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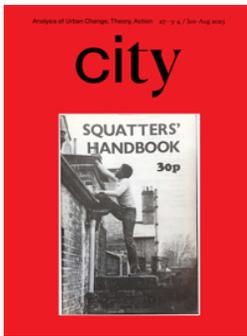
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Urban way of life as survival: navigating everyday life in a pluriversal global south

Prince K Guma [ID], Mwangi Mwaura, Eunice Wanjiku Njagi and Jethron Ayumbah Akallah

Southern cities have become increasingly inscribed in broader postcolonial and neoliberal development forces. In tandem with global pandemics, digital threats, and migration and climate crises, these forces have posed critical implications for all residents, decimating the middle class, widening the gap between elites and masses, deepening the cost of living for the urban majority, and making it harder to rise through the ladder. In such an environment, navigating everyday life increasingly becomes synonymous with survival, constituting a proactive process of inhabiting the city, where the self and the urban are always in the making. This paper examines prominent accounts of the urban way of life as survival. We take one large city of Nairobi in eastern Africa as a representative case, highlighting manifold rhythms and ensembles of survival, such as how residents make ends meet, optimize for a soft life, niche social infrastructures, and cultivate technological infrastructures. In their material manifestations, these rhythms and ensembles demonstrate the role and centrality of urban residents as proactive producers and co-creators of multiple urban forms. They draw us to a mode of survival that is continuous rather than intermittent and of inhabitation that is reparative rather than castigatory.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

1. Introduction

Southern cities have become increasingly emboldened with and inscribed within wider geopolitical forces of traveling policy, planning ideas, and frameworks of the past colonial era and present neoliberal ideologies and institutions. While policy programs continue to design aggressive control measures to impose 'order' by eliminating those that they perceive to be obstructive obstacles to urbanization and modernity (Demissie 2007; Bayat 2012), city plans continue to exclude, off-stage and outlaw settlements, homes, and livelihoods at the fringes of cities (Guma 2016, 2021). Rather than transforming local processes of production and capabilities of direct development, city plans, and policies continue to perpetuate urban segregation, where items such as bulldozers are used as principal planning and policy tools (Manji 2015) to upgrade urban places, improve residential areas, revitalize vacant land, and adapt city-regions to long-term visions of neoliberal capitalism. These realities, which are heightened by the effects of a global pandemic, migration and climate crises, and digital threats, affect all urbanites. For example, they decimate the middle class, make it harder to maintain a grip or hold of class or rise through the ladder, widen the gap between the elites and the masses, and deepen the 'cost of living' for both urban poor and affluent. In this environment, proactive mechanisms become the primary mode of navigating life in the city. Residents look beyond neoclassical structural and neoliberal solutions to devise out-of-the-box formulas and tactics. Amidst the evolving restructuring of cities under growing processes of urbanization, industrialization, digitization, and climate adaptation, it becomes imperative to recast survival and what it means in the contemporary present.

This paper examines the unfolding of urban life and survival, drawing from multiple angles, forms, and articulations in the global south. Specifically, we ask three related questions. First, what are the prominent accounts of survival in the global south? Second, what types of expertise, technologies, logics, sensibilities, and rationalities manifest in the urban survival processes? And third, how does studying and recasting survival from the global south challenge, reframe, or provoke our way of seeing the urban?

In answering, we propose the notion of the 'urban way of life as survival' to connect the temporal and spatial aspects of navigating everyday life in the urban south. We propose this notion to go beyond the linear, simplistic, and demarcative views of survival as something that is structurally produced, applying only to the urban poor and marginalized; or as something associated with negative undertones and connotations and therefore to be overcome or merely tolerated. We argue that survival is not just need-based, necessity driven, and animated by threats of urban and ecological catastrophe where only the best fit can (or are expected to) survive (i.e. in the survival of the fittest). Instead, it is a normal part of life that affects all and operates across all forms of urban life in the global south. Thus, the view of the 'urban way of life as survival' offers a more inclusive and nuanced reading of survival as a universal and multifaceted phenomenon that constitutes a way of life, a way of living, and a way of being in the city. It recasts survival as an ordinary and ever-present feat that is part and parcel of life in the city; it is an ongoing process that does not stop and

finally or fully completes after one 'arrives' or thrives, but continues beyond real or imagined spatial and temporal dispositions. Survival is a license that makes possible urban modes at the core of inhabitation. When seen through its permanency, perpetuity, and inevitability as a way of life, survival forms and stimulates a reappraisal of how we should read urban processes in a pluriversal global south.

We take one large city of Nairobi in eastern Africa as a representative case to highlight how residents navigate everyday life in a hardcore, fast-paced, and disaggregated city. As a disaggregated city, informal settlements which constitute about 15 percent of Nairobi's landmass, house up to 65 percent of its urban population. It is a hardcore city in the sense that state and private actors have historically ignored the material needs of large numbers of its urban population for several reasons including legacies of colonialism, internal political corruption, and an anti-poor bias in city planning, survival has become a core and inevitable part of how residents inhabit the city. Thus, to inhabit Nairobi is to inhabit a thickening of heterogeneous and provisional intersections and webs of networks defined by and through survival strategies, practices, and trajectories. As an urban resident, one is not a mere recipient but an active participant in co-producing everyday solutions. Here, survival may constitute less a counter-strategy than a human and technical operative mechanism consisting of different strategies and tactics, rationales and sensibilities, and rules and skills that make urban living possible. As the concentration of urbanization and urban life in Nairobi has long been influenced by socio-spatial exigencies of survival, residents have long described the city itself as 'shamba la mawe.' 'Shamba la mawe,' a Swahili slang for 'farm of stones' or 'concrete jungle' has come to constitute an everyday pithy formulation that residents have used to intimate the city as a place of pressures and uncertainties where one must be steadfast and tenacious to survive. Residents have also long expressed survival through their everyday routines and language. For example, it is common for Nairobians to use the expression 'nasurvive tu' as a vernacular greeting with an urban bias. This refers to 'I am just surviving' and is sometimes shortened to 'nai-survive,' a combination of 'Nairobi' and 'survive.' All of this, in addition to highlighting the disposition to the urban way of life as survival, also highlights the shift from the helplessness of the yesteryears of "navumilia kuwa Mkenya" (i.e. "I tolerate being Kenyan"). Thus, survival is not a form of surrender to the defiant spirit of 'uta-do?', but a form of urban assertiveness. For the urban majority, it constitutes an urban way of life, a pro-active dwelling in the city, or better still, a recreation and reproduction where both the self and the urban are always in the making.

