

## **Kibera – Complex History, Community Culture, and Collective Action**

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### **Section 1 – Introduction**

Most people have never heard of Kibera. I certainly had not until I began my summer internship with Someone Else's Child. On a basic level, Kibera is the largest slum in the whole of Africa, located in Nairobi, Kenya. However, as I have dug deeper into its history, with the help of SEC's Michael Christian, and Victor Onyango of Kibera Rising, a youth and community development organization, it became apparent that there was a lot more to learn from Kibera. Researching the past is integral in understanding the present and Kibera's history provides important insight into both the abject poverty that persists there, but more importantly, the culture of community that lends itself to hope for the future. This dichotomy is the basis of this research paper.

Kibera should be and has often been portrayed as a broken community, yet the undeniable sense of community provides hope. The question is where this solidarity and collective care comes from, and how it is maintained in an environment where necessities are scarce and formal leadership is even more limited. The goal in answering this question is to come closer to formulating a plan of collective action that would allow progress to be made in solving Kibera's surface level problems. Kibera is a close-knit, resourceful community, and its residents hold the key to a brighter future for the next generation.

## Section 2 – A Brief Overview of British Colonialism in Kenya

In order to fully understand the origins of Kibera as Africa’s largest urban “slum,” we must confront the brutal reality of British colonialism in Kenya at large. Beginning in 1492, European nations began a global conquest that would see roughly 85% of the world colonized by 1914.<sup>1</sup> Colonial activity in Africa really began in the 1800s, and Europeans employed a few different tactics in bringing natives under their “control.” In the case of Kenya, the British imposed “settler rule,” in which, under the pretense of “development,” white settlers forced Kenyans off their ancestral territory. Scrapping the political system previously overseen by elders and lineage heads, British settlers appointed African chiefs to institute colonial policies. Such policies included a taxation system that kept natives in a cycle of poverty, and a forced labor system that made Kenyan land an extraction zone.<sup>2</sup> The British colonial offices were headquartered in Nairobi and were intended to house exclusively Europeans and migrant workers on short-term, labor contracts. On top of the other laws the colonial government passed to suppress natives’ rights and freedoms, the Vagrancy Act of 1922 and similar pieces of legislation segregated, limited, and expelled the movement of Kenyans of whom many now called themselves indentured servants.<sup>3</sup> Within Nairobi, Africans could live in “African reserves” at the edge of the city. Residents must have a permit to live in Nairobi, and these permits separated the living spaces of non-Europeans according to their ethnicity. One of these groups consisted of

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Minor, “Comparative Colonialism” (lecture, History 49C, UCSB, January 17, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Minor, “Comparative Colonialism.”

<sup>3</sup> “Kibera,” Wikipedia, Accessed July 20, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kibera>.

African soldiers who militarily served the British colonial army, and their assigned territory became known as Kibera.<sup>4</sup>

Kibera, from the Nubian word for “forest,” originated as a settlement in the forests on the outskirts of Nairobi when Nubian soldiers from South Sudan returned from serving the King’s African Rifles, a British colonial regiment that handled “internal security functions” and employed African fighters in the World Wars.<sup>5</sup> While the Nubians had no legal claim to the land, over time, other groups settled in the area by renting land from Nubian landlords.<sup>6</sup> The violent exploitation of Kenyans by British colonialists had inevitably led to retaliation. The “Mau Mau” uprising continues to be the most notable radical movement against British occupation. In 1952, the British were met with a rebellion composed of Kikuyu people who sought to regain their political and territorial rights.<sup>7</sup> Radical Kikuyu fighters, who the British called the “Mau Mau,” attacked white settlers and their farms. The British detained, imprisoned, and tortured Kikuyu suspects hoping to suppress their nationalist sentiments.<sup>8</sup> After Kenya’s independence in 1963, Kibera was rendered an unauthorized settlement, but impoverished residents, of which the Kikuyu people made up a significant population, found Kibera to be comparatively affordable in comparison to legal housing. The demographics of Kibera have changed with time, but its origins suggest the populations’ shared experiences of mistreatment and marginalization that

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Onyango, personal interview, July 6, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, “Kibera.”

<sup>6</sup> Onyango, personal interview.

<sup>7</sup> Mwangi Wa-Githumo, “The Truth about the Mau Mau Movement: The Most Popular Uprising in Kenya,” *Transafrican Journal of History* 20 (1991): pp. 1-18.

