On Wednesday 3 April 2019, social workers, youth group members, activists and friends, all residents of Mathare, huddled together on the top floor of the Macharia building near the Olympic petrol station off Juja road in Nairobi, as they watched in horror, as two schools were engulfed in a fire. Thick, black smoke circled up and soon blanketed the entire valley. Alongside the two schools, another thirty or so houses quickly burned down to ashes in the raging fire. People raced to quell the fire with buckets of water, but police blocked their paths. Angry shouts filled the air as licking flames destroyed businesses, schools and homes in a matter of minutes.

This act of arson by police of a part of the Mathare neighborhood took place on the fourth day of a raid against the local alcohol economy, spearheaded by the notorious ‘killer cop’ known simply as Rashid. A public execution of two teenagers in Eastleigh on 31 March 2017 caught on amateur video that went viral established Ahmed Rashid’s notoriety. Ironically, the raid under his command, targeting the local alcohol economy in Mathare, started on Sunday 31 March 2019—exactly two years since that public execution. Over that period of two years, Rashid has killed, maimed and harassed many people, particularly young poor men from Mathare, and with absolute impunity.

On Sunday in late March, Rashid walked into Mathare accompanied by a troop of police officers from different police squads down the valley where they barged into homes and bars to destroy
alcohol and other belongings of local business owners and their employees. The Pangani OCS (Officer Commanding Police Station) and the Area Chief both claim to ‘have had nothing to do with the raid’, despite eyewitnesses sharing accounts of regular police and AP (Administrative Police) officers and equipment active during the raid. Mathare residents wondered how the police could conduct a full-scale police raid lasting a number of days without the consent of the authorities. That first night of the raid in Mathare was marked with fear, chaos and gunshots. Residents lost weeks of work and earnings, and others nursed bruises and deep cuts whilst defending homes and properties from the pillaging police. By Monday morning, that part of Mathare sunk into deep lamentation.

Kingi from the Social Justice Centers Working Group found his grandmother crying on Monday morning; Shosho Kingi has distilled and sold alcohol for more than four decades and has raised her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren while doing so. The police had poured her kangara, the distilling mixture, which had been almost ready for cooking. Subsequently, she had lost 4500 shillings, her monthly earnings, and was left seriously in debt. Thousands of small business owners and their employees and tens of thousands of their dependents suffered the same fate. On Monday, all the jiko’s (‘kitchens’) near the river remained closed; no one could work while the police patrolled in search of alcohol and production tools to destroy. This went on until on Wednesday, tensions between hungry and angry residents and police culminated into protests by alcohol distillers.

**History of the local economy**

To understand the impact of this crackdown on people living and working in Mathare, a brief insight into the history of the alcohol economy is crucial. As early as the 1930s, women who settled in abandoned parts of the quarry that later came to be known as Mathare earned money through sex work and selling home-brewed alcohol such as busaa and chang’aa. The colonial capital Nairobi only allowed a limited number of ‘native’ bachelors living in designated housing facilities. This area was also wedged in by the Royal Airforce Eastleigh Base (currently known as Moi Air Base), an askari barrack, and a transit camp for the Kings African Rifles. Other police barracks and army bases further away from Mathare also had close ties to sex workers in Pumwani, Pangani and Mathare. The massive influx of soldiers and prisoners of war (Italian POWs) during 1940-45 further attracted a growing number of female sex workers who increasingly settled in Mathare where rent was cheaper than in Pumwani.

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These women were among the many young people who were forced to leave their increasingly overcrowded homesteads in the ‘Native Reserves’ in the pre-WWII colonial period in search of work for cash to pay for hut tax, among other things. Even if women comprised the majority of residents in Mathare from the onset, men also increasingly came to live here. During the late 1930s, many of the rural-urban migrants also came from other illegalized squatter communities in the Rift Valley, where former farm workers had been displaced from European farms as a result of the gradual mechanization of farm work. Following these and other developments, Mathare became the bedrock of urban resistance against the colonial government and formed an important node in the Kenya Land and Freedom Armies (KLFAs)—also known as ‘Mau Mau’. The colonial government detained large sections of what it considered to be the ‘Kikuyu’ population and transformed many ‘Native Reserves’ into ’emergency villages’, which functioned as concentration camps during the ‘state of emergency’. Close to a million people were locked inside these camps, and tens of thousands of people, suspected of being freedom fighters, were imprisoned in makeshift prison camps scattered
all over Kenya. Upon their release, many of these ex-detainees could not return to the ‘Native Reserves’, as most of these areas were by now seriously overpopulated, while other places had been confiscated by the different authorities that had collaborated with the colonial government, with local chiefs being an example. As a consequence, released from prison, these men and women had no choice but to join illegalized squatter communities in either rural or urban areas, including Mathare.