Ultimately, this paper offers a modest attempt at theorizing from and with the south. In particular, we contribute to a way of reading, theorizing, and imagining urban life in the context of a pluriversal global south. By pluriversal global south, we imply a world where the human and non-human, and social and technical are relational and interconnected, and entail multiple trajectories, configurations, and explications for urban life. Thus, our paper offers a recount of urban life that recasts survival beyond the remit of twentieth-century and typically Eurocentric and neocolonial assumptions and impositions. In so doing, we advance a heterodox set of voices from the global south and contend that the role of diverse urban populations as producers, co-creators, and promoters

of multiple urban forms need to assume centrality in how we read, study, and visualize southern urban worlds.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We start with a review of literature on and instigate additional lines of inquiry around the urban way of life as survival in the context of a pluriversal global south. The following section examines rhythms and ensembles of survival strategies, practices, and trajectories, highlighting multiple ways urbanites make ends meet, optimize life, niche social infrastructures, and cultivate technical infrastructures. We conclude with implications for policy, planning, and research.

2. Urban way of life as survival in the global south

A horizon of critical geography and anthropology has examined different manifestations of survival as an urban issue, grounding survival through narratives inextricably linked with spatiotemporal practices of transient, makeshift, incremental, and provisional urbanism. Simone (i.e. 2004, 2016, 2022; Simone and Abouhani 2005) has offered a great starting point for critically discerning how the urban majority construct various survival strategies, specializations, and identities necessary for urban life in African cities and the global South. Simone (2016) highlights articulations of survival-by-always-doing-something-else, narrating from the experiences of urban residents how everyone 'always did something else to make ends meet and more, while those with no discernible jobs found ways to either live off the backs of others or accumulate money through the proliferating cracks in territorial and institutional networks' (Simone 2016, 210). In other words, to keep moving is to make ends meet, as this movement is what makes work 'available' and makes inhabiting the city's precarity possible. It makes it possible to create networks, get short-time gigs, find something, and sustain oneself in a city whose survival conditions demand more flexibility, mobility, and a hardcore mentality. Therefore, one must be flexible (Simone 2004), radically open (Mbembe 2017), and mobile to do work, be at work, or survive, as anything can change at any time. Maintaining moments and pendulums is how the urban majority construct various survival strategies, specializations, and identities necessary for urban life in the global south.

Different studies, drawing from critical infrastructures and popular technologies and economies have shown how residents in their urge for survival calibrate vital, incremental, and social strategies to navigate urban life. During times of intensified crisis, social infrastructures, and social capital become vital for survival (McFarlane and Silver 2017; Silver 2014; McFarlane 2012), providing what an "ecology of support" or a type of social infrastructure that serves as a safety net, especially during times of crisis (Klinenberg 1999; Piazzoni 2022). In different urban settings, residents reconfigure technologies to suit their needs, enabling survival by recalibrating infrastructure and services to their needs and actions that constitute citizenship indicators beyond the norms of rights and protests (Guma 2020, 2021; Guma and Mwaura 2021). Popular motorcycle taxis (or bodaboda riders) in Kampala have generated intense forms of sociality, solidarity, mutual obligation, and urban vitality (Doherty 2017). Often, these and other urban populations have formed instant collaborations turning to

alliances with humans to help dissipate the everyday risks and threats to sustain survival in the city. Amidst diminishing formal employment and perpetually precarious urban sectors of employment, many residents have sometimes sought countertheses to state regulations that they deem prohibitive, often as a way of bypassing reductive policies and demands through a mentality that leads to insurgent operations in their everyday work in the city (Guma 2022). Bodaboda riders, for instance, may 'cut corners' when they have to, take the back route to evade surveillance, or even stake claim on their agency and right to the city through collective agitations. Likewise, privately owned minibusses (locally known as matatu) which are the primary and popular public transport operations in Nairobi may exhibit self-identified 'underground' and innovative yet dissentive artworks and graffiti as well as the drivers' use of loud music and Sheng (a slang that combines Swahili and English) (Guma 2021).

Academic and activist engagements with different aspects of survival in Nairobi have offered critical and striking accounts of how residents niche alternative futures of urbanity in their everyday life. Thieme (2018) offers an example of how transient populations in the city survive through a kind of 'hustling' that requires some form of risk-taking with no prior maps, inclinations, or apparent possibilities. Thieme, Ference, and van Stapele (2021) show how in the absence of formal jobs, urban youth may find different ways to negotiate tacit urban forms and demands to make ends meet, such as living off the backs of others, accumulating money by exploiting cracks in the system, or simply by roaming around, idling and being in different locations at different time zones as an opportunistic and strategic survival mechanism. Employing the popular 'watu wa mtaa' phrase used by marginalized Nairobians to imply not just the neglect of ghetto inhabitants but also their ability to survive and endure through a variety of local strategies, Kimari (2017) demonstrates how youth determinedly manoeuvre the informalities of life on the margins in part by exuding confidence in their ability and agility to undertake small experiments that allow them to shape their terrains and survive extreme tragedies and ecologies of exclusion. Here, survival demands more flexibility, mobility, and a hardcore mentality.

