

Policing Gangs: Facebook, Extra-judicial Killings and Popular Imaginaries of Super-cop Hessa in Eastlands, Nairobi

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Abstract

Police and gangs have rarely featured as important loci of popular cultural forms, especially in Africa. As an institution, the police in Kenya are abstruse, opaque and often seen as against, and not for society. Popular culture is not only a window and a peek into how a society mainstreams ways of “looking” but also a way through which society articulates potentially controversial subjects. Nothing comes close to the controversy surrounding the subject of police killings of suspected gang members in Eastlands, Nairobi, Kenya. News reports on crime in Nairobi, drawing from news-gathering routines and news values that privilege specific experiences while excluding others, have framed gang violence in specific “singular narratives.” However, Facebook use in Eastlands Nairobi provides a unique canvas through which the imaginary of a “super-cop” is given multiple, if not conflicting meanings. “Super-cops” describe an unorthodox form of policing where specific policemen (mostly male), through a mix of public consent and state sanction, particularly in Eastlands, Nairobi, use extrajudicial means to confront suspected violent gangs. This paper reveals how Facebook groups’ discourse in Eastlands provides lenses that circulate alternative, if not equally controversial readings of so-called “super-cops” in ways that draw from Kenya’s conflicted urban histories to managing violent gangs in the city.

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Introduction

On October 25, 1976, in *Rainbow Magazine*, a children's weekly paper published by Hillary Ngweni since the 1970s, there was a cover feature story encouraging its young readers to consider policing as a career. Addressed to children in elementary schools, the magazine also congregated an emerging, mostly urban middle class that formed around some of Kenya's visible public schools. Such a representation of the police, and similar appeals to present-day young readers to consider police work, would be almost unthinkable. In both the popular, creative arts and in practice, the police in Kenya occupy a conflicted role. The police are respected and feared in different contexts and reviled and loathed in others. A settler colonial past and a violent independence struggle did little to hoist policing as admirable. Scholars have shown how the police provided much needed scaffolding to a colonial regime that was illegitimate, and which required repression and brutal force to sustain itself (Gimode 2007). In the colonial regime, the police—using brutal force as a defining element—were inscribed as the buffer between natives and European settlers, and an extractive instrument of tax and labour for the regime (Anderson and Killingray 1991; Clayton and Killingray 1989; Mkutu 2015; Omeje and Githigaro 2012). This hangover lingered further. In the post-colonial regime, it was an instrument of regime protection rather than citizen security. In the 1980s and 1990s, the state found in the Kenya police a handy instrument in the context of significant political uprising, often deploying the Special Branch (the intelligence unit of the police) against political opponents (Ruteere 2011). Kenya's police force was thus historically established as a quasi-military, inhibiting, and not necessarily a facilitating force. With rising urban crime in the 1970s and 1980s and amidst rapid urbanisation, much policing attention focused on gangs and violent crime. The police in Kenya increasingly drew on colonial era vagrancy laws to imagine and address urban gangs as a blemish requiring removal.

An examination of print, electronic and digital texts on policing in Kenya suggests that specific historical moments highlighted contradictory imagery of police-gang relationships. Karin Barber (1987) reminds us that popular cultural forms are not mere reflections of pre-existing attitudes and emotions, but are also sites where popular consensus is created and where unformulated feelings and ideas are given a shape and a name, spread and shared. In the first two decades after Kenya's independence, popular imagination and representation of policing as a service, and a desirable career, contrasts with some present-day perceptions, where the police are seen as a brute enforcer of compliance; corrupt, and a political instrument, especially in Kenya's violent election cycles (Hope 2018; Okia 2011). While the representations and popular expressions of police oscillate in a broad continuum, lately, the two apparently contradictory roles of villainy and heroism seem locked in a continuous struggle in the context of gangsterism in Nairobi's Eastlands. In the early 1990s, the revival of an East African hip-hop scene, the Dandora-based hip-hop group *Mashifta*, captured the apparent contrarities of police

imaginaries through their hit single “majambazi” (gangsters); where the police were cast as part of the criminal world in an urban space suffused in crime. The association of police with criminality in Kenya also draws from the controversial roles that police have played in post-colonial Kenya. Ruteere (2011) shows how police “outfits” such as the Flying Squad (dedicated to fighting armed gangs) and the Kwekwe Squad (involved in fighting the *Mungiki*, a proscribed violent sect that held turf in sections of Nairobi and Central Kenya), were lawless, and used extreme violence against suspects. The police have been cited as facilitators of assassinations of prominent dissident politicians in Kenya, enforcers of political detentions and the face of the excesses of the Kenyan state (Gimode 2007; Omanga and Buigutt 2017; Ruteere 2011).

