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Overheated stomachs

Njeri, a charismatic Gikuyu herbalist, is a well-known figure in Nakuru. On the streets of the city's central business district she is often addressed as *daktari* ('doctor' in Swahili), a title commonly given to healers and herbalists who have established themselves as authorities in the field of herbal medicine. Though divorced from her Maasai husband, she frequently credited his herbal knowledge when advertising her remedies for common urban afflictions such as diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular diseases. According to Njeri, these illnesses are the result of the increasing presence of 'chemicals' (*kemikali* in Swahili) in processed foods imported into Nakuru from abroad.

Until a few years ago Njeri ran her own Pentecostal church. However, as a descendant of the Anjiru clan, known for prophetic abilities and medicinal knowledge, she eventually came to feel that herbalism was her true calling. She could most often be found at market squares or crossroads, where she and fellow herbalists would demonstrate the harmful effects of *kemikali* on the body. I witnessed one of her dramatic performances in late August 2017.

The pounding sun and humidity made setting up the stage a laborious task. Old newspapers with alarming headlines about the loss of male potency, obesity and 'gayness' were strategically arranged around various props such as bottles, eggs, condoms and bags, marking the boundaries of her makeshift stage. The performance took place in an open space in Nakuru's CBD where a record store had once stood. The building had been demolished to make way for a modern, multi-storey structure better suited to the needs of a growing city. However, a dispute over the sales agreement had left the space in limbo, making it the perfect setting for Njeri's public demonstrations.

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When I joined the crowd that had gathered around the newspapers, Njeri had already begun. She poured some salt on the ground, positioned four eggs on top of the salt and sprinkled some waw-waw sweets on top. The assemblage of artefacts encapsulated the topic she wanted to present: all the 'dirt' (*chafu* in Swahili) that people put into their bodies makes them ill. Njeri explained to her crowd that the eggs originating from industrial chicken farms were fake. She carefully cracked one of the eggs and removed the membrane from the eggshell, pulling and rubbing it to show that its consistency was very similar to plastic. She handed it over to her audience, anticipating confirmation. A few of the bystanders were nodding in agreement, astonished by what they had just discovered.

Njeri continued by pouring some egg mixture in a plastic bag, adding water to it and topping it up with some tea leaves. She mixed the substance and once again gave it to someone in the audience, who confirmed that the smell indeed resembled that of tea. She explained to the bystanders that this was only one example of the 'trickery' (*ujanja* in Swahili) involved in food production. 'Milk people buy from milk distributors undergoes a similar process,' she stated. '*Kemikali*, flour and eggs are mixed to make a milk-like substance which is cheap, but fake,' she added. Njeri told her spectators how their current lifestyle was fuelled by harmful chemicals that pollute their health. From the sodas they drink to the sanitary towels that make women infertile, Njeri insisted that 'these things are fake and "burn the stomach"' (*zinachoma tumbo* in Swahili).

Herbalists such as Njeri argue that people's bodies are infiltrated by dirt. They attribute lifestyle diseases in Nakuru to a dangerously 'porous state of the stomach' (*tumbo imefunguka* in Swahili), which allows dirt to seep through into their bodies. Concerns about the toxicity of certain foods in Nakuru can be understood as part of broader anxieties regarding Kenya's economic ties with foreign nations – relationships that, as some interlocutors argued, threaten the country's sovereignty, particularly through its economic dependence on China. Symptomatic of this are the large-scale infrastructural projects that financially 'bind' Kenya to China, as discussed in Chapter 2. From this perspective, processed foods become 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2003 [1969]): they appear to transgress an ordered relation between body, substance and place, thereby exposing the fragility of the moral classifications through which purity is maintained. From this perspective, processed foods become troubling, both because they often originate from outside of Kenya and because they are seen to carry uncertain relations of production, handling and intention into the body.

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Ending the analysis there, however, would not do justice to Njeri's discourse. Most of my interlocutors were well aware of the bodily effects of chemicals in imported processed foods, yet continued to consume them on a daily basis. Even herbalists did not abstain from eating them. Chemicals are all around us and have become part of people's everyday experience of the urban. In Langwick's (2018, 419) words, '[t]he problem articulated here is that eating, drinking, cooking, healing and breathing all involve ingesting toxins'. Chemicals as dirt are no longer a substance 'out of place' as a rigid category. Instead they have become an inextricable part of everyday life, often invisible to the naked eye yet tangible in their effects. The pressing question is thus: how do people mediate and metabolise toxicity as an inescapable part of urban life?

I address that question in this chapter by examining how Nakuru's herbalists frame toxicity as the outcome of collapsed categories – 'inside' vs. 'outside', 'in place' vs. 'out of place' – with the stomach and gut serving as key infrastructures for experiencing and metabolising it. This aligns with regional ethnographies that focused on certain bodily parts and processes as entry points to study socio-economic and political concerns, such as Geissler and Prince (2010a) on touch, and Weiss (1992) on processes of embodiment by thinking through teeth in Tanzania.

Langwick's (2018, 435) idea of 'toxicity as a condition of life to navigate' resonates deeply here. For Nakuru's herbalists, this navigation unfolds as an enteric praxis – lived out in the stomach and gut – that echoes older forms of haruspicy or divination by inspecting the entrails of sacrificed animals. Broch-Due (2000, 62) describes this as a form of 'belly cartography' whereby the belly acts as a microcosmic body linked to the outside world. I consider Njeri and her colleagues to be contemporary, urban haruspices. These practices show similarities with earlier forms of entrail reading in the region (for Turkana communities see Broch-Due 1990; for Pokot communities see Bollig, Greiner and Österle 2014). Njeri and her colleagues, however, transpose the diagnostic logic of haruspicy into an urban context to shed light on the perils specific to urban life-worlds that are increasingly beleaguered by the toxicities of late capitalism.