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (Henry Holt and Co., 2005), 125.

would naturally render an overwhelming sense of kinship and community. According to Victor Onyango, Kibera resident and founder of Kibera Rising which aims to serve the area’s youth, this community feel has been passed on through generations and has become a defining element of Kibera’s social culture.<sup>9</sup>

### **Section 3 – Poverty and Community**

Kibera’s history has given way to a dichotomous contemporary reality – one in which community continues to be a guiding principle, but poverty is a very real hardship. Estimates regarding the total number of people in Kibera vary greatly, with a general consensus affirming that the population exceeds 500,000 but could range from 750,000 to over one million. Because the Kenyan government does not formally recognize Kibera, no census or other enumeration can confirm the number of residents. Regardless, the housing in Kibera is not sufficient to accommodate its population, and most people live in small, cramped shacks. Residents face challenges with sanitation, a lack of infrastructure causing sewage stagnation and an accumulation of garbage and waste. As a result, the area has become a breeding ground for diseases like typhoid and cholera and the life expectancy in Kibera is much lower than the world average, and lower still than the average in Africa as a whole.<sup>10</sup> A considerable portion of residents are unemployed, and gang activity, drugs, and sexual violence come as a result.

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<sup>9</sup> Onyango, personal interview.

<sup>10</sup> “Kibera,” The Lunchbowl Network, last modified 2020, <https://www.lunchbowl.org/kibera.html>.

These problems stem, in part, from a lack of government assistance or intervention. Many times, throughout Kibera’s history, various government agencies have promised (or threatened) to address the “Kibera problem,” but little meaningful action, if not ineffectual solutions follow.<sup>11</sup> Using the example of housing, new residences that are built with the intention of resettling Kibera residents often end up in the hands of the most well-off, educated, already powerful residents, which only jeopardizes the sense of solidarity in the area.<sup>12</sup> More malevolent can be government figures’ costly interest in political gain. Victor Onyango attests to the extreme violence and chaos that followed Kenya’s 2007 presidential elections as an example of the mistrust between political figures and Kibera residents. Such figures gain support through patronage, forming a loyal voting base, but at the expense of pitting ethnic communities against each other.<sup>13</sup> John Lonsdale calls this phenomenon “political tribalism,” and explains how the significance of community in Kibera has sometimes manifested into violence for the sake of politics.<sup>14</sup> But community, according to Mr. Onyango’s personal testimony, is what gives him hope for Kibera’s future. The most vulnerable in Kibera, both during peacetime and episodes of political upheaval, are children. Victor professes that the tragic and gruesome events he witnessed as a child fuel his passion for leading the next generation to a better tomorrow.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia, “Kibera.”

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Edna Wangui et al., “A Geographical Study of Kibera as an Example of an Uncontrolled Settlement,” *Journal of Eastern African Research & Development* 22 (1992): pp. 75-91.

<sup>13</sup> Johan de Smedt, “‘No Raila, No Peace!’ Big Man Politics and Election Violence at the Kibera Grassroots,” *African Affairs* 108, no. 433 (October 2009): pp. 581-598.

<sup>14</sup> Smedt, “‘No Raila, No Peace!’,” 581-598.

<sup>15</sup> Onyango, personal interview.

The hardships in Kibera are very real, and many Kibera residents experience abject poverty that can be unimaginable unless witnessed firsthand. However, almost all accounts indicate that an equally real level of joy pervades the city slum. In the face of their harsh environment, many residents display resourcefulness and strongly identify with their community.<sup>16</sup> Leaders like Mr. Onyango and ordinary citizens alike maintain a sense of responsibility and care for their neighbors, which contradicts the assumption that poverty invokes hopelessness. Many of the people currently residing in Kibera are migrants and, therefore, the demographic of Kibera as a whole is very diverse.<sup>17</sup> In this way, community members have the opportunity to celebrate their differences. In fact, a geographical study of Kibera found that “families in Kibera do not live only as nuclear families but more so as extended families.”<sup>18</sup> According to Mr. Onyango, the Kibera community rallies around a shared concern for the children. When kids show up to attend Kibera Rising programs they are not unattended. They tend to be accompanied by parents or guardians who sometimes even express reservation around handing their kids over. It is clear, in this way, that these children have anchors – home bases, people who care about them.

