East of Uhuru Highway: Inside Nairobi’s Most Iconic (And Much-Maligned) Neighbourhoods

By Dauti Kahura

Ismael Kulubi is a 66-years-old radio production guru with a scintillating voice that is still in great demand even after retirement. Advertising executives in need of an experienced voice hire him to do radio promos. By all measurable standards, Ismail has had a fulfilling career – he is a widely travelled man who has enjoyed life’s successes as a professional media man.

But his advertising and media professional friends have been always been puzzled by Ismael. With all the riches he made over the years and his ascribed social status, Ismael has lived all his life in Eastlands area, the eastern part of Nairobi that every Eastlander seeks to run away from at the slightest hint of money and success.

Eastlands: “No pretensions here”

A practicing Muslim, Ismael grew up in Majengo, the sprawling slum sandwiched between the famous Kamukunji Grounds and Eastleigh, the inner-city neighbourhood that is often referred to as “Little Mogadishu” Majengo has always been infamous for its variety of sex workers, some of whom come from as far as Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania. The slum dates back to the British
colonial era when it was seen as place where prostitution thrived. Women living there were believed to be sex workers who met the sexual needs of the black immigrant labourers employed in Nairobi who were not allowed to bring their families to the city.

After every Friday afternoon prayers, which he religiously observes at Jamia Mosque in central Nairobi, Ismael heads straight to Majengo in his gleaming beige metallic Mercedes Benz, something he has done for many years. His vintage German engineering marvel is still a spectacle to be behold among the ghetto dwellers. But Ismael is considered one of them and his posh car parked outside on Majengo’s main street is as safe as the Kenyan currency locked at the Central Bank building’s underground vaults in Nairobi city centre.

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“Majengo has the best pilau you can find anywhere in Nairobi,” Ismael tells me matter-of-factly. Every Friday afternoon, his hot pilau, specially catered to his culinary tastes, awaits him. “Majengo made me and it is a place that gives me immense joy, helps me stay firmly grounded and connects me with the people.” For Ismael, the Friday afternoon sumptuous meal served on large dishes called sinia is a social affair: He has his usual group who he eats with that ranges anywhere from five to ten people.

At one time, Ismael earned a salary that was commensurate with what is paid to top executives of blue chip companies. But that never stopped him from driving from the Karen and Lavington suburbs, where his offices used to be, to enjoy a meal cooked in the ramshackle kitchens and restaurants of Majengo. “Good food is a social engagement, it is not so much about how much money you spend on it,” says Ismael. And he can spend a lot. On any given Friday afternoon, Ismael can spend an upward of Ksh5000, depending on the number of people he is eating with. They will eat from the same sinia with their hands, seated on the floor. “There are no pretensions here, we eat together the way we eat in our respective houses,” says Ismael.

As they eat, Ismael’s Mercedes Benz will be attended to by between three to five young men who give it a clean shine like no other. This is another ritual in Majengo. “My car is never washed anywhere else – the boys know it, they have cleaned it for many years, it is like going to the same barber for many years. You do not want to change him because he has learned the nooks and crannies of your bumpy head.” The young men know that every Friday, some good money will come their way. “Ismael ni boy wetu… yuko chonjo…ua anatucheki kitu poa,” (Ismael is our man…he’s cool and pays us real well), say the young men.

After the sumptuous meal, drowned by the freshest of unadulterated juice, Ismael does not leave Kije (Majengo’s popular name). He has his spot outside where he sits with other men to chew gomba (also known as khat or miraa) that is specially delivered to him by his supplier of many years. He will then chew gomba - handas and veve are variants of the same thing – accompanied by copious amounts of black coffee throughout the evening, after which he will drive back home to his house in Buru Buru estate.

“People who live in the so-called leafy suburbs have ghettoised Eastlands,” quips Ismael. “They live in a make-believe world that has blinded them to real-life happenings outside their presumed safe cocoons. They think Eastlands is one huge criminal world. You can imagine what they think of my hood Kije: we are all sons of harlots. That young people here neither have ambitions nor dreams.
They are so wrong.” Ismael, whose long dead parents came from Saba Saba location in Maragua, Muranga County, says, “In Kije, the people are real, they have what it takes to live comfortably and decently and they are as informed with local and global current news as the Kenyans of Karen and Lavington.”

If you fly over Majengo slum, you would be amazed by the satellite TV dishes that adorn iron sheet rooftops. Inside some of these mud-plastered houses are some of the latest and funkieshi hi-fi equipment and exotic furniture that one can only imagine in a Kileleshwa high-rise flat or in Loresho’s leafy suburbs. These dishes beam news outlets from such channels as Al Jazeera TV, BBC, CNN and France 24 English TV.

