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Transcript

Hello. Hello, hello.

Welcome to the Oxford Anthropology Podcast.

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Hello you are listening to a podcast episode of the University of Oxford Departmental Seminar. My name is Peyton Cherry, a DPhil student at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography. The title of this seminar is *Parasites, invention and grace: taking turns in a street corner bureaucracy* given by Michael Degani. Michael is an assistant professor of environmental anthropology at the University of Cambridge. This talk analyses the styles of working conflict amongst electrical contractors who congregate across the street from a power utility office in urban Tanzania. Please enjoy the seminar.

Yeah. So just a little bit of table setting for this talk. As was mentioned, my first book, *The City of Electric* is really on issues of electricity access in a post colonial city in Dar Salaam in Tanzania. This is material that I wanted to make it into the book and it it didn't. I didn't have enough room and so it's me returning to it and giving it its due. It is a lot about improvisation and creativity, you know, in response to some of the conversations we were having over e-mail. But if you want to talk about electricity and energy policy or anything like that. I'm. I'm really happy to go there in the Q&A, you know, happy to go wherever you like.

And finally, I'll just apologise for not having slides. I hope that's OK. Maybe it might even be nice not to stare at yet another screen, but hopefully you'll find the piece sufficiently ethnographic to hold your attention. OK, so let's get started.

Imagine yourself disembarking onto a hot, crowded bus stop in the middle of Dar Salaam as a dala dala minibus rumbles away. You slowly trudge through throngs of people to a seemingly innocuous roadside stretch of dirt situated between a restaurant and an apartment complex. Dappled by the shade of a large tree, the spot attracts all manner of vendors, young kids bearing platters of kurosho ground nuts and Lucy cigarettes. Farmers and sandals leaning on carts of sugar cane and cassava, women carrying buckets of oranges and mangoes at their hips. At its centre, a young woman presides over a rickety wooden stand selling phone vouchers and a dozen different English and Kiswahili dailies. Cars and pedestrians form a steady stream along the narrow road with a small tributary veering off towards the glass doors across the street. The entrance to a municipal branch of the Tanzania Electric Supply Company Limited or TANESCO for short. This little kijiwe Kiswahili for ‘grindstone’ is just one of the many street corner hangouts that emerge in the interstices of Dar Salaam's urban geography.

But what makes this one notable is its relation to the TANESCO offices across its street for alongside the vendors and motorcycles, taxis, and, in some sense camouflaging them, is an array of electricians and contractors that hang out, shoot the breeze and ply their trade. For such men, dressed in collared shirts and dusty business shoes, the kijiwe offers a line of sight onto customers entering and exiting the building over the course of the day. Some look beleaguered, perhaps angry about bills or broken equipment. Others clutch telltale oversized green folders holding applications for new service lines that would connect them to the grid. Should they cross the street, they could find an array of services, a pool of draughtsmen who for a modest price would provide properly formatted diagrams of their household wiring, endorsed by the stamp of a licenced contractors seal. More conspiratorially, they might find electricians willing to repair or tamper or otherwise modify their existing service lines. Occasionally a TANESCO employee might walk over to confer with a particular contractor, perhaps surreptitiously handing him a stack of green folders.

So this talk offers an ethnographic analysis of the kijiwe as an important and somewhat under theorised socio spatial form in African cities and beyond. In many ways, the kijiwe exemplifies the unpredictable and improvisatory nature of what Abdumalik Simone calls Africa’s pirate towns, but how unpredictable and improvisatory are they exactly to sharpen this analytic, I will suggest the kijiwe usefully be understood as what the philosopher Michelle Serez calls a ‘parasite’. A formation that nests along the flow of urban institutional comings and goings, inflecting its currents and distributions. And any parasite, as Serez elaborated, is fundamentally a guest, one that must remain within a tolerable threshold of accommodation in relation to the channel that hosts. Indeed actors at the kijiwe are successful when they achieve the tricky balance of inserting themselves into TANESCO's bureaucratic operations. But not too much. They must capture something of those operations while allowing themselves to be reciprocally domesticated by its logics.

Now although or maybe because I have found the parasite to be a endlessly generative concept in its own right, and I've written about it in the book and and elsewhere, my goal in this talk is to relate it to two other propositions. The first is to see the kijiwe as a site of cultural invention. Which the anthropologist Roy Wagner defines as the act of bringing 2 seemingly unrelated conventions into a kind of metaphoric resonance. The second is to see that metaphoric extension as aspiring towards a kind of grace which the architectural theorist Lars Spobrick defines as that quality that radiates out from 2 forces in reciprocal counterpoint, the two terms grace and invention are complementary and together furnish a theory of urban street corners as figuration. As both metaphorical tropes and even metaphysical terms. As such, they help draw out the aesthetic, ethical, and even existential dimensions of African urban life, often overshadowed by accounts of political and economic crisis. Spobrick begins his massive tome on grace with the question: how do we live well?