There is a predictable pattern of those on the receiving end of the predatorial excesses of the police. In every election cycle the violent aspect of the police in Kenya grows worse. In the 2007 post-election violence, 1 200 people lost their lives, with many of them victims of an unofficial shoot-to-kill order in parts of western Kenya and sections of the ghettos¹ in Nairobi² (Okia 2011; Ruteere 2011). In subsequent elections, diverse forms of police violence in scale have taken place, but it was in 2007 that a serious national conversation was convened with the aim of reforming the institution. In 2010, a new constitutional dispensation set off, with, among other things, centring the police as one of the institutions that seemed to cry out for reform. The constitution facilitated a change of label from a “police force” to a “police service” as part of humanising the institution. At the centre of the controversial imagery surrounding policing in Kenya was the constant association with human rights violations, perceptions of high levels of corruption within the institution, and their propensity to be the most visible face of the excesses of the state and concomitant abuses of power. However, over and beyond the police’s role as instruments of state violence, an abiding history of extra-judicial killings has stalked the police, and this has come to define the identity of the institution, especially in Eastlands, Nairobi, a section of the city perceived to be teeming with violent gangs.

In the late 1990s, as many as four to five deaths linked to the police would be reported in a week. A nationwide police crackdown on *Mungiki*, a quasi-religious criminal gang in central Kenya, may have cost over 8 000 young men their lives (Jones, Kimari, and Ramakrishnan. 2017). Increased terrorist activities post-Westgate³ in 2013 also saw an upsurge of extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances in Kenya. These terror attacks, and others that happened around this time in other parts of the country, crystallised public opinion on extra-judicial killings as excusable ways of managing any forms of terror and violent crime. Extra-judicial killings in Kenya, as a controversial

1 The use of the label “ghetto” is deliberate here and suggests a more acceptable and respectful reference to the residents occupied by the interlocutors in this study, in sections of Eastlands, Nairobi.

2 Human Rights Watch (2008). <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/03/16/ballots-bullets/organized-political-violence-and-kenyas-crisis-governance>.

3 The Westgate terror attacks were carried out on September 21, 2013 by Somalia-based Al-Shabaab terror group in an upscale shopping mall in Nairobi, in which over 60 people were killed.

policing tool, have a long history (Akech 2005; Elkins 2005; Foran 1936; Republic of Kenya Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence 2008; Ruteere and Pommerolle 2003). According to Hewitt (1999), a policeman involved in the campaign against the Mau Pomerleau in the mid-50s, the police used what he termed as “excusable homicide” against “gangsters” whom they identified easily “as gangsters owing to their style of hairdo, plaited in little twirls, all over the head and sticking up like a porcupine’s quills” (Hewitt 1999, 201). On these accounts, the colonial police slaughtered an average of three to four hundred “terrorists” a month, categorised as “excusable homicides” (Hewitt 1999, 204). To date, these latter-day excusable homicides, in every sense extra-judicial killings, continue as an acceptable but unofficial practice of policing perceived in “ungoverned” urban spaces, especially in those sections of the cities perceived to have higher crime rates, circulation of small arms, and gang activity such as Eastlands, Nairobi. According to published reports and academic studies, extra-judicial killings of suspected gangsters are part of the quotidian reality of Nairobi’s Eastlands (Jones et al. 2017; MSCJ 2017; Van Stapele 2016).

Extra-judicial killings of suspected criminal gangs in parts and sections of Eastlands are bound up with Nairobi’s racialised colonial history, and have a peculiar yet significant public support. The area generally referred to as Eastlands is an expansive space that begins from the area between Landhies Road and Racecourse Road, covering the areas of Muthurwa, Kariakor, Pumwani, Eastleigh, Shauri-Moyo, Kariobangi, Korogocho, Huruma, Kaloleni, Majengo, Mathare, Kayole, Dandora, and much further towards Mwiki and areas bordering Kasarani. After the “allocation” of Eastlands as an African settlement, the 1950s onwards saw the expansion of Uhuru estate, and other middle-range category housing such as Jericho, Jerusalem and Maringo (Aseka 1990). Eastlands is largely comprised of city-council housing with a host of tenements districts cramped together in the model of 19th century cities such as New York, Glasgow and Berlin—individually owned buildings designed to stack as many rental units as possible (Huchzermeyer 2011) alongside “ghettoes” of such places as Mathare and Korogocho. Much of the “ghettoes”—popularly known as slums—and the tenements are unregulated, overcrowded, built into a “dense city” and partly motivated by a history of lucrative land-lordism. A vast majority of Kenya’s extra-judicial killings occur in Mathare, Dandora, Eastleigh and Kayole estates of Eastlands, Nairobi. The findings of this paper are drawn from a broader project carried out in Kenya between 2018 and 2021, which involved ethnographic work in Eastlands, specifically in Kayole, Mathare and Dandora. The larger project from which this spins out, involved numerous interviews with “reformed” gangsters, human rights organisations, and residents of the three neighbourhoods. This was heavily supplemented with a deep ethnography of community policing Facebook groups (*Dandora Crime Free*, *Mathare Crime Free*, *Kayole Crime Free*), all of which were later collapsed to the *Nairobi Crime Free Facebook* in an attempt to circumvent closures from Facebook. Specifically, this paper reveals how the confluence of social media and violent gangs has reproduced a quintessential persona, “super-cop” Hessa, in Kenya’s policing cultures in digital space. Following “Hessa” (an online alias for cops who use Facebook to mobilise public

support for extra-judicial killings), this paper shows how legitimacy and rationale for the controversy of extra-judicial killings of gangsters are manufactured online.

