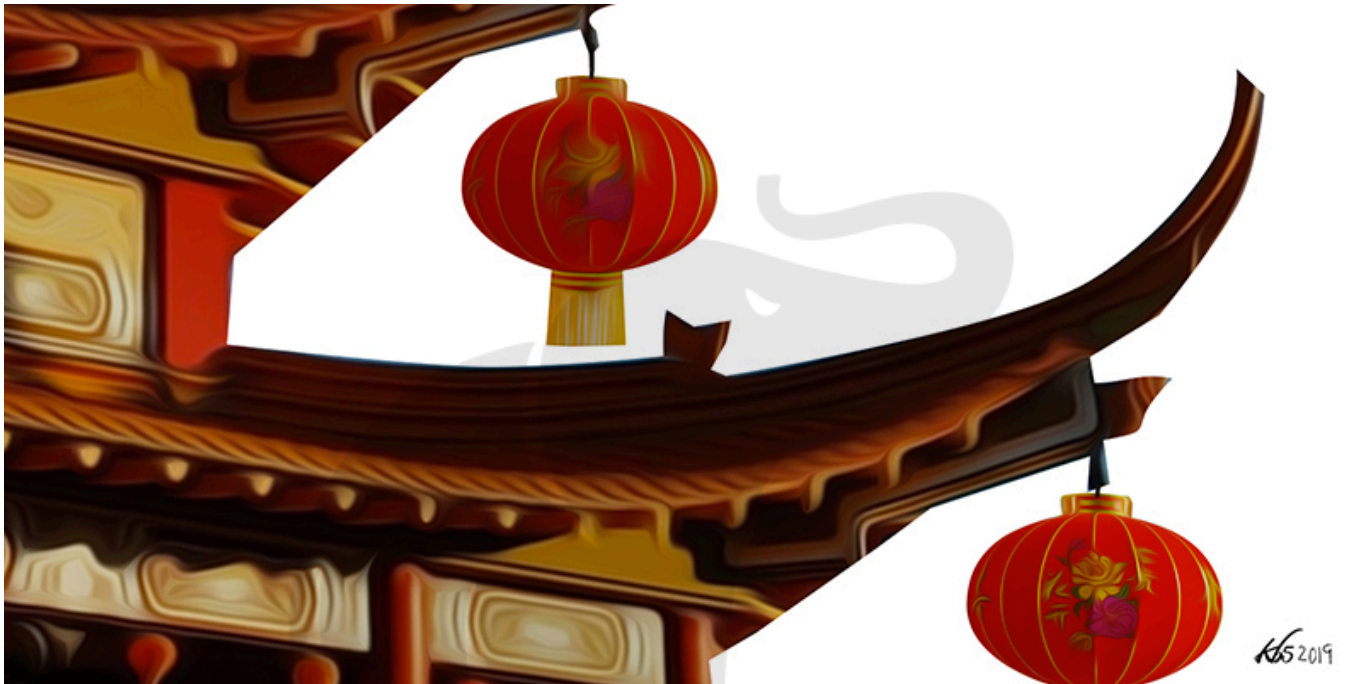




Legacies of Othering in Kibra and Chinatown

By April Zhu



Before the chang'aa fields of Mathare, you would get your “kill me quick” in Kibra. Distilled under the cover of night by sugarcane-lined banks of the river, [Nubian gin](#)—*arak* in Kinubi—would gain strength in underground *pipas*, or hidden inside someone's home. It would travel, hidden beneath women's clothes, around the young city of Nairobi, where it would be sold to drinkers or wholesalers. Or it would stay right there in Kibra, poured out only for a man who approached the door and signaled with a finger slicing across his throat.

All of this was illegal. In 1897, before Nairobi was even formally a city, the British colonial administration prohibited “natives” from drinking any form of distilled liquor, let alone brew it. It happened nonetheless in Kibra. Originally a 4,000-acre swath of land that stretched from present-day Lang'ata to Golf Course, Kibra was [given](#) to Nubian ex-soldiers of the King's Army Rifles as pension for their military service. Before Kibra—which means “forest” in Kinubi—eventually swelled into the densely populated slum we know today as Kibera, it was home to these Nubian ex-soldiers and their families, as well as the city's first “migrant” workers.

Although Nubians enjoyed considerable privileges over other Africans—not least land, at a time when “natives” were not even allowed to enter Nairobi without documents showing that they were at work—Kibra was in at least some sense the first “black settlement” in Nairobi. The first true black settlement was Pumwani, established in 1922. Others, like Kileleshwa, were destroyed and its African residents evicted. Kibra survived, through military patronage—and the administration's

failure to resettle the Nubian community elsewhere—and was “tolerated.” It became home to many African men who migrated to the city looking for wage labor and created a unique environment of transience and dislocation for the city’s “ethnics.”

