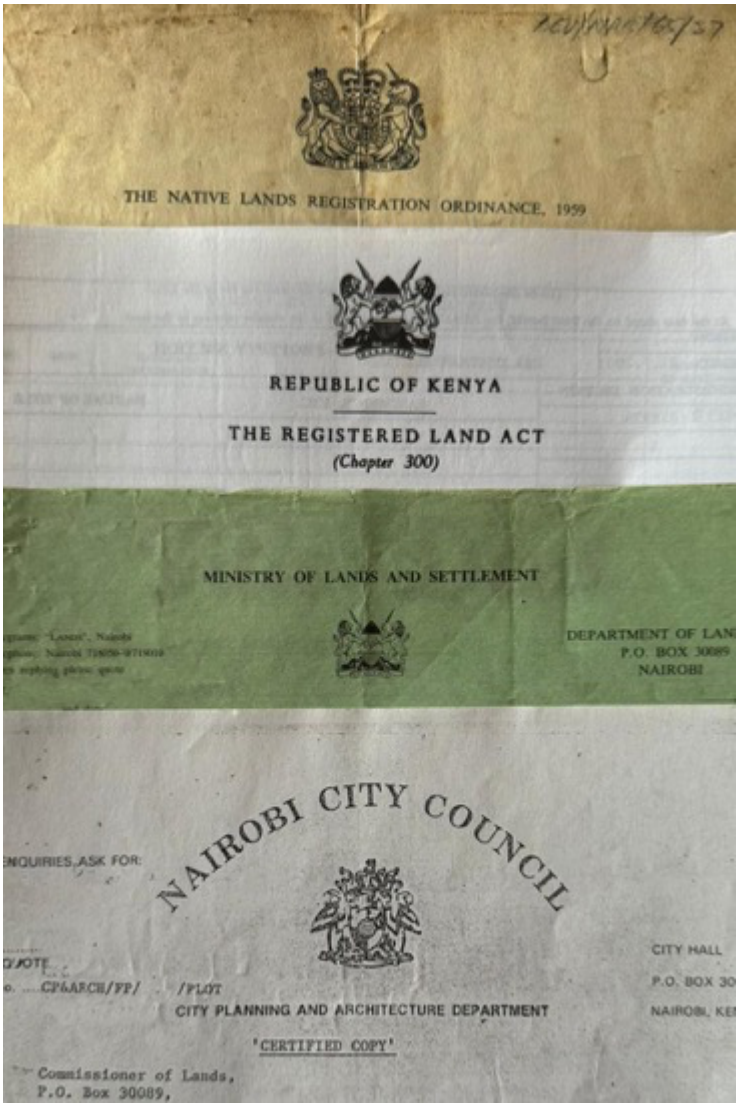
The city government adopted a demolition policy of such informal settlements/structures from the colonial government as they contravened the requirements of the building codes and other urban planning frameworks. It wasn't until the 1980s that forceful evictions were restricted to development in contravention of approved plans such as roads and other infrastructure service provision (Lines & Makau, 2018). However, the eviction threat for settlements with no security of tenure is always constant.

Moment 3: From Agricultural to Residential Uses and the Crisis of Identity and Culture

In 1963 Dagoretti was incorporated into Nairobi and notions of a garden suburbia made up of the new African middle class were abandoned (Chege, 1981). The country had just gained independence. The colonial government was no longer calling the shots and the need to incorporate a particular class of Africans into the capitalist economy through land ownership and to dissuade calls for independence was no longer needed. Dagoretti was now part of the capital city and the issues of land, squatters and peasants took a different dynamic. A newly independent state and a contested territory that was largely rural was now part of the capital city. The population in Nairobi increased as Africans migrated from the native reserves following the lifting of colonial restrictions on movement and occupation for Africans. This kickstarted a period of auto construction changing the materiality of buildings from mud and wattle to timber by both small and big land owners. Agricultural uses were no longer profitable. Rental housing then became a big source of income for landowners in Dagoretti as increasing population increased demand for housing.

We walked around the neighbourhood with Mr. N and noted that land parcels closest to the road were under residential uses while parcels closest to the river, were under agricultural use. The city government approves development applications for residential development as can be seen by the growth of new high-rise buildings and flats. The Riparian land regulations and right of way claims for infrastructure and services have changed/reduced their land sizes. Mr. N points out the ongoing sewer

connection project and the piece of land that was excised for the right of way, conceding that at least the city is finally attempting to supply infrastructure and services to them. But he complains about the amount they pay as rates to the city. This is the cost of being part of the city.


THE NATIVE LANDS REGISTRATION ORDINANCE, 1959

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

THE REGISTERED LAND ACT
(Chapter 300)

MINISTRY OF LANDS AND SETTLEMENT

DEPARTMENT OF LAN
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The Gikuyu people who settled in Gathungu in colonial Nairobi were farmers in the former Kiambu district. Independence brought land security in the form of title deeds. This together with structures changing incrementally from wooden to stone houses, suggests a permanence and security in land tenure. These changes

have solidified their claims to the territory as made manifest by stone walls and the paying of land rates to the city. After showing us the title deeds and other official documents, P. continues to shows us a photograph. It is of his mother and daughter with a cake on the table. He is recalling the long heritage they have had on the land.

The idea that achieving success must necessitate leaving home does not factor in for these children. Unlike the projected impressions of their life paths and ideas of success by outsiders, the children's future visions and their ties to their homes are interwoven. They made and continue to make the city home. Despite the changes occurring around them, the family remains unfazed. Home is a sacred space, a space of shared intimacy, of archive making, of ancestral longing. There is very little that will change that.

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Because Dagoretti is ancestral land to Mr. N's family and other land owners, they bury their dead here. This is home for them, they have ancestral connections to land here. But they are now part of the city. As land values continue to increase, there's increasing pressure to sell their land for urban development, but what happens to ancestral claims to this land with family gravesites? In some instances, graves have had to be exhumed and bodies moved to pave way for development. However, gravesites are ancestral linkages and are important for culture and continuity. How do they maintain these linkages and traditions in the face of these changes? The people persevere, graves exist as tiny islands in a sea of change with the continued hope that their children and grandchildren will have the same connection to their land and culture and maintain the same values.

The people who have bought land in Dagoretti do not have a similar connection to this land. Their interest is economic, but they maintain connection to cultural practices by picking and choosing which practices to value. For instance, the Kiza Residential development project in the neighbourhood, that centres the *Mugumo* tree within their development plans and visions. This pays homage to the space and the Gikuyu people who consider the *Mugumo* tree as sacred in Gikuyu mythology; or a cultural appropriation to fit in; to co-opt cultural practices and associate culture with their new development and claim and assert belonging to Dagoretti too. The Kiza development is reflective of the changing developmental needs in the area and possibly an image of what is to come. It is also an image of Dagoretti as a *space becoming*, the people are

constantly remaking the space, making the statement and claim, that they belong, that it's theirs.

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