For many actors, the kijiwe is just such a means to live well through it. They have invented a niche trade, one that earns them money to school their children, build their houses and buy some meat and beer at the bar on a Friday night. In short, it is a means of seeking some small measure of grace in their lives. But this requires them to hold an array of contradictory forces in counterpoint, bureaucracy and entrepreneurship, competition and collaboration. The utility and the consumer. As I'll show, different actors favour different styles of bringing these forces together, each with their own way of faltering and failing. And often enough in those failings, they are figured as mere parasites and parodies. Nevertheless, the kijiwe has endured for over 15 years amidst the shifting and sometimes hostile institutional landscape that hosts it.

So let me give you a few more kind of big picture thoughts about African cities and the way they've been talked and written about. So grace and I would suggest Wagnerian invention are not particularly prominent themes and studies of cities in Africa and of the global south more broadly. Ethnographers of African urban life have sought to emphasise the subversive agency of residents. Again, Simone offered what is perhaps to my mind the best thesis statement on such pirate towns. He says, quote, “If production possibilities are limited in African cities, then existent materials of all kinds are to be appropriated, sometimes through theft and looting, sometimes through heretical uses made of sometimes through heretical uses of languages, objects and spaces. And sometimes through social practises that ensure that available materials pass through many hands.”

And although this surely captures the gist of things, we might nevertheless ask to what degree there are local structures and principles at play in such piracy. Street corners are a case in point. Many ethnographers, here I'm thinking of Michael Ralph, Eileen Moyer, Brad Weiss, have written about street corners as a kind of flexible barracking of labour reserves, a place that underemployed young men claim in order to congregate and kill time, to demonstrate a masculinized generic potentiality for work or violence. And yet many other places are sites of actual work with their own rules, rhythms and hierarchies. Ibrahim Faisal and Amil Bize, for example, have described a shimo in the middle of Nairobi, that is a ‘pit’. In other words, an unlicensed taxi stand that traps the flow of pedestrians moving through the city. In a similar vein, Philip De Book describes A Kinshasa pothole that slows down traffic, creating opportunities for extortion and commerce. What are called the ghost flows of West Africa, bottlenecks along overpasses or highways, where vendors descend on traffic and sell through the window also become sites of lively and convivial markets. Now in their work a day, mundanity these urban spaces might be set to might be said to constitute inventions in the specific sense laid out by anthropologist Roy Wagner.

For Wagner, cultural invention is not quote “some bolts from the blue”, but is rather more like quote “invention in music”, a positive and an expected component of human life. And as that very example shows, metaphor is a key technology of cultural invention. It is a trope that extends the associations of some term or idea, for example, music, into some new context. For example, theories of culture. By invoking the trope of a pit, for instance, taxi drivers extend the associations of the rural hunt, its subterfuge and interceptions. Into a new context, namely the streaming rhythms of urban traffic. So key here is Wagner's insistence that invention is dialectical. Any metaphor is by necessity different from the thing it figures, but that difference would be merely arbitrary or fanciful if it were not, as he puts it, supplemented by analogy. If we did not perceive some latent iconic similarity between the terms. Call a Nairobi taxi stand a pit and you've captured something about its inventive presence in the urban landscape. Call it, I don't know, a palace or a pencil, and you're off in La La Land. Like a good guest, a metaphoric extension must somehow be both stranger and kin to the term that hosts it. Different but familial.

That said, Wagner did not really have much to say as far as I can see about landing on the wrong metaphor for a given situation, nor if and when a situation fails to embody a metaphoric extent. What happens, for instance, if you operate your taxi stand too much like a pit or not enough? This kind of pitfall I will suggest takes us to invention not just to symbolization, but as ethic and performance, and thus I will suggest to invention as a question of grace. In his 2020 work, *Grace and Gravity*, Spilbrook asks what makes for a graceful gesture. His inquiry spanning mossy and gift cycles, Greek sculpture, Dolphins, sports figures and much else besides. He theorises grace is radiating out from a specific kind of turn, a movement of reciprocal counterpoint or contrapposto. Consider his ordinary example of driving. When properly aligned human subject and machinic object are joined in a kind of communion. A driver animates her vehicles’ wheels and pistons, making it an extension of her will, but this requires that her own posture and movement be counter mechanised. Thus, when we drive gracefully as Spobrook puts it, it's as if we are the limbs and the car the torso. A bad driver, by contrast, fails to achieve this transfiguration. He is either too thuddingly mechanical or too aggressively limbic .Spobrook thus offers a pragmatic complement to theological conceptions of grace. Just as for Wagner, there's nothing particularly miraculous about the dialectic of invention and convention, grace here is not quote “some angelic curve freeing itself from gravity like a plume of smoke”. End Quote. No grace has a tensile quality, it is the act of bringing one element into counterpoint with another. So that through the dappling of difference and similarity some new third shape begins to shine through.