As an Asian-American, I was struck with a sense of familiarity when reading about Kibra’s early days, particularly the language of administrators and how differently these places were governed. To me, Kibra sounded a lot like the first Chinatowns in North America. (I’m referring specifically to the first Chinatowns to exist around the turn of the 20th century, and not “Chinatown” as shorthand used today for commercial-residential clusters of Chinese diaspora throughout the world.)

Like Kibra, Chinatowns were enclaves of racial Others at the frontiers of Othering, designed into cities that were young and growing, having just been established by white European settlers. Chinatowns were seen as “vice-towns,” diametrically opposed to other parts of the “good city,” which were clean, orderly, white, and Christian. The problematic conditions of these districts were ascribed, through essentialist ideas, to the race of their residents. What this means is that, while a certain street or block can be home to members of the Chinese diaspora, what makes a Chinatown a Chinatown—to [paraphrase](#) K.J. Anderson—is a story about the place that tells us more about the Insiders who make the rules than the Outsiders who live there.

Of course, the verminization of marginalized people in cities—whether sex workers, ethnic Others, or the poor—is hardly the exception and more often the rule. Ghettoes have always been governed differently. If you cannot keep “undesirables” out of the city, because you need cheap labor, then make sure they are concentrated and unable to move freely. Nairobi’s [high-rent](#), poorly serviced slums are the extension of a colonial policy that demanded cheap labor but wanted to keep the laborers at a distance. This is, unfortunately, nothing new.

But one aspect that Chinatowns and Kibra share is that they both formed in “new” cities where the influx, movement, and distribution of ethnic Others was an immediate design challenge for early urban planners. Vancouver and San Francisco had barely been cities for a few years when Chinatowns were formed; most Chinese migrants to Vancouver, for example, flooded in as “coolies” for the Pacific Railway. Nairobi, originally a supply depot along the railway route from Mombasa to Kampala, was established in 1899 and, in 1906, made the capital of British East Africa. The city was racially segregated from the very beginning, and until 1922, Africans were not permitted to build or live within city limits, only to pass through to work. They were required to wear a *kipande*, an identity document worn in a metal box around the neck, that allowed them access only to sites and times of employment. Thus, whether as migrants from another continent or indigenous people made strangers in their own land through coercion and the rupture of the existing economy, both Africans and Chinese found themselves unwelcome in a nascent city created by and for Europeans.

There are two narratives about Chinatown that we can use to understand the similarities between Kibra and Chinatowns in North America. The first is sanitation, and the second is morality.

The linking of sanitation and race is hardly unique to either Nairobi or early North American Chinatowns; “verminizing” language is commonly used to, first, explain significant differences between the races, and second, justify policies that separate them or account for unequal conditions. Put another way, depending on who you are and where people like you sit in hierarchy, “public health” is either a service or a weapon wielded against you. K. Scott Wong [writes](#) that images of the Chinese in Chinatown often played a role in a “larger racial and political agenda of promoting segregation and exclusion,” citing the 1876 Senate Hearings on Chinese immigration, in which John Durkee, the San Francisco Fire Marshal, lamented that property adjacent to Chinese was constantly depreciating in value because “houses occupied by Chinese are not fit for white occupation, because of the filth and stench.”

Durkee goes on to say that “the only way I can account for our not having a great fire in the Chinese quarter is that the wood is too filthy and too moist from nastiness to burn.” In Vancouver, a separate health and safety category was [set aside](#) for Chinatown, with its own inspectors, alongside other categories like sewage, pigsties, infectious disease, and slaughterhouses. It is clear that the goals of the fire marshal and his agency, or with health inspectors who covered Chinatown, were less maintaining safety for all residents than cordoning off of problematic people into their own quarters.

This “evidence” of the dirtiness of Chinese was cited in a hearing discussing the future of Chinese immigration to the United States. The logic—of using the conditions of physical quarters where Chinese live to inform a decision about other Chinese who may potentially immigrate—is that something inherently unsanitary or uncouth is embedded in essential race characteristics. That this race, and cultural behaviors associated with it, are total, immutable realities that cannot be influenced by policy (or connected more with, say, poverty).

