Hustling the *mtaa* way: the Brain Work of the Garbage Business in Nairobi's Slums

Magdalena Chułek

Abstract: The inhabitants of slums have developed creative ways of addressing the inherent instability of their lives. Chułek analyzes two approaches to self-organizing work on the basis of data gathered in two slum areas of Nairobi, Kibera and Korogocho, arguing that the key element of slum inhabitants' actions is the reproduction of structures which enable their survival by making their lives predictable. These structures are evident in the work of trash pickers and *orodha* people, who have developed a finely-tuned infrastructure that governs their actions while allowing room for as many as possible to participate. They can also be seen in the work of hustlers, whose "brain work" is dependent on their network of relationships and on their constant improvisation. These are two examples of the way that inhabitants of Nairobi's slums manage to maintain a sense of autonomy and agency in the face of constant economic challenge.

Résumé: Les habitants des bidonvilles ont développé des moyens créatifs de faire face à l'instabilité inhérente de leur vie. Chułek analyse deux approches du travail auto-organisé sur la base de données recueillies dans deux bidonvilles de Nairobi, Kibera et Korogocho, faisant valoir que l'élément clé des actions des habitants des bidonvilles est la reproduction de structures qui leur permettent de survivre en rendant leur vie prévisible. Ces structures sont évidentes dans le travail des ramasseurs de déchets et du peuple *orodha*, qui ont développé une infrastructure parfaitement adaptée à leurs actions tout en laissant des possibilités à un plus grand nombre de participant. On peut également les voir dans le travail des arnaqueurs dont le travail « intellectuel » dépend de leur réseau

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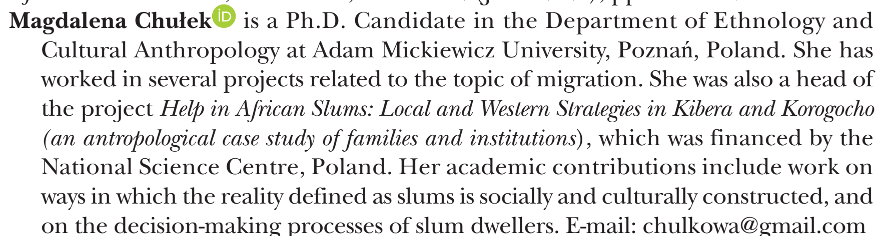

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Magdalena Chułek is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland. She has worked in several projects related to the topic of migration. She was also a head of the project *Help in African Slums: Local and Western Strategies in Kibera and Korogocho (an antropological case study of families and institutions)*, which was financed by the National Science Centre, Poland. Her academic contributions include work on ways in which the reality defined as slums is socially and culturally constructed, and on the decision-making processes of slum dwellers. E-mail: chulkowa@gmail.com

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de relations et de leur improvisation constante. C'est là deux exemples de la manière dont les habitants des bidonvilles de Nairobi parviennent à conserver un sentiment d'autonomie et d'actions individuelles face à un défi économique constant.

Resumo: Os habitantes das favelas desenvolveram formas criativas de lidar com a instabilidade inerente às suas vidas. Partindo de dados recolhidos em dois bairros favelados de Nairobi – Kibera and Korogocho – Chułek analisa as duas abordagens através das quais as populações se auto-organizam, defendendo que o elemento comum a todas as atividades de auto-organização dos moradores é a reprodução de estruturas que tornam previsíveis as suas vidas, assim promovendo a sobrevivência. Tais estruturas são notórias no trabalho dos apanhadores de lixo e dos indivíduos *orodha*, os quais desenvolveram uma infraestrutura bem otimizada que enquadra as suas atividades e ao mesmo tempo permite a participação do maior número possível de pessoas. São também identificáveis no exercício de trabalhos ilícitos, cujo "planeamento cerebral" depende da rede de relações e do improviso constante. Trata-se de dois exemplos que ilustram o modo como a população das favelas de Nairobi consegue manter um sentido de autonomia e de agencialidade perante desafios económicos constantes.

Keywords: Nairobi; slums; *mtaa*; Kenya; informal economy; hustling

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Introduction

In Swahili, *mtaa* means "neighborhood" or "district within a town or city." Those who use the term ascribe to it "a geographical, residential meaning ('here in the mtaa'), as well as a cultural and behavioral one ('it's the mtaa way')" (Thieme 2013:390). Doing something "in the mtaa way" is for neighborhood residents familiar and highlights what is unique to them. At the same time, it is connected with a sense of belonging (in terms of relationships, including neighborly ones, and networks of friends and acquaintances), which is closely tied to the agency of individuals and groups. These actions are manifested in the form of convictions creating an interpretative framework which legitimizes behaviors by co-creating the local way of being.

Mtaa has great significance for the nearly two hundred slums encompassing vast areas of Nairobi, Kenya's capital of over four million inhabitants.[1] Although slums take up less than one percent of the city's surface area and less than five percent of Nairobi's living area (Mitullah 2003; Oxfam 2011), they house more than half the city's population. Slums are commonly viewed as places which are uncertain and temporary, characterized by lack of planning and a large influx of people. However, such approaches overlook other important aspects which hinge on the organization of life in these areas and which are equally important for understanding the slums and living in them. This article is based on data from ethnographic research conducted in the Kibera and Korogocho slums to refer to the persistence of such places and to rethink the issue—neglected in literature—of slum

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stability, created within the everyday reality of its inhabitants.[2] Slum persistence may be interpreted as an uninterrupted process in which a densely populated physical area separates itself from the surrounding city due to a specific economic and cultural context. I connect stability with slum dwellers, and with the manner in which they generate a network of relationships that make it possible for them to survive in a space determined in such a way.