From this vantage, even parasites may approach a kind of grace. Michelle Serez relays the famous fable of the paralytic, who got who guides a blind man in exchange for carrying him on his back. That is the story of the lame man and the blind. “You laughed at the parasite,” Serez comments,wryly. “But you do not laugh at the exchange of legs for eyes. Like car and driver, their coupling invents a new balance, a figure 8 of conventional form and inventive force.” And so from one angle, the lane leading the blind may look monstrous or pathetic. But from another angle, it may look something like communion. Conjoining Wagner and Spobrook, we might say, then that such inventive turns spring forth. Or perhaps like music ring out when they bring conventions together into proper counterpoint. As we will see, the kijiwe turns the entrepreneur or in Wagnerian terms, analogizes him as a kind of bureaucrat turns TANESCO bureaucracy into a kind of market and turns urban space into a kind of office.

These figurative terms hold insofar as actors perform them in a controlled, graceful way. Not quite transcending those existing categories as reinventing them, as using new models and strategies to draw out their latent possibilities. Sometimes these inventive turns spin out or fall flat. They may be, as it were, all limbs or all torso, mannered, but with little energy, forceful but with little technique. Or they may just be some wobbling mixture of the two that sends them slightly wide of the mark. So. Two parts to the rest of the talk. In part one, I'll introduce the figure of the delegate working at the kijiwe. Bringing together entrepreneurial hustle and bureaucratic order in a single term. The delegate is an inventive solution to the problems of extending the power grid to new structures. I'll then sketch two versions of the delegate mirrored in their gracelessness: the all too conventional servant, the atuma, and the all too inventive fraud, the tapelli.

In some sense these cultural figures represent the most ideal or problematic strategies of working at the kijiwe. Part 2 will set these ideal typical figures into motion. It will describe an extended social drama between one interlocutor, whom I will call Simon, and another whom I will call ‘the nephew’ that came to stand as Simon's mirror image. Originally friends, their diverging styles of delegation unravelled them into something more caricatured, with one implicitly cast as the fraud and the other the servant. OK.

Part 1, the delegate. What then is a delegate? Imagine that you have built a house in Dar Salaam and are looking to connect it to the national power grid. Technically a licenced electrical contractor will have done the wiring. He would then draw a precise diagram, stamp it and affix it to your service line application, which then gets submitted to a TANESCO branch office. But in practise these three processes, the wiring, the drawing and the stamping are often separated into their own distinct transactions, done by different actors. This is because the city's handful of licenced companies can't hire a majority of the city's electricians. Furthermore, tenders are not evenly distributed amongst them. A few contracting companies at the top with extensive government or private tenders to wire hotels, apartment buildings and so. 4th and it is, it is widely acknowledged that those are one through the principles of 10% and indugunization, that is, bribes and nepotism indugu, meaning ‘kinsman’.

So what then happens to a licenced company that cannot compete for these tenders? An interlocutor named Simon explains. Here’s, Simon. “So the company's owner will say to himself, why don't I find some representatives to go camp out over there at TANESCO so that I get back a few 1000 shillings? It's like those taxi owners who delegate drivers to make them some money. The owner will delegate a representative of the company and that person will stamp the seal there as a representative electrical contractor.” In other words, what happens is that a freelance street electrician, a fundi yamtani will wire a house or other small scale structure. He or in some cases the customer herself, goes to the company delegate at the kijiwe. Sometimes the electrician provides a rough diagram already drawn on a scrap of paper. Sometimes he will just describe the wiring setup from memory. For a fee, the delegate will then draft an official diagram and rubber stamp it. In other words, most, in other words, most of the companies value is boiled down to its licence to the fact that TANESCO recognises its authority to assess proper wiring. And while there's nothing technically illegal about setting up such a streetside operation, it becomes ambiguous when one considers that the company delegate rarely sees a wiring job with his own eyes. Right. He's at the kijiwe. Or may not be trained enough to properly assess it if he did. It is in this sense that the kijiwe forms a parasite, atransitional zone where TANESCO's administrative structure shades into the urban public around it, making for a lively and multidirectional combination of market and street level bureaucracy.