Social Media and Constructs of the Eastlands' Super-cop

The “mainstreaming” of extra-judicial killings of gangsters in Eastlands, Nairobi is juxtaposed with a “celebrated” mode of policing phenomenon, where a mostly lone, plainclothes (typically male) officer occupies the role of an outlaw-cop. This oxymoronic, contradictory police persona, referred to here as “super-cop” is not only indicted in the perpetuation of a culture of extra-judicial killings in Eastlands, but is a complex product of established policing cultures, urban geography and popular (and populist) modes of addressing violent crime. Images, slogans and creative arts published in “community policing” Facebook groups in Eastlands provide insights into the significant public support that nourishes the symbolic and actual “super-cops.” Scholars argue that media platforms in general, as well as creative arts, not only mediate everyday life, but are also windows through which problems that continue to plague the post-colonial state in Africa are understood (Ligaga 2012; Ogude and Nyairo 2007). In Africa, digital media is giving popular expression and creative arts the platform where boundaries are pushed, where legitimacy and traditions are challenged, as well as where alternatives are mainstreamed. The dispersed, indeterminate online audience provides the backdrop where specific appeals are also fronted. Ligaga (2012) reminds us that the digital media in Africa is enabling the emergence of new cultures that elevate self-expression through a wide range of aesthetic forms such as music, film, drama, paintings and pictures.

But how do remediated expressions, images, and creative forms use the canvas of the digital to “legitimise” and “normalise” potentially taboo—if not controversial—social realities? While it is taken for granted that popular arts are synonymous with increased access, more symmetry and equivalence—exemplified through how the popular can be utilised by the marginalised and the disempowered to speak to power—community policing Facebook groups in Nairobi show how popular culture sometimes works in “collusion with power” (Mbembe 2001; Willems 2012). The historical progression or success of the “super-cop” as a lived, societal reality and a popular expression of social media discourse, expressive arts and news reports, is itself an expression of state power.

“Super-cops” are a product of Kenya’s violent colonial racist histories, policing practices and how particularly (Black) bodies acquire meaning in specific geographical spaces. “Super-cops” are also sustained and nourished by specific discourses on crime, journalistic silences, and popular and creative expressions of crime, gangsterism and policing in Nairobi. This paper goes beyond a human rights activist discourse, or its opposite, a journalistic inventorying of the frequency of killings, to explain why the “super-cop” as a discursive frame, flourishes in the discourse of urban gangs in Kenya. It is hardly surprising that Kenya’s digital space is providing insights into a phenomenon that was previously the subject of hushed conversations and official denial. Although extra-judicial killings have a long history in Kenya, the frequency has risen in the past

two decades with the rise of ethno-political gangs, criminal gangs, vigilante groups and suspected terror groups. Scholars argue that the rise of gangs and vigilante groups in sections of Nairobi is evidence of perceived or actual lack of legitimate security, the increase of “ungoverned” spaces in urban areas, a manifestation of rising inequality, economic interests by gangs, an increased fusion between criminality and urban politics, and the informalisation of security as a service (Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2006; Mkutu 2015; Mutahi 2011; Van Stapele 2016). The rise of suspected violent gangs and increase in terror activities have not just increased the tempo of extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances, but have also mainstreamed and hoisted the “super-cop.” Meanwhile, with digital platforms becoming a mass medium in Kenya, and increased access to internet-enabled smart phones, the discourse and practice of gangsterism and policing are equally becoming more visible online.

On 1 April 2018, a video emerged online showing a plain-clothes policeman executing two suspected gangsters in Nairobi’s 5th Avenue, a commercial thoroughfare in the sprawling Eastleigh estate. In the slightly over a minute-long video shot from the second floor of a housing flat, a crowd is seen gathering around the policeman, who is first seen holding a teenage boy by the scruff of his neck, before shooting him. On the floor, most likely dead, is his colleague who has just been shot by the same man. The video is shocking, not just for the sheer display of impunity, but for the fact that the execution is done for spectacle, at midday, and on a very busy street. The video goes viral. The next day there is a polarising debate in the country, especially on social media, about the penchant for extra-judicial killings among sections of the police in Nairobi’s Eastlands and the audaciousness of the act. It is neither the first time nor the last. Later that day, the Inspector General of Police, Brigadier Joseph Boinnet, confirms that he has watched the video and promises “punishment.” The police spokesperson assures that a probe would be needed to identify if the man in the video was a policeman. The Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA), a body formed to oversee and punish police excesses, and a product of the 2010 new “progressive” constitution, issues a rather formulaic statement calling on members of the public to come forward and volunteer information on what actually happened. Human rights organisations condemn the police, reminding the public that this is just a single moment in a continuum of extra-judicial killings in Nairobi. Except for a few feature stories following up on the families of the deceased, nothing much happens.