Although Kenyan authorities periodically demolish parts of slums, violently evicting inhabitants "in the name of development," Korogocho and Kibera have persisted, expanded, and entrenched themselves over several generations.[3] As a result, in certain areas a local awareness has already developed, tied to birth in the slums. Korogocho and Kibera attract economic migrants from poor areas of the country and refugees from beyond Kenya. Thus, as such they are areas of social relationships and of group identity creation and persistence. These relationships and identities deepen as the inhabitants' original intentions of returning to their prior locations fade over time. My observations point to an increasing trend for people to reside permanently in these districts.[4] Indeed, inhabitants fight, to quote Chester Hartman (1984), for their "right to stay put."

These districts constitute physically durable spaces, part of the city's topography, and their chief characteristic is a permanent temporality. The continuation of day-to-day life in slums under uncertain conditions constitutes the stable element of the everyday. Slums become a habitual environment of functioning, where the inhabitants create and maintain a routine, specifically with regard to their daily practices.[5] These practices make life in slums possible, enabling their inhabitants to achieve that which, after Liza Weinstein (2014), may be called a "precarious state of stability."

This article focuses on two ways of hustling, that is acquiring money, observed during field research which lasted over twenty months.[6] First, I describe actions that build networks of relationships structured by connections to and utilization of waste or trash. Second, I describe behaviors leading to a network of relationships that facilitates the gaining of information and utilization of this social capital as a strategic resource for survival. Some of my interviewees referred to these behaviors as "brain work."

Concepts and methods

By examining how stability is created in the process of creating economic networks, I reveal limits to entrepreneurial agency and a contradiction inherent in the generation of self-limitation, which I interpret as an ambivalent structure embedded in the very idea of a slum. The slum is not solely a context of specific events. To quote Sandra Calkins (2016:5), in this case context "is not behind or beyond a situation, but is in the situation itself." Instead, I highlight how slum inhabitants create social order, enabling them to make a living and supporting a universal status quo of slum as a

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functional but marginalized community. This article is, therefore, a response to the need for ethnographic examination of the micro-practices which create relationships (stable structures) aimed at survival, an examination that is linked to the emic perception of the slum as a permanent home and place of opportunity. A grassroots vision of slums is integral to the way slum dwellers make life possible and relatively stable.

The main method of data acquisition was participant observation, which I realized by living in the slums on a permanent basis. The first stage of my research consisted in carrying out over two hundred interviews. The research sample was diverse in a multifaceted way in terms of sex, age, social status, economic situation, reasons for living in the slums, and ways of valorizing and understanding them.[7] Next, I focused on selected groups, which allowed me to better understand the existing and well-known network of informants.

The practices described here reflect a way of dealing with slum conditions which, although by no means sufficient, is at least functional. It enables thousands of people to live in slums for years. It is, however, worth asking how this functionality is created in inhabitants' daily, grassroots practices. Referring to Marshall Sahlins (1999:407), Ton Otto says that "functionality, in this sense of instrumentality, cannot stand on its own; it has to be based on structure" (2007:41). In the context of this analysis I propose to broaden the notion of structure which, following Margaret Archer (1995:106), I understand here as "a system of human relationships between social positions," to encompass everyday actions of slum inhabitants, who create—in accordance with the concept of AbdouMaliq Simone—an infrastructure ("people as infrastructure"). Simone notes that African cities are characterized by "incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents .... These intersections … have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure" (2004:407–8). This is relevant also for the levels found within slums, where infrastructure is built from small-scale actions of thousands of individuals. It is this infrastructure that reproduces the slum from the bottom up and enables its inhabitants to survive in the struggling or arranging model. To understand the meaning of these terms a context is necessary. When talking about their lives, my interlocutors very often used the phrase "we are struggling" to refer to periods of severe shortages consisting in waiting for "an opportunity to act." The term "arranging" refers to any activity bringing about gain, that is, a flexible taking advantage of chances for earnings, getting food, or any opportunity to make a profit. This kind of activity is vital for existence and requires building relationships.

Slum inhabitants act in accordance with local rules, achieving a kind of stability which, from an outside perspective, is seen as highly provisional. Although the primary element of these actions is economic—the daily focus on the necessity of a minimum income—they simultaneously create value for inhabitants' individual and collective identities. Subjects viewed

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these values, such as satisfaction and dignity, as personal; they furnish a sense of influence on their own existence in their own way. Kibera and Korogocho inhabitants often term this as "being in the mtaa." What, then, does hustling the mtaa way look like in Kibera and Korogocho?

Hustling 1: Making stability out of a dumping ground

Korogocho shares a border with Dandora, the largest dumping ground in Nairobi. It is also the workplace of many slum inhabitants for whom trash has become a commodity. Being in the landfill brings with it the dangers of being exposed to toxic and otherwise poisonous waste or of being beaten (or even killed) in a fight for the best goods. Garbage trucks from the entire city come here. People who profit from the "garbage business" in the slums create a network of various dependencies and work in accordance with routinized forms of labor organization.