After independence in 1963, alcohol production and distribution remained a home-based economy in Mathare, and houses often doubled as bars where alcohol and sexual services were sold. It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that parts of Mathare (especially the following ‘villages’: Bondeni, Shantit and Mabatani) gradually became the epicenter of the largescale production and distribution in Nairobi of chang’aa. According to several bar owners we spoke with, the influx of rural-urban migrants during this period boosted the selling of chang’aa to unprecedented levels. Demographic records and academic estimates vary greatly but it is safe to say that the population in Mathare rose from a few thousand during the colonial era to many tens of thousands between the 1960s and 1980s. The trend of rapid urbanisation, especially in informal settlements, that took off after independence in 1963 accelerated during the 1990s. Population growth in Mathare only declined slightly during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when even more ghetto areas rose up to absorb the bulk of rural-urban migrants.

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A government decree banned chang’aa and busaa production in 1983 but the incoming MP of Mathare at the time allowed the continuation of home-based chang’aa production in return for electoral support (interview with Shosho Kingi, 3 November 2005). It was easier to distill chang’aa at home (and later at the river) without police detection than busaa, and the profit margins for chang’aa were also much higher. Soon, the Mathare river saw multiple cooking sites along its banks. Unfortunately, these profit margins have fallen significantly since the late 1990s, following a convergence of rising food prices (especially a type of molasses called ngutu) and increasing demands for police bribes since the 2000s. Still, the local alcohol economy sustains thousands of people in Mathare directly and is fundamental to most other economic activities located here. For example, shortage of firewood plagues adjacent neighborhoods, but not in Mathare. Every other small business on Mau Mau Avenue in Bondeni, one of the 13 ‘villages’ in Mathare sells large quantities of firewood. These firewood sellers have arrangements with construction companies for frequent early morning deliveries. Old wood from scaffolding at construction sites is transported to the area in large trucks. Every day, these trucks drop off mountains of firewood intended to fuel the widespread and constant distillation of alcohol at the sites near the river. At the same time, young men in search of work hang around these businesses from sunrise to midday to help offload the bulks of firewood and chop them into smaller pieces in return for a small stipend. Thousands more depend indirectly on the alcohol economy in Mathare. All this provides some insight into the abrupt devastation to the livelihoods of thousands and thousands of people caused by frequent crackdowns on the local alcohol economy by police.

**The culture of policing in Mathare**

After days without work and food, alcohol distillers took to Juja road on Wednesday morning, 3 April
2019, to protest the illegal and violent raid by police. A few media outlets, such as Ghetto Radio, squarely blamed ‘angry youth’ for starting the fire. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have spoken to many eyewitnesses who saw police officers deliberately setting the houses and schools alight. The so-called ‘angry youth’ were alcohol distillers who had not earned a living for three days. These (mostly) men make at most 300 Ksh a day for 10 hours of backbreaking work, barely enough to provide for a family of four. Hence, these families do not have any savings to rely on when work is disrupted by state violence, and the illegal raid by police had left hundreds if not thousands of families hungry for days. This led several husbands, fathers and brothers to take to the street and fight for their families, and they burned tires on the road to underscore their demand to work by blocking traffic. As has been witnessed by several people, during the ensuing fracas one officer carelessly threw one of the burning tires into a row of make-shift houses and carpentry workshops along Juja road, all constructed of highly flammable materials. Other eyewitnesses saw police officers who violently blocked people to try and stop the fire of reaching the labyrinth of homes, businesses and schools down the street leading into Mabatini, thus effectively encouraging the fire to destroy as many houses and other properties as possible. Crowds of people who had gathered with buckets of water were violently dispersed with teargas while trying to rescue their homes and belongings. Sadly, the teargas only further ignited the fire as residents watched their schools and homes burn to ashes.