A key substance within the herbalists' 'belly cartography' is undigested stomach content, known in Swahili as *mara* (*taatha* in Kikuyu), which carries profound metaphoric and material weight. Both Njeri and Njuguna use *mara* to moralise and conceptualise toxic intrusions into the body. Its liminal state – neither fully absorbed nor excreted – makes *mara* an ideal diagnostic tool to visualise bodily porosity. It enables the diagnosis of both environmental toxins and breaches in socio-political

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boundaries, such as foreign influences or economic dependencies, that render urban dwellers vulnerable to toxicity. Njeri used an artificial stomach that she filled with foodstuffs and toxins – typically consumed by Nakuruans on a daily basis – to demonstrate how the stomach contents eventually turn dark black, emitting heat and smoke – a metaphor for how toxic build-up causes bodily wasting.

Njuguna also employs *mara* in his healing work. During my initiation into his medicinal practices, *mara* from a billy goat, mixed with blood and herbs, was smeared on my face and thrown onto ritual artefacts to activate their healing properties. The *mara* of a billy goat, which is believed to consume hot plants, is regarded as a hot substance, in line with the Gikuyu classification of plants as either *miti mihoro* ('cold' or 'sweet' trees) or *miti mihiu* ('hot' or 'fierce' trees) (also see Johnsen 1997, 91 for similar notions of 'hot' and 'cold' plants among Maasai communities; Leakey 1977). While the 'hot' *mara* of a billy goat is used in initiation rituals to harness and control heat for mastering the science of healing and divination, the 'cold' and soothing *mara* of sheep and certain hyraxes, which feed on *miti mihoro*, is used in purification rituals to cool the body and restore its balance. However, Njuguna was rather critical of my stories about Njeri, dismissing herbalists as conmen (*watapeli* in Swahili) who exploited herbal knowledge for profit. Following Gikuyu custom, he argued it was taboo (*thahu* in Kikuyu) to charge money for herbal remedies.

This kind of scepticism towards urban herbalists was widespread among Nakuruans. Take Mama Muthoni, for instance: cautious about Njeri's remedies, she nonetheless requested a visit to a rural herbalist outside town when suffering from a severe toothache in 2018. Rural herbalists generally enjoyed a greater degree of trust than their urban counterparts, due to the perception that urban life was steeped in trickery.

Across all these herbal practices, the stomach and gut emerge as 'contact zones' (Pratt 1991) or spaces where the encounter with toxicity is realised and negotiated. Herbalists such as Njeri examine how the gut processes what passes through it – processed foods laced with chemicals (*kemikali* in Swahili) – alongside metabolic flows of life force (*moyo* in Swahili) and urbanity (see Figure 5.1). Through reflections on digestion, she ultimately assesses the viability of bodies and environments made overly porous by the toxic, economic and moral disruptions of late capitalism and guides Nakuruans in negotiating this bodily and socio-political porosity to cultivate more viable, 'cool' (*poa* in Swahili) insides. Analysing how herbalists conceptualise chemicals in foodstuffs

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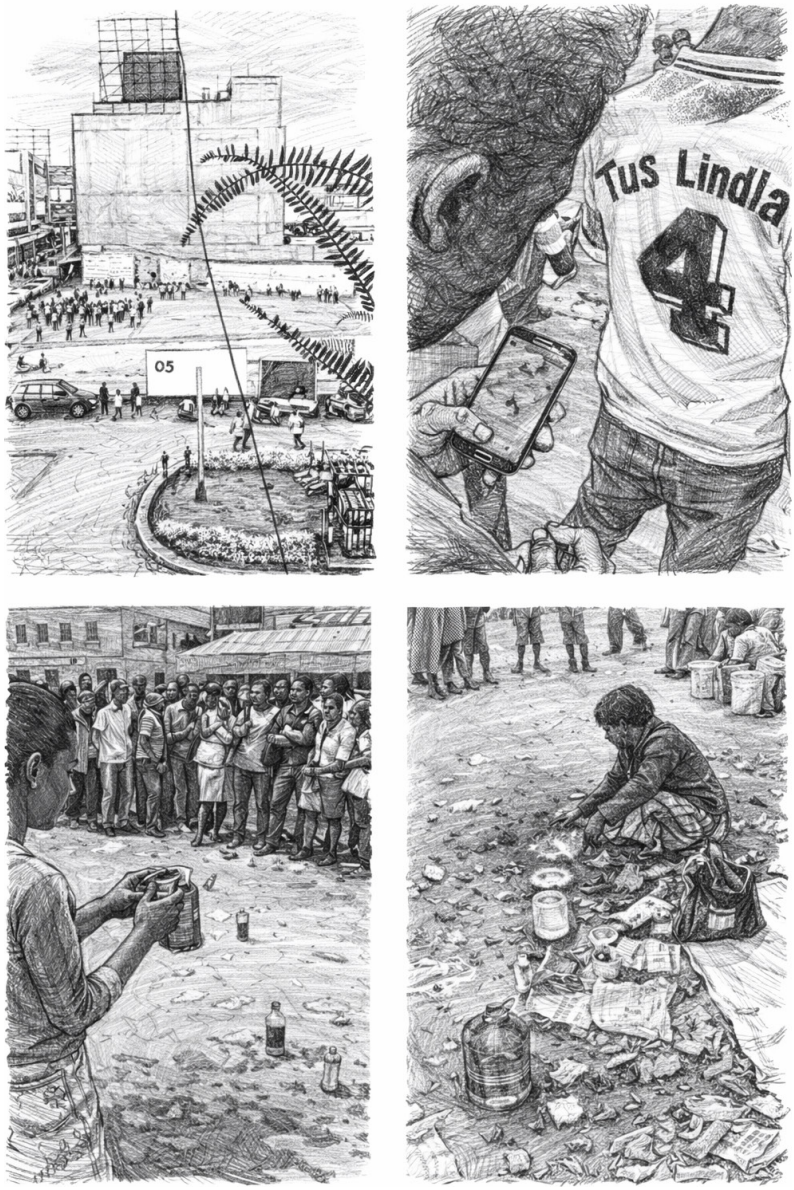


