Crisis and the Regeneration of the Self: The Mungiki Movement's Power of Mobilisation

Erik Henningsen and Peris Jones
Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research

Abstract

There is a flourishing of collective actors such as vigilante groups, militias and gangs that could be termed 'uncivil society'. These actors often have a 'Janus faced' nature and slide between roles as legitimate providers of social services and oppressors of communities. A potent channel for the articulation of grievances of underprivileged youths in particular, due to their illegality or militancy these actors are often disqualified from participation in formal political arenas. A case in point is the *Mungiki* movement in Kenya. The analytical tendency to focus mainly on the 'uncivil' face of Mungiki has served to hold back a fuller understanding of such movements. How exactly Mungiki attains its *capacity* to mobilise thousands, if not millions, of members requires more nuanced explanations for why young men in particular are attracted to the movement and what effect this has on their lives. A 'framing based' analysis from social movement studies is used interpret new empirical findings that draw on in-depth interviews with grassroots members. The article finds mobilisation a response to both social and personal crisis but with attendant programmatic responses that empower members. Whether the notion of 'power' identified is compatible with a progressive politics remains much less clear.

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Introduction

The widening of the space for associational life in African countries in the past two decades has thrown up an array of challenges to analytical frameworks and understanding. These spaces, which emerge out of the politics of the state provision and shifting state-civil society relations, have engendered the formation of organisations and social movements that correspond to conventional notions of civil society agents. But alongside these, there has occurred a flourishing of collective actors that could rather be termed 'uncivil society': vigilante groups, militias, gangs and mafias. A case in point is the *Mungiki* movement in Kenya, which is the focus of this paper. During its more than twenty years of existence Mungiki has been labelled variously as a 'millennial sect', 'youth gang', 'youth militia', 'vigilante   group' and 'mafia'. This list is by no means exhaustative, with analysis constrained by the secretive nature and at times illegality of the movement.

In societies characterised by a tapestry of 'partial sovereignties', Comaroff and Comaroff note, actors such as these appropriate the forms and re-commission the substance of the state through the creation of 'parallel modes of production and profiteering, sometimes even of governance and taxation, thereby establishing

simulacra of social order'.[1] These actors often have a 'Janus faced' nature, sliding as they do between roles as legitimate providers of social services and violent oppressors of communities in their social environments. They have become a potent channel for the articulation of grievances of underprivileged youths in particular, while due to their radicalism, illegality or militancy, they are often disqualified from participation in formal political arenas. As a result, they may enter into volatile relations with the state and formally recognised political actors, for whom they are sometimes seen as a convenient tool for political violence. At other times they may be subjected to violent state repression. Capturing the multi-faceted composition of such social actors rather than partial explanations is an arduous task.

Reports about the Mungiki movement in Kenyan and international media, for example, are often framed in a tone of alarm or condemnation. Mungiki is known to generate income from racketeering among slum dwellers and from extortion of operators in the collective transport sector. It has been involved in bloody clashes with rival youth gangs and in past Kenyan elections the movements capacity for mass scale violence has been mobilised in support for established political interests. Stories abound about the occult ritual practices of Mungiki and of gruesome killings of persons who oppose the movement, but often these accusations remain unverified and refuted by the movement. The moral panic associated with the 'Mungiki Menace' in the public imagination attributes all kinds of criminal and subversive deeds to the movement. From the outset the Kenyan government has evoked this demonic image of Mungiki to

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[1]   John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, 'Law and disorder in the postcolony: an introduction', in John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (eds.), *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006).

justify oppression and killing of its members on a grand scale. Above all, we argue such conflict and discourses has served to under-develop understanding of the movement.

Academic analysis and commentary on Mungiki, for example, has for the most part been concerned with the social, cultural and religious origins of the movement and with the elucidation of its role in Kenya's emergent political economy of crime and informal political violence.[2] These accounts certainly add important scholarly nuance. They remain, however, somewhat fragmented. One particular gap in analysis is deeper understanding of how Mungiki attains its capacity to mobilise young people in high numbers, even at times when there are great risks involved in having such attachments. We argue that this has been a consequence of prevailing approaches that tend to focus on 'high political' struggles over power among the country's rival political elites, and at best 'political tribalism', rather than exploring in more detail the 'low politics' of survival in the everyday life of young Kenyans.[3] Studies of Mungiki have paid limited attention to the actual experiences of ordinary members themselves. Most analysis seems rather to rely on the assumption that the movement is an automatic response to poverty and political disenfranchisement. These are clearly essential

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[2] (David M. Anderson, "Vigilantes, violence and the politics of public order in Kenya", *African Affairs*, 101, (2002), pp.531-555, Peter M. Kagwanja, "Facing Mount Kenya or Facing Mecca? The Mungiki Ethnic Violence and the Politics of the Moi Succession in Kenya 1987-2002", *African Affairs* 102 (2003), pp. 25-49, "Power to Uhuru: Youth Identity and Generational Politics in Kenya's 2002 Elections", in *African Affairs* 105 (2006), pp. 51-75, Musambayi Katumanga, "A City Under Siege: Banditry and Modes of Accumulation in Nairobi, 1991-2004", *Review of African Political Economy* 32, 106 (2005), pp. 505-520, Susanne Mueller, 'The political economy of Kenya's crisis', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2, 2(2008), pp. 185-210, Mutuma Ruteree, 'Dillemas of crime, human rights and the politics of Mungiki violence in Kenya' (Kenya Human Rights Institute, 2008).