Separate groups set so-called "bases," where they store the objects they have collected and which they view as their property. They say, for instance, that "anyone can work in the Booma [local name of the dumping ground], as long as he or she does not take someone else's property." One of my interlocutors, when explaining to me the system of work in the landfill, said: "There are trucks for regular people; you can go and pick whatever you want from them, but you can't go and take things from trucks for special groups." By "special groups," he meant people who picked trash from trucks which had been "bought out" by them or their chiefs. A chief is someone who often does not personally work in the dumping ground but hires pickers to collect specific kinds of refuse. "Buying out" a garbage truck entails paying the driver and thus gaining exclusive rights to selecting trash brought in that particular vehicle. This way pickers or their chiefs buy access to specific types of refuse, which now become valuable "goods." A truck with good commodities costs about KES1000, whereas one with a less valuable load could cost KES500. From the former it is possible to achieve a 100 percent profit, whereas from the latter the profit could amount to around KES100.[8]

The chief, his pickers and the orodha people

M. is 45 years old. He has lived in Nairobi for twenty years, since he came here in search of work. Now he has the status of a chief, buying out trucks. Over ten years ago he got a job at the landfill within a Catholic mission project. That was when he established contacts with people working there and with drivers of trucks bringing in trash: "Some were my neighbors. I asked them about everything, about how and when the trucks came and how everything worked." Yet to be successful at the landfill one needs not only contacts, but also specialist knowledge. According to M.: "There are things you can pick, but they won't bring you profit. Things can be of different quality, and you need to know this." M. is interested in gathering

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materials which can be recycled, mostly plastic bags. Clear ones are the most valuable—he says: "For those you can get, for instance, KES25 per kilo" at a factory near Korogocho. Another "good commodity" are little plastic bags used as packaging for milk.[9] Those you can sell for KES13 per kilo. However, in the case of his particular material, it is necessary to transport the bags to a company which will buy them, which—together with their preparation for sale (they need to be washed out)—significantly reduces profits.

Although M. works as a picker, he often undertakes construction work. Not wanting to lose his influence in the dumping ground, which is his only stable source of income, he hires three women to "take care of his business." They pick the objects and bring them to his "base." These workers are M.'s neighbors whom he knows well. He trusts them: "You cannot give your business to someone you don't know, because at the end of the day it's you who has to make a profit." The women start work around 6:00 a.m. and often spend up to ten hours in the landfill. In one day, they are able to gather two sacks of commodities. Sometimes they do not work in the dumping ground, but in the nearby polluted river, where they clean the plastic bags their chief bought from other pickers. For cleaning an entire batch, which often takes several days, they are paid KES500 or 600, which they divide among themselves. As one of the women said, "It's not much, but it's better than sitting at home with nothing." The division of income is the goal of the effort. Such organization reduces the uncertainty of being.

Another group co-creating the "garbage business" are those known in Korogocho as "orodha people." In Korogocho the word *orodha* is used to denote "collection of many things" and refers to objects found in the landfill. Orodha people buy, and later sell, objects selected by pickers. According to S., who does just this, these are: "good things, valuable, already selected from the truck." Of most value are any kind of electrical appliances or their remnants, cables, and extension cords. Although often broken, these are still attractive commodities whose "sales are the best," which according to S. guarantees survival: "If we have this in our sacks, we know it will bring us ugali [a dish made of maize flour which is a staple in Kenya]." S. sells cables, extension cords, and chargers for KES100 per item, and for KES50 you can buy an immersion heater. Her husband can fix broken appliances before they are sold, but then their price goes up by, for instance, KES40. She sells plastic boxes and other objects which have nothing to do with electricity for between KES5 and 30. She makes approximately KES200 a day, although some days she is "in the red."

S. is 35 and has run her "orodha" stall on the main street of Korogosho for eight years. Nine years ago, after the death of her parents, she came to Nairobi from a village in the hope of a better life. Here she met her husband, who ran an "orodha business." Today she admits that "this isn't a good business, but there is nothing else." Her husband sometimes does odd jobs, but that income is less stable than the small profits from orodha and so it cannot form the basis of the family budget. For this reason, twice a

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week he goes further into the landfill and (usually) buys two sacks of trash selected by pickers. He usually buys from the same people; the sacks cost around KES1500. Knowing S. and her husband's expenses and income, I was surprised her husband was not a picker, as this would enable them to reduce the cost of obtaining commodities. However, further research clarified why this was not possible.

Distribution of possibilities

People working in the "garbage industry" in Korogocho act in accordance with a strict division of labor. My interviewees believe there is an unwritten obligation to respect this division into types of activities. "Orodha cannot pick. You either pick, or you sell. Everyone has to have a job," I was told. "We know one another, so we'd know if someone was selling something they picked themselves." They also stressed that the sanction for breaking this rule is most often a beating and being banned from the landfill. However, my observations show that it is possible to return to work after a few weeks or months. Although working on their own would allow individuals to earn more, division of labor, that is, performance of a given act by more people than are actually needed to carry it out, is a form of protecting those individuals who, in this way, are certain to make at least a minimal profit. It is a way of building stability. Division of labor guarantees access to profits for a larger number of people (as more are drawn into the business), and thus brings with it not only the chance of survival, but also a particular sense of justice and equal opportunity. Yet, despite what supporters of "informal economies" say, this does not result in a rise in employment.

The dumping ground's "success" consists in dividing the "garbage business" into ever smaller sectors, and not in generating new jobs (cf. Ferguson 2015). It is a kind of bottom-up economic structure stabilizing reality, which is seen in a dualistic manner, as unstable and yet offering a chance for survival. Adhering to these rules of the division of work creates a sort of social order. It is predictable, because it has its rhythm and tangible consequences. At its source, there are spontaneous projects undertaken in response to the opportunities within the surrounding environment. Thus, agents create a network of relationships through which they secure their uncertain existence. However, this is a structural support, not idealistic, but a forced "reluctant solidarity" (Bähre 2007) created by the ever-present difficulties of life in the slums. It is visible, for instance, among the orodha people, who sell their merchandise right next to one another and at very similar prices. They create a kind of competition which can be defined as relative. Because of this, all of them are able to run a business. Yet here, solidarity is in no way a form of socialism. Rather, as Mary Njeri Kinyanjui (2014:94) describes it, it is an interdependence in which various persons ensure a social infrastructure for one another in order to survive. I learned from my interviews with slum inhabitants that for them it is their individual needs, and not the whole structure, that are a priority. "Garbage business" workers see

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themselves as businesspeople wanting to improve their lives. They connect development not with large-scale macroeconomic restructuring programs, but with their own microentrepreneurship, the catalyst of improvement. In practice, their goals can be attained only if they are part of the "people as infrastructure" model.

