

Placenames and Belonging: the Case of Kibera's Nubians, Kenya

Joh Sarre

Coaching | Workshops | Academia: www.joh-sarre.de

Abstract: Approximately 25,000 Nubians live in Kibera, Nairobi's largest slum, which they consider their ancestral home. As descendants of African soldiers in Britain's colonial armies, they have faced marginalization and de facto statelessness. Joh Sarre's dissertation examines their overlooked experiences, focusing on the negotiation of contested notions of belonging, inclusion and exclusion.

The study is structured around three interrelated perspectives: conceptual, methodological and empirical. The first major chapter explores the historical entanglements of land, ethnicity and politics in Kenya, which forms the background against which Nubian claims to belonging are negotiated. Joh Sarre examines how powerful discourses around land-ownership and ethnic identity influence Nubian (non-) belonging to Kib(e)ra and the Kenyan nation.

In three empirical chapters, Joh Sarre analyses the spatial practices through which Nubian belonging is being performed and negotiated. The first of these chapters discusses contested place names in Kibera, showing how Nubians use oral history and naming practices to assert Nubian firstcomer claims. It is this chapter that this article expands upon. The second empirical chapter in the book explores Nubian weddings and wedding processions as performative acts of belonging. The third empirical part focuses on burial practices at and negotiations around the (re)naming of the 'Kibra (Nubian) Muslim Cemetery', highlighting how religious and cultural norms determine belonging, inclusion and exclusion in death.

The final part of the dissertation synthesizes findings within the broader context of politicized ethnicity in Kenya. The study concludes that belonging is a practical negotiation of identity, and that space/place serve as key frameworks for analysing these dynamics. By exploring land, ethnicity and social practices, the study contributes to discussions on identity formation, marginalization and recognition in Kenya and beyond.

[belonging, identity, ethnicity, recognition, space/place, maps, toponyms, oral history, Nubians, Kenya]

'Some call it *slum*, we call it *home*'

When walking the streets of Kibera, an informal settlement in Kenya's capital Nairobi, as a white foreigner, it is wise to look as if you know your way around. If you absolutely have to ask for directions, knowing local place names and landmarks sets you apart from the naïve slum tourist prone to getting mugged. Having spent several months in Kibera and making a point of learning relevant place names from everyday conversations, biographical interviews and school compositions, I thought I had become fairly good at both place names and avoiding looking lost. However, I was in for a surprise when I attended a meeting about land rights in February 2014: hardly any of the

place names or landmarks mentioned by the participants, all of them members of the Nubian ethnic minority living in Kibera, sounded familiar to me.

From the roof of a water tank (one of the few structures that rose above ground-floor height), Kibera, as it was called at the time of my research (2011–2014),¹ looked to me like a densely woven blanket of corrugated-iron roofs, its mud-and-wattle huts and tin shacks covering the sloping terrain of southern Nairobi all the way down to the Nairobi river and dam.

Its beginnings lie in the first years of the twentieth century. By the end of that century, Kibera had gained notoriety as the ‘biggest slum in Africa’, infamous for its unsanitary living conditions, poverty and violence. Reports that it had one million inhabitants were certainly inflated, but it is safe to assume that it is home to more than 200,000 people (Desgroppes and Taupin 2011; de Smedt 2011:105f). It was this place that some of its inhabitants, calling themselves Nubians, claimed as their ‘ancestral homeland’, their sentiment summed up by one of them telling me: ‘Some call it *slum*, we call it *home*’ (JS fieldnotes 2011).

Kibera’s Nubians, a minority of 10,000–15,000 people (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, personal communication 2014; Balaton-Chrimes 2015:20) living in this multi-ethnic slum, trace their ancestry back to the so-called ‘Sudanese Soldiers’, colonial troops who had been recruited into Britain’s colonial army from places all over present-day Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda etc. The soldiers and their families were stationed in many urban centres in the then colony of Kenya in the early twentieth century. The majority of Sudanese soldiers settled on a military training ground just outside the newly founded capital Nairobi, in an area that turned into a sprawling slum as the city grew outwards to engulf it over the course of the 21st century.² Nubians cite adherence to Islam, the use of Kinubi, an Arabic creole language, particular foodstuffs, grass-woven objects, the female attire *gurbaba* and the *dholuka* dance and music as cultural and identity markers besides their military ancestry.