Figure 5.1 A storyboard sketch based on photographs of Njeri teaching her audience about the dangers of processed foods in Nakuru's city centre. © Nick Rahier

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as 'heat' offers broader insights into the permeability and vulnerability of both Nakuru and its citizens, which, according to Njeri, 'soak in' pollution as a byproduct of everyday life in an ever-toxic world (also see Roberts 2017; Reno 2015; Little 2019; Hoover 2017; Langwick 2018).

Porous bodies

> Njeri walks toward the container.
> 'This is dirt that you keep putting in your foods.'
> She points at the content.
> 'Let me put in for you the substances they call strawberry fruit.'
> She adds an artificial strawberry flavourer to the container.
> 'Does this look like a fruit? The devil and his wife have arrived, we said Kenya will be referred to by 2030 as "Kanya". This is dirt … it's all dirt.'
> (pause)
> 'When it [chemicals] gets in men's bodies, it eats up their veins and bones.'
> She makes gestures, showing how men suffer from erectile dysfunctions, and then points at a lady.
> 'Your legs are not swollen because you stepped on something, but because of the things that you consume nowadays. I told you to stop playing with a person called *muzungu* [white man]; this *muzungu* said he wants to finish all Africans because you chased him away with a *panga* [machete]. Now he is back! He had a gun, he ran away and now he is back with what is known as chemicals.'
> […]
> Njeri points at the container, which by now contains a dark, purple-coloured substance. Some smoke is being emitted from the container.
> 'Is this not a fire? Wait and see, is this not like the hell? This is fire in your stomach.'
> She adds a herbal tablet to the artificial stomach.
> 'Today is a day for happiness. By protecting ourselves from chemicals, we avoid this dirt and will not die before our day. Men and women from the past lived for a long time. Nowadays, if you test people, those who live without a course, they urinate with a weak beam. Because they have been affected by these chemicals, it [urine] ends up on their trousers.'
> (pause)

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> 'This herbal medicine I am giving you will wash you from your "inlet" [mouth] to your "outlet" [anus].'
> She points toward the bottle.
> 'This resembles [the body of] a human. Let us observe how it works. Your stomach will act the same way as what happens in this bottle and in a similar way the dirt in your body will come out.'

Njeri would time her performances for the rush hour, setting up in busy public spaces such as bus stops or market squares. She would gradually build her narrative, sharing gossip about the latest local scandals while pouring 'junk' substances into her plastic five-litre bottle representing the stomach. By the end she would have added common food chemicals such as artificial colouring, sodium nitrite, sweeteners, potassium chloride and so forth, promising her crowd that she would eventually make fire and prove that *kemikali* 'burn' (*kuchoma* in Swahili) their stomachs. The main emphasis of her performances was on the loss of potency in both men and women and their diminishing capacities to perform sexually. This, she argued, is caused by the burning effects of *kemikali*.

Her statements are reminiscent of Cousins's (2015) argument that the gut and stomach have mediating capacity. Looking for ways to investigate 'how the natural and the social are mutually absorbed in [the gut's] porous linings' (Cousins 2015, 3), he examined:

> whether we can think of the gut, defined loosely as the whole apparatus from the mouth to the anus – including the stomach, intestines, colon and enteric nervous system that envelops them – as a specific kind of anthropological object.

The gut, Cousins argues, acts as 'a particular kind of mediator of social relations' (2015, 2). Stomachs, in Njeri's account, serve as a means through which urbanites not only experience social life, the significance of which has been proven by earlier studies done in the region (Geissler 2000 on geophagy; Holtzman 2009 on taste; Straight 2007, 93 on stomachs and personality; Leakey 1977, 1243 on the significance of stomach content), but also actively process everyday urban toxicity. Njeri argues that stomachs can be 'too open' (*tumbo imefunguka* in Swahili), enabling toxins to seep through the stomach's porous membrane, which hinders a prosperous life flow, or 'too closed', clogged by dirt which equally impacts negatively on proper flow. Herbal concoctions can be used to alter the porosity of the stomach, thus re-establishing proper bowel movement and subsequent life flow.

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De Boeck (1998, 37) similarly observed the idea of (female) stomachs being 'too open' or 'too closed' within the Luunda communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Equally relevant are Devisch's (1993) observations among the Yaka communities in the DRC, which explore comparable concepts of bodily porosity. It is in the belly that food is absorbed and whatever cannot be transformed into blood is excreted. He argues that 'blood is thought to be either produced or corrupted specifically in the abdomen and especially in the heart and liver' (Devisch 1993, 138). Maintaining a healthy bowel movement was considered very important and enemas were occasionally also taken to get rid of any illnesses. In Nakuru similar ideas regarding bowel movements and urinary output are linked with concerns about the toxicity of urban lifestyles. Njogu's story illustrates this well.