This unique kinship system makes for a tangible and impressive level of productivity in spite of the challenges already named. Kibera provides affordable, however rudimentary, housing for Nairobi’s low-income residents.<sup>19</sup> As a self-contained, localized economy, Kibera thrives and provides labor for Nairobi’s wider urban community.<sup>20</sup> One word that comes up often

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<sup>16</sup> The Lunchbowl Network, “Kibera.”

<sup>17</sup> Wangui et al., “A Geographical Study of Kibera,” 83.

<sup>18</sup> Wangui et al., “A Geographical Study of Kibera,” 86.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth N. Ngugi et al., “Family Kinship Patterns and Female Sex Work in the Informal Urban Settlement of Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya,” *Human Ecology* 40, no. 3 (2012): pp. 398.

<sup>20</sup> Ngugi et al., “Family Kinship Patterns and Female Sex Work,” 398.

in reading about Kibera residents is “resourcefulness.” A lack of formal political leadership requires community members to take charge over their own circumstances and experiences. House fires are common in Kibera due to the prominence of unventilated shacks and a lack of running water. Local youth leader, Mutua, describes the equally common practice of offering one’s, usually already cramped, home up to those who experience these disasters.<sup>21</sup> Police presence in the area is minimal, and Kibera residents have rallied around the concept of “community justice.” Through a controversial but apparently effective approach, when someone witnesses a crime, such as theft, they are expected to stop what they are doing and rally as many people as possible to go after the perpetrator.<sup>22</sup> These sorts of practices and customs attest to the inventiveness and resilience of the people. Evidenced by their contributions to the outside economy, and creativity in finding solutions to everyday problems, it would be a mistake to view Kiberans as helpless or destitute. Nonetheless, the media, both internationally and within Kenya, portrays Kibera as dangerous and dejected. These generalizations make for a great touch point for NGOs and charity programs whose efforts have been widely ineffective in improving the state of Kibera.

#### **Section 4 – Attempts at Community Uplift in Kibera**

Numerous nonprofit organizations, mostly with very positive intentions, have turned to Kibera with the intent of alleviating poverty. Those who do so in a way that makes a meaningful difference, however, are few and far between. There are lessons to be learned for NGOs with

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<sup>21</sup> Olivia Graziano, “Life in Kibera: A Different Perspective,” The Culture-ist, published June 30, 2020, <https://www.thecultureist.com/2020/06/16/life-in-kibera-a-different-perspective/>.

<sup>22</sup> Graziano, “Life in Kibera. “

genuine intentions on all fronts. “Carolina for Kibera” promises a community focus “to effect change that will stick.”<sup>23</sup> Their mission statement emphasizes a commitment to developing local leaders that will do the work necessary in catalyzing positive change.<sup>24</sup> The sincerity and execution of these goals, however, can be called into question. Kibera Town Centre, another organization known for its human needs services, has been providing safe drinking water, sanitation services, and accessible information dealing with COVID-19 in the settlement.<sup>25</sup> Kibera residents themselves make masks, create explanatory posters, install hand-washing stations, perform door-to-door campaigns, and so on.<sup>26</sup> In every case, community members are central in taking initiative and mobilizing resources. The community demonstrates an obvious willingness to take matters into their own hands.

Unfortunately, many NGOs approaches lack comprehensiveness or altogether ignore the capability of Kibera residents themselves. In the 1990s, the donor community lost faith in Kenya under the corrupt regime of President Moi. Money was soon coming directly to NGOs, and Kenya became one of the world’s largest recipients of international aid.<sup>27</sup> Despite all this money and attention, life has not improved for Kiberans after almost three decades. In the case of “Carolina for Kibera,” the NGO has pulled back support and does not remain as active as it once was, despite the work yet to be done. NGO leaders have trouble turning local volunteers into

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<sup>23</sup> Regina Ridley, “Community Engagement Inside Kibera,” Stanford Social Innovation Review, published September 1, 2011,

[https://ssir.org/articles/entry/from\\_the\\_field\\_community\\_engagement\\_inside\\_kibera](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/from_the_field_community_engagement_inside_kibera).

<sup>24</sup> Ridley, “Community Engagement Inside Kibera.”

<sup>25</sup> Henry Owino, “Into Their Own Hands: Kibera, Kenya’s Largest Slum, Tames COVID-19,” Pulitzer Center, published July 7, 2020,

<https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/their-own-hands-kibera-kenyas-largest-slum-tames-covid-19>.