With Muslim names devoid of ethnic markers, a comparatively recent arrival in Kenya and lacking a rural tribal homeland, Kenyan Nubians had long been excluded from the unofficial but frequently evoked list of *Tribes of Kenya*, effectively hindering their recognition as Kenyans (Balaton-Chrimes 2011a, 2011b, 2015). This meant difficulties obtaining identity papers, rendering many Nubians factually stateless (Open Society Justice Initiative 2011a, 2011b). At the time of my research, however, Nubians were making progress in their lengthy struggle for official recognition: the category ‘Nubian’ had been introduced in the 2009 census; for the 2013 elections the constituency was renamed ‘Kibra’ (the Nubian version of ‘Kibera’); and in 2017, a ‘community

1 At the time of writing, over a decade had passed since my research (2011–2014). Kib(e)ra being a vibrant place of rapid change, I use the past tense to mark my information as historical. I use ‘Kibera’ to refer to the place its non-Nubian inhabitants relate to and ‘Kibra’ for the place that Nubians have a particular relation to.

2 For an excellent and extensive account of Nubian (oral) history, see de Smedt (2011).

land title' for parts of the area was issued to them, acknowledging the Nubian presence in Kenya after more than a century.

In this article, I will examine how Nubians relate to their homeland of Kibra, and to one another. I will do so by analysing Nubian-only toponyms (place names), which differ from those used by non-Nubian Kiberans or the state.³

On a theoretical level, this article addresses the question of the role of space in constructing belonging, in this case via shared meanings of toponyms (place names). Methodologically, I look at toponymy as an avenue to researching belonging, an otherwise fuzzy concept to research empirically. It is the link between people and place (which in turn links them to other people) that I will examine by looking at the toponyms that the Nubian inhabitants of Kib(e)ra use for the place they call 'home'.

'Belonging' is a more recent arrival in the debate about identity, relatedness and collectivities. Belonging, I argue, is a more apt descriptor of the processes at hand, bearing in mind that belonging is not immutable once attained. Rather, these attachments and categorizations are in flux, needing constant negotiation, (re)affirmation and performative 'work'. The gerund verb form ending in *-ing* turns our attention to these situational, processual, active and performative aspects of people negotiating categories and attachments, as highlighted in the respective literature (Probyn 1996; Lovell 1998; Geddes und Favell 1999; Yuval-Davis et al. 2006; Antonsich 2010; Albiez et al. 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011; Anthias 2013).

The term 'belonging' not only describes human-to-human-attachment, it also extends 'to other people, *places*, or modes of being...' (Probyn 1996:19, my emphasis). As Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka describes it, 'people belong to spaces and sites, to natural objects, landscapes, climate, and to material possessions' (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011:206). This particular way of belonging, of the relation between people and place, is what I call 'spatial belonging' (Sarre 2022).

A large body of literature at the intersection of geography and the social sciences deals with processes of place-making. A central argument is that humans turn indeterminate space into place by filling it with meaning. One way of doing so is naming (Cresswell 2004:8). Through the act of naming and the (collective) use of a toponym, previously indeterminate space is endowed with meaning, or its meaning reified, created as a 'place' (Kostanski 2014:273). It is through the process of naming that humans negotiate their relatedness to places and to others – another aspect of spatial belonging. By the same token, the use of collectively agreed-upon, mutually understandable toponyms fosters belonging among people. It is the Kiberan Nubians' ways of relating to and through place names that I will describe and analyse in the following sections.

3 The Nubian toponyms were gathered through a series of mapping exercises, from (biographical) interviews and everyday conversations, as well as through compositions written by the pupils of a primary school in Kibera.

Nubian Toponyms: Meaning-Making, Place-Making and Spatial Belonging

Military Toponyms, Clans and the Importance of Overarching Nubiness

To most of Kibera's inhabitants, the area between *Kwa DC* (At the District Commissioner's) in the north and *Darajani* (At the bridge) further south into the settlement is known as *Makina*.⁴ My Nubian interlocutors, however, knew more particular names for smaller places within that area which I did not hear in conversations with non-Nubians: *Kambi Alur(u)*, *Kambi Baka*, *Kambi Kakwa*, *Kambi Kuku*, *Kambi Lendu*, *Kambi Mundu*, *Kambi Te(t)*, *Kambi Forty Forty*, *Kambi Ravine* and, simply, *Kambi*.⁵ Only *Kambi Muru*, south of *Darajani*, was both shown on the government advisory plan and frequently used by non-Nubian Kiberans as well.