Figure 1: A blurred image from a phone of police officer Rashid, executing a suspected gang member in a street in Eastleigh, Nairobi, as a crowd watches (April 1, 2018)

A few months later, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published a documentary in which a Nairobi-based journalist, Jamal Osman, gains access to Ahmed Rashid, the policeman who executed the teenagers. The documentary, an exemplar of access journalism where Jamal Osman exploited cultural capital with influential “Somali elders” in Eastleigh, cast Rashid as a police officer who plays the quintessential “super-cop.” In the documentary, Rashid comes off both as a victim of crime and a dispenser of instant justice, and riding on substantial state and community support to maintain order and keep violent gangs in check. The piece is shot in Eastleigh estate, the sprawling mostly Somali-inhabited neighbourhood, which lies adjacent to the Mathare ghetto.⁴ One of the scenes shows Rashid and five other plain-clothes policemen scrolling through a phone with pictures of suspected criminals. They call themselves the Pangani six and Rashid cuts a comparatively imposing figure as a leader of the group. “We must have some goals to achieve” and as yet we have not reached that goal” [sic] he tells his police colleagues, all in plain-clothes. A few are chewing Miraa (Khat), a popular sedative in Eastleigh and are clearly glowing in the moment. The Pangani six sift through Facebook accounts on their phones as they listen to Rashid, “Ours is to get all gangsters who are living in our neighbourhood. For those we have profiled we have

4 Mathare is in many ways also described as a slum in popular press and academic journals. I deliberately use the word “ghetto” since it is the preferred label by residents of Mathare.

to get them dead or alive,” he speaks with an apparent tone of finality. The reference to “profiling” involves some perceived grounded knowledge of suspected gangsters, their family and social networks, probable addresses and their digital footprints, mostly from their Facebook accounts. The pictures and other relevant information are shared among the police, anonymised police Facebook accounts and linked to so called “community policing” Facebook groups comprising hundreds of thousands of residents of Eastlands, Nairobi and administrated by mysterious “super-cops” calling themselves “Hessy.” Hessy, just like Rashid, is not the ordinary neighbourhood policeman. “He” is a symbol, and the most obvious expression of a policing practice perfected and maintained in Eastlands from the 1960s to date, in which an officer or group of officers come to embody the contradictory attributes of mystery and familiarity. He inhabits the conflicting roles of a law enforcer and an outlaw in an inscribed war against suspected violent gangsters, where he juggles state demands for order, public pressure on police to rein in violent crime, and normative ideals of due process and justice.

In Kenya’s security discourse, “super-cops” are as much loved as they are hated. In parts of Eastlands they have emerged and have been made a necessary evil; applauded as dispensers of on-the-spot justice and bulwarks against violent gangs, but reviled as violators of human rights and murderers. They are both a product of policing cultures and popular discourse of crime-worlds; a grim situation in which ungoverned and blighted urban spaces call out for a type of super-hero. Thus, while the “super-cop” is in many ways a product of institutional structures and individual agencies, its digital variant, Hessy, is a response to existing gang cultures within digital spaces. For Eastland gangs, Facebook offers a space where members can tell their story and construct gangsterism as an admirable and possible path to meaningful youth identities. Thus, Hessy, as a “super-cop,” seems to respond not just to the street level and online presence of gangs who use Facebook to perform and dramatise gangsterism, but also to gangsters who are not shy to use the affordances of Facebook to announce their exploits, even while creating a martyrdom around “fallen” gang members.⁵

Hessy, Facebook and Nairobi’s Super-cops

In 2016, Hessy emerged as a Facebook persona, first as *Hessy wa Kayole* (Hessy from Kayole). Kayole, a Nairobi Eastlands working-class neighbourhood with a history of violent gangs, was unsurprisingly the “birthplace” of Hessy. His persona was formed on Facebook and was a natural response and exploitation of affordances of a digital space that is unregulated, hypermediated, and accessible to many in Eastlands, Nairobi. With decent internet speed and cheap and accessible internet in Kenya, Facebook is Kenya’s foremost “mass” digital medium, mobilising and congregating users across social, generational and economic classes. The popularity of Facebook, and its “massified” attribute are well captured in how it is sometimes derisively labelled as “Mukuru kwa Zuckerberg”; a juxtaposition with the much more cerebral platforms such

5 On Facebook, and in conversations with former gang members, gangsters often used the word “fallen” to describe and refer to former members killed by police.