Distraught, many slept outside on Tuesday night. The fire had also destroyed the electricity supply line and the ensuing blackout increased overall insecurity. One resident recounted to us: “For nights, gunshots have become our ringtone.” Another one added: “We live in war, but nobody cares.” While living through this terror for four days and nights, Mathare residents watched the news at night that either ignored their plight and the criminal acts by police or put the blame decidedly on them. On top of the above mentioned pejorative ‘angry youth’ frame, Mathare residents were sweepingly cast as criminals and the local alcohol economy was without fail depicted as illicit and dangerous. Indeed, a lot of misconceptions about Mathare and local industries persist. For example, chang’aa is not an ‘illicit brew’ after being legalized in September 2010. The current modes of chang’aa production in Mathare may occur without a license and may not adhere to regulations, but that does not warrant such a violent and criminal crackdown by police. If the production is not up to standard, why not encourage bosses, distillers and sellers to obtain licenses and invest in improved manufacturing? The answer is simple: too many people high-up in police and government ‘eat’ from the industry as it is. Everyone living and working in Mathare is familiar with the daily routine of police visiting the distilling sites and bars where alcohol is produced and sold to collect bribes. A resident explained to us:

“Police eat a lot. For each drum on a fire at a jiko you pay 200 [Ksh] to 4 squads, so that is 800 [Ksh] for 12 hours. Before the raid there were uhm... like 7 jiko’s, so they operate 24/7. And on average there are 7 drums on the fires, at each jiko. At night it becomes more. For one day and night, together, these bribes can easily be something like 100k, for a month that is like, [calculates on mobile phone], wow, that is 3 million [KES]. Just for police. Wah!”

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This total is of course a conservative estimate because it does not include the bribes police take from bars and alcohol distributors, and it does not include police officers who produce their own alcohol.
Most of all, the number of drums along the riverside vary immensely. Sometimes, a *jiko* can have 15 or 20 fires operating at once, while at other times only 3 or 4. The above calculations only serve to give an indication of police involvement and investment in the alcohol industry in Mathare. Considering this, why then does the police initiate a raid to clamp down on the very industry that ‘feeds’ them?

A first part of the answer pertains to internal divisions within police. Police are not a homogenous entity, and rumors have it that Rashid and his team were eventually stopped by other police officers in the course of the week because they saw their avenues to ‘easy money’ destroyed. That, at least to some measure, explains why on Thursday the raid was abruptly halted. What’s more, crackdowns on the alcohol economy are not uncommon, despite the entanglement of police in this business. In July 2015, Mathare residents lived through a similar period of police terror which left two people dead and thousands people without work for weeks. Many believe that such attacks are often triggered by a desire of particular police units or individual officers to show, as one resident put it to us, “the ‘higher ups’ that they are doing their ‘job’ and/or deserve promotion”. This time too, many residents believe ‘killer cop’ Rashid went out to show the incoming Inspector General Mutyambai that he earned an upgrade of some kind. A resident shared with us that in his view Rashid demonstrated his exceptional cruelty during the course of the raid by forcing a customer of a local bar to drink bleach while he compared bleach to *chang’aa*. The young punter barely survived this ordeal.

The police officer mentioned here is not the only one. Similar notorious policemen who are known to execute and torture mainly young and poor men frequently patrol most urban settlements in Nairobi. According to several of our fellow activists, these plain cloth police officers, called ‘killer cops’ or *maspiff* by some, are not part of regular police units that are locally known to be connected to specific police stations and which patrol Mathare and surrounding neighborhoods on a daily basis. They told us that these police officers operate under the direct command of the County Criminal Investigations Officer (CCIO). Several (non-state) security groups in Mathare that work together with these police officers revealed to us that several of them also enjoy substantial support by influential business owners, for instance in Eastleigh. The exact operational and support structures of these ‘killer cops’ and how they collaborate with regular police units remain somewhat opaque to local activists and residents, but all agreed that these plain cloth police officers enjoy considerable power and are able to kill with impunity through their powerful back-up.

When considering the relative opacity of their operations, the public visibility of these police officers in Mathare (and other urban settlements) is indeed rather astounding. They are also not a recent phenomenon. Most Mathare residents above 25 years old can easily recall the cruel reign of different ‘killer cops’ as far back as the late 1990s, such as the ruthless Habel Mwareria a.k.a. ‘Tyson’ in early 2000s who was also popularly dubbed ‘the Ghost’ because he often seemed to materialize out of thin air when- and wherever problems occurred. He killed suspects without asking questions, in front of people and in broad daylight and would vanish as rapidly as he had appeared. He was later promoted to the ATPU (Anti-Terror Police Unit).