And as Simon observed to me, this combination is evidenced in the figurative way, the kind of scare quotes way that these delegates might describe themselves as contractors. So here's Simon again. “Now there are lots of people at the kijiwe who call themselves contractors even though we don't actually conform to the proper environment of contracting work. So I hesitate to call myself a contractor straight up. What we do is sit alongside TANESCO where we can see the person who is holding the application form, and we're quite experienced. We know what someone is holding in their hand, even if you put it inside a brown envelope, we know. What we'll do is appear in front of him or follow him. And say, hey, I'm a contractor, I can help you. I can draw a diagram of your electrical wiring. I can stamp it with my company stamp and TANESCO will accept the application. So you present yourself as a contractor even though he doesn't really know what kind of person a contractor actually refers to.” So Simon and his compatriots are obviously not contractors in the conventional sense of entrepreneurs competing for end to end electrical installation tenders. Seizing on a certain stretch of the process, they have inventively extended its meaning analogizing it to a kind of bureaucrat. The quintessential representative of a larger authority. At the same time, insofar as the contracting company itself is operating along the margins of legality, they have in some ways reshaped the very source of which they are, in principle, derivations. Indeed, contracting that is drafting and stamping may well constitute the bulk of a lower tier company’s income, particularly as delegates, build up relations with electricians and other clients. That is, insofar as they get repeat customers.

And in this way, reciprocally, they reinvent what it means to be a bureaucrat along a rubber stamping bureaucrat along the lines of an entrepreneurial contractor, it depends on hustle and reputation. Note 2 how Simon's description of how contractors do their jobs at the kijiwe is replete with contrapuntal movement. Delegates shift between periods of watchfulness and a sudden, well timed pounce. Then, having seized their potential clients, they must ensnare them in a counterpoint of active entrepreneurial solicitation and passive bureaucratic obstruction. These contrapuntal movements not only invent a new kind of contractor they also thicken ordinary urban space into a proper street corner, a kind of transitional zone of what environmental psychologists call prospect and refuge. That is an oasis of relative calm that nevertheless affords sight lines onto the striving life of the city.

So at its most successful, the kijiwe affords contractors a reasonable livelihood and provides a useful service for customers who have not had their wiring done exactly by the book. In this section, however, I want to explore 2 unsuccessful figures that haunt the kijiwe: the servant, the atumbra, and the fraud, untapelli. Together they form a photo negative of the graceful contrapuntal movement that successful delegation requires. If the trick of delegation is to turn the authority of a registered contracting company just so, then the danger here is to perform either a lifelessly mechanical replication of that authority or an overly animated short term striving disconnected from it. Or, to call back to Serez, “if the servant is blind, unable to give form, to force, the fraud is lame, unable to give force to form.” I write in my field notes. Godfrey places the green TANESCO folder down on a bed of newspaper lying on the concrete floor and takes out the stamp pad from its well creased white envelope. He places the stamp on the bottom of the TANESCO application and carefully presses on it with the tip of his booted foot, hands propped against the doorway for support. Godfrey forcing the stamps last bit of ink onto a service line application sums up the kijiwe’s parasitic logic.

In the absence of large scale, well remunerated tenders that span the entire ring wiring process, process from wiring to connection, actors at the kijiwe crowd, a particular stretch of that process and ring it for all they can. During my field work, about 6 stamps were floating around the kijiwe and these managed to directly and indirectly support about 20 agents. A company owner will rent out his stamp to a few different agents for weekly payments, who are thus placed in the ambivalent situation of being both coworkers and competitors.

Consider Godfrey and Simon, who shared a stamp. Godfrey did not really have much experience with electricity at all and was relatively new to the kijiwe. His uncle Julius, who owned a contracting company, had brought him here, making him a sort of coworker with Simon. One day, Simon received a profitable job that required him to fill out and stamp multiple diagrams for a commercial building intermittently across the day. This went on into the afternoon when, with a coveted green folder in his hand, he asked Godfrey to bring him the stamp, which was just sitting a few feet away on the edge of the newspaper stand. Godfrey chided Simon. “What is this? Servitude. Aletta. Ottumwa.” This is a small moment, but I think a revealing one. On the East African coast, ottumwa, a difficult term that is often translated as slavery but also includes more general forms of servitude was historically one variant on the great theme of social dependency, analogous to the relationship between youth and elders, women and men, strangers and hosts. Indeed, vibarua, day worker and mfundi handyman, or technicians, two words that are used to describe electricity workers today originally referred to a particular class of servants in the 19th century, free to work for urban wages so long as they remitted a portion to their masters in tribute.

Ottumwa's root verb tuma means to send as in a messenger or delegate bearing the will of another, and as such it's etymologically related to the word for prophet or apostle in tumain. In practise, servants contested their mechanical subordinate status and one’s degree of social recognition, often by often by converting their commercial success into title, ritual performance, and sumptuary dress. And yet, patrons disdained such strivings and often sought to remind servants of their place as quote “dumb beasts who could at best mime true membership in a community”. And so for Godfrey, who was relatively inexperienced and thus had yet to build up a client base, being asked to go fetch, rankled insofar as it suggested a passive, merely mechanical relationship to the stamp and to the company. To being its servant, as it were.