as Twitter or Instagram. Mukuru kwa Njenga is a small but congested ghetto next to South-B, in the heart of Nairobi's industrial area, and the word play with Facebook founder's name, Mark Zuckerberg, reflects both the class dimensions in the use of Facebook and an acknowledgement that Facebook is probably now the medium of choice for the urban masses in Kenya, and may now be rivalling or eclipsing radio and television. Karin Barber reminds us of the ordinariness and non-canonical nature of popular culture and alludes to mass access as a key feature of popular culture. In her book, *A History of African Popular Culture*, Barber (2018) argues that popular cultural forms are objects of and sources for historical inquiry, and bearers of their own past: "they embody historical memory and a consciousness of continuity with the past, as well as an orientation to what is new and changing in social experience. Apparently, new forms may recapitulate or repurpose remembered precursors" (Barber 2018, 3). In Eastlands, these new media technologies are not only refashioning and remediating the phenomenon of "super-cops" as a symbolic reality but are reflecting the social realities of this.

As a subject of rumour, Hessa represents the collective will of Eastlands' residents and their basic need for safety, while at the same time providing the legitimising "idiom" for inserting extra-judicial killings as part of the quotidian realities and everyday discourse.⁶ Most residents in Eastlands, Nairobi, have some "knowledge" of Hessa. Some claim to have met him. Others say there are "several" Hesses. If you ask human rights activists in Dandora and Kayole, a few names are suggested—sometimes with certainty. Crime reporters interviewed are more cautious about revealing actual identities but appear to know more than they would reveal. Rumours on Hessa are not so much about what he does but are part of how crime discourse is constituted in Eastlands, and how the ambivalences and uncertainties of safety and human security are linked to moral claims and desires for justice and punishment. These rumours and their circulation are contradictory as they signal raw state power, even while suggesting state failure and the inability to manage urban spaces.

For Hessa, unlike previous "super-cops," the online space enables greater elaboration and enactment of his persona and the possibility of inserting rationality into a controversial policing culture. Facebook gives rumours on Hessa a chilling form of concrete reality. Since 2016, as violent crime soared in Eastlands, and as gangs there (the most prominent at the time was named *Gaza*) acquired increased online presence, Hessa emerged as a digital persona and grew a huge following on Facebook. Using Facebook tagging, he addressed gangsters in a casual yet familial vernacular, and with time, congregated a huge online audience mesmerised at the dramaturgical performance of cops and gangs, involving actual actors, on a live stage, in a deadly plot often framed as a fight to finish. Routinely, accusations of crime are tagged on a suspected gangster's Facebook name with alleged details of dates, victims and weapons used, often signed

6 For scholarly engagements with rumour, see Ghosh 2008; Chandravarkar 1998; White 1994; and Musila 2008a&b.

off with a plea to “repent, surrender firearms or self-exile from the city.” This performance, targeted at an individual but addressed to a broad (digital) audience, allows “super-cops” to dominate and steer discourse on gangs and violent crime in Eastlands, while implicitly soliciting public support that excuses and collapses into one the multiple roles of investigator, prosecutor, judge and executor.

While doubts linger on the actual identity of Hessa, how many Hessies actually exist, and whether he is male or female, there is little doubt of Hessa’s occupation as a policeman, or a group of policemen going by that identity. Hessa is the alter ego of “killer” police or “super-cops” who prowl Eastlands’ actual and digital spaces, styling himself, or themselves, as crime-busters. The use of deep Sheng knowledge of the vast Eastlands’ geography betrays a familiarity with the rough, murky side of Nairobi’s tough neighbourhoods. Human rights organisations in Eastlands consider Hessa to be a modern-day symbol and extension of Kenya’s long history of extra-judicial killings and culture of deifying killer cops. Although the use of a diverse range of profile pictures is meant to mask identity, the connotations to policing and security work are unmistakable. The higher echelons of police in Kenya officially deny association with the formal institution but acknowledge that “Hessa” is an “excitable chap who has a lot of interest in security!”⁷

Building on the original Hessa, more “unofficial” police accounts have been created; *Hessa wa Huruma*, *Hessa wa Mathare*, *Hessa wa Dandora* and *Blackest Widow*. The accounts are clearly linked with images and texts circulated from one Hessa account to another, nourished with the shadow mission of legitimising and mobilising public support for extra-judicial killings. By the end of 2016, similar Facebook groups mobilised around security discourse emerged in Dandora, Mathare and Kayole. The administrators of these groups were the Hessies. Meanwhile, a bizarre but not entirely surprising practice emerged on these Facebook groups, where the names and detailed profiles of suspected violent gangsters in Nairobi were published online. Residents in the Eastlands estates of Kayole (Oyole), Dandora (Dandoch), Eastleigh (E-sitch) and Mathare refer to these practices as “*kuanika*” (loosely translated as “expose” or “parade”). It essentially involves a “profiling” on social media where suspected gangsters are exposed online, thus allowing the Eastlands public to be easily mobilised against “crime” and criminals. Often, if not always, it is a site where the public is organised and primed to support police action inclined to avoid the legal mechanisms of dealing with gangsters. *Kuanika* is part of a shame genre, not uncommon in Eastlands where social networks are fairly close, that is understood as the most basic and supposedly harmless, extra-judicial means of managing gangs.