[3] John Lonsdale, 'Moral and political argument in Kenya', in Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and Will Kymlicka (eds.), *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa* (James Currey, Oxford, 2004).

contextual factors in understanding of Mungiki. That said, these factors do not in themselves breed activism of this nature –they may just as well result in inactivity and submission.

The article proposes a 'framing-based' analysis based on social movement studies to provide a joined-up understanding of the formation and growth of Mungiki. To understand these formations it is necessary, for example, to draw out their sociology and political economy. In addition, however, one must examine the ability to mobilise followers based upon doctrines and cultural beliefs that frame and ignite meaning and agency in these processes.[4] We seek to throw light on precisely why young people are attracted to join the Mungiki movement and what effects this has on their lives. Methodology was therefore primarily based on life-history technique interviews conducted with grassroots Mungiki members in Nairobi in May and June 2010.[5] The 14 local members interviewed had varied backgrounds with regards to the duration of membership in Mungiki, positions in the local branch organisation of the movement; all were Kikuyu and predominantly males. In addition, interviews were also carried out with members at the Mungiki farm in *Kitengela* outside of Nairobi and with the national leadership, including its leader, Maina Njenga.[6]

The article first provides a brief historical overview of Mungiki, prior to the main sections that are based on analysis of life histories of Mungiki members.

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[4] James Toth, 'Local Islam gone global: the roots of religious militancy in Egypt and its transnational transformation', in June Nash (ed.), *Social Movements. An Anthropological Reader* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2005), pp. 117-145.
[5] Interviews were carried out in key informal settlements associated with Mungiki in Nairobi: Mathare North, Mathare Valley and Soweto in Kayole estate.
[6] Interviews also took place with non-members, many of whom had their lives adversely impacted by Mungiki activities. While fully aware of such acts of oppression we are examining the construction of Mungiki ideology and mobilisation and hence material gives priority to members own accounts.

A notion of 'power' is identified but whether it is compatible with a progressive politics remains much less clear.

Between religious revivalism and the culture of vigilantism

Based on existing academic accounts Mungiki can be seen to have arisen out of three currents in Kenyan society and history: a long standing tradition for religious cum political revivalist movements, deep seated resentment in the population with regards to the inequalities of Kenyan society and the escalating corruption of the country's political elite, and a countrywide proliferation of a 'culture of vigilantism'.[7] Mungiki first emerged among Kikuyu resident communities in the Rift Valley province in the late 1980s. According to a recent interview with the chairman and founding member of Mungiki, Maina Njenga, the movement was born in the wake of an incident in which Njenga, then a student in his late teens, was believed to have arisen from the dead and came to be recognised as a person with prophetic abilities.[8] Mungiki quickly gathered a following among the landless, squatters and internally displaced persons in rural and urban areas in the Rift Valley and gained a strong constituency in urban and rural areas of Central Province, which is the heartland of the Kikuyu population. Within a few years the movement had spread to Nairobi, where it found a fertile ground for recruitment among youths in the ages of 18 to 40 in the slums and shantytowns of the city.[9] Today the movement claims to have a nationwide structure, but the Rift Valley, Nairobi and Central provinces remain the core. Estimates of the number of followers of Mungiki are uncertain, and the size of the

[7] Anderson, "Vigilantes, violence".
[8] *Daily Nation* (Kenya), 18 June 2010, Section 2, p. 2-3.
[9] Kagwanja, "Facing Mount Kenya or Facing Mecca?".

membership has probably fluctuated considerable over the years from approximately 1.5 – 2 million members, but with Mungiki itself claiming as many as 7 million.

Most observers place Mungiki in a line of Kenyan revivalist movements, the common thread of which is that 'they have rallied their followers behind traditional values to challenge the orthodoxy of the mainstream churches as well as injustices by the state'.[10] The message brought forward by Mungiki is a call for an abandonment of Christianity and Western lifestyles – including the use of alcohol, tobacco smoking and European personal names – and a return to traditional Kikuyu values and religion, as expressed in worship of the Mount Kenya deity *Ngai,* the practice of traditional Kikuyu rituals and the reinvigoration of neglected Kikuyu shrines or holy places in various parts of the country.[11] In sociological and, in some cases, biological terms, the followers of Mungiki can be described as descendants of the Mau Mau movement. The Mau Mau war is often referred to as an unhealed wound due to both the ferociousness of the violence which was exerted by both sides to the conflict and successive post-independence governments' attempts to quell its memory. The land issue which was the structural cause of the rebellion has remained a major source of social conflict in Kenyan society. The claim to represent the blood and a continuation of the 'incomplete' struggle of the Mau Mau is a persistent ideological concern of Mungiki.

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[10] Kagwanja, "Facing Mount Kenya or Facing Mecca?", p. 33.
[11] For a period in 2000 Mungiki, however, turned to Islam (Kagwanja "Facing Mount Kenya or Facing Mecca?").