Njogu, the now deceased husband of Mama Muthoni, often immediately secluded himself in his bedroom when he came home. Mama Muthoni would prepare for him simple, mildly spiced meals using ingredients from Njogu's ancestral home, where they grew organic (*kienyeji* in Swahili) vegetables. When I asked him about his seemingly peculiar behaviour, he explained that it was a way to navigate the toxicity of the city. Njogu believed he was more frequently exposed to the 'threats' of Nakuru than was his wife, and therefore needed what he referred to as 'revitalisation' (*kuimarisha* in Swahili) within the safe confines of his compound. Despite his efforts to avoid external toxicity, Njogu's health was deteriorating. He was eventually hospitalised due to severe diabetes, which led to kidney failure. However, his greatest concern was not his medical condition, but rather the resulting fatigue and reduced urinary output. He found these symptoms particularly embarrassing, interpreting them as signs of weakness.

Herbalists echo Njogu's concerns about a disrupted life flow. They also draw a direct connection between the body's flow, whether through urinary output or bowel movements, and people's overall health and wellbeing. They emphasise that maintaining these flows is essential to sustaining vitality and preventing the negative effects of urban life and its associated toxicities. In the above transcript Njeri shows her audience how stomach content can turn dark black, emitting heat and toxic gases as a result of chemicals in foods that clog desired flows from, in her words, the 'inlet' (mouth) to the 'outlet' (anus). Part of the herbal solutions she promotes are herbal enemas that trigger bowel movements. Njeri argued that an excretion of a toxic build-up in the stomach and the restoration of a good bodily flow helps to bring back 'life', a term that encapsulates a variety of things including vitality, health, wellbeing, strength and virility.

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This aligns with Taylor's (1988) analysis of disrupted flows in Rwanda, where he explores the pathological significance of disturbances in bodily fluids, distinguishing between healthy and disordered flow. Taylor argues that in the past overseeing this flow was the sacred responsibility of the Rwandan divine king. Although Rwanda no longer has a monarchy, these symbolic constructs of 'flow' versus 'disrupted flow' continue to shape contemporary Rwandan popular medicine, evident in the discourse of both patients and healers.

Of particular relevance to my analysis is how the medicinal practices of herbalists such as Njeri conceptualise urban toxicity, especially from processed foods, as being absorbed through the stomach's porous membrane. It then infiltrates deep into the body and disrupts flows of life force between the self and the environment. That life force flows between humans and non-humans is well discussed by Myhre (2017), who demonstrates how Chagga practices in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania metabolise life force from a broader network of plants, animals and substances such as beer. In Nakuru these life-force transfers have become increasingly toxic, with the stomach mediating encounters between vulnerable 'insides' and perilous 'outsides'. The enteric system serves as a gateway through which urbanites internalise the daily realities of the city, including its pervasive 'heat'.

These dangerous 'outsides' are often attributed to influences originating from Nairobi, as discussed in the introduction of this book. These are viewed by my herbalist interlocutors as the gateway through which foreign (and often toxic) lifestyles and substances spread into the Kenyan hinterland. Nakuru's ambivalent position, between village and metropolis, makes it especially fertile ground for herbal discourses and practices.

Nakuru lost most of its glory during the 1980s and 1990s under the weight of structural adjustment plans. After reforms and the liberalisation of the market, especially under the rule of former President Kibaki, processed foods flooded towns as supermarkets started to mushroom across Kenya. Herbalists invoke widespread knowledge of the global processed food surge (see also Stuckler and Nestle 2012, 1) bombarding places such as Nakuru with nutrient-void products that even the government acknowledges are linked to illness, yet struggles to regulate adequately. It is against this backdrop that Nakuru became an important centre from which to argue for less porosity and come up with herbal interventions to deal with an increasingly toxic world.

Njeri's performances also call into question 'how and to what extent the self and the world mix' through absorptions between persons and

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substances (Solomon 2016, 5). In this context the stomach, gut and cities function as 'permeable interfaces of active traffic' (Solomon 2016, 5). The focus on maintaining a healthy 'inside' by regulating what enters the city, stomach or gut should be understood as a reaction to the intensified chemicalisation of the world under late capitalism. I use the term 'late capitalism' to refer specifically to the current stage of capitalism, marked by its contradictions, crises and often absurd disparities. This period is sometimes also called 'late stage capitalism', reflecting the notion that the world, characterised by its concentration of wealth and power, along with its dependency on imperialism and mechanisms of domestic control, may be approaching an inevitable collapse (Ford 2019, 20).

The stomach and gut as mediating membranes resonate with broader ideas about the body as the most tangible frame of experience and source for metaphoric transpositions (Devisch 1993, 133). As such, they are as much a lived reality as the borders that separate Nakuru from elsewhere, or the fence that secludes the homestead from the city, as exemplified by the story of the late Njogu. Njeri's focus on metabolism also recalls Landecker's (2011, 177) definition of 'new metabolism' as 'a model in which food enters the body and in a sense never leaves it, because food transforms the organism's being as much as the organism transforms it'.

Solomon's (2016) notion of 'metabolic living' is also insightful in this regard. Solomon researches the intricacies of the entanglements of food, bodies and fat in everyday life in Mumbai, India. He defines metabolic living as 'an actively ongoing process people endure to survive the porosity that all life entails' (Solomon 2016, 9) and investigates the 'connections between food and urban life to explain that absorption is taking hold as the grounds for experiencing and making sense of chronic illness' in Mumbai (Solomon 2016, 5).

'Metabolic living' extends its value beyond India as a framework linking food, body and city. It shifts focus from food's ties to intimacy and personhood towards its roles in metabolic science, urbanism and consumerism. Solomon's analysis centres around the notion of 'absorption', which he uses to describe the way in which bodies, substances and environments interact, transform and redefine one another in dynamic ways (Solomon 2016, 5).

Njeri's herbal performances exemplify this expansive understanding of metabolism, operating not just within individual bodies but across life domains and environments. By focusing on her metabolic discourse, we can analyse food toxins as integral to everyday life, rather than external anomalies. This aligns with Langwick's (2018, 435) notion

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of toxicity as an everyday 'condition to navigate', which here manifests as an enteric praxis – in which stomach and gut mediate the city's toxic excesses.

