

## Violent place-making: How Kenya's post-election violence transforms a workers' settlement at Lake Naivasha



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### ABSTRACT

Violent events significantly influence the identity of places. Post-conflict areas evoke specific meanings and emotions, and the narratives of violent events have profound effects on the individual and collective interpretations of the venues of violence. This paper addresses the interdependent relationship between violence and place, considering the structural and multi-scalar conditions of a relational and discursive making of places. By linking them with an empirically grounded analysis of the materialisation of violence, we follow Gearóid Ó Tuathail's (2010) call for a more grounded study of place-specific causes for violent conflict. We focus on an empirical example – the post-election violence in Kenya 2007/08 – and look into one of its venues, a poor and heterogeneous workers' settlement at Lake Naivasha in Kenya's Rift Valley. Considering the specific socio-political setting in Kenya, we first examine the factors that explain why the violence broke out at that place in particular. We combine an exploration of the structural conditions that determined the violence, and which still regulate social life at present, with a presentation of the individual accounts of people directly or indirectly involved in the violence in Naivasha. We then investigate how the experience of violence has influenced the imaginations of the place, and whether these localised imprints of violence in Naivasha continue to regulate social and spatial (re)organisation after the events themselves. The study reveals that politically instigated societal divides continue to exist, and that memories of the violence induce intensified processes of segregation in the surveyed settlement during times of political uncertainty.

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### Introduction

The violence following the general elections in Kenya in December 2007 was of unprecedented intensity and extent and resulted in over 1300 casualties and more than half a million internally displaced people (KNCHR, 2008). The unrest affected the whole country, but its venues were the poor and multi-ethnic agglomerations, as well as the borderlands of the traditionally ascribed ethnic territories, which were inhabited by a heterogeneous population due to past resettlements or labour immigration (Article XIX, 1998; KNBS, 2007; KNCHR, 2008).

Occurrences of violence play an important part in the making of places (Springer, 2011). Against the background of the spatiality of the post-election violence in Kenya, we seek to address the

interdependent relationship between violence and place. We assess the reverberations of the 2007/08 events on social and spatial regulations, and illustrate how violence transforms a place. Focussing on the perceptions of those people directly or indirectly involved, and their altered interpretations and interactions after violent experiences (Kent & Barnett, 2012), we link those empirically grounded criteria with structural precursors of violence. In doing so, we follow the request of Ó Tuathail (2010) for geographically grounded research into violent conflicts and more systematic consideration of place-specific causes of violence. We build upon empirical data from one of the hotspots of the post-election violence: a densely populated, low-income labour migrants' settlement at Lake Naivasha in Kenya's Rift Valley (Map 1). Our contribution offers answers to the following questions:

- Are there place-specific causes for the occurrence of violence in Naivasha?
- Do the impressions of the violence continue to influence the imaginations of Naivasha and regulate socio-spatial (re)organisation?