The growth of Mungiki in Nairobi in the 1990s occurred at a time when the city's population expanded rapidly.[12] Most of the migrants who came to the city found their way to the informal settlements where two thirds of its population resides. Outside of its affluent residential areas, Nairobi has always been plagued by high levels of crime and a relative lack of formal structures of governance and government services.[13] In the 1990s this situation was exacerbated as the Kenyan government went into decay as a result of dwindling economic growth, foreign imposed structural adjustment programmes and spiralling corruption and looting of public resources by the Moi administration.[14] To resident communities in low income areas of Nairobi, government services was virtually non-existent and people's trust in the impartiality and efficiency of the police was minimal. Business owners and private citizens who could not afford to buy services from the private security industry relied instead on informal arrangements and vigilantism was seen as a legitimate response to problems of security and lack of access to institutions of justice.[15]

Mungiki was just one actor in a growing landscape of vigilante groups, militias and gangs who took on roles as enforcers of public order in this situation. Since the 1990s Mungiki has acted as a provider of security and informal justice in informal settlements in Nairobi and elsewhere, and has been effective in curbing criminal activities. It is against this backdrop Mungiki has been

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[12] Winnie Mitullah, 'Urban slum reports: the case of Nairobi, Kenya'(UN Habitat, Nairobi, 2003).
[13] David M.Anderson *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of the Empire* (W.W. Norton, London, 2005).
[14] Roger Southall, "Re-forming the state? Kleptocracy and the political transition in Kenya", *Review of African Political Economy* 26, 79 (1999), pp.93-108.
[15] Anderson, "Vigilantes, violence".

characterised as an agent of 'globalisation from below' by some observers.[16] Others, however, instead highlight the violence and criminal practices that have gone hand in hand with the legitimate activities of the movement, and in particular with regards to its taxation of the *matatu* transport industry.[17] In the past decade Mungiki has been involved in many bloody clashes with rivalling militias in Nairobi and elsewhere over the control of sources of income. In some such cases it is widely assumed that Mungiki has acted on assignment from or with the backing of powerful political interests. Indeed, as one observer noted of the political violence of the Moi era elections, most Kenyan top level politicians were relying on private militias and could be ready to pursue a warlord strategy in the event of a political crisis.[18] Kenya descended further into warlike conditions after the contested elections in 2007.

In spite of a troublesome relation to the government and its uncompromising critique of the Kenyan political elite, evidence suggests that Mungiki has gradually been drawn into the politics of informal repression. On several occasions Mungiki has openly allied with established political interests. It is widely assumed that the movement is backed by powerful political actors, including several MPs from Central Province. Prior to the 2002 election Mungiki was brought under the wings of the Kanu party and rallied in support of Moi's presidential candidate Uhuru Kenyatta. In the 2008 post-election violence, Mungiki was mobilised by senior members of the government to carry out

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[16] Terisa E. Turner and Leigh S. Brownhill, '"Women never surrender": the Mau Mau and globalisation from below in Kenya 1980-2000', in Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Nicolas G. Faraclas and Claudia von Werlhof (eds.), *There is an Alternative: Subsistence and worldwide resistance to corporate globalisation* (Zed Books, London, 2001), pp. 106-32.

[17] Anderson, "Vigilantes, violence", Katumanga, "A city under siege".

[18] Southall, "Re-forming the state?".

revenge attacks on non-Kikuyus in extensive numbers in the Rift Valley and elsewhere in the country. The scale of the events that unfolded after the elections overwhelmed the country's rulers and for a time the state lost control over parts of the country to poor young Kenyans for whom the violence served as a 'hugely empowering event'.[19]

Explaining Mungiki's power of mobilisation: 'Cultural framing'

The overview provided in the previous section begins to raise reasons for why young people may join Mungiki. In accounts of these processes, to date, however, a more coherent and 'joined up' analysis of the movement is missing. There has been a distinct omission in terms of understanding of what actually legitimates and motivates collective action for Mungiki. We seek to correct this omission by analysing Mungiki therefore as a *social movement* and especially its apparently dynamic capacity to mobilise members. Social movement analysis revolves around core perspectives underpinning collective action: collective behaviour, resource mobilisation and political processes.[20] In addition, 'new' types of social movements have been associated with mobilisation against state intrusion rather than addressing issues to do with economic transformation and re-distribution.[21] Although the last perspective is criticised especially from the vantage point of countries experiencing social movements amidst high levels of poverty and

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[19] John Githongo, "Fear and loathing in Nairobi. The challenge of reconciliation in Kenya", *Foreign Affairs* 89, 4 (2010), pp. 2-9.

[20] M. Diani and D. McAdam, *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford University Press, Oxford); D. Della Porta and M. Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2006).

[21] Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*.

inequality,[22] nonetheless, there are advantages to focusing upon the active construction of a movement.

First, looking at mobilisation avoids the misplaced tendency in many accounts that give priority to *either/or* political, cultural, and economic factors; *either* structural *or* agency based explanations. Second, and in relation, rather than seeking to place a label of overt political resistance we are most concerned with how Mungiki actually constructs its identity and meaning as a movement. We therefore foreground an approach that uses 'frames' to explain mobilisation of social movements.[23] In attempting to fuse both structural and agency explanations for mobilisation we refer to the term cultural framing as '[T]he conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action'.[24]

As can be imagined, young people join Mungiki for complex reasons, several of which have already been alluded to. The personal histories of attachment to Mungiki that were collected in interviews with members reveal several types of experience emerging as cross-cutting themes in these self biographical accounts. In the sections that follow we group themes from respondent interviews in accordance with the framing approach.[25] First, this concerns a *diagnostic* frame, which involves how potential members and members depict their social reality in terms of problems encountered and especially apportioning blame for this. In short, is there concern over particular

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[22] Richard Ballard, 'Social movements in South Africa', Peris Jones and Kristian Stokke (eds) *Democratising Development: The Politics of Socio-Economic Rights in South Africa* (Martinus Njihoff, Leiden, 2005), pp. 77-96.
[23] Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* **26** (2000), pp. 611-639.
[24] Diani and McAdam, *Social Movements and Networks*.
[25] Benford and Snow, "Framing Processes".

issues, especially a deep well of resentment or grievance perceived as injustice and who is deemed responsible? This element underpins a collective sense of identity. Second, a *prognostic* frame puts forward a (programmatic) response to these problems in terms of strategies and solutions – what can be done? As Benford and Snow note, however, these responses may not in themselves be adequate for mobilising support. [26] Third, a *motivational* framing is therefore a critical dimension in mobilising action, and the one that gives force to agency to turn both diagnostic and prognostic accounts into action. This dimension actively animates a collective identity by channelling grievances, and builds membership, belonging and solidarity. We discuss each of these dimensions in turn.