Absorbing toxic outsides

Older Nakuruans often reminisced about the 1990s, when Nakuru was reputed to be the cleanest town in Kenya. It even attracted delegations from near and far who sought to learn the town's model for maintaining cleanliness. However, a population surge following the 2007 election violence, combined with Kenya's economic liberalisation, caused Nakuru to lose its former glory. Many residents attributed the rise of hazardous chemicals infiltrating Kenya to the presidency of Mwai Kibaki, who served from 2002 to 2013. After years of stagnation under President Moi, Kibaki revitalised Kenya's economy, ushering in a period of rapid growth. His administration's 'look-east' policy and neoliberal agenda opened Kenya's markets extensively to non-Western powers, with China and Japan playing leading roles in driving the country's economic boom (Mabera 2016, 378).

Kibaki's administration also launched Kenya Vision 2030, a development blueprint heavily reliant on foreign investment and aimed at transforming Kenya into a middle-income country by 2030. These deepening economic ties led to increasing distrust in the government's ability to regulate food safety, fuelling panics over 'fake' (often Chinese) foods perceived as counterfeit or laden with toxins.

In Njeri's performance, her provocative use of the term 'Kanya' carries two layers of meaning. Firstly, it references the biblical figure of Cain (*Kaini* in Swahili), the first-born son of Adam and Eve and brother of Abel. In some interpretations of the Bible Cain, who murders Abel, is seen as the originator of evil, violence and greed. Secondly, 'Kanya' (China + Kenya) alludes to the increasingly contested relationship between China and Kenya, hinting at fears among Nakuruans that Kenya will one day be overtaken by China and become 'Kanya'. By drawing parallels between Cain, the growing Chinese presence and Kenya Vision 2030, Njeri underscores the omnipresence of 'evil' in the city in ways that resemble the Pentecostal moralisation of Nakuru's cityscape (see Chapter 4).

To reinforce her point, Njeri keeps her phone filled with videos documenting the food scams that plague Kenyan markets. One video, for instance, shows chickens being injected with antiretroviral medicine;

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another demonstrates the toxicity of Chinese-imported fish. These videos serve as examples of nationwide scandals involving counterfeit food, revealing collusion between the state and corporate or individual interests. Njeri uses such videos to reinforce her argument that diets are increasingly shaped by food industries dominated by a small number of affluent families. Among them are the British-Kenyan Delamere family, known for its dairy production and for controlling extensive farmland and conservancies across the greater Nakuru region. Nor is it uncommon to see social media feeds in Kenya lamenting the erosion of food sovereignty. The content of the threads is about, for instance, the claim that energy drinks fry brains, corrode stomachs, roast livers, reduce libido, impair sperm health and reduce sperm counts (Amerix 2023). Others advocate rejecting Bill Gates's influence, seen as eroding food sovereignty through GMO seed dependency (Wafula 2025).

Such rumours about food scams are raised against a backdrop of borders that are thought to be too open, making the lives of Kenyans more vulnerable to the afflictions of globalisation. In this regard Meiu's (2020) recent work on plastic belonging among Samburu communities in Kenya is insightful and complements my analysis of metabolic living in Nakuru. Meiu argues that concerns over plastics in Kenya gained momentum in the 1990s amid rising environmental awareness. During the 2000s this evolved into 'a war on plastics', ultimately culminating in the 2017 ban of single-use plastic bags in 2017 (Meiu 2020, 232). In Nakuru debates over banning plastic were especially evident in discussions about Lake Nakuru, which had become increasingly polluted by plastics washed in from town during heavy rains. Furthermore, the harmful toxic smoke above the Gioto rubbish dump, caused by burning plastic waste, was a frequent topic of debate among my interlocutors. Both cases were a significant obstacle for the Nakuru municipality, then heavily invested in the city-upgrade project.

Meiu (2020, 224) explores how plastic is associated with foreignness and its afflictions. His research with Samburu 'plastic boys' – men aged in their twenties to early forties who make a modest living selling antiques and plastic artefacts – reveals that the Samburu peoples consider these men, like the plastic objects they sell, to lack ties of descent and therefore as 'non-Samburu' (Meiu 2020, 224). This aligns with broader perceptions of plastic being representative of 'unbelonging'. Among his interlocutors both plastics and 'plastic boys' are perceived as devoid of life force (Meiu 2020, 226).

In Nakuru similar connotations of plastic and unbelonging persist. For example, Njeri demonstrated to her audience the shell membrane of

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an egg, which she claimed was made of 'plastic'. She argued that eggs from broiler chickens hatched in incubators (*mayai stima* in Swahili), rather than naturally; they lacked proper DNA and lineage. The reference to plastic is invoked to signify 'fakeness' and cheap foreign products from China (also noted by Meiu 2020, 226), viewed by many of my interlocutors as harmful to Kenyan sovereignty.

Eggs without DNA, 'plastic boys' devoid of life force and processed foods as 'sustenance without cultural value' are all reminiscent of Mbembe's (2003, 390) notion of 'necropolitics' or the 'subjugation of life to the power of death'. Njeri's identification of food chemicals with older forms of oppression such as colonialism and her use of 'Kanya' to demarcate a world haunted by evil are relevant here. Her statement bears resemblances to Mbembe's description of colonised bodies that are 'kept alive but in a state of injury' (Mbembe 2003, 21), Jean and John Comaroff's (2002) references to 'zombies' and Nixon's (2011) interpretation of environmental pollution as 'slow violence'.