In the literary genre, Nairobi has featured in many stories where Kenyan authors, through a kind of (self-) retelling, have expressed a wide range of evocative writings and representations of the city through depictions that echo diverse obsessions and fascinations, and irritations and fears about global culture, domestic traditions, postcolonial development, and urban society. For instance, since his first novel in 1964, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has influenced and inspired hundreds of accounts and narratives by Kenyan writers of Nairobi as a representational site of such depictions and manifestations. Meja Mwangi (i.e. 1973) has attended to intricate, complex, and nuanced narratives and questions of identity struggles and acknowledgment of multiple identities, cross-culturality, and community for transient inhabitancy within Nairobi's urban sphere. Mwangi (ibid.) has used the metaphor of 'cockroaches scuttling about in a frantic dance of survival' to portray urban survival amidst Nairobi's chaos (Kurtz 1998, 158). Many other novels such as Mukoma wa Ngugi's (2009) 'Nairobi Heat' and 'Black Star Nairobi' (2013) appear to have not been written in a vacuum but rather draw extensively from specific contexts and

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situations that attest to the different ways that survival unfolds as an urban way of life. These authors have used several narratives and imaginaries, tales and legends, and accounts and projections to embody the essence of urban life and survival and offer imaginaries and snapshots of fleeting, mobile, and small stubborn makeshift constructions, products, and exhibitions on the streets, and everyday hustles referred to as 'jua kali.' Moreover, they have showcased various aspects of Nairobi's history, current state, and envisioned future in light of the responsive and proactive bottom-up or top-down approaches through which urban residents appropriate space, infrastructures, and policies in the city for survival.

In tandem, this work highlights survival as a powerful aspect in southern urban environments. It circulates in contradictory ways and acts as a symbol of opposition to oppressive and all-encompassing hegemonic regimes. It is a way of navigating the modern industrialized society that has lost its way and is on the cusp of a catastrophe of global proportions. To a greater extent, this work views survival as a coping and navigation mechanism in urban depravity, precarity, and resilience where residents devise innovative and creative responses that characterize the ability to live amidst disaster, failure, and uncertainty. It highlights practices, strategies, and discourses embedded in what it means for people to survive in everyday spaces amidst complex subject-state relations of inclusion and exclusion. This work adds to a discourse that has piqued within southern urbanism—mainly focusing on the vagaries and peculiarities of 'cityness,' 'urban-ness' and complexity and vibrancy of urban life (Mbembé and Nuttall 2004; Pieterse and Simone 2013; Simone and Pieterse 2018; Guma 2021). However, while crucially valuable for grounding survival through narratives inextricably linked with spatiotemporal practices of transient, makeshift, do-it-yourself, incremental and tactical urbanism for valorizing geographies of informality, adversity, and marginality, three areas still leave room for further study and provocation.

Firstly, there is a need to add a theorization that recasts survival as a distinct, inevitable, and ubiquitous urban practice and way of life for all residents. Accordingly, we go beyond views of survival-as-informality—and counter the relative vagueness of narratives where survival is theorized from the view of informal settlements, informal economies, and informalized modalities of access to services. We transcend the typical focus on processes and practices of the urban poor in geographies and communities that exhibit spatial and social inequalities, segregation, and marginalization, where residents who navigate the high degree of precarity are pushed to shove and to the limits and the edges of the city (Simone 2008). We contend that rather than reproaching 'survival' as a euphemism for navigating difficulty, poverty, marginality, and deficiency under moments of pressure and informality, it is better to capture the notion in its different strains and facets to more realistically explain different aspects and realities of the urban way of life to provide a more comprehensive and holistic view of urban life focusing not just on the urban poor but also the working class, middle income, and affluent residents.

Secondly, there is a need to go beyond certain terms that lend a certain reification to dualistic and bipolar dichotomies in describing urban life (survival-thrival), urban forms (slums-cities, central-peripheral, formal-informal,

legal-illegal, planned-unplanned), constellations (material-immaterial, human-non-human, public-private, informal-formal labor), and arrangements (unstructured-structured, uncivil-civil, unruly-rule-based, unpredictable-predictable). These terms propagate contrast between two worlds—the inner and the outer city, the orderly and the chaotic city, and the center and its periphery or surroundings. Yet, these two worlds are somewhat entangled and symbiotically play off each other in diverse ways. They are not set in opposition to each other but are entangled and co-productive. Rather than attempt to highlight or explain binary divisions that influence survival ideologies and affective economies, we explore the complex and interconnected ways that urban life and survival interact, inform one another, and together, enhance our understanding of urban inhabitation in cities of the global south.

And thirdly, there is a need to study cities beyond the historical disposition of transience. For long, cities in Africa have been visualized through the lens of people who maintain robust ties with the rural courtesy of the colonial exclusive policies that sought to control urban movement for the indigenes; especially as a mechanism of controlling labor in pursuit of the colonial and racial agenda. Yet, most urban populations in African cities today have strong ties not to the rural but to the urban. This brings us to the notion of home versus house in urban diction: how does this shape the everyday interactions and imaginations in the city? In this paper, we attribute our analysis to residency and the status of home; reflecting in our focus on the emerging drift in many southern cities where young populations claim stake in the city or its streets and neighborhoods as permanent residents with established roots and strong kinship and family ties here. Thus, they are not transitory inhabitants on the move, but typically Nairobians by birth or through their connections with the city and nowhere else to call home. They must approach urban inhabitation from a more reparative rather than castigatory manner. They must do this not only for their own good, but also for the good of the city. In other words, for the city to be better; better for them to call home, not just a place they inhabit.