Diagnosis: layers of injustice – mapping 'us' and 'them'

In this section we group themes from interviews with Mungiki members according to how they and the movement seek to explain social reality and the nature of problems encountered by its members. The diagnosis adhered to by Mungiki members emerges in a set of representations which allow them to understand and evaluate historical and political processes which have contributed to the shaping of their lives as follows.

Personal and political crisis

There are striking aspects of Mungiki members' accounts that coalesce around a deep seated sense of injustice with regards to the living conditions endured. Interviews revealed a strong awareness about the injustices which have been

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[26] Ibid.

committed against ordinary people in Kenya from colonial times up until the present. These injustices were seen as direct causes of the difficulties Mungiki members had experienced growing up in slums in Nairobi or in rural areas in Central Province in particular. Explanations of Kenya's broader predicament were closely interwoven with much more personalised accounts of struggles against the odds. Narratives of personal problems experienced such as drug and alcohol abuse was uniformly cited: First, dropping out of schooling prematurely due to lack of financial means to cover school fees. The emphasis upon the unfairness in inability to pay school fees was commonplace. Lack of opportunity to go to college and further education was also oft cited. Second, the premature termination of formal education often propelled respondents to a life on the streets. To become a street child, with social conditions depicted as particularly challenging and at risk to substance and other forms of abuse, was accorded a particularly high indicator of social exclusion. Third, many described their young adult life as plagued by alcohol or drugs, with hardships linked to this lifestyle and inability to participate in a normal life. Again, these hardships were continuously juxtaposed with the opportunities monopolised by the Kenyan elite.

In addition, the hardships in eking out a living so evident in these accounts were then depicted as compounded by encounters with state authorities. It appears typical to recall direct abuse by state authorities, including periods of imprisonment. Several mentioned periods in either juvenile camps for rehabilitation, experiences of beatings; false arrest; detention without trial; bribes taken by police and so on. Some who ran businesses, such as brewing of the illicit alcohol *changaa* or hawking, were particularly vulnerable to police harassment

and payment of bribes. One respondent relayed how the profit from his hawking was very marginal, so that payment of even a nominal 'fine' to the police was very damaging to one's income. On becoming Mungiki members, the targeting by police appeared to intensify in certain periods. The most visible dimension of these has been the plethora of extra-judicial killings of members. But there were also other forms of abuse particularly to do with police fines. In the words of one member from Kayole:

Police got me one time. They beat me. I was going home. It was the rainy season 2006. I was starting journey to home with 2800ksh. But the police frustrated me very much. One police man caught me here (showed us by neck) and asked "what are you doing here?" "I am polishing shoes." They said "you are Mungiki" and went in my pockets. When I refused they beat me. They then took me to the police station and said that the things they took were "exhibits". The money they said was from the *matatus* and was illegal. But they never write my money (i.e. registered it), just my phone and a card. These police are thieves. I then went to a relative. In the meantime the police said I had been "touting" and I was charged 3000ksh more in fine!! I never saw my money and then this! I told god to prey for me!.

Once again, given the precarious economic environment, such acts deepened a sense of victimisation at the hands of authorities. Most members appeared to be in and out of informal sector activities. One respondent recalled how after many years as a casual labourer he finally got a more settled job, working as a gardener for a 'wealthy person'. The precariousness was illustrated by him being a victim of two robberies, the second time losing everything, even all his food. Upon registering his concerns over insecurity with the employer, however, this was apparently met disparagingly. The level of personal insecurity was again

juxtaposed with the negligence of the better-off. Another respondent encapsulates all these different facets in one powerfully interwoven account:

I lived in a tiny house, literally a bed and was drinking and smoking. I was caught by police (for brewing) and thrown in jail as a suspect for a crime. I was never charged but stayed on remand in jail for 3 years. If you have money you can buy your freedom. If you have nothing you stay in prison. I survived there. But when I came out I was asking myself, how will I live? Like my dad who died when I was in Standard 7 [school class for approximately 14 year olds]? 'What kind of hell is this!', I asked myself?

The quotation articulates a range of grievances: anti-social behaviour, precarious economic existence, the injustice at the hands of police, and the sense of unfairness at the discrepancy between his life and those of wealthy Kenyans. It highlights the experience of having been abandoned by political authorities and deprived of opportunities to search for prosperity and the sense of humiliation that ensues from leading a life as a victim of these socio-political circumstances. What emerges from Mungiki members' self biographical accounts is a narrative of crisis in a twofold sense of the term. On the one hand, they describe a moral crisis at the personal level. This can be seen to tie in with a distinctive Kikuyu discourse on civic virtue encoded in norms of reciprocity of household production and the image of the responsible head of the household.[27] The deprivation of large sections of the Kikuyu of ownership to land which started with the incursion of European settlers did not only present them with a problem of material reproduction but of how to conduct a morally worthy life under these conditions. As John Lonsdale has noted, an insistent question has for long been 'how then can

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[27] Lonsdale, 'Moral and political argument'.