These ideas demonstrate how certain bodies are 'designated [as] expendable' (Nixon 2011, 151) – known as 'discounted bodies' by Mbembe (2019, 10) – and are more exposed to the violence of market forces, environmental decay and chemical exposure through the 'violent inaction' of regulating authorities (Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi 2017, 1281; Davies 2018). Njeri's dystopic stance encapsulated by her use of 'Kanya' hints at the realisation that Kenyans are 'subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead' (Mbembe 2003, 40).

Concluding the analysis here would be overly simplistic and reduce Kenyans to passive victims of toxicity. Herbalists' efforts to modify the porosity of the stomach and gut, thereby restoring proper digestion and re-establishing the flow of life force, represent an active strategy to reconfigure the boundaries between inside and outside, autochthonous and foreign. These practices address the perceived over-porosity of these boundaries, seen as allowing harmful external influences to penetrate too easily. By taking control of toxic intrusions from foreign markets through their enteric interventions, herbalists assume a regulatory role that my interlocutors feel the government has failed to fulfil.

'Eating veins'

Herbalists' narratives draw from broader regional discussions about occult economies and witchcraft. Authors such as Geschiere (1997) and the Comaroffs (1993) offer essential insights into occult practices as

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reflections of modernity's 'excesses'. Smith's (2008) study of the Wataita community in Kenya similarly explores the metaphorical and imaginative dimensions of both witchcraft and development. He suggests that witchcraft and development 'emerged as opposite potentials of the same moment, the same act, and the same idea' (Smith 2008, 20), revealing how modernity, development and witchcraft often follow similar logics and operate in tandem.

Although these types of analyses are highly insightful, the life-worlds of Nakuru herbalists do not neatly fit within narratives that position them as abstract critiques or alternative interpretations of modernity, late capitalism or neoliberal markets. I do not view herbal practices in Nakuru as examples of primarily discursive critiques of power, as is common in interpretations of vernacular modernities and post-colonial agency (see among others Appadurai 1996; Gaonkar 2001; Piot 1999; Hodgson 2001). Rather than approaching these practices as symbolic commentaries on domination, I treat them as pragmatic and ontological engagements with how harm, power and foreignness materially enter bodies and life-worlds. Key to my analysis is the fact that witchcraft pivots on the distinction between insides and outsides, the autochthonous and the foreign (Geschiere 1997, 2013; Stroeken 2010). This provides a key interpretive frame for understanding how toxicity is perceived. The effects of *kemikali* are interpreted as a collapse of boundaries between insides and outsides, attributed to the intrusion of foreign markets into Kenya. They follow a logic similar to that of witchcraft that must be metabolised.

Taking this analogy into account, Njeri's use of the term 'eating veins' to describe the effects of food chemicals in processed products is hardly coincidental. The concept of *kemikali* 'eating veins' challenges the distinctions between who or what consumes and whom or what is consumed. Hunger and eating have long been metaphors in sub-Saharan Africa to discuss witchcraft, bribery, power, corruption and greed (Bayart 1993; D'Arcy and Cornell 2016; Fabian 1990; Schatzberg 2001). Hornborg (2014) extends the metaphor of eating into the realm of capitalism, arguing that if commodities are understood as the embodiment of other people's life energy, as Marx suggests, then capitalism is a transformation not only of slavery, as Graeber (2007) has argued, but also of cannibalism. Nyamnjoh (2018) similarly posits that Western modernity can be understood as a quest for superiority and supremacy, achieved through the metaphorical cannibalisation of the non-Western 'other'. The Comaroffs (1999, 279) write about 'occult economies', referring to the actual or perceived use of supernatural methods to achieve material gains.

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Echoing these arguments, herbalists in Nakuru describe chemicals as endowed with a kind of consciousness, infiltrating the stomach and feeding on the body much like spirits (*shetani* in Swahili) possess and consume their hosts in episodes of spirit possession. In this vernacular toxicology, such absorptions weaken the blood and ultimately lead to a 'loss of strength' (*kupotea nguvu* in Swahili).

Kemikali are invisible to the naked eye. They are also easily disguised in everyday products, part of the quest for success and power that undergirds global capitalism. Herbalists argue that chemicals are key substances used in the accumulation of wealth, which they ascribe to witchcraft and sorcery. In a similar fashion Pype (2012, 48) demonstrates that for Pentecostals in Kinshasa, 'witches' try to capture blood and 'eat life'. She states that Pentecostals consider this eating idiom or vampiric act a spiritual attack; consuming the blood of another is a technique to steal his or her soul. In Nakuru Njeri frequently reminded her audience not only that *kemikali* 'eat' (*kukula* in Swahili) people's veins and pollute blood, resulting in a loss of overall wellbeing, strength and virility, but also that the people behind these food businesses do not come from the same blood or lineage, making them difficult to trust. She discussed the sacrifices one makes by consuming processed foods, explaining to her audience how the 'demonic' chemicals 'weaken your blood' (*kupoteza nguvu ya damu* in Swahili), polluting urbanites' lineage ties and 'making them dry' (*kuparara* in Swahili). In using the term 'dryness', the opposite of what life force should embody, she refers to a state of bodily wasting and a depletion of bodily vitality: a consequence of the overheating effects of chemicals in the stomach.

The association of acts of witchcraft with foodstuffs suggests that in the act of eating, one's agency becomes intertwined with that of others. A meal typically involves the labour and influence of various agents, be they farmers, supermarket owners or food scientists, highlighting how consumption is deeply connected to broader networks of enacted agency. Herbal discourse in Nakuru confirms that things that are eaten can be dangerous, and that adulterated and processed foods invert the roles of eaters and what is eaten. *Kemikali* eat, and life force is eaten.