Now, if commercial failure or inexperience degrades and immobilises the delegate, turning him into a kind of brute beast that goes where it is told, an inverse image of that degradation is the hyper mobility of the fraud. Here's an example.

For a long time at the kijiwe I used to trade barbs with a contractor that I nicknamed Wanam punga or Mr Rice, a jittery and talkative guy who would always teasingly ask me about the rice in my wallet and how he could get some of it. And Rice, being a kind of connoting, a kind of coastal, sophisticated foodstuff in opposition to the kind of inland cornmeal style ugali, and thus a very appropriate metaphor for money in the pocket of a white stranger. But then one day, Bonam Punga stopped showing up. Now, this wasn't all that unusual. Different characters at the kijiwe occasionally got jobs on construction sites and would leave for months at a time. But it turns out Bonam Punga had left because he had been unable to pay rent for his stamp. Before returning the stamp to its owner as he was instructed, he surreptitiously made a duplicate and continued to use it. When the owner of the company discovered the mischief, he sent a man out to the kijiwe to find Bonam Punga and threatened him. But by that time he had already stopped coming by. In fact, the man mistakenly ended up threatening another contractor, much to the latter's confusion. I later learned that Bonam Punga had set up shop at a kijiwe outside another TANESCO regional office at the city's Peri urban outskirts. “His chattering and his tendency to always be moving about”, Simon later told me, laughing “are textbook characteristics of the untapelli, the fraud.” In other words, Bonam Punga had abandoned the kijiwe's conventions altogether, opting instead for a kind of pure invention, and as a result he too was reduced to mindless movement. Not the mechanical gracelessness of the pure subordinate, but the erratic gracelessness of the short term improviser, disconnected from the underlying structural principles that would otherwise channel and shape it. And if you've read stuff I've written about zaniness, you can sort of see the connection there.

Like the delegate, the servant and the fraud are figurations. They are styles, modes of being and working at the kijiwe, but more specifically they are delegation in the parodic mode. They make the turn of delegation too mechanical or too animated, losing the sense of counterpoint that stabilises it. And thus in certain moments individuals like Godfrey or Bonam Punga come to figure as moral exemplars, cautionary embodiments of convention and invention at their purest. Simon thus found it easy to dismiss Bonam Punga's flights and generally ignore Godfrey's grumblings. But as we will see below, other individual styles of delegation were subtler, and invited more ambivalence.

OK, Part 2. The uncle and his nephew. After a few weeks of hanging out at the kijiwe, I came to notice what I thought was an interesting puzzle. The kijiwe was in fact composed of two subgroups. One group included Simon, Godfrey and Julius clustered near the newspaper stand towards the road. The other congregated near an apartment building doorway approximately 30 feet back and while there was certainly spatial and social interchange between the two, one could nevertheless see a distinct pattern. I was further intrigued to notice other divisions. Simon's group was predominantly Christian, while the other was predominantly Muslim. And this could structure many long and involved debates about religion and biblical exegesis, ones that sometimes turned heated but mostly remained at the level of utani, a kind of tit-for-tat teasing. Utani is often translated as joking relations. A notable member of the latter group was an owner of a registered contracting company, a devout Muslim that I affectionately called ‘the sheikh.’ Bedecked daily in a flowing white kanzu and a jaunty kofia, he delighted in drifting over to the other group to debate, often successfully goading Simon into fits of Christian chauvinism over the course of long afternoons. Even fans of Darts 2 rival football clubs Simba and Yanga tended to break down along these lines. One day, for instance, the shek sparked a heated argument when he mischievously claimed that Yanga was started by coastal people while Simba was started by quote “those mixed races derived from Arabs who came and married our sisters.”

Godfrey and Simon, both from Tanzania's Southern Highlands, hotly objected. Simba, they insisted, had in fact been started by inland people, yes, but ones who had nevertheless been living and settling in Dar Salaam for a long time. In essence, this argument recapitulates a classic Simba and Yanga rivalry that is the anthropologist Tarasu Tsuruta has shown has been going on since at least the 1930s. Here's tsuruta. Yanga’s supporters probably thought that their team was of local people, wenyeji, in contrast to Simba, the team of outsiders, wagenen, or guests. On the other hand, Simba fans scoffed at Yanga supporters as uneducated fishmongers, so the rivalry then was between poor and uneducated local people, that is, Yanga fans, and wealthy and educated immigrants, that is Simba fans, which did include a number of wealthy Arab traders.