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“If you entered some of the houses here in Kije, you would literally be taken aback,” says Ismael. “There are houses that have 42-inch smart cable TV and Persian Bukhara rags and Turkish carpets that can only be a dream for many of the pretenders to middle class tastes. You know those houses where you have to remove your shoes to enter?” Many of these items are imported from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Yemen.

The traditional suspicion about Eastlands as an area where “dreams are made” and once those dreams are actualised you flee from the area to go and live those dreams elsewhere is a long-held stereotype that persists to date. Indeed some of the Nairobians who started life in the Eastlands estates, dingy or otherwise, comprise a big chunk of the most successful Kenyans who now live on the west side of the city’s spatial suburbs. Their pastime is nostalgically recounting how they are wasee wa mtaa (estate mates). Yet many, having bought into the Eastlands narrative themselves, are publicly embarrassed to be associated with the area.

My recent encounter with a high school chum of many years convinced me that the Eastlands narrative is not fading away in a hurry. Steve Ngotho, who has lived in Pretoria, South Africa, for a long time was in town recently. When he gave me a shout, we met at a restaurant in central Nairobi. After the usual pleasantries, Ngotho, who I had always known to shoot straight, asked where I lived…nowadays. “I live in Buru Buru,” I told him. “Ah, you mean you still live in Eastlands?” he asked. What he really meant was: What in God’s name would you still be doing in Eastlands?

Ngotho grew up in the western side of Nairobi, the general area that is west of Uhuru Highway. Uhuru Highway is the trunk road that cuts across the city centre and links the city to the highways that lead to Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the port city of Mombasa.

I was born and bred in Eastlands, but Eastlands is often viewed as a place – if you were “unfortunate” enough to be brought up there - where you finished school and once you were done, you quickly left the area. Ngotho, you can bet, is not the only former Nairobian to still harbour the “Eastlands narrative” (even when he lives abroad) – a place for people with failed ambitions and aspirations, where dreams did not take off.

The Eastlands narrative has its roots in the colonial era when some “African” areas were associated with congestion and crime. Hence, Eastlands to date is viewed as a place that does not have the attraction and aura of suburban “posh living”. For Eastlanders, the “leafy suburbs” imply breezy air, lots of jacaranda and pine trees, bungalows and maisonettes with compounds and open spaces that
can only be found across Uhuru Highway.

Dr. Mosley Owino, a consultant dentist, likes to remind me that East London, where he trained as a dental surgeon, has many of the same characteristics and reputation as the Eastlands area of Nairobi: It is a place riven with deep poverty and overcrowding and which is not immune from the social problems that afflict such areas - the existence of rival gangs, loafers, social misfits and petty and hardcore criminals.

**Buru Buru: “Like a suburban British hood”**

Buru Buru estate, where Ismael bought his house in the 1980s, is one of the iconic estates that sometimes still salvages the Eastlands reputation, even as the estate itself, which has five phases, struggles against ghettoisation. Largely built in the 1970s, with the last phase five completed in 1982, Buru Buru was the estate where newly graduated architects, accountants, lawyers, physicians, quantity surveyors, among other graduates, aspired to live and start out because it captured their upward mobility aspirational lifestyle, its Eastlands location notwithstanding.

Construction magnate John Mburu has lived in Buru Buru ever since he graduated from the University of Nairobi in the early 1990s. With a yearly turnover of hundreds of millions of shillings, Mburu’s friends in the industry cannot understand why he still lives in the same house he started out in. A shilling billionaire, Mburu says Buru Buru is a suitable place to live in – it does not have the wannabe pretentious suburban lifestyle like many of the new estates that have come up: “It still retains decent, respectable and habitable estate characteristics that represents the lifestyles of people who have progressively grown their incomes.”

Buru Buru is among most famous suburban estates in East and Central Africa. When I first went to Tanzania, a quarter of a century ago, my newly acquired Tanzanian friends would ask me which part of Nairobi I came from. “Ule mtaa ambao unaishi mawaziri na wakuu wa serekali, unaufahamu?” (Do you know the estate that Kenyan ministers and top civil servants live in?) It was amusing to learn that my Tanzanians friends considered Buru Buru to be such a posh estate that only elite government people lived there.

“Buru Buru is very much like a British suburban hood,” says Stacy Wanjiku, who lived and studied at the London School of Economics (LSE), University of London. “Even the way people park outside their houses on the roadside is so British.” Wanjiku, who herself lives in Buru Buru, says the picket fencing may have long gone, but Buru Buru still retain its stand-out character with its shopping centres and it semi-detached architectural design uniformity.