Observation of the life of the inhabitants of Kibera and Korogocho shows that work is more than just material gain. Following the example of Karl Bücher (1899), work can be viewed not only as a means to an end, but as a meaningful human action. Here, it is worth asking about the potential "gains" of such action. Apart from the profitability of actions (the economic side), such gains can encompass values giving meaning to the life of the people involved. According to Gregor Dobler, acting itself, as a basic way of relating oneself to the world, is an expression of human dignity (2016:864).

Hustling 2: "Brain work" as a means of creating stability

F. is 35 years old. He is a sixth-generation Kibera inhabitant. He was born here and has lived here all his life. In keeping with his wish, I will call him "007," a reference to the fictional British secret agent whose symbolic significance will become evident. I often saw him sitting for hours with his friends, chewing *miraa* leaves and leafing through newspapers, and I wondered how he made his living.[10] It turned out his financial standing was much better than that of his neighbors, who had a similar life story and, presumably, similar opportunities. He himself said, "I too am unemployed. I simply walk around. I don't have work, but I think you can see what I do." 007 often emphasized that he never did menial work, but that "brain work" ensured his survival. He said: "Here we work with our brains. We don't let things run us. We run things." This way of life enables him to plan to buy a house outside of Kibera, on the outskirts of Nairobi. He wants to "keep it for old age," staying active in the slum until then. "It will be for the future. I buy, I build, I will put tenants and when I will be old, I will go there to eat my money. That's the plan." He also stated: "I won't be able to make money outside. Kibera gives me the opportunity to get money. Here I make connections. If I'm not here, the opportunity passes. Being here, this place gives me money."

One day, early in the morning, 007 received a call from a friend who said that his brother was "in deep shit." He had been arrested for causing a small accident and, because he was a *matatu* driver (matatus are minibuses which serve as private means of city transportation in Nairobi), he viewed the situation as particularly difficult. He could be facing a fine of KES50,000. The friend was calling to ask if 007 had an idea how to solve this problem. First, 007 asked his interlocutor to top up his phone KES1000, and then he contacted a policeman he knew and told him what had happened. The policeman asked for the car's registration number. Negotiations began. 007 told him that, in return for not pursuing the case, the brother of the arrested man could pay him KES20,000, to which the policeman responded:

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"Make it 25,000." Next, 007 called his "client" and said: "The police are crazy, they want 30,000." Two hours later, the friend sent him this amount, of which 007 gave 25,000 to the policeman, so he had 5,000 left. He got another 5,000 from the policeman for his mediation. Thus by 10:00 a.m. 007 had made KES10,000.

Another one of his ways of making money was based on his contact with a local NGO leader. One of this NGO's actions was the distribution of free food among poor inhabitants of Kibera—four small trucks per month, filled with sacks of rice or beans. 007 and the NGO leader had a deal. Each month, 007 could take 50 bags and sell them, and they divided the profit. At that time a 10 kg bag of rice cost between KES1500 and 2000, depending on the quality. 007 sold such a bag in Kibera for KES2000, but told the NGO leader that he did it for KES1500. Thus, 007's profit amounted to KES62,500 a month.

A third way of earning money consisted of obtaining profit from the government project Kazi Kwa Vijana ("work for youth" in Swahili), whose goal was to enliven the economy while at the same time engaging young people and giving them temporary paid work. In Kibera, such a contract was for three months, after which time another group of young people took over the jobs. The work was daily street cleaning, and the remuneration was KES10,000. When 007 learned about the program from a friend, he immediately went to see a chief he knew (a representative of the government's administration in his area) and made, as he called it, a "business deal" with him. He became the supervisor of the cleaning group and signed a three-month contract. Like everyone taking part in the program, he got a bank account into which the ministry paid a monthly salary of KES1000. One of his tasks was to choose who would be employed, so he chose fifteen people from among his family and friends. This was the last day he showed up at his work in person. As he said: "I don't plan on doing menial work. My assistant will do it for me, and I will be able to go and look for another business." He chose a cousin to take on the role of supervisor. Every person he chose to work gave him KES3000 from each payment. Thus, apart from his own salary, each month he got KES45,000. He gave his own salary to the chief, as part of their "deal." Apart from money, he gained appreciation from his family and he remained trustworthy in the eyes of the chief. This exchange illustrates the rules of functioning of a project which "creates" jobs without taking into account the most important aspect of life in the slums, that is, the real relationships connecting people, their ability to speculate and, finally, their creativity and readiness to take risks.