The most prominent of these Facebook groups was *Dandora Crime Free*, which later merged with the *Nairobi Crime Free*, before being pulled down by Facebook in 2019.

7 <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/34643-hessa-wa-dandora-reacts-ig-joseph-boinnets-citizen-tv-interview>.

Signing up for membership in the group involved an easy but quite revealing three-question process. “Have you ever been arrested for any crime? Have you ever served time in jail for any offence? And, do you support police efforts to fight crime in Dandora?” Answering all the questions appropriately marked the first step in a process that allowed one to join a Facebook group that convened in one space—hundreds of thousands of “Eastlands residents”; the police; and members of criminal gangs. Pinned on the group’s Facebook wall is a banner appearing to announce its mission: “to forgive a terrorist is left to God, but to fix their appointment with God is our job.” It essentially summarises the online commune’s *raison d’etre* and primes the online audience to support the “extra-judicial killing” of gangsters. This “banner” constructs categories of people deemed dispensable with public moral sanction by invoking a pithy, indifferent, even slightly humorous way of talking about murder. By invoking God, crime is translocated from the realm of law and justice into a fight between good and evil. Tapping into the language of terrorism taps into discourse and practice that marginalise human rights discourse, due process, and privilege executions, lynching and enforced disappearances.



Figure 2: A screen grab of the Nairobi Crime Free Facebook group-2018



Figure 3: A screen grab of one of an updated profile photo on Hessy wa Dandora’s page

In interactions addressed to a public constituting over 200 000 members, Hessy articulates their controversial actions in moral discourses of necessity and inevitability, where they are caught between maintaining order-by all means, and fighting off scrutiny from human rights organisations. Cheered on by a cacophonous online commune, they use CCTV footage of violent robberies to suggest their actions are done in the public interest. It is a platform that deliberately enjoins and implicates the participating public into mobilising support for extra-judicial action against suspected gangsters. These appeals transform the digital space into a “public-courtroom” where Hessy prosecutes cases, sometimes addressed directly to a tagged “gangster” and accompanied by copious amounts of alibi, accusations and “evidence” against profiled gangsters. In a tagged Facebook post to a suspected gangster published in February 2017, Hessy claims:

... (name withheld) and company limited [sic] am much aware that you are members of this crime page aka #Online_morgue...mnajua vizuri chenye mlifanya sunton alafu mkarudi kiamaike sio, poleni sana mliiba TV nne but tatu zikavunjika its OK sina shida nazo but kitu tunataka ni hizo bunduki tutawapea conditions (you know well what you did in Sunton, then kiamaike, you stole four TV sets, although three broke down. We don’t really care much about the stolen items ... we only want you to surrender the guns in your possession). We give you the following conditions, 1. Submit those guns to any

police station and we'll guarantee your safety, 2. Surrender those guns to any church or tuwapee (we give you two choices) a: kill yourselves b: torokea Sudan (self-exile)_kazi tutawafanyia (we will work on you) ... let's now see who's the winner ...

Such polemical posts not only offer glimpses of the performative acts of rogue police in digital spaces, but also give insights into how “super-cops” rationalise their actions to online audiences by framing their actions in moral terms of public safety. Notably, the post reveals a pattern that is common offline; rudimentary, basic profiling drawn from familiarity with the social networks and spatial realities, where suspected gangsters are “initially contacted” and “persuaded” to either quit violent crime or surrender their firearms. This appeal is framed in a moralising, altruistic discourse, which in some way locates “super-cops” in a quasi-judicial role, where they perform, negotiate and make concessions. Sometimes, inserted in their homily to gangsters is an appeal to the suspected gangster to leave town, so that if the offer of self-exile is “ignored” extra-judicial killing is legitimised. Thus, as a digital practice involving profiling and killing suspected gangsters, it is nothing new and is remediation of a policing practice that has not only existed in Eastlands for years, but one that is rooted, “popular” yet controversial. These controversial methods have in recent years also emboldened individuals and groups opposed to “super-cops” and have elevated the voices of human rights organisations in Dandora, Kayole and Mathare. Following a spate of killings linked to the police in July 2017, human rights organisations staged a series of public protests. Using the digital platforms, Hessa turned to the public (3 July 2017, Hessa wa Dandora):

If we are guilty of exposing crime let us be, how many times have these criminals put innocent Kenyans at risk? How many times have Kenyans been robbed at gun point? How many times have our mothers, daughters and wives been raped by these thugs. ... We need to eliminate the bad fruits from the public. Sijui ni kwa nini human rights wanatufight (I do not know why human rights organisations are fighting us?) These guys wakiwapata (if they find you) they don't care about your so-called human rights. Kenyans can we count on you to expose these criminals?