Early Nairobi planners, which included South Africans who drew from urban planning [practices](#) implemented in southern Africa at the time, also separated Europeans, Indians (“Asiatics”), and “natives” to keep diseases that were prevalent in poor, working-class districts from spreading to areas inhabited by Europeans. Fears of non-European districts as an “unsanitary and as a serious public health menace” were exacerbated after bubonic plague [outbreaks](#) in Nairobi’s lower-class railway housing and the Indian Bazaar in 1900, 1902, and 1904. In the eyes of the administration, this epidemiological problem had an ethnicized solution: enforcing strict racial residential segregation. The legacy of colonial, racially segregated urban design in Nairobi still [lives on](#).

The strictures placed around these “migrants” were meant not only to keep the city clean in terms of public health but also morally. Kibra and Chinatowns were seen as breeding grounds for prostitution, theft, and other crimes (and sins) that, if not contained or eliminated, would contaminate other parts of the city. By 1897, the Native Liquor Ordinance criminalized the consumption of distilled alcohol by Africans, an effort meant to curb “disruptive drunken behavior.” In 1921, the Nairobi Municipal Council established a “native brewery,” which served a beer that was “pure and of low alcoholic content” to African men over the age of eighteen. Of course, men still drank; they were just getting it in Kibra.

At a time when Africans’ wages ranged from 50 to 500 shillings per month, Nubian women were making 6,000-20,000 shillings per month. Police often raided Kibra and even arrested distillers, but even after paying bribes and bail, the profit margins were comfortable. At the peak of these police raids and patrols, gin production was driven underground—quite literally, as some distilling *pipas* were dug into the ground. In 1936, a special police post was established in Kibra to focus specifically on “suppressing drunkenness and crime.”

Chinatowns also were associated with prostitution, a vice (or tolerance thereof) attributed to cultural differences. Although in Vancouver, sex work was hardly limited to Chinatown, its presence Chinatown drew the ire of Europeans, who [criticized](#) the practice in terms of women’s welfare: “The Chinese are the most persistent criminals against the person of any woman of any class in this country.” Perhaps the substance that came to be associated most with “Chinamen” was opium. According to Anderson, by the 1920s in Vancouver, when racist narratives were being used in British Columbia, “the old opium image fed and was assimilated into an [image of Chinatown as a narcotics base](#) and ‘Chinese’ as dangerous distributors.”

“Oriental” proclivities towards these vices—whether sex, opium, gambling—were rendered not only as “un-Christian” but also polluting, with the potential to travel and surpass the necessary boundaries, threatening white neighborhoods with their proximity. As with Kibra, from the perspectives of municipalities, managing these vices was a matter of separating away “amoral”

elements and preventing spillover to “decent” districts, which was achieved through regular campaigns of raids.

As mentioned earlier, there is nothing novel about certain quarters of a city being governed differently to others. In fact, this was a natural solution for a colonial city that faced the dilemma of needing laborers, not wanting to raise wages and quality of living, and also not wanting the laborers (and their “problems”) to sit too close for comfort. Comparing Kibra and Chinatowns, though perhaps at the cost of being too neat, does reveal basic similarities in how this problem was “solved.”

For some Chinatowns, even though discriminatory, racist practices and, more recently, gentrification form a looming threat. For the most part, they have survived and remained important cultural centers and symbolic spaces for diverse Asian immigrant communities in North America—especially when “multi-culturalism” became cool, and cities realized they could capitalize on “culture” for [tourism](#). On the other hand, Kibera today still plays a similar role as a hub for the poorest of the working class in the city. The process by which Kibera turned into the Kibera we know it to be today, during which Nubians were [pushed](#) into shrinking corners of their land (and into statelessness), uses similar mechanisms to those in the colonial era.

Going into the archives and studying the way in which bureaucrats regarded and crafted policies for certain groups of people can help us understand some of the legacies of this type of urban design today. It can help us identify what has not changed at all, and understanding root problems, in turn, can help us develop better solutions, which is all useful.

However, there is one very significant thing this cannot do. Examining policies and discourse from the perspective of those in power through documents, as I have, is fundamentally incomplete because it excludes the voices of any of those who ever lived there. If Chinatown is a story that tells us more about the Insiders who make the rules than the Outsiders who live there, then it is certainly also true that it is not the only story—or even the most important one.

Though they fade from memory with each generation, the complicated, mundane, diverse experiences of the people who lived in these districts of exclusion should form the centre of any inquiry into oppression. Some of these stories will, of course, refer to or react to the structures that constrained their existence—how Nubian women changed their brewing practices to avoid arrest, for example. But others will have had nothing to do with their oppressors; they are stories of people who lived in a certain place at a certain time, who chose to do it in their way. The sounds, sights, patterns, and ways of living that only they could know. Which, for people living in a place for which everything seems ascribed to a single and questionable aspect of their humanity—race—is a most supreme form of resistance.

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