Structuring the day through face-to-face interactions

I noticed that in the area 007 was referred to as a "famous person." When I wanted to visit a part of Kibera I didn't know and which my neighbors thought was "dangerous," I often heard that I should ask 007 for help. People explained that since he was "famous" due to his many contacts and

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being recognized, only he could "ensure my safety." However, in time it became apparent that his influence did not span all of Kibera. Every once in a while, my famous friend referred me to his friends from the part of the slum I wanted to become familiar with. The question arose: How did 007 make friends and establish and maintain his position in the area? The answer lay in his routine activities, which I at first ignored, deeming them of little interest. Yet that to which 007 did *not* point my attention proved an important clue. What was significant was his seemingly simple daily rhythm. He arose around 7:00 a.m., and left the house around 10:00 a.m. Usually, he returned there late at night. He said: "I just walk around the area. I gather information, and I believe that something will come along that will occupy me." It turned out that "walking around the area" was an orderly activity with a specific goal. 007 regularly visited the same places in which Kibera inhabitants (mostly men) chew miraa. For several dozen days I drew maps of his daily contacts. He walked the same paths and streets, systematically visiting friends' houses. He regularly went to the area where the main government administration offices in Kibera are located because, as he said, "that's where you can find good information." The term "good" referred to information which 007 was able to use to gain specific goods. And so, I often shadowed 007, always to a place where he believed "something was happening."

The pattern of his actions pointed to him trying to build a stable network of contacts, as often as possible widening it to include relationships in other parts of the slum when potential new opportunities arose there, for example a rumor about a planned government project, a presidential visit, or a road construction. 007 established his much-valued contact with the chief by himself. When the chief was starting his term in office, 007 went to see him and offered to give him a tour of this dangerous area and ensure his safety. He introduced himself as an "expert on the area," who had lived in Kibera since birth. It should be stressed that the chief was not from Kibera; he only came there to work every day. This was one of many examples of 007 identifying with the slum he knew so well. He was able to use this knowledge to his advantage and create an image of the slum to fit a given situation. In this case, he stressed information which meant to convince the chief of the dangers lurking in this district and of his potential usefulness to the chief. Following 007, I came to the conclusion that his daily expenses exceeded his income. He spent as much as KES800 on miraa, food, and drinks he consumed with his friends, rather than putting this money aside, for instance, to pay for his son's education, which he claimed was very important and at the same time problematic due to its cost. My further observations, however, revealed that these expenses were a pragmatic element of a strategy and a kind of investment which enabled him to acquire information and maintain his position in the area. His cell phone was also of importance in this respect. 007 said: "You have to have a phone. I spend a lot of money on topping up. I buy cards for KES50 or 100. Sometimes I don't buy them every day, but there are days when I buy them

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every 2 hours if business is hot." But not all of 007's phone conversations were about "business." He often called his friends just to ask how they were feeling and exchanged information which, from the point of view of getting money, seemed unimportant. Yet those conversations were of key importance for maintaining contacts and finding new areas of activity. Thus, they were a form of investment, enabling him to gain information, build his local position and, in consequence, secure a livelihood.

Nicknames

007 preferred direct contacts, outside the control of third parties. He did not allow face-to-face meetings between persons he believed to be potential competitors and those he saw as "too valuable to share." Another element significant for effective establishment (and control) of contacts was the customary means of communication, preferred by slum inhabitants and stemming from the ever-active aspects of the oral community model. This does not mean that the people who live there are illiterate. Rather, it is connected with a way of thinking in various everyday situations. In the community I researched, face-to-face interactions and transactions were of great importance, as was the knowledge of nicknames, which were closely connected with creating and maintaining a specific identity. I became interested in these daily behaviors and the skills which enabled 007 and his friends to build and maintain their image in the area. For instance, I became aware of how much time they dedicated to social exchanges—seemingly of little importance—during each accidental meeting in the streets, and how such meetings were arranged. A recurring element of greetings and conversations was the stress put on the status a given person enjoyed in the area by means of using their nickname, such as President, Big Fish, Boss, or Chief, which symbolically emphasized their agency. Names are not arbitrary symbols; they are meaningful not only in an etymological sense, but also in a synchronic one, where they have important pragmatic meanings which affect the character of human interaction (Wierzbicka 1992:302–3).

Pseudonyms are an element building individuals' status by referring to their "above average" skills (cf. Smith 2008). As I mentioned when I first began describing 007, his pseudonym stresses his cunning and ability to "fix anything." Also, as such, it became a tool for constructing his specific identifications, and of freely manipulating the image of the slum; in the case of being "like 007," this was the perfect place to show one's resourcefulness, influence, and ability to make a relatively large amount of money. F.'s image was also created by the right "look": sunglasses and a leather jacket. His clothes were not just functional, but they also highlighted the status of someone influential, creating a specific symbolic representation of his special abilities. It appeared, therefore, that aside from profit, the aim of 007's actions seemed to be prestige connected with a sense of dignity (cf. Bourgois 2003).

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Through mtaa practices to structural ambivalence

Based on the described practices, I will answer the question of how to conceptualize hustle in mtaa. Next, I will briefly discuss the mtaa-based relationships and the role of know-how in shaping the stability of slums. I will finish the analysis with an explanation of slum's ambivalence which is crucial for understanding how these places work.

Arranging hustling in the mtaa way

Although slums are commonly perceived as storage yards for the surplus of humanity, where people live in extreme poverty, an emic perspective unveils other attitudes towards these areas.[11] Both people employed in the garbage business and 007 deemed these districts places of opportunity and development where "it is cheap," "one can do business," and "prices are adjusted to the capabilities of the poor." My research confirms that the slum criteria set by the UN are not identical with the priorities and worries of individuals living in these districts. For example, although an inadequate number of toilets in the slums is a real problem, for many of my interlocutors this was not as burdensome as lack of a cell phone, which for many is a tool enabling them to attain their means of support (see also Haidkamp et al. 2010:81–88). From the perspective of some of the inhabitants, the slum in a specific way creates material conditions and social space which enable them to survive and secure a livelihood. For many slum inhabitants, life there consists in being able to hustle to get by (see also Thieme 2013; Chernoff 2003).