I live as an honourable Kikuyu?'.[28] This conundrum appears to have had an acute

bearing on the lives of Mungiki members prior to their inclusion in the movement.

On the other hand, informants' accounts clearly point to a crisis of
legitimacy with respect to the political authorities. Given the immense inequalities
of Kenyan society this is hardly surprising. At a rudimentary level this diagnosis
is by no means unique to Mungiki members. Many commentators on Kenyan
political life have pointed to a growing resentment among ordinary Kenyans with
the corruption − in the sense of moral irresponsibility − of the country's power
holders, and how this has been accentuated in the past two decades as a result of
the exposure of the regime's excesses in primitive accumulation. Among Mungiki
members feelings of alienation and anger with the political authorities and the
country's hereditary political elite are acute. In interviews they talked for long
about how access to the resources since colonial times has been monopolised by a
few families referred to by one informant as follows:

I am asking, does Kenya only belong to one [elite] family? My parents struggled. People have
gone to jail. I struggle. I went to jail. People are not eating. How will they ever get a job or a car or
become an MP? This Kenya belongs to the Royal Family.

This profound sense of 'us' − the excluded and unfairly treated people, and 'them'
− the elite, provides an important foundation for group identity among Mungiki
members.

The awakening call

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[28] John Lonsdale,'Kenya: ethnicity, tribe and state' (http://opendemocracy.net) (17 January 2008).

Mungiki member's notions of 'us', evident in interviews, generally referred more narrowly to people of Kikuyu origin, and hence to frictions between these and other ethnic groups (or 'tribes' as they are commonly referred to in Kenya). Several longstanding members of Mungiki we interviewed, who had joined the movement during the Moi-era prior to 2002, recalled how the Kikuyu population at this time was fragmented and marginalised due to political oppression by the regime and its favouring of other ethnic groups. In members' accounts of the decision to join Mungiki, the departure from an inauthentic Westernised life style, depicted as comprising elements such as Christianity, drinking and smoking, and the return to a hitherto stigmatised Kikuyu identity figured prominently. One member from Kayole who joined the movement in the mid-1990s explained that what attracted him to Mungiki in the first place was its call for 'togetherness' among the Kikuyu. At a public rally he heard Mungiki preachers talk about how the Kikuyu were squatters and that they should come together and 'share their problems'. Apart from the call for solidarity among the Kikuyu to better endure the times of difficulty, the message he was presented with at the rally was about finding the way back to ones 'roots'. According to the informant, this message impacted on him to the extent that he felt compelled to acknowledge himself as a Kikuyu:

I listened to them at the open ground. It was about my tribe, about my forefathers, my history. They talked about getting back to your roots, to the ways of the forefathers.

Going back to one's 'roots' implied returning to the religious practices such as praying to Mount Kenya. It also meant accepting the spiritual authority of leader

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Maina Njenga and his prophecy about Kikuyus uniting together. As the informant explained, the conversion to Mungiki emerged as if an act of reconnecting with his true self. In a similar vein, a more recent member of Mungiki described the process of joining the movement as one of 'finding a home'. As much as informants framed the story of coming to accept Mungiki's call for conversion as a return to their Kikuyu identity and 'roots', it was also described by many as a revolt against the Christian churches. A local Mungiki leader, for example, suggested that the movement was started in order to 'beat the churches', in other words, to offer something more authentic and representative of the masses. Exposure to the 'preaching' of Mungiki emerges, therefore, as an awakening event, which made them come to terms with a Kikuyu:

I heard Maina preaching. The story being preached affected my heart. It reminded me of things talked about with grandmother. So many preachers were in the meeting. No preaching was the same. Different talents of different preachers. One could start with history of bible. Another about our country history, with examples of freedom fighters. Then another about our culture and traditions. Another about our country and the economy.

The reference made to a grandparent in the quotation is also typical of informants' accounts of the process of becoming a Mungiki member. In many cases, the message brought forward by Mungiki evoked memories of stories told to them by grandparents about the Mau Mau rebellion and how to behave according to Kikuyu culture. Often, for those arriving in Nairobi, messages preached by Mungiki members, and practices witnessed, such as taking snuff, provided resonance with earlier stories expressed by grandparents.

Indeed, there was a remarkable resonance and self-identification of individual accounts with messages and meanings from the *Mau Mau* movement. Again this was particularly manifest in references to memories of stories told by grandparents concerning experiences from that period of Kenyan history. In this connection it was emphasised that having fought and sacrificed their lives for the freedom of their country, Mau Mau veterans have never received adequate recognition.[29] This was linked to a broader indictment of the Kenyan political leadership as representatives of actors in Kenyan society who never took part in the anti-colonial struggle. It was the middle class moderate nationalist and chiefs and collaborators with the colonial power, who could afford to send their children to universities abroad, who inherited the country after independence. As one respondent put it, 'the trophy was taken not by those who played the game [i.e. Mau Mau] but by those watching'.[30]

Itweka

An important theme expressed by informants, usually raised with apparent enthusiasm, concerns the concept of *Itweka*. It refers to the transferral of power and authority from the initiated members of one age set to the next in Kikuyu society, which in accordance with tradition is to take place with intervals of forty years. In this sense, *Itweka* was deemed to embody the responsibility of older relatives every forty years to 'give way' to younger members to govern affairs. As such, the idiom of *Itweka* appeared to be useful to members in framing the desire

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[29] Several informants cited examples of fighters, such as the wife of the Mau Mau general Dedan Kimathi, who has been living a life in poverty, despite sacrifices made.