So this rivalry outlines a kind of moral economy of invention along the Swahili coast and Dar Salaam specifically. British colonial officials had long complained that quote, Swahili or coastal people, that is zaramo or endareko communities were only interested in spending money inimical to the discipline, of often Christianized up country migrants, as well as relatively privileged Arab and Indian classes who in their perspective tended to save and invest in houses, bicycles and other assets. Thus there is a socio economic cross hatching of invention on each side of this rivalry. As locals, coastal people stood, what for, what had theretofore been the conventional and the indigenous, right? They were the locals. But as scroungers at the bottom of the new colonial era economy, they suddenly stood for undisciplined invention. Up country migrants had an inverted mixture of convention, economic discipline and stability. They were the ones who ostensibly knew how to save and invention, while social newcomers, right? They weren't the locals. So this cross hatching perhaps lends itself to the sense of symmetry that structures tit-for-tat joking relations like the kind that so often unfolded at this particular kijiwe and across the region historically. Often rooted in inner ethnic forms of hosting and travel, joking relations, as David Graeber put it, “Tend,” quote, “To be mutual. An equal exchange of abuse emphasising and equality of status.” In other words, behind any particular barb was the recognition of a certain kind of equality. That all are fated to play the socioeconomic game, and can only ever and perfectly combine the powers of convention and invention to do so. In Spobrook’s terms we might say, then, that the pleasure of utani lies in bringing these opposing combinations of convention and invention into contrapposto. Who doesn't, after all, appreciate the grace of a friendly insult and its invitation to counter.

At the same time at this kijiwe, Simon's joking relations with the uncle were layered over its structural inverse, relations of avoidance with his nephews, with all of its implied inequalities and hierarchies. That is, Simon agreed with my observation that there were two basic groups at the kijiwe, and they tended to keep their distance. From each other. But he dismissed the idea that it had anything to do with religion. In fact, as he mentioned in passing, he himself had married a Muslim zarama woman from the coast. The source of their division, he explained to me one day, lay in their style of doing business. Here's Simon describing that.

“We started the kijiwe before those other ones came. None of them were here. The ones who started, they respect me, they have limits to conversation and they know how to translate words. And we've been together for a long time. But all those other people who came, they are the sheikh’s people. He was with us since the beginning. True. But the others were just sitting around in USwahilini.” That is the poor Swahili areas of the city. “Doing nothing but ringing people's necks and they were complaining to the shef. Uncle, uncle. Life is hard for us and he brought them here just a few years ago like in 2008, whereas we started back in 1998. The sheikh's nephew came as a total guest and Ingeni, who didn't even know the first thing about drafting. Then he got some instructions. I don't know if he went to a witch doctor or did a little something or what, but now if he gets a little job for 10,000 shillings.” That's about $4. “He thinks to himself. Well, I wasn't getting 10,000 shillings in USwahilini, and here I'm getting 10,000 and he thinks, Life is sweet.”

So I eventually heard a version of this story from others at the kijiwe. Simon was friends with one of the chef's nephews, who also worked drafting diagrams. At some point, the chef's nephew began to make noticeably more money. As he did in my interview, Simon attributed his friend’s success to supernatural means. Though Simon protested he was just joking, and his meaning misconstrued a falling out ensued and the two groups, as it were, fissioned.

In good extended case study fashion, let me draw out a few of the historical and biographical contexts of this social drama. Originally from the Southern Highlands, Simon grew up comfortably in the northern city of Shinyanga educated in a private primary school. When his grandfather died, his father was called back down to their native area in Ambaya, where the family took up petty cash cropping. Frustrated with his reduced circumstances, Simon reached out to the son of his father's second wife, a police officer working in Dar Salaam. He agreed to house Simon and fund his education at Veda, atechnical schooling programme, but two years in, he lost his position and could no longer support Simon. Having now twice lost educational opportunities, Simon left feeling dejected, out of God's favour and amKosi a loser. He went back to Ambaya for a stretch but found he could still not stomach village life. He returned to Dar, but with no money and no real sense of how to enter the market with his partial Veda education. With nothing much to lose, a friend introduced him to someone. Who, quote, does that kind of self-employed work that involves that of TANESCO, TANESCO, and the linguistic reduplication indexing it's something kind of fishy. He signed Simon up and a few days afterwards instructed him to arrive at his house at dawn. There Simon was given Nahuli, bus fare. They boarded a bus together and unceremoniously arrived at the kijiwe in front of TANESCO offices. From that point on, Simon was more or less left to his own devices. Here's Simon describing that time.

“I arrived and those who were already there doing that kind of work couldn't stigmatise me because I was brought there by someone who's known I was there and I sat and I sat. But it was a bad time because the guy couldn't give me any financial help. Sometimes he would be there when it was time to leave. Sometimes he wouldn't, and I wasn't used to asking people for fare, so I thought, wow, what's 10 kilometres? Why don't I just walk it? Once back in the neighbourhood, I might ask someone for 500 shillings and maybe he would give it to me and I'd use it for fare the next morning. I'd go and sit all day without even Chai, breakfast.” And so I asked Simon. So did that guy introduce you to the people that he knew there? And Simon answered. “This guy is one of those hooligans an amoni. He brings you to the battlefield, but you apply your own intelligence. There's no instruction, introductions are sly. You just know that if he's close to someone, that person will be kin to you also. But there's none of that serious introduction. This is so and so you just forcefully insert yourself. And it's like this guy will deal with you. This guy won't. And you all come to know each other in time.”