By using *kambi*, meaning 'camp', as the impermanent structures of mobile troops were called in the colonial army (de Smedt 2011:119), these place names refer to the military past of the Nubian community. The use of this historical term runs through all generations of Nubians. Most of those who participated in collecting place names during my research (which also yielded the *Kambi* toponyms) belonged to the grand-parent generation, though some were the sons and daughters of veterans. However, a man in the parent generation without any military experience also used the term when we could not find a quiet place to talk but instead sat down temporarily in a lively schoolyard for our conversation: 'Leo tumepiga *kambi* hapa' (Today we pitched our camp here. RB 03/12/2012, my emphasis).

When 7th graders at a nearby Primary School wrote compositions 'About my home', many mentioned *Makina*, but only few pupils used Nubian toponyms – interestingly, children with Muslim names seemed to live in *Kambi* areas of Kibera and/or use *Kambi* toponyms:

My name is [Muslim female name]. I am a Kenyan girl. ... I live in Kibera slums at *Kambi* with my aunt.' (composition 004, my emphasis)

My name is [non-Muslim female name]. ... I live in *Kambi* village its [sic] near the stage. (composition 068, my emphasis)

4 I doubt that non-Nubians were aware of the Kinubi and Arabic roots of this place name, explained to me by members of the Kenyan Nubian Council of Elders as follows: 'This centre of Kibra is called Makina, this is also Arabic. Arabic meaning *makina*, that means 'settlement', *makaan*, *makaan*!' (KE-NUCE 03/03/2011).

5 In Kiswahili, stress is on the second to last vowel (e.g. *Kambi Múru*). By contrast, Nubian pronunciation of these toponyms stressed the last syllable/vowel (*Kámbi Murú*, *Alúr(u)*, *Baká*, *Kakwá*, *Kukú*, *Lendú*, *Mundú* etc.)

My name is called [sic] [Muslim male name]. I live at *Kambi Aluru*. (composition 104, my emphasis)

The names of the various *kambis* are derived from ethnic groups of origin from which Nubian soldiers were recruited.⁶ BA, a man from the grandparent generation, told me about the ethnic composition of Nubians' ancestry and their places of settlement: Kambi Lendu (from Kongo), Kambi Aluru (from Uganda/Congo), and Kambi Muru (from Sudan). There are different groups: Murú, Bari (people from Juba), Dinka, Fojul, Kakwa, Mundú, Abkaya, Makaraká (live in Lindi), Majiko (from Uganda/Sudan) (notes interview BA 20/12/2012). Indeed, Kakwa is an ethnic group in Uganda, Baka, Kuku, Mundu, Moru/Muru in South Sudan, and Lendu in the DRC. It seems to have been common practice under the British to settle soldiers according to their (assumed) ethnic backgrounds (de Smedt 2011:119).

At the time of my research, however, these former 'tribal' identifications were considered a thing of the past and were being reduced to clan identities under the ethnically framed shared identification as 'Nubian' or 'Wanubi'. A woman of the grandparent generation told me:

*In Sudan, they have clans.*⁷ Kambi Muru, that is a *clan*-tribe [ni kabila ya *clan*]. There is a tribe called Murú. Kambi Muru: *village* of Umuru. When you come here in between, you will hear Kambi Kakwa. *There is a clan called Kakwa*. ... There are Mundu. Inside, they are here. ... In their *village*. (MH 31/12/2012)

Ethnic origins, her explanation shows, governed the settlement structure of Kibra in the early days and are preserved in the Kambi toponyms. Nowadays, these ethnic categorizations are subsumed under the umbrella label 'Nubian', as the category Sudanese (Soldiers) hindered Nubian recognition as Kenyan citizens in the post-independence period until recently (de Smedt 2011:17, 117; Balaton-Chrimes 2015:96; Sarre 2018). Distinctions according to (assumed) ethnic origin (e.g. endogamous marriages) lost significance in the 1970s and 1980s. Now these subgroups are largely unified under 'Nubians/Wanubi', exemplifying the situational malleability and simultaneity of (categories of) belonging.