**Woodley and Kimathi: Civil servant estates**

The estate that comes closer to once being a residential area for senior government civil servants is Woodley, which is located in the south-east of Nairobi, adjacent to Moi Nairobi Girls on Joseph Kang’ethe Road. Woodley is a fashionable estate made of a mixture of high-rise flats and bungalow houses with huge compounds and while it was not largely inhabited by cabinet ministers – at least certainly not in the 1980s - for some reason, Woodley was the residence of the senior-most Luo civil servants.

Alex Oduor, who lives in the estate, which is owned by Nairobi County, tells me that Woodley has all the trappings of a proper middle class neighbourhood: his house is in a safe secluded area, has a big compound for kids to romp about and to host a barbeque and is big enough to entertain guests and host visiting relatives from rural areas. Oduor himself lives in the three-bedroomed house once owned by Washington Okumu, the humongous jolly professor who brokered peace between Nelson
Mandela of the African National Party (ANC) and Gatsha Buthelezi, the leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), in Johannesburg, South Africa in the 1990s.

The estate closest in resemblance to Woodley in terms of design and layout is Kimathi estate in Eastlands. It is ensconced between Bahati and Jerusalem estates. Built in the early 1970s, Kimathi is your archetypal middle class neighbourhood that has a family ring to it: an “enclosed” estate with modest houses and little compounds. Mwai Kibaki, the third President of Kenya, kept a house there for the longest time. Up to 1974, he represented Bahati constituency which Kimathi estate was a part of. Hudson Mwangi, a businessman who has lived in Kimathi estate for many years, says the estate is unpretentious and allows him to operate “below the radar”, without attracting too much attention from the prying eyes of gossipers and nosy people.

**Kilimani and Kileleshwa: “Lonely jungles”**

The estates that were truly classical middle class neighbourhoods were the adjoining suburban areas of Kileleshwa and Kilimani located in the west of Nairobi. They were your conventional neighbourhoods for senior civil servants from 1963 to early 2000s. “But today, these areas have become concrete jungles; the high-rise flats that are coming up daily have completely erased the beautiful memory of the semi-detached bungalow and maisonette residential houses that adorned the area,” says print journalist Oyunga Pala, who grew up in the Kilimani area. “In the days that I grew up in Kilimani, the area was attractive and scenic, the houses had huge compounds for children to safely play and run around in, and the neighbourhood had lots of trees and kaiyaba (Kei apple) fences.”

The gentrification of Kileleshwa and Kilimani occasioned by the new money of the *nouveaux riches* and the recently minted millennial millionaires have transformed these areas into impersonal, “cold flats” where next-door neighbours live like total strangers, meeting only on the staircases and in lifts. Lilian Rice, a British national who lives in one of these flats, told me there is a “fake friendliness” among flat mates living in Kileleshwa. “Every time I visit my friend and workmate in Donholm in Eastlands, I notice the stark differences: the place is bubbly and full of life. The children are running helter-skelter, playing football or hide-and-seek. The neighbours pop in (unannounced) to share a funny anecdote or to enjoy a cup of tea together… I tell you the camaraderie is real and unpretentious.”

Rice says that the corner kiosks and green grocery vibandas (sheds) of Donholm really enchant her. “They serve as meeting points for people to banter and chat.” Rice concludes that Kileleshwa is “a lonely jungle” and Eastlands, with all its “dirt and disorder”, has “variety and vivacity.”

This variety of life was best captured for me by Rhoda Mbaya, who was brought up in an old Kileleshwa neighbourhood. When their father, a senior civil servant, died suddenly, the family had to move out of their five-bedroomed government house and relocate to Uthiru, a peri-urban and semi-rural area on the outskirts of Nairobi, 12km west of the city centre, in a place called 87. “Of course, it was at first traumatising, but we quickly adjusted,” said Rhoda. “The thing about living in the old Kileleshwa was that we led a secluded and shielded life, so when we had to move to Uthiru, it was obviously a scale-down, but we soon realised that Uthiru had its own advantages.”
Used to a subsidised life all her life, Rhoda was gratified to find that Uthiru had a cheaper and affordable lifestyle that was commensurate with her middle class tastes and which did not compromise her family’s social upward mobility. Her five siblings still rent out a five-bedroomed bungalow there, which is much more affordable than a house around the Kileleshwa/Kilimani “posh” areas.