[30] There is not the space to detail all the parallels to Mau Mau drawn by respondents, but one more included extra-judicial killings, for example.

for change with understanding injustice and poor leadership encountered in Kenya as due to generational conflict. It could refer to a specific generational struggle within the Kikuyu community between the young people and politicians of the Kibaki generation who have stayed in power for more than forty years since independence, or more broadly to the struggle between youth and the aging political elite. More broadly, the concept of *Itweka* was used with reference to class struggle and the takeover of political power. According to several of our informants the concept simply means 'revolution'. As such it is more than a normative claim levelled against the political elite or a rallying call to the members. To Mungiki members *Itweka* is an event which has been foretold by their spiritual leader Maina Njenga. This directs us to the final element in the Mungiki 'diagnosis'.

The Millennial vision

The role and authority of Maina Njenga as spiritual leader of Mungiki has been underplayed in previous accounts of Mungiki. Almost all informants readily attested to their belief in Maina Njenga's prophetic powers and divine role as a saviour of Kikuyu people. Many stories were presented about visions and mystical experiences which had occurred since Maina was of young age, and of prophecies he has made which have come true. One such story recounted by informants was about a vision Maina had as a schoolboy in the classroom where he was given a message about the suffering of 'his people' (i.e. the Kikuyu). In the words of one informant this incident was a divine call for Maina to wake up to the task of 'leading his people out of its misery – like Moses'. Another, local leader of

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Mungiki, in Mathare, 'Paul' (not his real name), had intimate knowledge about several clashes with rival gangs which have taken place over the past decade. Although lives have been lost in these events, in reply to whether he had any regrets about Mungiki's activities and subsequent ousting from the settlement, John made it abundantly clear he did not. To explain his position Paul referred to an encounter with Maina Njenga:

In 2005 Maina came to visit us in Mathare. He told us that one day we will all evacuate this place. That day will come!

The informant firmly believed this to be a prophecy indicating that destructive activities Mungiki have taken part in are justified by the liberating cause to which they are linked.

Another testimony to Maina Njenga's spiritual authority concerns the recent turn of Mungiki towards Christianity. After he was released from prison in 2009, Maina Njenga, declared himself a reborn Christian and joined a Pentecostal church community. This precipitated divisions within the movement, and parts of the membership, we were told, refuse to enlist in the church. Given the enthusiasm with which informants talked about Mungiki as a revolt against the churches this decision was clearly difficult for some. Some had a pragmatic view, pointing out that bible reading has always been important to Mungiki and that *their* version of Christianity is close to their old beliefs. Alternatively, it was deemed strategic, in that the 'born again thing' is mainly a matter of renewing Mungiki's public image and a necessary move to gain acceptance among the broad sections of the people. Others made it clear that the move to Christianity

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cost them dearly, but that they nevertheless accepted the decision ultimately 'because it is Maina's will'.

Our review of the various ingredients of the Mungiki diagnosis of members' experiences directs attention to a mix of divisions of class, generation and culture in Kenyan society, as well as to divisions within the Kikuyu community. More than a set of self-ascribed identities, the mix produces the rudiments of a Mungiki 'world view' from which a moral mapping of the principal actors in Kenyan society is done. Injustices are used to explain the difficulties experienced by Mungiki members and create commitment to a moral and political struggle. The article now turns to Mungiki 'solutions' to these struggles.

Prognosis: mobilising the masses

The programmatic 'solutions' Mungiki devises for the practical-material, moral and political problems raised in the diagnosis run along two overlapping paths. One concerns moral regeneration of the self through liberation from inauthentic 'bad' lifestyles and the return to Kikuyu values. The other is about forging unity in the Kikuyu masses in order to establish an alternative source of power and collective organisation to the state.

Liberating the self

A typical idiom used to talk about conversion to Mungiki was described as becoming a 'good person'. At its simplest this refers to the requirement of the movement that members should break with or be 'liberated' from 'bad' ways of

living. Several persons we interviewed recalled how when joining Mungiki they were compelled to relinquish their former life styles and adopt a more responsible and respectful way of living. The habit displayed by informants of referring to non-Mungiki Kikuyu youths as 'drunkards' is revealing in this regard. When describing the content of the 'preaching' from Mungiki they had been exposed to prior to their decision to join, the message of abstinence from alcohol and drugs figured prominently and was the most tangible demand upon joining the movement. In many cases this was tantamount to a major reorientation in life.

At the Mungiki farm at Kitengela two veteran members who had been with the movement since the very beginning in the Rift Valley, told the authors that their role in the movement was as advisors for groups of 'troubled youths' brought to then and other Mungiki farms for 'rehabilitation'. As one recalled:

The message was always about making bad people good. We started liberating them, then we got them to change and then [we come together and contribute] to support them in business.

The rehabilitation process converts undergo at the farms was termed 'liberation'. While living at the farm the youths are accustomed to a life of hard work and sharing. At the end of the stay the youths are assigned work on Mungiki 'projects' (see later) or they are provided with a grant from other members to establish a business of their own. The farm at Kitengela, the veterans stated, embodies the movement's values of solidarity and self-sufficiency they seek to imprint on the converts and hence also the personal transformation involved in conversion to Mungiki. This directs us to the core message and purpose of Mungiki according to

respondents, namely, the forging of unity among the socially excluded members of the Kikuyu.