Besides the Kambi toponyms, there is another place name carrying a historical reference to Kibra's origins as a military training ground, albeit unbeknownst to most

6 These narratives of ethnic origin may not have been as clear-cut as they were often presented to me, again foregrounding the processual and negotiated nature of attachments and categorizations. Douglas Johnson (2009:116) argues that in some cases, an ethnic identity may have been established only when individuals were incorporated into the 'community' of Sudanese soldiers which was structured along ethnic categorizations by the British commanders.

7 The interviews were carried out in a mixture of English and Kiswahili, interspersed with some Sheng and Kinubi and translated by JS. Statements that were made in English in the original are marked in italics.

people using it today: *Lain Shabá / Laini Saba*. Whereas my Nubian interlocutors spoke of *Lain Shabá*, the name was inscribed as *Laini Saba* on the government advisory plan, the only official representation of Kibera I was able to get hold of, representing the government's perspective of Kibera before its restructuring. Non-Nubian Kiberans I talked to also used *Laini Saba*. Asked about the meaning of *Laini sába* (*Laini* = Engl. line or Kisw. soft; *sába* = seven, 'line 7'), they wondered how it came to be, imagining that it could have been the end of a *matatu*⁸ line no. 7 in former times. In the Nubian pronunciation, *Lain shabá* (*Lain* = Engl. line; *shabá* = Kinubi shoot) revealed its original meaning: it denoted the place where soldiers lined up for shooting practice, that is, the 'shooting range'. Such differences in pronunciation may seem negligible, but apart from obscuring Nubian military history, pronunciation plays a major role in the sensory aspects of spatial belonging, as Robin Kearns and Lawrence Berg argue: '[W]e consider pronunciation to be an important element of the cultural politics of place naming within post-colonial societies [moving] beyond the visual to consider a wider sensory spectrum in the constitution of place' (2002:283).

The military toponyms described here are building blocks in the construction of Nubian belonging to Kib(e)ra: They draw on their honourable military past, which is a core building block of Nubian identity. They represent overlapping webs of belonging to (formerly ethnic, now clan-based) sub-categories of Nubian identity, which also used to structure settlement patterns in Kib(e)ra. While these have been downplayed to foreground Nubian identification as ethnic, they are traceable in the Nubian *kambi* toponyms.

'Kibra means forest': Taming Nature, Claiming First-Comer Rights

Another aspect of the oral history stored in Nubian toponyms is the wilderness, untamed nature and natural phenomena that marked Nubian life in the area at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the members of the Kenyan Nubian Council of Elders explained to me, it is even how the whole area received its name:

IAF: Nubians started *most of these urban centres*. And Kibra is *the largest of them all*, it is indeed the biggest. And the meaning of Kibra – *you noticed I don't call it 'Kibéra', I call it 'Kibra'*!

JS: That sounds like Arabic...

IAF: *This is very Arabic indeed*, even in Arabic, '*kibra*' means '*forest*'. *A thick, tropical forest in Arabic is called 'kibra'*. *That's why we called it 'Kibra'*.

⁸ *Matatus* are (mini)buses that operate as public transport in Nairobi.

J: *So there was a forest here?*

XX: *Yes, it was.*

IAF: *Thick! All the wild animals, lions used to roam here. If you don't look after your kids, they'd be snatched by lions and leopards and hyenas.* (KENUCE 03/03/2011)

Other members of the Nubian community echoed this narrative, such as two elderly women telling me: 'This is the reason you hear "Kibra" – Kibra means *forest*. Forest. There were *wild animals*. I even heard sounds of hyenas here. So they [the Nubians] came and constructed/fixed [*wakatengeneza*] it' (MH 31/12/2012) and 'Kibra was full of trees, mere bush; many died from snakes that attack from above' (notes interview HT 20/12/2012).