In sum, this paper contributes a southern-inspired analytical agenda for defining and discerning conceptual geographies of the urban, emphasizing the need for alternative epistemologies and "theory cultures alert to their locatedness and sources of inspiration, open to learning from elsewhere, respectful of different scholarly traditions and committed to the revisability of theoretical ideas" (Robinson 2016, 188). Heeding to Guma (2021) and Bhan's (2019) provocation that speaking of Southern urban practice requires rooting oneself in a situated location and from a particular core of urban systems and configurations, we offer a post-structural and plural understanding of the city through a critical reading of urban life and survival that reflects particular realities, contexts, and experiences. We draw inspiration and the contention that any city-based research must be conducted with a willingness to acknowledge that cities in other parts of the world may offer different insights into urban processes being studied (Robinson 2006). Thus, it is imperative to consider new concepts to adequately capture this diversity, alternative theories to challenge universalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), and more inclusive perspectives including non-expert perspectives (Lawhon and Truelove 2020), to broaden the scope of urban theory (Guma 2021; Bhan

2019), in part, by 'continuing to stretch existing terms and ideas, insist on a more inclusive canon, or write from an emergent southern one' (Lawhon and Mwaura 2023: n.p.).

3. Rhythms and ensembles of survival in Nairobi

This section exhibits a series of prominent accounts at the core of urban inhabitation. Drawing from a mode of delivery that cuts loose from stylistic conventions, particularly in challenging and blurring boundaries between storytelling and ethnography and chronicling and situating, we articulate the permanency, perpetuity, and inevitability of survival as a way of life through different rhythms and ensembles that highlight how residents produce, co-create and promote multiple urban forms. Our findings emerge from personal observations and interviews between March 2015 and June 2022. The observation method constituted a research strategy of immersion where we sought to identify different urban realities and contexts in Nairobi, and structured urban walks across different streets through fleeting engagements and walkabouts. We observed different economies of everyday life, infrastructures of care, sociality and solidarity, and technological infrastructures of survival. On the other hand, the interview method was semi-structured and lasted around 45 min, with the longest being over 70 min long. We interviewed twelve urban residents with experiential knowledge of urban life and survival in Nairobi.

The overall questions of interest during our interview and observation process included the following: what is visible about survival; how do residents intuit themselves in Nairobi; how do they engage (with creatives, in inclusive spaces, through social or communal solidarities); what tactics and strategies do they employ; what types of expertise, technologies, logics, sensibilities, and rationalities are manifested in daily processes of survival; how is survival perceived and experienced beyond individual experience?

Deriving from this process, we selected a set of ethnographic storylines, anecdotes, sketches, testimonials, impressions, and reflections that highlight survival networks at the core of inhabitation in Nairobi as an urban context-oriented through plural, multiple and continuous trajectories. We recount these ethnographic materials through the lens of four main interlocutors: 1) Edson, who makes ends meet in a hardcore city; 2) Tayari who optimizes for a soft life in a fast-paced city; 3) Imani, who together with her family, friends and family friends, niches social infrastructures of care and solidarity; and 4) Kennedy, who cultivates technological infrastructures of survival through grassroots community-based efforts. Three of our research collaborators and interlocutors (Edson, Tayari, and Kennedy) were born and raised in Nairobi, while one (Imani) has lived in Nairobi for over 20 years. They both view Nairobi as the city they choose as their permanent home.

3.1. Making ends meet in a hardcore city
Edson, a prospective entrepreneur, navigates urban precarity by seeking out additional alternative opportunities beyond formal employment. Edson currently lives with two friends in a single-room apartment in Mathare. This urban area

enacts a situated and located agency as an urban sphere that has long been bypassed, neglected, and ignored by central frameworks on a large scale. Urban populations must self-organize and restructure themselves through precarious networks of activism and participation to survive. Thus, survival demands a hardcore mentality. Edson and his friends (also colleagues) must work different shifts (i.e. one on the morning shift, one on the afternoon shift, and another on the night shift), driving the same vehicle. They alternate their sleeping schedules to keep the survival pendulum in motion. In their operations, they employ available digital hailing applications (Uber and Bolt), social networking sites (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), and mobile payment systems (M-Pesa and Airtel Money) in their daily work. For Edson, digital hailing platforms offer stability through low-cost marketing opportunities. They allow Edson and his friends a cost-effective platform to interact with potential customers and clients, create new markets, navigate profit-making gaps, and sustain themselves in business. For them, survival is an urban way of life, just as the urban way of life becomes synonymous with survival since to inhabit a hardcore city effectively is to survive continuously by being tactical and calculative where one must maneuver to make ends meet.