Simon came to the kijiwe in 1998, but in 2002 things started to change. This was the beginning of a four year contract that put TANESCO under the private management of a white South African firm, Net Group Solutions. Net Group tripled the price of electricity and launched a punitive disconnection and debt policy, debt collection policy. In turn, the period saw an efflorescence of fixers popularly known as visoka. To soften the blow in usual chilina neighbourhoods, street Electricians would surreptitiously reconnect residents to the grid after TANESCO disconnection teams rolled through. Outside the office, touts would offer to help resolve people's debts at a discount, but the potential to defraud customers was significant as well, with various kinds of scams and double crossings lurking alongside these services.

Simon recounts. “In those times, there were a lot of thieves. People were leaving their street jobs, many of them weren't even electricians. Some of them were selling Mitumba, second hand clothing. Others were doing this and that, tailoring, what have you. After hearing that at TANESCO, there's opportunity for punga for soft, easy money for rice, they bring themselves over and after three days they've already become a local person, wenyeji. And truly, they were getting money just by running their mouths. Work like that was all over the place and people came to try and catch it, and they filled up the kijiwe.”

Now, for various reasons, I don't have time to get into, but happy to talk about it, the situation stabilised under Tanzanian management, and today the grid remains under firmer bureaucratic control than in the Net group period. Still, there are plenty of ways to make what Simon calls soft, easy money at every level of skill and occupational hierarchy. Consider, for instance, his claim that the sheikh's nephews were diagramming and stamping for as little as 10,000 shillings. In general, such jobs averaged three times that much, depending on the. number of rooms and their wiring. This price reflects the cost of renting the licence itself and in turn ultimately to fees paid to various regulatory bodies. Sometimes though, contractors do under sell in a bid to increase their market share as one drawer, a man named Tolu, who generally stayed with Simon's group, told me. “These are guests or newcomers, wageni or youth, vijana, that charge low because they find it hard to get a foothold without slowly building up clientele.” The danger of this strategy is not charging enough to cover rent on the stamp itself, but as Tolu said, quote, “They don't care. They just want to make some. Money to get enough. To eat, to take a girl out, or to hire a prostitute.” If and when this scheme proves unsustainable and they are unable to pay rent on their stamp, they must return it or forge it, or flee, as Bonam Punga chose to do, or perhaps press on the forbearance of a tolerant uncle. And it is this taste for rice, for soft, easy money that for Simon, differentiates the two subgroups at the kijiwe as he sees that the sheikh’s nephews may draw and stamp, but they are uneducated about the principles of electrification behind the work. Under their uncle's patronage, they treat it as just another way to make quick spending money, no different than the tailors or clothing vendors who crashed the kijiwe and took up work as vishaka in the Net group era. Pricing to move in this way injects a note of anti social competition and indifference to the respect owed to coworkers and to the principle that gain comes not from the price mechanism but from the accumulation of social relations with clients. Viewed in this light, they are ever the stereotypical Yanga supporters. Uneducated and poor coastal Swahili type figures out for the short term score. Indeed, underselling might even be understood as a kind of witchcraft in its own right, an illicit manoeuvre that may explain economic success, at least in the short term.

At the same time, it's hard not to see the way that all the ways that the nephews form an inverse image of Simon's own law. Simon positions himself as a figure who's paid his dues. He arrived to the kijiwe, as it were, all torso, a stranger sitting and fasting and forcefully inserting himself. Over time through experience and reputation, delegation became a slightly down market version of the educated electrical contracting work he aspired to. A way of preserving his initial dreams of upward mobility in the city. In contrast to Simon's stoicism, the nephews were, quote, crying out about their difficult life and came to the kijiwe not as strangers, but as kin. In his eyes then their grace was merely given, extended by the hand of an obliging uncle who plucked them out of USwahilini. As such, they seemed to treat contracting work as one more short term way to wring necks to someone who has lost his own familial patron and felt out of God's favour, theirs would seem a cheap grace indeed.