Etymological explanations like 'Kibera is said to be derived from the Sudanese Arabic word for forest' (Parsons 1997:88) and Kibra meaning 'thick forest', 'bushy area' (Balaton-Chrimes 2013:338; de Smedt 2011:8) were echoed by many of my interlocutors (KENUCE 03/03/2011, 09/08/2014; MA 09/01/2013) and are cited widely. Shuichiro Nakao, in his study of Arabic creoles like Kinubi and Juba-Arabic, also gives the example of '*kibira*, forest' (Nakao 2013:97, 101). Interestingly, there is little linguistic proof to support these derivations. Neither Jonathan Owens, Professor of Arabic linguistics, nor Sudanese colleagues I asked confirmed any Juba-Arabic or Sudanese-Arabic equivalent or root of 'Kib(e)ra' as 'forest' and only pointed to *kibir* meaning 'large'. An alternative explanation might be that it stems from one of the languages of origin spoken by the Sudanese soldiers. Yet despite the unclear linguistic origins, the narrative of taming nature has taken hold in both the Nubian and the scientific community and supports the oral history that makes Nubians the first ones to settle in the area, turning the wilderness into habitable land. It was not without pride that I was told

So we did a lot for making Nairobi what it is. We are the ones who built it, so it became what it is today. ... In fact Nairobi was established in 1900, but Kibra was very much around. So, this explains how long Nubians have been in Kibra. (KENUCE 03/03/2011)

Being the founders of Kibra is a source of pride and a fundamental building block to their call for recognition. As Samantha Balaton-Chrimes confirms, '[m]any Nubians ... rest their claim to indigeneity upon being the first to develop Kibera' (Balaton-Chrimes 2015:96). One activist for Nubian land rights, who was well aware of indigenous struggles elsewhere to have land rights restored or recognized on the basis of first-comer status, told me emphatically '*We are the aborigines [sic] of Kibera!*' (fieldnotes JS 2014).

By insisting on the use of 'Kibra' instead of 'Kibera', Nubians reified their claim to taming the wilderness, making Kibra (or even Nairobi) what it is and substantiating their belonging to Kibra and Kenya. Working on similar narratives in West Africa,

Carola Lentz mentions the ‘ambiguities that are typical of “traditional” land tenure in Africa, that is, land rights in a dominantly oral context, without cadastres, land surveys and written titles. It is these ambiguities that make narratives so indispensable’ (Lentz 2005:158). She calls these legitimizing narratives ‘first-comer narrative[s]’ (ibid. 2013:109), pointing to the layered claims presented in many locations.

According to the Nubi elders, the Nubi can claim first-comer rights to many cities in Kenya. To substantiate this, the speakers invoke a widely accepted trope: the image of pre-colonial mainland East Africa as rural and of cities as colonial foundations. Situating the Nubians within this narrative legitimizes their claim to land rights and – by claiming Kibra as their ancestral homeland in line with the Kenyan narrative of ethnic homelands – citizenship rights as Kenyan citizens.

Several toponyms refer to natural features that may have been more important when Nubian families relied on subsistence farming in the early days of Kibra. Some of these toponyms have entered common use, but others, having become irrelevant to an increasingly urban life in Kibera, have largely been forgotten.

One place name used widely is *Toi* (*market*). Non-Nubian interlocutors tried to explain the meaning of *Toi* by likening it to the English ‘toy’. *Toi*, I was told, is the Nubian word for the clay soil found there. A glance at my gumboots after shopping for groceries in *Toi* market on a rainy day made this explanation very plausible.

Nubians use *Gumberedú* to refer to a part of Kibera further down towards the river, beyond the Nubian ‘strongholds’ of Makina and Kambi Muru. This quarter is known to non-Nubian Kibera residents as *Gatwekera* and is deemed a Luo stronghold in the ethnically subdivided informal settlement.⁹ According to my interlocutors’ explanations, this toponym is composed of the Kinubi expressions *yom* (‘day’) and *beredu* (‘to wash’), ‘meaning a muddy place where you have to wash yourself every day’ (Notes interview BA 20/12/2012).

Other toponyms evoking an intact nature, natural features and a rural Kibra are *Shederan kubar* (in Kinubi *shederan* = trees, *kubar* = large), translated as the ‘place of large trees’. At the time of this study, not a single tree had remained. A hill, which has also disappeared under dense construction, making it hardly noticeable as a landscape feature, was referred to by my Nubian conversational partners as *Galalima* and translated to me as ‘Halima’s Hill’ (Kin. *gala* = hill, *Halima* = Muslim female name). Neither for *Shederan kubar* nor for *Galalima* were there any non-Nubian equivalents, suggesting these places play no role in the perception of the non-Nubian majority of Kibera residents. Like many Nubian toponyms, they have been subjected to what Jack Goody and Ian Watt have called the ‘structural amnesia of orality’ (Goody and Watt 1963:309), where new information replaces older layers of meaning which have lost relevance to the present.