Through this inversion, chemicals affect relationality. Not only are veins 'cut' (*-kukata* in Swahili) but, using Strathern's (1996) terminology, relationships are also 'gathered', 'severed' or 'blocked' through *kemikali*'s eating of life force. According to Njeri's statements, chemicals deplete virility in both men and women. As *moyo* is transmitted through the union of paternal semen and maternal blood, the *kemikali*'s consumption of life inevitably leads to a complete depletion of a lineage's vitality.

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Njeri's stance towards chemical toxicity thus reveals how, once absorbed at the level of the 'intimacy of the house' (Geschiere 2013), chemical substances affect life and its reproductive and metabolic processes. By 'eating' blood, *kemikali* consume things that operate through blood, such as kin and the ability to reproduce kin relations. This process, coming back to Mbembe's notion of necropolitics (2003), becomes the foundation of 'dead-worlds'. The concept is reminiscent of Smith's (2008) observation regarding the link between the consumption of blood by *majini* and the inability to reproduce kin relations among Taita communities in Kenya (Smith 2008, 104).

This destructive effect on kinship and reproduction also shows how closely *kemikali* are tied to sociality. The intimate relationship between *kemikali* and sociality can be understood through Geschiere's (2013) notion of 'proximity' and Pype's (2016) concept of 'interference'. Both hint at the idea of undesired involvements of others in one's life. Njeri illustrates how external forces infiltrate the lives of urbanites through insidious, toxic entanglements that attack from within, turning global connectivity into a promiscuous threat (see also Chapter 4): food corporations operating beyond Kenya are believed to embed harm in daily meals, making distant relations metabolically intimate.

Metabolising heat

Herbal performances are closely linked to instances of 'overheating'. If the occult nature of *kemikali* signifies the collapse of boundaries between insides and outsides, disrupting life flow, then overheating is the inevitable consequence. Similar interpretations can be found among Sukuma communities in Tanzania, where the loss of 'coolness', or self-control, is understood as the result of witchcraft attacks (Stroeken 2000, 164). In Kisukuma witches are believed to feed on 'heat' (*nsebu* in Kisukuma), a term that simultaneously denotes unpredictable emotions and the transgression of taboos (Stroeken 2000, 164).

Stroeken's analysis of adultery among the Sukuma is equally instructive. He shows how both 'dirt' and 'foreign semen' are articulated in Kisukuma through the same idiom, *mako*, while children born out of wedlock are considered 'hot'. Heat, following these examples, can be understood as the breach of 'cool' interiors by matter out of place: whether dirt or foreign semen in the Sukuma context or *kemikali* and foreign markets in Nakuru's toxic everyday life.

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Heat's polysemy is also crucial to understanding the regulation of life flow in Njeri's medicinal practices. For each performance, she would use a second installation in addition to the bottle representing an artificial stomach. Every time she put chemical substances or foods into the bottle, she would add smaller quantities of the same to a mountain of salt, sugar, sweets and eggs, creating a volcano-like structure. This 'volcano', she argued, was an accurate representation of the foods people consume on a daily basis; if all went well, it would spontaneously erupt towards the end of her performance, proving the overheating and therefore 'devilish' effects of chemicals on the body. My interlocutors often spoke of *kemikali* as tools to 'steal *moyo*' and diminish viability. They served to disrupt the vital flow required for proper growth as manipulated foodstuffs halt calorie-to-life-force transformations and obstruct blood flow, ultimately hindering health, wellbeing and life itself.

Sexual potency and genitals, particularly the breasts and penis as the core 'transmitters of force' (Gutmann 1926, 659), are frequently scrutinised by healers and their clients in relation to toxicity and pollution. Similarly the mouth and anus, seen respectively as the 'inlet' and 'outlet' for toxic external influences, are central to discussions about sexual connotations among herbalists. Njeri's reference to 'worrying' news articles about the rise of homosexuality in Kenya, thereby linking anal sex with disrupted flows and toxicity (see also Chapter 4), is a key example. The anus, as a regulator of balance between influx and outflux, becomes a metaphor for maintaining equilibrium, which is consequently disturbed by anal sex. A parallel can be drawn with oral sex. Hendriks (2021, 408) discusses how in the Democratic Republic of the Congo concerns about the health effects of anal intercourse include fears that sperm intake would 'block' the body, as semen was thought to 'rot' inside and cause the belly to swell.

Regarding the above anti-queer discourse, I have argued elsewhere (Rahier and Devos 2024) that the romanticisation of a more organic and natural past also carries less progressive undertones. The rise of processed foods is often portrayed as a marker of moral decline, entangled with shifting gender roles and 'African' moral values. Criticism of processed foods goes beyond health concerns to reflect gendered expectations of domestic labour. In these women remain the primary kitchen caretakers, tasked with providing life-giving nourishment through fresh, healthy meals.

Traditionalist discourse thus often reinforces heteronormative and patriarchal values, as illustrated by Njeri. She also incorporates anti-queer gossip tabloids as stage props. Old newspapers featuring sensationalised

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stories that link the decline in male potency to 'gayness' are placed among objects such as bottles, eggs, condoms and bags. Similarly the late Njogu, a member of the Gikuyu council of elders or *kiama*, upheld conservative ideals by positioning women as household guardians and emphasising their duty to prepare labour-intensive, traditional organic (*kienyeji* in Swahili) foods.