Edson and his colleagues must labor beyond bounds within his free time to make ends meet. This entails strategic moments of roaming around opportunistically to look for work—a strategy locally referred to as 'maraoundi' (sheng for going round). This strategy encompasses earning a living at the street level by means of acquiring creative skills, aptitude, and street-smartness—i.e. through pursuing casual work downtown ranging from fixing and repairing cars, leaky sewage systems and pipes, and broken meters and appliances. The logics, calculations, and rationalities that drive Edson's maneuvers are unpredictable, sometimes invisible, and often bizarre to an unfamiliar stranger. Still, this speaks to how residents seek to inhabit the city not temporarily and precariously without agency, but as residents with the right to transverse and negotiate the city. Edson argued that he must do this since 'What Nairobi teaches one is the need to think outside the box [and this] entails being ready to try as many things [rather than being] confined in any of these boxes.' Edson argues that this is better than indulging in grassroots 'gang' work within the neighborhood where 'gangs' have become essential for survival: gangs help youth to garner deeper connections and networks. These connections and networks are essential for acquiring gigs including repair and mechanic-related work. While 'gangs' offer youths a much-needed supportive community (because cliques of their nature often tend to be collectivist, not individualistic in their mode of operation), and their members espouse radical practices of care (since they are solidarity, offer an alliance, and protect members from impeding harm), they are dangerous in the sense that they become addictive where rather than becoming a temporary phase in life, they become rather a life commitment in the urge to survive and to not have to 'burn any bridges in this hardcore city.'

This story is thus one of the manifold rhythms and ensembles constantly in motion: Edson and his colleagues operate through heterogeneous modes that offer a set of skills and labor, which draw from their life experiences. While avoiding the temptation of joining a gang outfit to make ends meet, Edson must rely on his two friends for the most part as this has now become increasingly

central to his survival. These friends constitute a support system transcending the dominant neoliberal order and power forms. It questions (and complements) elite norms and systems of inequalities and is not captured by the limits of standard institutions. This system offers alternative avenues to extant exclusive, ineffective, and often inadequate systems. For Edson, such a support system offers livability beyond outlooks of survival as an endless rather a day-at-a-time rehearsal. It demonstrates both economic and survivalist logics and articulates radical forms of care, solidarity, and organizing at the grassroots beyond sheer capitalist accumulation. This support system reflects micro-spatial urban practices, dynamics, and realities that fuel the increasingly powerful popular economies of the urban south, where survival becomes an urban way of life.

For Edson, living in a single-room apartment, working different shifts, and alternating sleeping schedules in tactical and calculative ways constitute innovative maneuvers and strategies to make ends meet. Survival, thus, does not imply the fight to live, endurance through hardship, or simply existing amidst adverse conditions. Rather, it is a proactive process aimed at continuously creating and experimenting with different possibilities in search of solutions and ways to make ends meet. It is a type of survival where he and his colleagues must operate at the intersection of multiple marginalities along the spectrum of formality and informality—they may flexibly bypass official means and circumvent restrictive customs as a way of laboring beyond bounds to navigate the city. They make ends meet by taking only the necessary risks required to make ends meet: all this is fine as long as they do not join a gang outfit of sorts to survive unless the worst comes to the worst. They would instead maneuver for now than deal with the complex dynamics in a highly precarious and hard-core urban context.

3.2. Optimizing for a soft life in a fast-paced city

Tayari, a jill of all trades, survives by juggling many things to maximize income streams. Tayari grew up in Madaraka, a fenced and gated middle-class estate approximately three miles from the city center. The estate was constructed in the 1970s by the then city council of Nairobi and has long been regarded as an ideal dwelling for burgeoning middle-class residents owning or renting 2—to 3-bedroom houses and apartments. Tayari still lives here as she appreciates what the estate offers: a perfect home and community livelihood, adequate gardens, parking lots, and other necessities that tend to be rare in Nairobi's other neighborhoods. Outside of the roughly physical and inflexible streets of much of Nairobi, Madaraka offers a neat and confined environment, it offers a 'soft life' that many Nairobians aspire for.

Optimizing for a soft life, Tayari must hustle and bustle through the hurdles of urban life and be bold and creative to optimize avenues for social and economic capital and opportunity in a fast-paced city. Tayari must 'wear different hats from time to time' and constantly seek improvement for herself and others. For example, Tayari constantly seeks new opportunities in addition to her temporary employment at a media house. While only a recent graduate from a tertiary institution, Tayari wears many other hats: she is a feminist, a poet, a spoken word artist, a writer, a public speaker, a vlogger, a blogger, a podcaster, an activist, a financier, an online marketer, and an influencer. In an age where access

to the internet and digital platforms have enhanced the spread of cosmopolitan cultures, digital platforms are critical infrastructure in her everyday work. Tayari employs online platforms like Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and WordPress to create content and keep up, publish poems, articles, videos, photos, and music, and advocate for or against global concerns. Tayari particularly uses TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube to engage audiences through short thought-provoking yet entertaining videos, lip-syncing to powerful anthems, performing dance challenges, and creating videos that reach broad audiences. In addition, she raises awareness and funds for various causes related to human rights, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence. For her, it is insufficient to depend on a single avenue: to survive in the fast-paced city, one must tactfully position themselves within the consumption-driven culture of the internet, where online streaming, social media, and entrepreneurship allow or facilitate a kind of gigs, moments and pendulums that make it possible for one to sustain their livelihoods. One has to plan and orient themselves accordingly, as Tayari argues: 'Kanairo inabidi umekaa ngumu,' a Sheng expression for 'in this harsh city of Nairobi, one must don a thick skin' as the survival conditions of the city demand more flexibility, mobility, and fast-paced mentality.

The urge for a soft life in the fast-paced city has led Tayari to dream that one day, she will start and run her business enterprise—all she needs is to keep going, keep growing, and seek out opportunities. Tayari must partake in a laborious routine not just because this has become an urban way of life for many urban youths but also because of what she aspires for in terms of the kind of urban life she highly idolizes which is synonymous with a leisurely lifestyle. She must be many things simultaneously and possess the capacity to compose and decompose to become different things at different times (Simone 2016). Thus, to survive is to keep the wheels in motion, where survival is an ongoing process that continues even beyond her own thrival. Here, survival is more outward-looking, long-term, and future-oriented; it requires a particular kind of creativity, determination, and action geared toward change; capital, connections, and collaborations; and a real and engageable audience to support and amplify the impact of hustles. Thus, Tayari must constantly move with the trends of the moment (i.e. 'what's on' now) to keep with the pace of motion, but also move with the flow to evade the old way of doing things and optimize for a soft life.