Slum practices are often analyzed within the framework of "informal economies" (Bryceson & Potts 2006; Hansen & Vaa 2004). In Nairobi, however, the informal sector spans the actions of the majority of society, hence the usefulness of this category becomes doubtful (Hart 2007:28).[12] What is more, ethnographic data undermine the reasonableness of presenting the informal sphere as separate from the formal (Du Toit & Neves 2007). This is because the boundary between the formal and the informal is often very fluid, and this dichotomy may not confirm to empirical evidence. As an analytical tool informality, therefore, does not properly describe issues connected with practices aimed at surviving.

Reflecting on the shortcomings of the concept of informality, James Ferguson (based on ethnography in South Africa) proposed that precarious livelihoods of the poor be characterized not in terms of "informality" but rather of "survivalist improvisation" (2015:94). Similarly, Christian M. Rogerson (1996), writing about the poorest attaining their livelihoods, suggests the term "survivalist enterprises," a term that stresses the search for temporary ways of coping with a dramatic reality. This approach is part of the trend within which hustling is seen as a synonym or an expansion of categories such as "ingenuity economy," "economy of improvisation and self-reliance" (Neurwirth 2012), "misfit economy" (Clay & Phillips 2015),

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"shrewd improvisation" (Craig 2009:206; Roy 2011:231; Ramakrishnan 2016:33) and "pirate modernity" (Sundaram 2010). Mitchell Duneier (1999:67–68) points out that that which distinguishes a practice as hustling is not its legal or illegal status, because hustling can belong to both categories. Whether something is or is not hustling is determined by the agent's ability to improvise. Here I understand improvisation to mean actions undertaken without preparation and planning, consisting in utilizing one's ingenuity and flexibility to maintain and enhance self-respect through economic activity.

Improvisation is a constant feature of slum life, yet it occurs only at a specific level of slum inhabitants' functionality. The activities I describe involve inhabitants broadening their agency by means of building relationships, so that the situations in which they can "arrange something" become repetitive. This in turn leads to their attaining the necessary minimum income to satisfy their modest desires. By gradually placing themselves ever deeper within the "people as infrastructure" model (which is connected with the skill of building trust with clients and partners), they try to single-handedly shape the conditions of inclusion into the system of relationships they create. This is why, for example, pickers cannot at the same time be orodha people, and 007 must be paid if one wants to gain access to a government program job. At these deeper levels of social ties, improvisation (lack of planning) is, therefore, less significant and visible since relationships are based on repetitive experiences. Thus, the slum inhabitants systematically create rules which are then taken for granted. This allows them to distance themselves from the frustrating "here and now" and shift to the mid-term perspective, for instance, making it possible for them to plan actions such as M.'s hiring people to work in his business. For most of the people I spoke with, hopes "for tomorrow" were connected with arduously keeping up the status quo, which they value in the present. Of key importance are efforts to maintain a continuity of conditions which enable them to survive. From the perspective of slum inhabitants, hustling is not a passing state but rather a way of living which allows them to attain a sense of relative stability without eliminating the sense of uncertainty.

The "Know-How" of Mtaa

In "brain work" and in the "garbage business" mtaa-based relationships are of great importance. Neither landfill workers nor the majority of 007's contacts were connected by family ties; what is more, they often came from different ethnic groups. The inhabitants' ties to their origins do not disappear, but their application as a social guiding structure changes in the process of adapting to the conditions of slums. The common "being in the mtaa" appears to circumvent basic identities and emerges as the "local knowledge" guiding slum inhabitants' behaviors and their decisions about whom to take into consideration in building everyday economic relationships.

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From the outside, slum communities are viewed as "people of the slums," a certain imagined collectivity framed by a material space to which the label of "poverty" is attached. Notwithstanding this characterization, the mtaa community built "within the slums" is connected with a sense of integration ascribed to living in the same conditions, with cleverness, intelligence, and respect. These features make up the notion of "being local." The collective dimension of mtaa is expressed mainly in terms of the street cunning one must have in order to effectively function in a slum, that is, to co-create functional and stable structures in practice (cf. Di Nunzio 2012). The idea of this cunning constructs a communal sense (within particular groups in the slums) that "those who are part of the mtaa" are able to "take care of themselves" in order to endure in a situation in which public institution are unable to effectively help them. Thus, mtaa encompasses both the knowledge of the local environment and, at the same time, a sense of identification. To know the slum is not the same as to know the mtaa.

Know-how plays a key role in mtaa functioning (Polanyi 1958). Know-how is determined by the context and the skills of individuals (see Archer 1995 on reflexivity). It is expressed by intentional actions (such as going to the dumping site) which influence routine activities outside constant reflection (taking a specific route), which are significant for making life in the slums functional. On the level of hustling they create a platform for reproducing the stability of the slums also in terms of space. Of particular importance is role of habitual actions, such as taking regular routes or sitting in specific places, in both agency and slum stabilization.

The motor aspect of walking in individual movement practices is the most basic example of creating a relatively stable space. It is via walking that people familiarize themselves with space, making it known and significant (De Certeau 1984). As demonstrated by instances of hustling, movement occurs not only from place to place but also by means of interactions (cf. Ingold 2007). Space becomes a network of a person's routes and communication junctions. Kim Dovey (2017:484) notes that "informal settlements often embody the mysterious intensity of the labyrinth—a place that is impenetrable and disorienting to outsiders, but permeable for residents." Permanent inhabitants were sometimes amused when those recently arrived from villages could not find their way around the slum. The space of slums, made up of thousands of similar, narrow paths, must be learned. This was even more apparent in the dumping ground. As one of the women pointed out, "Walking in the landfill in an art—you have to know where you can step. Otherwise, you're dead."