“The vegetables are fresh and cheap, we get the milk straight from the cow, fresh and unskimmed and kienyeji (indigenous) chicken and eggs. The crux of the matter is that you can’t have your cake and eat it,” said Rhoda. “Uthiru is teeming with people, we weren’t used to that, but yet again, the people are cosmopolitan, friendly and hospitable...but you know what? We discovered mutura (a sausage-like delicacy made out of stuffed offal) and pork. Uthiru has the best pork place in town.”

The rapid gentrifications of the city’s better known neighbourhoods, says Oyunga, are robbing the city of its iconic suburbs and traditional beautiful look. Kilimani’s expanding gentrification is already encountering opposition. The Kilimani Residents Association is up in arms against Cytonn Investment Company, a real estate private equity firm that intends to mobilise funds and put up a multi-storeyed building in the area.

Eastleigh: “Where dreams are incubated”

Gentrification in Nairobi has not been confined to the western side of the city. The Somali people’s influx in Eastleigh has led to a rapid and haphazard gentrification of the area. High-rise buildings have risen: some magnificent, some ugly and an eyesore. The buildings are both commercial and residential. A couple of years ago, a former powerful cabinet minister was persuaded to visit Eastleigh – a place he himself had confessed he had not visited for “donkey years”. The minister was astounded beyond belief when he found the area was home to two- and three-star hotels, complete with deluxe suites for accommodation and a la carte three-course menus.

Amid Eastleigh’s chaos, confusion, grime, mounting garbage, open sewers and systemic failure of services, there are Somali residents who live like Arab sheikhs in some of the most crowded and ugly flats. When Abdulrahman let me into his house on the top floor of a flat facing Pumwani Maternity Hospital, I was taken aback by the apparent affluence: The large sitting room was bedecked with jewelry and Arabian Nights-like ornaments, an imported sofa and a thick Afghanistan carpet. His prayer room was a wall-to-wall carpet affair. His expensive cutlery was like that of an emir. It was only after I came out of the house that I realised that indeed I was in the shambolic Eastleigh neighbourhood. Inside Abdulrahman’s house, it felt like I was in an affluent flat somewhere in Qatar or Yemen.

One of the areas that has been under perpetual threat of gentrification is Eastlands itself. The vast estates of Bahati, Hamza-Makadara, Jericho, (Lumumba and Ofafa) Jerusalem, Kaloleni, Makongeni, Maringo, Mbotela and Uhuru that make up the “real” greater Eastlands area and whose fame has rested on council houses belonging to the now defunct Nairobi City Council, are being targeted by “private developers” who have been marking them for a long time to bring them down in the name of constructing “better” and more spacious accommodation for the residents.

“Eastlands maybe the place where dreams are incubated and people are not pretentious, but it can be also a place that drains and sucks up your energies”

It is true that many of these houses could be past their building life cycle. Their average lifespan is 60 years – Maringo estate was built in 1958, for example. The Kaloleni “bungalows” were built in the 1940s. During the 1960s, this was one of the poshest African quarters. Jericho Lumumba was built in
1962, a year before Kenya got its independence from the British. A beautiful, well-designed and laid-out estate, with ample open spaces for recreation, it still retains its shine despite obvious neglect that includes peeling paintwork that no one remembers when it was last undertaken, uncollected garbage, dilapidated plumbing and open sewers.

Peter Mugo, who is a resident here, allowed me into his “humble abode” for a cup of African tea that has the milk, tea leaves and sugar all boiled together. Mugo’s humble abode is a two-roomed affair but the house is nonetheless as middle class as they come: it has all the gadgets and trappings of modern urban living. He has the latest Samsung smart TV, Sony Hi-Fi music system complete with woofers, stylish settees and an expensive carpet to boot. “My subsidised rent allows me to save enough money to send my kids to quality private schools,” Mugo told me. His youngest 10-year-old son is busy with his play-station, while his second born daughter is on her laptop googling her school homework on the Wi-Fi that her dad has installed in the house.

“Eastlands maybe the place where dreams are incubated and people are not pretentious, but it can be also a place that drains and sucks up your energies,” says Victor Ochieng. Before moving to the west of Nairobi, Victor lived in Donholm for several years. “I used Jogoo Road (the trunk road that runs through the major Eastlands estates). All the time I lived in Doni I can tell you the traffic snarl-ups on Jogoo Road used to give me incessant headaches. Doni was also not an easy estate to live in: if it’s not water shortages, its garbage strewn all over. And when it rains, it floods. That was enough stress for me.”

Still, after moving to the west side of Nairobi, he now appreciates that people in Eastlands at least live within their means. “There’s a lot of flush money in places like Kileleshwa and the majority of lifestyles are sustained by credit cards. In essence, people here live beyond their means, all in the name of maintaining class and status.”

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