Tayari's story highlights a distinct, generic, and emerging form of survival among urban youths who aspire and work towards maximizing possibilities for new opportunities. It is representative of a general trend where elite and middle-class urbanites who inhabit the new age of faster and more paced, flexible, and dynamic urban lifestyles are not fazed by their attempt to create new possibilities and opportunities proactively—constantly, they must strive for more to keep up with the fast pace of urbanization to survive in the fast-paced city. Tayari's story stimulates a reappraisal of how we should represent and understand urban life in the global south as something always in process—never finally completed; and survival not as something to overcome or merely tolerate, but instead as a part of life. For many urbanites like Tayari, survival is not simply a vehicle that stops once one has 'arrived' or thrived. It is not a vehicle where one alights after they have achieved 'success' but is a continuous vehicle

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of upward social mobility and a source for innovation, technological progress and wealth creation, and socio-economic networks and self-organization. Indeed, for Tayari, online presence through social media and online platforms is essential as it helps her build an audience, her most prominent market, where she shares news and opportunities, engages in informal chit chat and 'banter,' memes and emojis, and experiences, but also establish social groups, hangs out in bars, cafes, restaurants, bookstores, and theaters, and seeks out relationships and networks beyond individualistic lifestyles. This reflects how she, and other youths like her, are shaping new lifestyles that cater to youthful demands and tech-savvy populations, driving demand for modern, technology-driven amenities and services as well as cultural and entertainment in popular urban economies.

3.3. Niching social infrastructures of care and solidarity

Imani, an enterprising career woman and mother of five, navigates life in the city by niching social infrastructures of care and solidarity. Imani has a stable source of income and thriving businesses in beauty and cosmetics and real estate. She lives in Kilimani, an affluent mixed residential and commercial estate in Nairobi. With her friends, family, and family friends, Imani has formed a merry-go-round group, colloquially referred to as Chama in Kenya. This Chama comprises 30 women who combine resources to achieve common or individual financial goals. In its typical sense as a merry-go-round, every member contributes 10,000 KES (80 USD) weekly through cash deposit or digital platforms such as M-Pesa, Kenya's ubiquitous mobile phone-based money and payments service. Every seven days, one member takes home KES 300,000 (2,400 USD): If a member cannot individually raise 10,000 KES a week, they can partner with someone else and each contribute 5,000 and will be counted as a single member. When their turn to receive money comes, they are given 300,000 KES that they share. As a micro-savings and investment group, the Chama helps friends, family and family friends navigate the city together through social networks and support systems beyond official and established structures. Members contribute to improving each other's conditions and economic life through it. Pooling money together makes it possible for members to start business ventures as a strategy for survival.

In urban contexts where uncertainty and precarity constitute the norm, Chamas serve as forms of the social infrastructure of care and solidarity and are critical valves of survival. As a solidarity group, Imani's Chama also acts as a platform through which members organize social events and activities, including monthly excursions outside the city. Being an exclusive and tight-knit group of friends, family, and family friends, new members must undergo extensive interviews and be introduced by an existing member. Once one has been thoroughly vetted, one can then join the group. The Chama thus highlights a form of infrastructure formed under social conditions and emotions to fellow members beyond the sheer logics of capitalism. As a hub of care, solidarity, and survival, the Chama allows members to raise capital and expand their social infrastructure and survival networks even within their small circle of family, friends, and family friends. One can always hit a hard rock within a time-based, uncertain, and unpredictable city like Nairobi. An emergency can arise (i.e.

illness or death of a loved one) at anytime. Chamas help residents to navigate risk and to be accountable to themselves collectively. With a Chama like the one Imani is a member of, she can inhabit the city through radically open and flexible intersections and webs of urban life and survival.

Our interviews with Imani highlighted the importance of creating and sustaining social infrastructures that transcend one's family, friends, and family friends. According to Imani, there does not need to be a disaster and uncertainty for forms of solidarity networks to emerge and there does not need to be a logical explanation for them. This solidarity emerged out of convenience rather than need or necessity, although it ultimately constitutes a significant part of survival in the city. This solidarity encompasses alternative avenues of survival; it represents solidarity with and care for others and offers a distinct account of inhabitation beyond the standard complexities and temporalities of urbanity. They do not survive by simply living and enduring adverse and challenging conditions but by proactively inhabiting through co-producing and co-creating systems outside the more hegemonic forms and institutions.

For residents like Imani, social infrastructures like Chamas are a normal and regular routine and part of dwelling, inhabiting, and surviving in the city. Chamas constitute the norm, enabling, mediating, and determining the daily rhythms and the very architecture of local living in the urban. They have become an inevitable part of how residents survive in the city, allowing members to depend on one another to navigate marginality. As such, they reflect organic materialities and aesthetics of communal care traditions and are a part of 'infrastructures of everyday life.' They enable survival and solidarity and embody everyday sensibilities through which urban transitions and geographies sustain urban life beyond neoliberal optics. However, they use formal digital platforms such as M-Shwari which is a social collateral service, M-Pesa which through its 'Chama Account' offers a service for Chamas to collect funds conveniently and more securely, and Pezesha which offers a business-to-business digital lending infrastructure focused on providing affordable working capital different ventures such as savings group by entrepreneurial women that make informal loans more accessible beyond banking bureaucracies. This highlights the role of digital space as an unregulated space-the urban equalizer—enabling operations devoid of avoidance and surveillance of state control and manipulation; where residents can invest in and through 'small' rather than large-scale machinations and performances.