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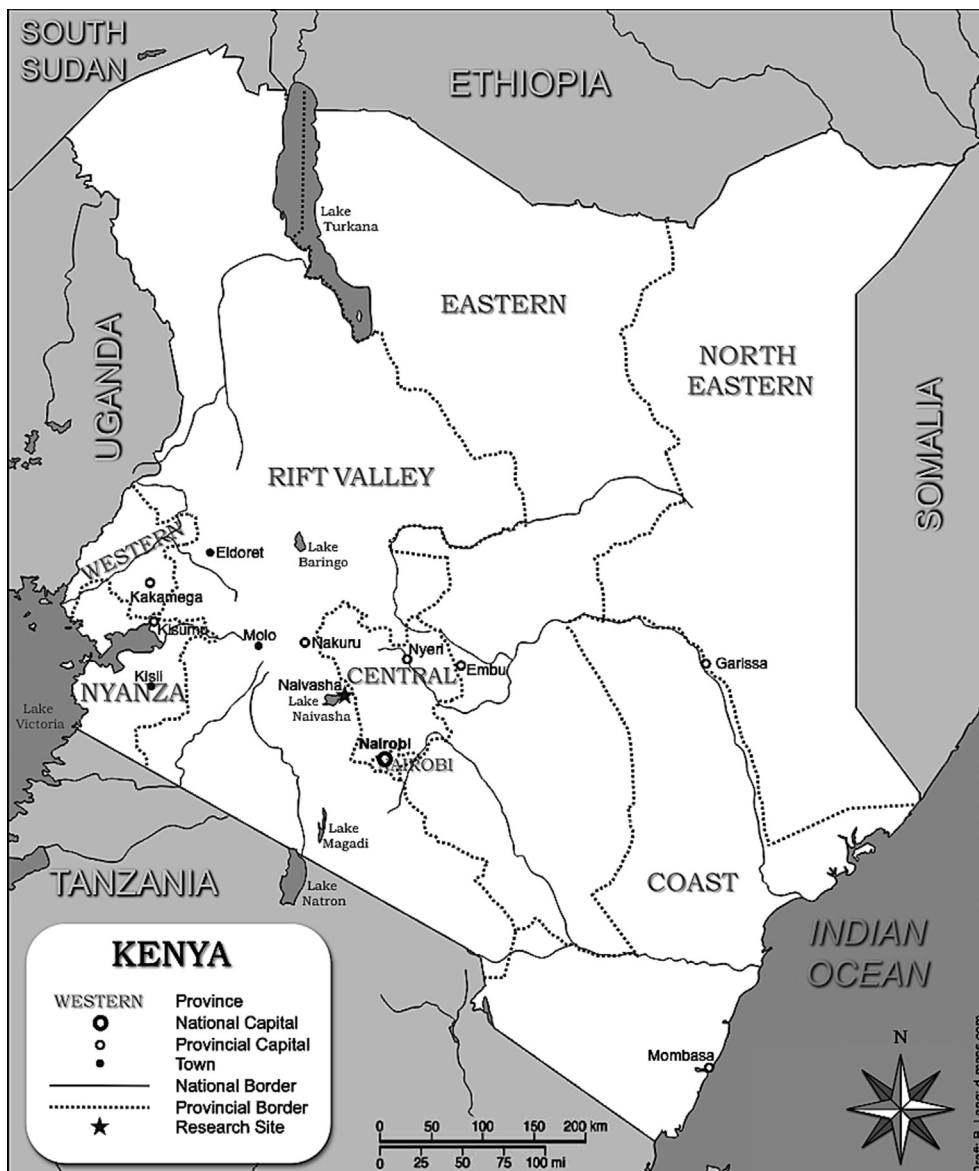
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To grasp local perceptions of violence and place, between May and September 2011 the first author conducted 57 qualitative interviews and transect walks, as well as numerous informal conversations with residents of the settlement (see [Table 1](#)). An outsider with respect to the place and its history, the author made initial contacts with the help of Maasai research assistants from Naivasha. After that, distribution of leaflets and use of the snowball system helped to identify informants. Informants were selected through a process of theoretical sampling, differentiating between people directly and indirectly involved in the violence, their areas of origin, ethnic identities, and duration of stays in Naivasha. Until reaching theoretical saturation, empirical data were encoded, abstracted for reasons of confidentiality, and analysed in reflexive revision with existing theoretical writings according to Grounded Theory ([Strauss & Corbin, 1998](#)). The method of theoretical sampling reveals patterns and developments that apply to the surveyed settlement, two and a half years after the violent events, and prior to the next general elections in March 2013.

Politically induced violence in Kenya reaches back to the post-independence era. First President Jomo Kenyatta, and his successor from 1978, Daniel arap Moi, readopted the tribalistic politics of the colonialists and violently eradicated political opposition ([KHRC, 2009](#)). When allocating political positions or redistributing colonially expropriated land, they favoured members of their own ethnic group, and discriminated against members of other communities ([Lonsdale, 1992](#); [Oucho, 2002](#)). Moi's regime was responsible for outbreaks of ethnicised violence around the 1993 and 1997 general elections, in which members of the Kalenjin community were incited against alleged political opponents of the Kikuyu ethnic group, mainly over access to land and power ([Article XIX, 1998](#); [Boone, 2009](#); [HRW, 1993](#)). Moi's autocratic rule ended in 2002 when a vast majority elected Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu, president.

Hopes for a transition to a true multi-party democracy with this shift were dashed when Kenya reverted to its former volatility after the December 2007 elections ([Githongo, 2008](#)). Kibaki had not honoured his election promises during his incumbency, and hopes



**Map 1.** Map of Kenya with provinces, key locations and research site (Draft: B. Lang 2014, modified after [d-maps.com](http://d-maps.com), (10.10.2014) <http://bit.ly/ZxlEPC>).

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