Importantly, the dumping ground regularly features vapors and smoke from smoldering refuse. People often explained to me how those working in the landfill have to know the area very well in order not to fall into pockets of melting plastic hidden under piles of new trash. 007, in turn, by taking the same routes, determined the reach of his agency. In following the inhabitants on their daily routes, I recreated the act of individuals

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organizing space so that it provided opportunities for stabilization. It can be said they created individual topographies of the mtaa. In this context, the labyrinth of the slums' street network can be deemed part of the inhabitants' legacy, embodying experiences and know-how, which make particular parts of the mtaa functional (cf. Dovey 2017:484). An equally significant aspect of routinely creating a stable space are practices which I will here call "the art of sitting." One kind of sitting is termed idling and is commonly scorned. Hustlers represent another kind. Orodha people and 007 spend many hours sitting in one place. But sitting is something one needs to "know how to do" for it to be productive. In the case of hustlers, sitting cannot be viewed as idleness. Rather, it is a kind of activity, of searching for "an opportunity to act," as this "just sitting" may result in finding something to do, or in something finding them. It allows them to alternate "killing time" with generating income, which provides them at the same time with a place and a legitimization in the public space of their surroundings.

Structural Ambivalence

Slum inhabitants' hustling activities are usually analyzed within two competitive discourses defining this type of space. The life of slum inhabitants is reduced to a narrative of either "an apocalyptic nightmare" of poverty and disintegration of social ties, or a romanticized creativity and "amazing entrepreneurialism." In the former case, slum inhabitants are categorized as victims condemned to carrying out marginalized work (Davis 2007). In the latter, they are presented as heroes, with unique abilities and above-average creativity (Koolhaas & van der Haak 2002). Both these visions are too one-sided. The first does not take into account slum inhabitants' agency, which makes them capable of effectively fighting the injustice of the social system. The second disregards historical and political determinants which (co)create structures of "self-regulation." The victims/heroes dichotomy breaks down in confrontation with everyday life in the slums. Analytical escape into one of these extremes poses the threat of essentialization.

The life of my interlocutors is made up of the interchangeability of periods when they have the chance to arrange something and those when they must struggle with a lack of such opportunities. It is because of these constantly changing levels of uncertainty that they are sometimes described as brilliant entrepreneurs and other times as people who have hit economic bottom. In reality, they are characterized by a dual identity as victims or heroes. A solution would be, then, to look both at the limitations stemming from slum conditions and at the agency and reflexivity of their inhabitants, which generate relatively durable structures to address these limitations. I term this "structural ambivalence," which helps avoid the above-mentioned, stigmatizing dichotomy and, more importantly, defines slum inhabitants' life "here and now" for

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the future. Ambivalence suggests their participation in the reproduction of poverty and, at the same time, their resistance towards it.

Homi Bhabha (1984) introduced the notion of ambivalence into postcolonial discourse, observing that ambivalence is compelled, because exact replicas of colonizers would be too dangerous. I take ambivalence beyond the discursive level, where it functions in a similar way. The slum inhabitants participate in solutions proposed by the authorities and numerous institutions, which allow them to survive but not to leave poverty. These solutions confine them to specific conditions—ones of a deficit of goods and of limited opportunities. One example of this is their lack of title deeds to the land, which would allow them too much freedom and would deprive the authorities of the ability to manage the land. Hustling also seems convenient for the authorities. It allows the poor to come into their own as "free and independent" yet, at the same time, responsible for themselves, i.e., without help from the state. Thus, freedom is here thoroughly ambivalent.

Nearly all of my interlocutors said they dreamed of formal work to give them a sense of stabilization. This goal was attained by a few of them, among them one of the pickers, who was hired as a housekeeper. I was surprised when, after three weeks of housekeeping, she told me she had "quit" and was, once again, "independent." 007, in turn, had the opportunity to start working as a security guard in a supermarket, but he did not take that job. He also explained his decision with "the need for autonomy." My interviewees pointed out that what characterized hustling in the mtaa way was being free of the humiliation of contract work and imposed schedules. In practice, however, this freedom is negated by the conditions of the slums. Kathleen Millar (2014:34) noted that the regularity and form of contract employment often do not correspond to the reality of life in the slums. This reality has a different kind of stability—one of recurrent crises. For some of the people I spoke with, the dumping site was a more stable source of income than, say, work as a housekeeper or in a supermarket, as it was better suited to their rhythm of life. For instance, due to their living close to the landfill, the picker's children were often sick, which prevented her from keeping "steady" work.[13] Work in the dumping site, on the other hand, does not come with any imposed schedule. What it does require is keeping up one's network of relationships. Freedom is thus based on affiliation and interdependence. Millar (2014:35) writes about this in the context of "relational autonomy."

My observations confirm that, paradoxically, hustling often allows slum inhabitants to combat uncertainty on their own terms and in accordance with their abilities. Organization of time is of key importance here. The behaviors of my interviewees illustrate a way of organizing one's work and private life in which these two spheres of functioning overlap. For example, S. sells orodha near her house, so she can look after her children at the same time. In this way, she has adapted her method of making money to the specificity of life in the slums.

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Conclusion

This article presents an approach to slums that focuses on the inhabitants' grassroots practices, those which allow them to survive and which were created in response to their identification of the slum as home and place of business. Mtaa practices generate a local understanding of stability. My observations show that inhabitants of Kibera and Korogocho actively participate in the process of distributing not only various resources, but also the structures (relationships) themselves. It is not just making money that is of key significance, but the very inclusion in a network of relationships which makes it possible. What is more, relationships are here deemed important if they are assessed as durable.