9 On ethnic subdivisions and ‘strongholds’ in Kibera, see CIPEV 2008:31; Michelle Osborn 2008:324; Okoth Okombo and Olang’ Sana 2010:22; as well as Joh Sarre 2022:66.

By using toponyms that allude to the natural features of the area, they keep alive the memories of a Kibra that was less densely settled, in which agriculture and sustenance farming were the livelihood at hand and where people would congregate under tall trees. These toponyms bear witness to the longstanding relationship between Kibra and its Nubian inhabitants. They are also remnants of a Kibra that has vanished but that lives on in the memories of its inhabitants. This bond between people and place is woven, among other things, from childhood memories and nostalgia.

Nostalgia: Longing for and Belonging to the Kibra of the Past

In contrast to others who used *Kibera*, my Nubian interlocutors used *Kibra* to refer to their place of residence, which in most cases was also their place of birth. In the biographical interviews, they told me about their childhood in Kibra. They reminisced about Kibra's past while at the same time expressing their frustration about the dire current state of the place they called 'home'. One woman of the grandparent generation told me:

Kibra was very clean. You wouldn't see...now we are shocked...someone urinating on the street or doing whatever!!! You would not have seen that! It was very clean. ... But nowadays, we are shocked. Even the elders [wazee] who died, if they came back to life, they would not believe this is the Kibra they left. They can't. Noo, they would say, this is not Kibra, it was clean! (MH 31/12/2012)

Besides the physical changes, people lamented the decay of manners and social cohesion. A man of the parent generation explained to me how social cohesion fostered discipline in his childhood years, saying:

Also, discipline was of high class. The younger used to respect the older ones so much, you know. A child did not belong to father and mother only, a child belonged to the community [mtoto alikuwa wa jamiu]. If walking down the street, you have to be very careful, you have to hold your manners all the time, because you don't know who is watching you. (HL 11/01/2013)

Aided by his elder brother, who was part of the conversation, he went on to narrate how a child playing truant would be questioned by any elder and brought to attend Quranic school or to be disciplined. They went on to remind each other of the games they played and how they enjoyed swimming and hunting in the area as boys – an imagery hardly conceivable when looking at the water-streams turned into sewage and the crammed mud-and-wattle structures that now cover the area.

The narrative of high moral standards, discipline and a tight social network among Nubians in Kibra was reiterated by many of my interlocutors. Members of the Kenyan Nubian Council of Elders were also reminiscent of Kibra in the past. After a vivid description of the past Kibra, a man of the grandparent generation told me emphatically: *'Fifty years ago, you would have loved it!'* (KENUCE 09/08/2014)

A negative assessment of the present, a past that is idealized in memory, highlighting the positive aspects while downplaying or ignoring negatives: this nostalgia, from the Greek *nostos* (= return (home)) and *álgos* (= pain), originally referred to the sensation of ‘homesickness’ and thus has a much stronger spatial reference than the almost exclusively time-related usage of today would suggest. The longing character of the nostalgic gaze towards the past Kibra corresponds to Elzabeth Probyn’s suggestion that in ‘belonging’ there is always an element of ‘longing’ (Probyn 1996:6). ‘Belonging’, in contrast to ‘identity’, captures ‘the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state’ (ibid. 1996:19).

I argue that Nubian belonging is also captured by the use of the toponym ‘Kibra’, which contains childhood memories and nostalgic images of a place long lost to rapid social and physical change. The Kibra of one’s childhood no longer exists, yet the shared nostalgic bond to this place, though lost in time, is revived when referring to Kibra. As Laura Kostanski remarks: ‘[M]emories of place imbue a present-day identity on the users or inhabitants of the place. This place identity is almost the glue which holds community groups together through a shared understanding of their collective past’ (Kostanski 2014:287). Consequently, when people use ‘Kibra’, they are reminded of the place they grew up in, which is a basis for their belonging, with the shared feelings of joyful memory and painful loss being cornerstones of Nubian belonging together and to Kib(e)ra.