In Eastlands, “super-cops” are in many ways an expression of and the natural outworking of the compromises and consent that derive from an entrenched security discourse between the state and the public. This populist discourse, often also scaffolded by local politicians, draws from a reality of everyday violent crime and the construction of narrow options for security agencies in the context of what is articulated as a dysfunctional judicial system. Thus, the public (imagined as that which includes and extends beyond those convened online) is routinely encouraged to “cheer on” and co-produce a digital space that glorifies the super-cop. Through hashtags and digital sloganeering, a shared vernacular is created that legitimises police killings and cajoles the public to participate—both symbolically and in actuality—in the digital profiling of suspects and the actual execution of profiled gangsters.

The role of language is visible. Sheng, an urban variety of Kenyan Swahili that has morphed from a “youth language” into a vernacular of wider use and is thought to have first emerged in Eastlands, is the coded vernacular that is deployed online to express, organise and frame suggested responses to Eastlands’ gangs.⁸ These “digital crime-worlds” (constituted by ghetto experience and Sheng) use hashtags to circulate a catalogue of catchphrases, labels, metaphors, visual images, moral appeals, and other symbolic devices that congeal into an interpretive package that normalises and naturalises the necessity of the super-cop. These discursive frames stamp “super-cops” with legitimacy, authenticity and a sense of rootedness in the shared lived experiences of Eastlands’ residents, hence further strengthening the implied empathy that drives their actions, while simultaneously attempting to bridge the gap between police and ordinary civilians.

The discourse tapping on public health and eliminating disease is not uncommon in Nairobi Crime Free Facebook groups—where gangs are framed as vermin and germ requiring extermination. Catchphrases and Facebook taglines recalling ordinary public health campaigns are routinely used to “mobilise” support against violent crime. For instance, “hashtags” such as “*KickpolioutofEastlands*” and “*WapeweChanjo*” (give them vaccine) are often used to draw a link between viruses and crime, and to prime audiences on the necessity of extra-judicial killings. The images constructing crime in Eastlands as a paralysing virus invoke the “super-cop” as a necessity, and broadly sanitises extra-judicial killings. Often, the Facebook audience would respond to suspected gangsters’ profiling on Facebook pages by tagging and foregrounding these hashtags; thus, nourishing an interpretative package that anchors gangs as *whakapapa*, a public health concern.

The appeals to the digital public take diverse forms beyond seeking actual affirmative responses from the Facebook groups through hashtags and other creative catch phrases. The use of evidentiary materials that would ordinarily comprise actual adversarial court processes like CCTV and TV footage, photos of actual crime scenes, and many times the publishing of images of crime victims, is common. The labour of gathering and sharing this material transforms these Facebook groups into quasi-judicial spaces, where “super-cops” perform the prosecutorial roles that should ordinarily be taking place in formal corridors of justice. The power dynamics of the established online platform and the positionality of Hessa as both a “super-cop” and an extension of the “state” mean that their position regarding culpability, guilt or innocence is rarely doubted. These appeals, so compelling and grotesque, play on the Facebook public’s anxieties about violent crime and invite a reductionist, simplistic interpretation to address violent crime, where the hashtags *Waumepamba* “bite-the-cotton” (a crude description of an embalmed corpse), *Wapewecopper* (give them a bullet), *permanent sleeping pill* (PSP)

8 See Githiora (2018) for a more detailed dive into the development and use of Sheng in Kenya

or *wapeweilekitu* (give them that thing) are deployed in a way that normalises and (with a casual abandon) cheapens human life.

These discursive strategies are not just central in understanding the widespread support of the “super-cops” in Eastlands, but are aimed at transforming police killings of suspected gangsters from random, disparate incidents to a mainstreamed, accepted form of policing violent gangs in Nairobi. Hashtags and slogans in Eastlands’ Facebook Groups (Nairobi Crime Free and Dandora Crime Free) are decidedly implicated, not impartial and designed to prime audiences to take sides. Notably, as extra-judicial killings are reproduced as inevitable, necessary methods of policing and managing violent crime (and gangsters), the image of the methodical “super-cop” is in tandem hoisted as a bulwark against gangs. In the image below, one of the many published on the Facebook groups, drawn by Sparta Vinnie, a resident of Kayole and member of the Kayole Crime Free Facebook group, Hessa is cast as the lone male undercover, a digital savvy cop whose methods involve “online research”, profiling and “taking care” of suspects.