At the same time, Simon's polarised framing might include subtler shadings. We shouldn't forget, after all, that Simon too arrived to someone stranger by the good graces of a hooligan who shielded him from stigma, and by the time of my field work, the sheikhs’ nephews had already been around for four years and seemed to be making steady money. They were hardly pure opportunists. From this angle, then, Simon's complaints may evoke someone like Godfrey, a stayed servant of the stamp and company, mechanically harping on deference and procedure in the face of new competition and thus spurred to invent an over animated accusation. So it may be fair to say that the difference between them, while real enough, might also be relatively stylistic. Where Simon has a kind of bureaucratic aspiration, a long term stability that belies a continuous hustle, the nephews favoured a set of entrepreneurial tactics that were themselves may tacitly viable by the long term stability of patronage. In the middle stands the sheikh himself, both licenced contractor and Swahili uncle, forming a fragile relay between the two groups, and perhaps the two styles of being at the kijiwe that they. Indeed, after spending long hours at the kijiwe, it seems to me that utani at which the sheikh so excelled was a way to express and even curve these diverging accents back towards each other. It's notable, after all, that the social drama began when what Simon intended to be a joke that the nephew had gone to an nganga, a witch doctor, was taken as a serious affront, prompting, prompting new patterns of spatial avoidance. In the wake of that breach, sporting jousts over race, religion or football might acquire a sharper edge. The contrapposto of friendly riposte may lose its grace.

OK, I'm going to conclude very quickly. We're just a little bit over. So in our last interview, Simon reflected on his work and his relations with TANESCO across the street in ways that highlighted both the grace and the parasitism of the kijiwe. Here's Simon.

“It's true. TANESCO workers don't want to respect us, although we provide a lot of benefit they don't, except insofar as it benefits them, respect us. But this life we have here at the kijiwe it can provide for us. I've been able to raise two children through this work. I'm building a house and I'm in the very final stages of it. A fine house. Well, it's not bad. It has three rooms, a dining room, a sitting room, a master toilet, a public toilet with just this. My child attends primary school, although it's a government school, but my youngest child attends a Catholic nursery school, 300,000 shillings per year. This is expensive for us at the kijiwe. It's hard in our environment to make a profit, but you find still that a person can despise you. Even worse, as if you decide to pass each other in a bar. They enter and we enter. They order meat. We order meat, they order beer and we order beer and that bothers them. Ah, those guys just sit outside. No official work, but their cheeks are filling out. Their necks are filling out. What are they eating? And they regard us as what those vishoka, those thieves, those saboteurs, they judge us on appearances. If you have something to eat. Where'd you get the money? If you fill out if you aren't fresh. Where'd you get the money? They despise us based on how we look sitting at the kijiwe. But still I can say it's preferable. The way I see it, employment is slavery ottumwa, you're under the law, under pressure and then caught up in scandals and fights and witchcraft to be self-employed is better and I pray to God he continues to grant me the ability to be self-employed rather than employed.”

In the long afterlife of colonial dispossession and marginalisation, African cities are often understood to be processes of serial invention. Drawing on the insights of Roy Wagner, I've argued that to work, inventions must evince a certain modesty, finding ways to turn existing conventions just so. And in so doing, they become conventions in their own right, tropes that form waypoints within the city and within the working lives of its residents. Little staging grounds, offering both refuge and prospect. As such, there can be something graceful about them. If grace, as Spobrook asserts, is the quality of living well, then Simon seems to have found just that. Building a life by turning contracting into something at once more reliably bureaucratic and more inventively entrepreneurial than either of those livelihood strategies could have been on their own.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which no matter how respectively delegates at the kijiwe might carry themselves, no matter how much they try to shed their Swahili or vishoka connotations, their liminal position always threatens to render them grasping servants, mere parodies and parasites. Parasites, after all, are defined by thresholds of accommodation. The degree to which a guest or interloper may nest upon a channel without getting permanently chased out or destabilising the system as such. For Simon, having lived through the management era of Net Group and its subsequent cleanup, the sheikh’s nephew seemed to court just that kind of destabilisation. Unreconstructed Swahili denizens, they are just a little too battlefield and thus threaten to confirm all the stereotypes that TANESCO workers hold of them. And so I really think that ethnography of places like the kijiwe can tell us about something about invention in African cities.

Wagner tended to focus on the turn of invention as something complete and fully formed, and I think this was because he was generally working in a symbolic register. By contrast, a focus on performativity highlights that such turns may not unfold as desire. They may have all of the wobbling variations in flexions and frictions that beset reality and thus make them, in some sense, merely derivative, bad imitations of the conventional grounds they aim to metaphorically transfigure.

Thus, on the best of days, Simon gets to play the part of the self-employed delegate, but on the worst he is subject to all of the witchcraft scandals and fights he asserts that is characteristic of bureaucrats and that he asserts he has escaped but is manifestly caught up in. Spobrook attends to just this phenomenon when he observes that grace is continuous with, but not reducible to habit. When some act of living well springs forth and counterpoint it is invention in real time. It radiates a newness as something extra, as Julian Pitt Rivers put it. “That is never guaranteed and often elusive, and for precisely that reason requires a kind of machinic repetition to prepare its coming.” The kijiwe was a difficult place, filled with brittle or indifferent coworkers, condescending TANESCO bureaucrats and oily scammers. And yet, like Simon and many others, I found myself returning to it over and over again. Thanks.

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