Competing Toponyms, Contested Belonging(s)

In conclusion, Nubian toponyms in Kib(e)ra serve as markers of collective meaning-making, transforming unmarked spaces into places of significance, places of belonging. However, the Nubian sense of belonging to Kibra does not go uncontested. The disregard of Nubian toponyms by the majority population and the state reflected the struggles of Nubians for recognition within Kib(e)ra and the broader Kenyan nation at the time.

This goes to show that toponyms are not neutral descriptors, but tokens in processes of relating, belonging and emotional attachment, as well as exclusion. As I have shown in the opening vignette, knowing place names positioned myself as an ‘insider’ and helped keep me safe. In the meeting, the more exclusive flip side of toponyms became obvious, leaving those listeners clueless who weren’t party to the in-group codes. This stresses that the answer to the question ‘Who belongs (here)?’ is a constant subject of negotiation.

Place names and the memories and oral histories they invoke are part of a larger struggle and politics of recognition, citizenship and belonging. Which place names are used by whom and recognized officially is often representative of power relations and competing hegemonic and subaltern narratives (Alderman and Inwood 2013:212). These negotiations are also situated in larger power dynamics, as can be seen in other

struggles over the naming of public places (see, for example, the 'Rhodes must fall' movement in South Africa or initiatives by 'Berlin Postkolonial' to have colonialist street names in Berlin's 'African quarter'/Afrikanisches Viertel changed).

In the Nubian case, the oral history preserved in military toponyms, the assertion of first-comer status through nature-related toponyms and the nostalgic attachment to a bygone Kibra collectively contribute to the construction of Nubian (spatial) belonging. Nubian toponyms underscore Kib(e)ra's historical depth¹⁰ and significance for Nubian Kenyans as an 'ancestral homeland'¹¹. The existence of different sets of toponyms in Kib(e)ra underscores the contested nature of Nubian (spatial) belonging in Kibra and, by default, to the Kenyan nation as well.¹²

10 By doing so, they also challenge the widespread idea of slums as transient and impermanent.

11 Given the enormous importance most Kenyans attribute to an ancestral homeland, further research could explore how non-Nubian inhabitants relate to Kibra as their place of birth and/or residence (in comparison to an ancestral homeland elsewhere), a question that lay beyond the scope of my research.

12 In my thesis, I have analyzed the momentous historical interplay of ethnic categories, ethnic homelands and citizenship in Kenya (Sarre 2022:35–72).

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Jonas Baumgart, Maximilian Sarre and ZfE/JSCA's anonymous reviewer for their useful feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I am also grateful to the institutions that founded parts of my research (SFB 700 'Governance in areas of limited statehood', FU Berlin, and the *Bayreuth International Graduate School in African Studies*), as well as to the Nubian community in Kibra without whose support this PhD project would not have been possible.