In their functionality, Chamas define socio-material relations and connections of persons who form committees, task forces, and groups that come into action for the common good. Here, friends, family, and family friends niche formations that veer toward embedded sentiments and sensibilities of interconnection more than disaffection, collective networks more than individualism, cohesion more than the competition, resolutions more than dissolution, and co-working more than 'going it alone.' Within this context, residents look beyond the idea of the state as the custodian of the public good and seek to counter the deficits, anomalies, and absence, lack, and incompleteness of established modes and formal structures with alternative formations that are on what Simone (2004) has classically referred to as 'people as infrastructure.' Simone (2014, 322–330) invites us to see them as something that gives "inhabitants something to work

with, something to try and put right, something that brings people together who otherwise would keep their distance, and thus a platform for the incessant rehearsal of different ways to 'work things out.'" As such infrastructures, they stretch and supplement our understanding of survival. Social topographies, networks, and connections allow people to survive beyond linear temporalities of urban life and habitation across different spheres of urban life in the pluriversal global south.

3.4. Cultivating technological infrastructures of survival

Kennedy, a community organizer and social entrepreneur, attempts to catalyze large-scale urban transformation by cultivating technological infrastructures of survival, in part, through grassroots community-based efforts. Kennedy grew up in Kibera, a settlement often dubbed in the media as one of the largest informal urban areas in East and Central Africa where tens of thousands struggle to survive through quilted or patchwork infrastructure systems that defy the principle of universal access and spatial homogeneity. Kibera constitutes a heterogeneous space where technical infrastructures are primarily driven by ordinary people thriving on the fringes of informality. Kennedy emboldens and symbolizes the need to live beyond despair by manifesting real hope and building modest solutions through partnership and engagement. It is this need that, for Kennedy, marks the foundation of a grassroots movement called Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO).

Our interviews with Kennedy between 2015 and 2016 at SHOFCO reveal the forward-thinking mindset in the approach to provisioning for the poor: SHOFCO was created to address systemic challenges and remains one of the most grounded social mobilization initiatives and organizations in Kibera to date. As a community-based organization, SHOFCO depicts its mantra of 'shining hope' in and around what would be considered desperate and hopeless livelihoods of Nairobi's urban poor and informal areas. SHOFCO runs several infrastructure initiatives and programs, which include: educational schemes, integrated 'pay-as-you-use' public toilets, biogas systems, automated water kiosks, overhead water storage tanks, borehole projects, and the flying pipes initiative. Of these, the flying water pipes initiative is the most innovative. The initiative is a mobile, dynamic infrastructure that seeks to re-configure everyday spaces by instituting new modes of access and bringing about new experiences of inclusion for residents through infrastructures that go above the skyline of the settlement, sometimes protruding over the faded and tainted rooftops. The project includes sinking boreholes, and laying pipe systems for pumping water to distant water kiosks for enhanced and optimized access (Akallah 2022). Beyond materializations of state provision at odds with the majority world, the idea for aerial pipes rather than the usual underground pipes epitomizes a kind of creativity and innovation born out of the precariousness and depravity that informs survival in heterogeneous urban worlds of the global South. The flying water pipes offer a chain of distribution that is grassroots and synonymous with self-assembling and do-it-yourself engineering and connection. Like most CBOs working in informal settlements, SHOFCO experiments with several ideas that promise sustainability and a more significant impact on the lives of the urban poor they target. More so, the dream for improved livelihoods and

a realistic approach to dealing with the challenges of access in informal areas come alive through this organization's projects and initiatives. Thus, SHOFCO offers integrated modalities for provisioning and indicates a kind of survival sustained through an indigenous approach and heterogeneous devices.

SHOFCO offers not simply alternatives but options that make urban life in the settlement legible; it offers local, grassroots solutions and creates and deploys socially oriented options as alternative and complementary systems to global, capitalist, and neoliberal approaches and markets. Through its deeper knowledge of the institutional and systemic obstacles to effective governance and service delivery, SHOFCO is able to navigate the murky gangsterish arrangements of governance by seizing community engagement and delivering practical solutions for urban survival. Rather than replicating or repairing broken systems, SHOFCO pushes back and highlights holes and cracks in the neoliberal system. It creates alternate utopias of survival beyond those promoted by the state or corporations. In this context, SHOFCO becomes a cultural producer attempting to reconstruct the supply of critical services. It harnesses local labor and materials where possible to deliver service to the communities at little or no cost. It takes advantage of the loopholes and creates markets to fill gaps and sustain their livelihoods (a way to fix or repair a broken system). It attempts to make city life and survival possible by triggering new ways of thinking about infrastructures that are explicitly rich in their ability to foreground the complexity and ambivalence of survival.

This story demonstrates the role of residents (i.e. households and other actors) in co-producing urban infrastructure. A story from the lens of residents who claim the city to be their home and therefore approach urban inhabitation from a more reparative manner. It articulates aspects of reparative urbanism at work where residents and local actors play a critical role in the operation of the technological infrastructure within a single settlement. Amidst profound popular distrust towards hegemonic institutions such as governments, corporations, and other large organizations, it defies the principle of universal access and spatial homogeneity in Nairobi, highlighting an option that has been cultivated through community-based work as well as lived, bottom-up, ad hoc and hybrid logics and registers. As such, it defies planning ideals that align with modernist trademarks of city-making and valorizes the role of residents in creating and sustaining infrastructures of survival (i.e. beyond a priori and teleological conceptions). It highlights a different kind of modernity, as an infrastructure of survival defined by local visions of the urban majority and transcends the hegemony of centralized formalized networks and socio-technical systems. As an option in a quilted landscape of off-the-grid, non-networked, and DIY (do-it-yourself) engineering and re-purposed technological infrastructures, the case of SHOFCO shows how Nairobi is developing different structures and frameworks outside the realms of the state and municipality. SHOFCO is one of many technological and social mobilization instruments for provisioning, co-producing, and co-creating survival solutions through partnerships against diverse and overlapping urban and infrastructure landscapes (Akala 2019; Akallah 2022; Akallah and Hård 2020). It shows how while the city has long been served with ubiquitous infrastructure systems and ordered urban materialities, stubborn yet progressive operations continue to emerge that defy