<sup>26</sup> Owino, “Into Their Own Hands.”

<sup>27</sup> Linh Vo, “Kibera Slum: When Kindness Kills Development,” Duke-UNC Rotary Peace Center, accessed July 25, 2022,

<https://rotarypeacecenternc.org/kibera-slum/>.



full-time employees, not because those locals fail to show up, but because NGOs come into Kibera with a “we know best” attitude that minimizes their capabilities. In other words, there have been continuous failures to transfer jobs to those who understand the needs of the community best. Kibera residents who engage with outside NGOs describe feeling commercialized rather than helped.<sup>28</sup>

The root of many of Kibera’s problems is a lack of employment, prompting many men to engage in dangerous and counterproductive gang activity. Women, who undoubtedly lead lives of constant potential abuse in Kibera, are treated as fragile and dependent, when their hardships, more often than not, make them stronger and more capable. NGO leaders, nonetheless, fail to give these people jobs, which would mitigate the unemployment problem and allow residents to flex their skills. All in all, the most glaring fault on the part of NGOs is combining poverty with inability.<sup>29</sup> Charity and donations are helpful, but simply dumping material resources into the community is not sufficient in ending the cycle of poverty in Kibera. Community empowerment and poverty alleviation sound good on paper and poor Africans with certificates and smiles look great in pictures, but NGO leaders neglect to look at what should come next.

## **Section 5 – Someone Else’s Child and Kibera Rising**

Seeing Kibera simply as a slum – an example of undeveloped Africa or a beneficiary of Western intervention – is a mistake. These assumptions have been kept alive for too long and actually fueled many of Kibera’s longstanding challenges. The harsh conditions that they live

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<sup>28</sup> Vo, “Kibera Slum.”

<sup>29</sup> Vo, “Kibera Slum.”

under do not define the people of Kibera. Kibera is full of talented and ambitious young people who are passionate about investing in their community. By every measure, Kiberans themselves are the most knowledgeable, most well-equipped, and most capable when it comes to addressing the issues they still face. This is why Kibera is the perfect launchpad for understanding the importance of collective impact and collaboration.

Over 5 years ago, Someone Else’s Child began working with existing non-profits in Africa, driven by the obvious effects of climate change, poverty, lack of consistent educational resources etc., on the population.<sup>30</sup> SEC’s partnership with Kibera Rising, a youth development program, has proved to be beneficial to Kibera residents as well as SEC leaders who gain much from the communal feeling, care for youth, and hope for the future that pervades the area. Salim Rollins, an American living in Nairobi, and Victor Onyango, lifelong Kibera resident, created Kibera Rising which serves about 100 young people in three distinct sub-programs – Slum Dance Africa, The Empowerment Program for Girls, and Capoeira Kibera which all impart critical life skills and offer outlets of empowerment for all participants.<sup>31</sup> COVID-19 and other factors stalled the momentum of the program, but it has since thrived. Rightfully entrusting residents themselves with the uplift of their community, SEC is modeling a positive approach to NGO involvement in Kibera.

Victor has been a key leader in Slum Dance Africa for several years, and it has become an integral part of Kibera Rising’s success. The movement doubles as a breakdancing program, and source of inspiration for youth members who learn positive lifestyle choices through dance

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<sup>30</sup> “Kibera Rising and Rungano – Ndoti,” *Someone Else’s Child Africa Journey 2022*, July 2022, 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Kibera Rising,” 2.

as an art. With an about equal mix of male and female participants, the program also fosters friendships that form a caring community. Slum Dance hopes to send several athletes to the 2024 Paris Games, which breakdancing being a newly recognized Olympic sport. One of these athletes is Brian Ouma, who earned the championship in the under 18 division of the Rotation Dance Competition. Kibera Rising's recent showcase brought together almost 200 youth, their parents, and other community supporters. The trust in and notoriety of the program stand in contrast to the mistrust Kibera residents justly hold toward government agencies and other NGOs who have continuously failed them. More importantly, this turnout attests to Kibera's communal feel, the significant skills of residents, and the program's impressive impact. Though it is hard to pinpoint the source of Kibera's "magic," when it comes to the unwavering sense of solidarity, it is clear this this is what must be fostered in improving the economic obstacles of the region.

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