References

- Albiez, Sarah, Nelly Castro, Lara Jüssen, and Eva Youkhana eds. 2011: *Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging: Practices, Theory and Spatial Dimensions = Etnicidad, ciudadanía y pertenencia*. Madrid, Frankfurt a. M.: Iberoamericana; Vervuert.
- Alderman, Derek H., and Joshua Inwood 2013: Street Naming and the Politics of Belonging: Spatial Injustices in the Toponymic Commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. *Social & Cultural Geography* 14(2):211–233.
- Anthias, Floya 2013: Identity and Belonging: Conceptualisations and Political Framings. *KLA Working Paper Series No.8; Kompetenznetz Lateinamerika - Ethnicity, Citizenship, Belonging*. http://www.kompetenzla.uni-koeln.de/sites/fileadmin2/WP_Anthias.pdf, accessed March 25, 2024.
- Antonsich, Marco 2010: In Search for Belonging: An Analytical Framework. *Geography Compass* 4(6):644–659.
- Balaton-Chrimes, Samantha 2011a: Counting as Citizens: Recognition of the Nubians in the 2009 Kenyan Census. *Ethnopolitics* 10(2):205–218.
- Balaton-Chrimes, Samantha 2011b: The Nubians of Kenya and the Emancipatory Potential of Collective Recognition. *Australasian Review of African Studies* 32(1):12–31.
- Balaton-Chrimes, Samantha 2015: *Ethnicity, Democracy and Citizenship in Africa: Political Marginalisation of Kenya's Nubians*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- CIPEV 2008: *Kenya: Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence (CIPEV) Final Report*. Nairobi: Government Printers. https://www.knchr.org/Portals/0/Reports/Waki_Report.pdf, accessed March 25, 2024.
- Cresswell, Tim 2004: *Place: A Short Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Desgropes, Amélie and Sophie Taupin 2011: Kibera: The Biggest Slum in Africa? *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review* 44:23–33. <https://journals.openedition.org/estafrica/pdf/521>, accessed March 25, 2024.
- de Smedt, Johan 2011: *The Nubis of Kibera: A Social History of the Nubians and Kibera Slums*. Faculty of the Humanities, Leiden University. <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item:2936754/download>, accessed March 25, 2024.
- Geddes, Andrew, and Adrian Favell eds. 1999: *The Politics of Belonging: Migrants and Minorities in Contemporary Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Johnson, Douglas H. 2009: Tribe or Nationality? The Sudanese Diaspora and the Kenyan Nubis. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3(1):112–131.
- Kostanski, Laura 2014: Duel-names: How Toponyms (Placenames) Can Represent Hegemonic Histories and Alternative Narratives. In: Ian D. Clark, Luise Hercus, and Laura Kostanski eds., *Indigenous and*

- Minority Placenames: Australian and International Perspectives*. Pp. 273–292. Canberra ACT, Australia: Australian National University Press.
- Lentz, Carola 2005: First-Comers and Late-Comers: The Role of Narratives in Land Claims. In: Sandra Evers, Marja Spiereburg, and Harry Wels eds., *Competing Jurisdictions: Settling Land Claims in Africa*. Pp. 157–180. Leiden: Brill.
- Lentz, Carola 2013: *Land, Mobility and Belonging in West Africa*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Lovell, Nadia ed. 1998: *Locality and Belonging*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Nakao, Shuichiro 2013: The Prosody of Juba Arabic: Split Prosody, Morphophonology and Slang. In: Mena Lafkioui ed., *African Arabic: Approaches to Dialectology*. Pp. 95–120. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Okombo, Okoth and Olang' Sana 2010: *Balaa Mitaani: The Challenge of Mending Ethnic Relations in the Nairobi Slums*. Nairobi: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kenia/07884.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2024
- Osborn, Michelle 2008: Fuelling the Flames: Rumour and Politics in Kibera. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2(2):315–327.
- Open Society Justice Initiative 2011a: Nationality and Discrimination: The Case of the Kenyan Nubians. <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/54a364bb-1e8d-493d-91bf-96809a5e9ccb/kenyan-nubians-factsheet-20110412.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2024
- Open Society Justice Initiative 2011b: Nubians in Kenya. Numbers and Voices. https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/80052ac6-53c4-4ee9-9d43-a267db431f00/nubians-kenya-data-sheet-20110506_0.pdf, accessed March 25, 2024
- Pfaff-Czarnecka, Joanna 2011: From 'Identity' to 'Belonging' in Social Research: Plurality, Social Boundaries and the Politics of the Self. In: Sarah Albiez, Nelly Castro, Lara Jüssen and Eva Youk-hana eds., *Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging: Practices, Theory and Spatial Dimensions = Etnicidad, ciudadanía y pertenencia*. Pp. 199–219. Madrid, Frankfurt a. M.: Iberoamericana; Vervuert.
- Probyn, Elspeth 1996: *Outside Belongings*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Sarre, Joh 2022: *Zugehörigkeit und Heimat in Kenia: Das Ringen um Anerkennung der Nubi in Kibera/Nairobi*. Berlin: Reimer.
- Sarre, Joh 2018: The Nubians of Kibera 'Revisited': Detribalized Natives, Slum Dwellers, Middle Class? In: Lena Kroeker, David O'Kane, and Tabea Scharrer eds., *Middle Classes in Africa: Changing Lives and Conceptual Challenges*. Pp. 135–156. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira, Kalpana Kannabiran, and Ulrike Vieten eds. 2006: *The Situated Politics of Belonging*. London: SAGE.