Forging unity: security and economy

'Unity' points also to tangible practical advantages of mutual cooperation and the establishing of relations of trust. This message finds strong resonance among members in the slums of Nairobi. One informant from Mathare North, 'Darius',[31] left his home in Central Province to live in Nairobi after secondary school. Here he made a stressful living as a hawker in the Central Business District for about five years, during which he learned about Mungiki and eventually joined the movement. How Darius arrived at this decision was through the realisation that solidarity is of critical practical importance to poor individuals:

As an individual one must expect to struggle – I had to! Together we are stronger than as individuals.

In this regard unity can be taken to refer to several things. It points to a strategy of building strength in numbers. The meaning of the term Mungiki in Kikuyu is 'masses' or 'multitude', and the constant push to expand its following seems to be an inherent objective of the movement. Judging from interviews, it is likely that processes of recruitment often works its way through personal networks of kin and friendship in a manner which is analogous to the growth of a pyramid scheme. According to an informant who converted to Mungiki in 1999 there were only a handful of members at this time in Mathare. When joining Mungiki he was

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[31] All names of Mungiki local members' respondents have been changed.

instructed to be relentless in his efforts to convert more people to the movement, and within a short time span he managed to recruit more than ten new members among his friends. As these in turn went on to recruit more converts from their personal networks, the movement quickly extended its reach among Kikuyu youths in Mathare. Similar processes were unfolding in other networks of youth in the slum area. As a result membership grew to several thousands within a few years.

The emphasis on numerical strength is coupled with a code standing by one's 'brothers' in times of trouble. A dilemma which was recurrently brought up in interviews concerned legitimate and honest livelihoods for 'liberated' members. One method was, as mentioned, to provide a 'start up' grant of cash to enable them to establish small scale businesses. Another is to assign them work on the various 'projects' Mungiki runs. As several informants testified to, if experiencing difficulties in running businesses, or, personal crises, fellow members of the movement can be trusted to act as a 'safety net' providing security or a donation of money. One, who has business selling firewood in Mathare North, told us that he can store his goods in the open in a densely populated neighbourhood without much concern about theft. Since everyone in the area knows that the firewood belong to Mungiki, no one would dear to steal from it. This was echoed by the owner of a clothing shop located on a busy street in Kayole who explained that 'Property from Mungiki can not be stolen!' and that people in the area are aware that members would quickly assemble a 'crowd' and act against the culprits.

Unity can also refer to a disciplined and efficient organisation. When explaining how he arrived at the decision to join Mungiki, the hawker cited kept

mentioning how he was 'impressed' with the 'coordination' and efficiency of the movement in organising the hawking business in Nairobi's Central Business District. The profit he made from this business was marginal and when caught by the City Council police he was forced to pay bribes that therefore cost him dearly. To this and other hawkers Mungiki had a critical function in warning against police raids, enabling escape with their goods. Apart from protecting the 'lines' from the police, Mungiki arbitrates disputes between the hawkers to ensure that one's place in the hawker's line is not stolen by others. In exchange for this support the movement charges a fee from the hawkers. More generally, informants attributed these qualities benefits to the Mungiki structure of organisation, comprised by a dense network of committees and councils at numerous levels going from the neighbourhood "platoons" to the national leadership.

As part of the Mungiki performance of unity members referred to an unbreakable bond of loyalty, referred to by some as a policy of 'zero-defection'. Belonging to Mungiki is symbolically affirmed in the initiation ritual new members undergo. Commentators on Mungiki have indicated that this is a ritual of oath taking modelled on those of the Mau Mau movement, and that it is centred on the experience of physical hardship and the use of blood and bodily fluids. Informants described the initiation ritual as a 'baptism' involving the use of water, fire, oils and the slaughter and eating of a goat. The issue of oathing is sensitive in Kenya due, among other things, to the memories of the Mau Mau rebellion. While some informants affirmed the power of the initiation ritual as an institution which instils loyalty in members, others downplayed its significance in comparison to

the solidarity arising from the realisation that they constitute a community of interest. When asked about the initiation ritual as a source of unity, one informant dismissed this arguing instead that: 'The problems we are facing is the glue'. And while some insisted that oathing has no part in the rituals, others explained that they had sworn to god never to leave the movement, and that they dreaded the consequences if they were to break this promise. What seems certain is that the initiation ritual represents a symbolic sealing of the individual member's incorporation into Mungiki as a community of trust and loyalty.

On every count, the programmatic solutions of Mungiki that have been described appear as a response to a social situation characterised by vacancy of state services, illegitimacy of political rule and a climate of distrust. In dealing with this reality Mungiki mimics the state for those the latter has abandoned.

Gaining control: the motivational framing of Mungiki

If the diagnostic and prognostic frames are seen as the 'theoretical' and 'strategic' visions which underpin Mungiki's power of mobilisation, then the motivational frame refers to the actual 'delivery' to the members in terms of changes to their existence. Many of the reflections our interview subjects shared with us about the immediate and long term personal rewards of membership in Mungiki can be seen in the notion of gaining control over one's existence. It points to experiences of material but also moral betterment of one's life situation, to a sense of empowerment ensuing from inclusion in a powerful collective and to experiences of egalitarian inclusion in organisational affairs. One of our interview subjects, 'John', captures this well.

John was born and grew up in Mathare North, where he joined Mungiki in 2000. Prior to this he had by his own account been living as a 'hustler' and 'hopeless' since leaving school. He spent three years in jail accused of a serious crime (see earlier account). After being released from prison, John started to contemplate his 'future' and the lack of direction. He described his conversion to Mungiki as a matter of coming to see 'the light' and 'reality' and as an event which brought great changes to his life:

Because of Mungiki my life automatically changed. It was like changing gear in a car from low to high gear. I started to see miracles. I married. Got a job. Then I was employed in [mentions the employer], and had stopped drinking and smoking. I was in control.