such thinking. Here, a semblance of 'order' away from what order is presumed to be can be seen to be emerging contrary to the often depicted narrative of survival as synonymous with chaos and absence of thrival.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, we sought to examine the unfolding of everyday life and survival at the core of urban inhabitation in the global south. We have captured, with ethnographic storylines, anecdotes, sketches, testimonials and observations, rhythms and ensembles of survival, highlighting particular accounts that constitute articulations of making ends meet, optimizing for a soft life, niching social infrastructures, and cultivating technological infrastructures. In their material manifestations, these accounts highlight the urban as an intertwinement of a different mix of people, technologies, and infrastructures. They demonstrate survival not as something to overcome or merely tolerate but as an ever-present and continuous part of urban life. Survival here is not good or bad, or something leading up to value eventually necessarily but is indeed inevitable to how residents inhabit the city. For all four of our main interlocutors, survival is apparent in the everyday drills and practices in different contexts and it is an inevitable interweaving of hybrid and heterogeneous webs that combine both human and non-human and social and economic registers of urban navigation consisting of ups and downs, twists and turns, and rounds and rounds. It is a non-linear phenomenon that ebbs and flows between continuities and discontinuities, hopes and disappointments, prospects and obstacles, victories and disappointments, complexities of incompleteness, and pervasive uncertainty and pervasive uncertainty conviviality. Moreover, our rhythms and ensembles of survival highlight absences and presences, openings, and closures, struggles and solidarities, new technologies, urban links, and tactical actors and institutions that are integral in making urban life possible. They illuminate how through their flexibility and 'radical openness' and socio-material relations and connections, urbanites employ in their everyday life different logics, calculations and sensibilities and survival strategies, practices, and trajectories to flexibly bypass and circumvent official routes, policies, and regulations in the context of a hardcore, fast-paced and disaggregated city. These accounts serve as a starting point for thinking about and through the urban way of life as survival, one that recognizes the pro-active manifestation of the city, an articulation—or better still, recreation and reproduction—of an urbanism always in the making, where the city continues to form or constitute new meanings of what it is to be urban. Nairobi's residents are not waiting for the grand solutions to constitute urban spaces. Still, they are playing a significant part in reconstituting their spaces through individual and collective practices, reflecting a more reparative rather than castigatory approach to urban inhabitation from the global south.

This paper adds to the broader repertoire of studies and a way of visualizing urban life from the global south. It challenges the neoliberal and reductionist reading of survival. Moreover, recasts survival as an urban practice that is continuous rather than intermittent, ordinary rather than catastrophic and crisis-laden, and inevitable rather than conditional upon particular circumstances.

However, there is a clear need for a richer dialogue that adds to theory from the global south to challenge existing knowledge production asymmetries and strengthen perspectives from a pluriversal south. Therefore, we call for further investigating more nuanced formations and articulations of urban life and survival. Such investigation is important for the purposes of offering alternative understandings of complex, diverse, and peculiar urban articulations of survival that reflect current shifts in progress: the manifold rhythms and ensembles presented herein highlight the need for alternative theorizations as 'ways of knowing and being' to 'transform and inform theory' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 49). Alternative theorizing of survival and urban life requires urban scholars and researchers to revise dominant conceptualizations further and advance appropriate optics and vocabularies that cater to hybridity, alterity, and diversity. Moreover, it necessitates unlearning existing theories, challenging conventional and codified notions, and producing knowledge that draws from lived realities and context-specificities of survival. In this regard, the role of urban residents as co-creators and promoters of urban forms need to assume centrality in academic dialogues of southern urbanism.

Going forward, plural and interdisciplinary investigations of survival become increasingly necessary and pressing especially as we seek more socially and ecologically just urban futures. On the one hand, a reading of survival as an ordinary and ever-present feat that operates across all forms of urban inhabitation opens Pandora's box of questions regarding how to account for those for whom survival is not a possible life course or option. These may include situations of failure to survive due to conditions of premature exposure to death, legitimized and instrumentalized forms of rule and extraction, infant mortality due to varying degrees and types of urban vulnerability, and nascent trends ingrained in fast-paced and hardcore urban regions where youth purpose to "live fast, die young." Further studies could examine situations where the need and capacity to survive is not always feasible, practicable, or achievable. On the other hand, there is a need to recast, reconceptualize and recount the stories of those that survive, when they survive, and how they survive: it is imperative for further research and empirical work to bring forth more symbolic, political, and central sites and aspects of survival to the fore of theory making and policy-design and to instigate new and radical socio-technical paradigms of planning and development that are attentive to the diverse ways through which residents inhabit the city in the context of the twenty-first-century city. Here, the role of urban residents as producers of different imaginaries that breed heterogeneity and incompleteness has to assume centrality in how we study the south and theorize southern urbanism. Reading the urban way of life as survival brings alternative forms of urban life, infrastructure, and economies to the fore of contemporary city-making processes. It provokes different perspectives beyond dominant conceptions that speak to different forms of power and urban inhabitation.

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