Figure 4: “Hessa” doing research before profiling suspects on Facebook, courtesy of Sparta Vinnie (Kayole Crime Free)

While this image updates the old iconography of “wanted” and “crime mugshots” with the new image of the “super-cop” at his laptop, a contrast to their under-resourced police stations, the image of Hessa as a lone cop contrasts with popular and widely held perceptions of Hessa as a team of police officers operating in Eastlands. This seeming contradiction reflects historical realities of how corporate efforts are individualised in the super-cop. As a super-cop, Hessa is very much an expression and embodiment of institutional practices, popular perceptions and specificities of managing crime in Eastlands. The mystery of Hessa was evident from the interviews carried out in Kayole and Dandora. Some residents of Kayole and Eastlands referred to Hessa in the singular,

claiming to know him, and all his names; yet others described Hessa as a team of police officers working together. Others doubted the “digital skills” displayed by Hessa, suggesting that it was a collaboration between bloggers and police officers in Eastlands. The Inspector General of Police, on live TV, described Hessa in laudatory terms as a “Kenyan” passionate about monitoring security and violent crime in Eastlands. Some officials from the Kenya National Human Rights Commission referred to Hessa as the “Facebook Patrick Shaw”⁹ an odd yet subtle endorsement of the “methods” deployed in Eastlands, coming from a public funded, ostensibly autonomous body established to monitor compliance to human rights violations and help victims of such violations seek redress. Some Eastlands’ residents described Hessa in language connoting a close familiarity, as a product of collaborative efforts between civilians (probably community policing groups) and police officers. Cumulatively, the contrariety between mystery and familiarity on one hand, and heroism and notoriety on the other, has built a perception of Hessa as a “team” of conscientious “killer cops.”



Figure 5: Team Hessa, courtesy of Sparta Vinnie (Kayole Crime Free)

9 Shaw was a British born police reservist who perfected and mainstreamed police extra-judicial killing in Kenya in the 1970s and 1980s, and whose methods were state supported. His legacy is often retold in Kenyan newspapers in both mythical and legendary terms.

Team Hessa Hu-combat crime ndani ya streets zetu, through social media; hao hu-corporate na public ku-identify wahalifu, hao hufanya investigations zao na wakishaget proof enough, wanapass it forward. Then wanaanika mhalifu nakumpa warning about his/her course ... if possible, team Hessa who inform parents/guardians wa mhalifu by visiting them ama by tenje before taking any other steps. One thing team Hessa hua against and strictly discourages ni robbery with violence ambayo who lead to death ya raia innocent. Major role ya team Hessa wana encourage disarmament, wanabelive ma-youth ni ma-champ, wanaweza hustle bila crime.

Team Hessa combats crime in our streets through social media. They work with members of the public to identify suspected criminals. They do extensive investigations and when they gather enough proof of culpability, they pass it forward and publish details of the alleged crime on Facebook. They use Facebook to tag the suspect, and warn him/her to change, and stop a life of crime. Sometimes, team Hessa visits the parents of the profiled gangster, or his/her guardians at home, or calls the parents on the phone, to warn them of their son/daughter's activities (usually the parents are requested to reprimand or exile their child). (Team) Hessa is a response to violent crime (in Eastlands), which has often caused the deaths of many residents. The role of team Hessa is to encourage disarmament, because they believe the young people (in Eastlands) are able to achieve success without resorting to a life of crime.

This simple comic (figure 5), appearing like a commissioned public relations work, was published in *Kayole Crime Free*, and packed and condensed into one-page interviews conducted in Eastlands, seeking insights into the perceptions of Hessa in Eastlands. While not exactly sweeping, it nonetheless reveals widely held perceptions of the role of “super-cops” in Eastlands. It draws on a recognisable and popular iconography associated with public health campaigns around past public health campaigns, aiming for simplicity, accessibility as well as persuasion. The aim is to dismantle alternative, counter discourses of the “super-cop” as the unhinged killer cop and suggest a reading of the “super-cop” as methodical and rational, but misunderstood and necessary. Here, the artist represents Hessa as a team of cops operating in some of Eastlands' violent urban spaces guided by pragmatic rationality.

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on a complex manifestation of extra-judicial killings of gangsters in Eastlands, Nairobi, and the performative modes of self-staging by figures who present themselves as outlaw police. Unlike other performative genres that are purely fictional, these performances move back and forth between the online landscape and the streets of Eastlands, with tragic results, while staging a moral claim for the appropriateness of extra-judicial killings of alleged criminals. Drawing from history, and using the “faceless” digital police persona Hessa (a convenient performative role), the police seem to be engaging in very self-conscious acts of self-staging and crafting particular kinds of personae carefully curated from an attentive reading of crises of youth criminality, policing and security as well as Kenyans' disillusionment with the formal legal apparatuses. Hessa and “their” imagined publics seem to craft the “super-cop”

figure from a blend of history (Patrick Shaw), state centric demands of order by all means, and not unlikely, from popular TV shows of heroic do-gooder “lawmen” who fix the society using unconventional methods, such as Chuck Norris’ Texas Ranger or the “Lone Ranger” and possibly other marvel super-heroes. With a racialised spatial history spawned out of deprivation, congestion, violence and disease, Eastlands’ security crisis yearned and called out for a champion, and through Facebook, “super-cop Hessa” stepped in to fill that need.

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