These narratives suggest that external influences are to be feared and draw on a nostalgic vision of a 'static' and more 'authentic' past. In doing so, they reinforce gender hierarchies and domestic expectations that parallel conservative movements in the West, such as fascist notions of the organic state and modern-day ecofascism (Rahier and Devos 2024). How this romanticism for an 'authentic past' plays out is explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Concerns about the 'occult' nature of food adulterations and the consequent herbal practices in Nakuru exemplify how everyday urban experiences of pollution and toxicity are fundamentally metabolic processes. By mediating absorption and excretion, and modulating the body's absorptive capacities, herbalists and their patients reconfigure the boundaries between what enters the body and what is kept out. In doing so they address the unwanted porosity caused by the toxicities of urban life, transforming harmful 'heat' into manageable 'coolness'. By producing herbal concoctions to facilitate bowel movements, herbalists help urbanites to negotiate their body's exposure to toxic influences and 'cool down' overheated stomachs. In this context of 'cooling,' Stroeken (2018, 37) highlights that in medicinal practices all forms of initiation, whether rites of passage or healing, are seen as acts of 'cooling' (*kupoja* in Kisukuma). This term signifies the regulation of life itself, encompassing both the mitigation of heat and the achievement of social status and recognition.

In order to cool down overheated stomachs, herbalists use all kinds of herbal shrubs, the leaves of the *muleleshwa* tree being the most common ingredient. The shrub-like tree is endemic to the Nakuru region and its leaves have been used to treat a variety of gastro-intestinal disorders (for example, the 'tarmacker' with swollen legs whom Njuguna treated in Chapter 3). To provide immediate relief from the symptoms, Njuguna applied *muleleshwa* leaves to 'cool down' the overheated condition of his patient while awaiting further diagnosis. In referring to the efficacy of *muleleshwa* leaves, Njuguna used the Kikuyu verb root *-gita*, which originally connoted both 'to grow too thick to be seen through'[1] and 'to flourish, prosper', linking domestic order to wealth (Peterson 2002, 39). The verb referred to the act of fencing a Gikuyu compound to domesticate the 'hot' and 'untameable' forest

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outside in order to create a 'cool' and 'fertile' homestead inside, thereby assuring prosperity for the extended family.

Some of my Gikuyu research participants in Nakuru knew the verb *-gita* in relation to the construction of a thatched roof or to denote someone wealthy. They explained that someone who is able to build a thick thatched roof is considered wealthy, hence the analogy. Along the same line of reasoning, a Gikuyu compound was (and according to some Nakuruans still is) swept with 'cold' or 'sweet' trees (*miti mihoro* in Kikuyu) such as *muleleshwa*; these are non-poisonous, thornless trees that have soft leaves and often taste sweet.

In her analysis of interference in Kinshasa, Pype (2016, 248) suggests that urban suspicions towards the dangers of people and goods encountered along the streets (*nzela* in Lingala; *barabara* in Kiswahili) resonate with long-standing fears of 'the forest', understood as the domain outside the social world within Central African cosmologies. Commodities that can be found on the street or also, according to my data, in supermarkets, local hotels and bars are considered dangerous as their origins or networks are unknown. In this way they are similar to the world of the forest, inhabited by 'heat' in the form of wild animals, poisonous herbs and malevolent spirits (see also Chapter 4).

Njuguna's use of the verb root *-gita* in reference to this new urban moral order of 'risky' and 'safe' (or 'hot' and 'cold') spaces needs further unpacking. The semiotic potency of *-gita*, 'cooling' and 'heat', all references hinting at boundaries between toxic outsides and healthy, fertile insides, makes these concepts particularly useful in relation to urban experiences of toxicity and pollution. When urbanites consume herbal concoctions, herbalists such as Njeri and Njuguna explained that they 'fence' their stomach and gut to re-establish 'cool' and 'fertile' insides by growing bodies 'too thick to permeate through'. They are therefore shielded from potential interference by foreign markets and protect themselves against overheating, which could make them 'dry' or devoid of life force. This is similar to Njogu's practice of revitalisation (*kuimarisha* in Swahili) within the safe premises of his compound.

The use of herbal concoctions to alter the porosity of the stomach and gut, and the subsequent cooling and soothing effects they provide, demonstrates how everyday experiences of pollution and toxicity are addressed corporeally. Through these practices people work to achieve cooler states of being in a world where bodies and environments alike bear increasing toxic burdens, eroding their capacities to sustain life.

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Sustaining life

Kemikali in foods are understood to be everywhere. They constitute an invisible yet tangible presence that affects the body, has become an inescapable part of daily life and is increasingly entangled with global food supply chains that my interlocutors believe are manipulated by those in power. In these conditions, where the potential for viability is eroded and life gradually becomes threatened rather than nurtured, herbalists feel compelled to call for a proactive bodily response. Their teachings encourage urbanites consciously to confront and mitigate the toxic exposures that infiltrate both their bodies and their surroundings, positioning these practices as essential for preserving health and wellbeing in a compromised urban environment. Herbalists reveal that navigating these toxic environments implies an enteric praxis. The enteric system mediates what the nation's borders are unable to keep out: foreign interference threatening Kenya's food sovereignty. More specifically, herbalists see the lining of the stomach and gut as a porous boundary between the self and the outside world. By altering the porosity of such boundaries, toxic interference may be physically mediated and metabolised, restoring the body's ability to sustain life and maintain wellbeing.

The interference caused by chemicals, if left unchecked, can penetrate the intimacy of the household, where it is perceived as an occult attack on a person's life flow. Herbalists describe this collapse of insides and outsides as an escalation of 'heat', asserting that these *kemikali* attacks overheat the stomach and therefore ultimately lead to physical deterioration and bodily wasting. Quoting Hoffman (2017, 9), 'the present is toxic. But within it, impossible new bodies are born.' In the case of Nakuru, this refers to bodies through which 'hot' and 'toxic' outsides are given sense, both materially and metaphorically, and are consequently metabolised to forge more viable conditions that sustain a 'cool' life.

Notes

1 Used to refer to the hedge surrounding a compound.

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