This statement effectively summarises many of the features of what, in accordance with Benford and Snow's analytical scheme,[32] can be referred to as the 'motivational' framing of Mungiki membership.

Improved living

Most obviously, the notion of gaining control refers to improvements in material conditions of living, ensuing from the direct and indirect practical-economic advantages of membership in Mungiki. Becoming a member of Mungiki, we have seen, meant relinquishing a way of living centred on the use of alcohol and drugs in favour of a more future oriented life style. An immediate effect of this, several informants pointed out, was that a bigger part of their available income could be channelled into productive activities and on the development of their households.

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[32] Benford and Snow, "Framing".

Informants explained how the 'start up' grants provided them with various types of small scale business opportunities. One person who used to make a living as a brewer of *changaa* in Mathare was given a donation of ksh 5000 upon joining the movement. This enabled him to establish a business of making and selling cakes. In other cases again, members without independent sources of income supported their existence through Mungiki 'projects'. An informant belonging to a platoon in Mathare North, told us that they charge residents in the area a fee of ksh 100 per month for collecting garbage, out of which the individual Mungiki members make a monthly income of ksh 5000. This may be below the official minimum wage but sufficient for survival in Mathare according to informants. Another member who belongs to a platoon that runs a car wash in the same area explained that the individual members make ksh 3-400 from a days work at the car wash. The most lucrative of these ventures, we were told, is the *matatu* operations members run. The basic effect of these and other practical-economic advantages of joining Mungiki was a raise in the living standard. However incremental these changes might be, they enable a better degree of security and as such can be critical for establishing a member's own household.

Becoming a good person

John's experiences at the start of the section aptly illustrated one's obligations to relatives and household. At around the time he joined Mungiki tragedy struck as three close relatives died within the span of one week. In the absence of his older brother, who was working abroad, his mother relied on him to arrange for a funeral. This can be a costly undertaking to Kenyans and in any case far beyond

what John could then afford. In this moment of crisis, Mungiki contributed a large donation of money which allowed him to organise a proper funeral for the relatives at the family home in Central Province:

No one in my community expected this. It was a big surprise for many. Many people in my home area were impressed by this and the movement got more interest as a result.

Apart from the attention brought to Mungiki and the loyalty to the movement this gift must have forged, it can be assumed to have elevated his status and respectability, in John's own eyes as well as in his social surroundings. This directs us to another meaning of 'control' in this context. In most cases, our informants accounts of how they found their way into membership in Mungiki are framed in a narrative of personal growth and transformation from a life as a 'rude boy', 'gangster', 'hustler' or 'gang member' to that of becoming a 'good person', and usually these accounts are replete with allusions to a liberation or rebirth of the self. This narrative of personal change points above all to the experience of regaining moral dignity. The decision to join Mungiki was endorsed by and in some cases led to a (re-)establishing relations, for example, with their parents, or, in being regarded as respectable and successful by friends and relatives, or, establishing a family and to take on the role as head of a household. As such, the lifestyle and ethic of self-sufficiency prescribed by Mungiki can be seen to entrust its members with an effective and credible solution to the moral predicament facing the poor we noted earlier concerning how to live as a 'honourable Kikuyu'.

Conclusion: Mungiki's power of mobilisation

The failure of development NGOs to create mass mobilisation of civil society is in stark contrast to the Mungiki's capacity to mobilise large numbers of poor youths at grass roots level. The movement's ability to mobilise must therefore be viewed as impressive. Our exposition of the cultural framing of Mungiki provides some answers to the question of how the movement attains this mobilisation. The diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framings of Mungiki we have described are clearly expressive of a voice from 'below' and resonant with the vernacular languages of the masses of alienated youth who have been abandoned by the Kenyan authorities. In the face of such abandonment members therefore allude to their experiences of gaining a semblance of 'power'. Our purpose is merely to explain and not to place a value judgement on such 'power'. Nonetheless, what can be said is that while every member of Mungiki interviewed seems able to produce a complex critique of the workings of the Kenyan postcolonial state, they could not demonstrate a political programme of reconstruction. This brings to mind one of the main conclusions in Frank Furedi's acclaimed analysis of the Mau Mau rebellion.[33] According to Furedi, the strength of the Mau Mau movement was its organisational autonomy, while its weakness was the lack of a binding ideology. In our understanding, this assertion applies with equal force to Mungiki. While some argue that a conception of an antagonistic 'us' and 'them' relation is probably an indispensable requirement to any political struggle,[34] claims to represent 'the people' against 'oppressors' is not in itself a guarantee for

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[33] Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (James Curry, London, 1989).
[34] C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso, New York, NY, 2000).

progressive politics.[35] Since his release from prison in 2009, Njenga has been publicly forging relations with Prime Minister Raila Odinga, former President Daniel Arap Moi, been appointed a Kikuyu elder and courting donors. For the first time Mungiki has been permitted to register a political party. In interviews with high level Mungiki representatives we were told that the movement is aiming to elect Njenga to Parliament in 2012. Whether this will lead towards further 'political tribalism' and integration of Mungiki in the 'business as usual' of elite politics of Kenya, or points to the crafting of a new type of political force in the country's politics, very much remains to be seen.

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[35] Comaroff and Comaroff , 'Law and disorder in the postcolony'.