Those working in the "garbage business" attain precarious stability by finding work as a result of dividing jobs which already exist (that is, those connected with transforming waste into goods), which brings with it a division of profits. It should be noted that, although equal division of earnings functions among the three women pickers, hired by M. and working as a group, this rule is not in force in the entire landfill. While one day they may be able to make some money and divide it among themselves, someone else may not make any profit. Not everyone is able to make money regularly, each day, but being an element of a network of relationships enables them to make money at all. In effect, they take care of their place in the structure today, because it enables them to make a profit tomorrow. This is how a structure which limits their actions, by not allowing them to simultaneously be pickers and orodha, at the same time becomes their goal. Similarly, in the case of 007, it is critical for him to be part of the network as it enables him to "trade information," which in turn can show him "an opportunity to act."

Consequently, individual agency is not limited only to obtaining a livelihood, but also spans the creation of stable structures which make this possible. The individual (co)creates a relatively stable and reproducible structure which encompasses a network of people taking on specific social roles. This gives the individual the opportunity to act, that is, make money and survive. Ultimately, the structure / relationships stabilize(s) existence making it, to an extent, predictable and desirable due to values such as pride and a sense of agency. At the same time, the resourcefulness of the inhabitants, which co-creates the status quo of the slums and contributes to their persistence, strengthens their built-in marginalization. The described hustlers create stabilization of a certain quality, and slum conditions become a norm from which it is difficult to escape.

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Notes

1. The exact number of slums in Nairobi is hard to determine; according to the latest report (United Nations 2014) there are 199 of them, while Wanjiru and Matsubara talk of 135 (2017:21).
2. Kibera is believed to be the largest Nairobi slum. It is located some six kilometers from the city center and spans an area of 2.5 km^2. Korogocho can be found on the other side of town, some ten kilometers from the center. It has an area of 1.5 km^2, which makes it the fourth-largest slum in the capital (UN-Habitat 2009:57). There is no precise data on the number of people living in Nairobi slums. According to the most recent census, carried out in 2009, some 250,000 people live in Kibera, and 150,000 in Korogocho (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2009).
3. Kibera was established as a settlement for war veterans who fought in the British colonial army. It was known as Nubian Village because the group of settlers, although heterogeneous in terms of descent, assimilated under the name of Nubians. In literature and talks with inhabitants, various dates of the village's

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establishment appear (see Parsons 1997:89; Clark 1978–79:36); on their basis it is possible to assume the settlement dates back to the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Korogocho is believed to have been established in the 1960s. It was created as a result of the development of induced resettlements, when inhabitants of slums demolished in the city center were forcedly resettled there by the Nairobi City Council (Lee-Smith 1990; Burugu 2015). When telling the stories of their places of residence, both Kibera and Korogocho inhabitants stressed that these areas "changed from villages into slums" (i.e., conditions commonly seen as characteristic for slums appeared in them) in the early 1990s.

4. J. Falkingham, G. Chepngeno-Langat and M. Evandrou (2012) for three years studied 2,270 older inhabitants of selected Nairobi slums in terms of their migration plans. The data gathered show that only every fifth respondent declared a plan to leave these spaces.
5. I intentionally do not refer here to the notion of "slum habitus" (Bayat 2007) as it is worth pointing out that "Habitus derives from the Latin term 'habere,' which means 'to have' or 'to hold.' Habit, on the other hand, refers to know-how and competence—both mental and corporeal" (Akram & Hogan 2015:609). As such, it refers to knowledge whose manifestation are routine behaviors which make it possible to function in the slum.
6. My interlocutors in Nairobi used this English term without translating it into Swahili. Tatiana Thieme (2017:10–11) stresses that since the 1960s this word has been connected with legally and morally dubious practices. In the 1980s it functioned in American hip-hop and constituted an important element of the politicized narration on urban poverty and daily fight in "ghettos." From pop culture it permeated post-colonial African cities. In Nairobi, the term "hustling" functions within the Sheng slang, which is a mixture of Swahili, English, and local vocabulary. Due to this, hustling offers a conceptual framework which makes it possible to define the subjective relationships between slum inhabitants and their earning practices (they often say they are jobless, but every day they go out to "make money").
7. In this article, I give examples of hustling both by men and women. I do not, however, develop the theme of agency determined by sex (women dominate in trade, while brokers are usually men), of which one should nonetheless be aware and which merits a separate discussion.
8. KES1000 is about USD10. Most slum inhabitants have at their disposal USD1 or 2 a day. Examples of costs of living in Nairobi slums: rent alone varies between KES2000 (USD19) and KES6000, monthly electricity costs KES300 (USD3), and the cheapest hot meal for one person can be bought for c. KES20 (USD0.19).
9. In Kenya since 2017 there has been a ban on plastic carrier bags. Nonetheless, still many foods are sold in plastic packaging.
10. Also called *khat*, a flowering plant used as a stimulant. In Kenya, chewing *mirra* has a long history as a social custom.
11. The question of overpopulation is also referred to in the UN definition, in which a slum is determined by criteria stemming from a general infrastructural deficit, that is lack of: 1) treated water, 2) proper sanitary equipment, 3) adequate living space, 4) living quarters constructed in a permanent manner, and 5) secure right to renting or using land (United Nations 2015:2). These issues are viewed as the most significant problems inhabitants of these areas face.

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12. For instance, according to the 2011 Economic Survey of the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics in Nairobi, 2.7 million people are engaged in informal economic activities (Kinyanjui 2014:4). At that time, the city's population was estimated at 3.36 million. Nairobi's population is continuously growing, as is—in direct proportion—the number of people employed in the informal sector (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2017).
13. See also literature on "poverty traps," e.g., Banerjee & Duflo 2011.

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