Nevertheless, the ‘killer cop’ gained new strength in popular discourse when in April and May 2017 alleged police officers calling themselves ‘Hessy’ became rapidly infamous by posting pictures on different Facebook pages, carrying this name, of suspected ‘thugs’ before and after they purportedly shot them. Speculations continue to the date of writing this article about who or what ‘Hessy’ really is. Some people claim it started with an actual police officer who was shot in the leg and while he was recovering home in the month of April 2017 he started this network of ‘Hessy’s’ on Facebook. This is substantiated to some extent by the fact that there is an infamous police officer who is nicknamed Hessy and who is known to kill mostly young male crime suspects in Kayole. Others say that one officer or a group of police officers from different police stations in Eastlands chose this name because of the reputation of this particular police officer. Again, others state that the different
‘Hessy’ and adjacent pages on Facebook are not created by one or more police officers, but by a team of bloggers that works together with specific ‘killer cops’. The ‘Hessy’ and adjacent pages (such as Nairobi Crime Free and Dandora Crime Free) soon gained a massive following online and continue to be a topic of intense debate offline, for instance among residents in Mathare.

**Local dynamics and the future of chang’aa**

Police violence in Mathare, such as extra-judicial killings and illegal raids on people’s livelihoods, are enabled by a combination of factors. In contrast to the knee-jerk homogenization and criminalization of ghetto residents, for instance in mainstream media in Kenya, people inside Mathare are equally divided about the use of (criminal) violence by police as Kenyans are elsewhere. Police use such local divisions inside this neighborhood to push their own agenda. For instance, they work together with residents, popularly dubbed informers or *watihaji*, who are paid by police for information on people, business activities and other developments locally. This explains how police were able to find the entrance to the *jiko’s* at the river or the places where bars are located.

However, the incentives of informers to tell on their neighbours often go beyond merely monetary motivations or concerns about crime. Local competition or revenge play a big role as well. Police also depend too much on such secondary and often faulty intel because the local turnover of police, following frequent transfers, is quite high thus limiting the time police have to understand local dynamics. As a result, local informer-networks have some power to manipulate police behavior towards their own agendas. To illustrate, sometimes ‘killer cops’ like Rashid parade a suspect throughout Mathare and when they receive calls from as little as three informers confirming the identity of the suspect, the suspect is taken to a backstreet and executed (see also Van Stapele 2016). Our fellow activists have documented several cases that follow this pattern (see also MSJC 2017).

The recent raid in Mathare on the local alcohol economy stopped as suddenly as it had started and without any outcome other than destroyed livelihoods, schools and homes and injured people. Slowly, alcohol distillers went back to work on Friday 5 April and gradually the local economy picked up again. Such crackdowns have never stopped the local alcohol industry and never will. If the government wants to make the local alcohol industry more safe and bring it in line with regulations, why not work together with business owners and their employees to develop ways to make this affordable to them? If alcohol consumption is the problem, why not invest in rehabilitation programs and explore underlying factors that contribute to widespread cheap alcohol consumption, such as vast unemployment and extreme stress? If the government wants people to stop working in this industry all together why not develop alternatives together with them? Crackdowns slow production for a little while but do not alter the make-up of this industry in any way, yet the Mathare residents who have for generations depended on this economy bear the brunt given that they can’t miss a day of work. On Thursday 4 April 2019, one resident asked us: “Who is Rashid? How can he do all this, kill our young men for years, then come to destroy our work, huh? Who is he?” Another one said: “Why are there no people coming from Red Cross, or our government leaders, like when Dusit happens or Westgate? Are we not human beings?”
An interesting shift has taken place since the raid. In the weeks following the raid, resentment against police culminated in two clashes between police and distillers because they refused to pay bribes to police. Several meetings between police and Mathare’s ‘Big Fish’, i.e. wealthy and influential bar owners and distributors, have tried to re-establish the collection of police bribes, but the ‘Small Fish’, small-time bar owners, have sided with the distillers in rejecting police presence at the jiko’s. One small-time bar owner explained: “We pay these bribes to cook chang’aa, but this raid put us back so much. We have not recovered so why pay bribes to police? We refuse, and we [the ‘small fish’ and the distillers combined] are the majority, we have strength in number.” However, his face turned sullen when he said: “But the police cannot ignore their money for long, we expect them to come in and attack us any day to claim their bribes again. In the end they have the guns.”

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