

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Tasting ‘kienyeji’: gustatory explorations of city futures in Nakuru, Kenya

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## Abstract

In Nakuru, a secondary city in Kenya, the city’s future is explored multi-sensorially. In this article, I argue that Nakuru residents explore urban futures through the taste of different kinds of foods. I examine how the relational power of taste not only triggers visceral imaginaries of greener and ‘cooler’ futures in which bodies and landscapes grow more ample, lush and healthy but also invokes memories of, and nostalgia for, pasts in which the entanglements of foods were configured differently, often explained as more ‘authentic’ and ‘clean’ (*safi*). I argue against vision as the most important sense-making tool to look back at lost pasts and to ‘imagine’ healthier urban futures. Instead, I demonstrate how futures in Nakuru are experienced and given shape by engaging in critical gustatory explorations of the real, tangible materialities of different kinds of food that flow through the city.

## Résumé

À Nakuru, ville secondaire du Kenya, l’avenir de la ville est exploré de manière multisensorielle. Dans cet article, l’auteur soutient que les résidents de Nakuru explorent les futurs urbains à travers le goût de types d’aliments divers. Il examine comment le pouvoir relationnel du goût non seulement déclenche des imaginaires viscéraux de futurs plus verts et plus « cools » dans lesquels les corps et les paysages deviennent plus corpulents, plus luxuriants et plus sains, mais également invoque des souvenirs et une nostalgie de passés dans lesquels les imbrications d’aliments étaient configurées différemment, souvent décrites comme étant plus « authentiques » et plus « nettes » (*safi*). L’auteur conteste que la vision soit l’outil de création de sens le plus important pour repenser à des passés perdus et « imaginer » des futurs urbains plus sains. Au lieu de cela, il démontre comment les futurs à Nakuru se vivent et prennent forme en se livrant à des explorations gustatives critiques des matérialités tangibles réelles de différents types de nourriture rencontrés dans la ville.

## Resumo

Em Nakuru, uma cidade secundária do Quênia, o futuro da cidade é explorado de forma multisensorial. Neste artigo, argumento que os residentes de Nakuru exploram futuros urbanos através do sabor de diferentes tipos de alimentos. Analiso como o poder relacional do gosto não só desencadeia imaginários viscerais de futuros mais verdes e “frescos”, nos quais corpos e paisagens crescem mais amplos, exuberantes e saudáveis, mas também invoca memórias e

nostalgia de, passados em que os enredos dos alimentos foram configurados de forma diferente, muitas vezes explicados como mais “autênticos” e “limpos” (*safi*). Eu contesto a ideia da visão como o instrumento de fazer-sentido mais importante para olhar para passados perdidos e para 'imaginar' futuros urbanos mais saudáveis. Em vez disso, demonstro como os futuros em Nakuru são vivenciados e moldados através de explorações gustativas críticas das materialidades reais e tangíveis dos diferentes tipos de alimentos que fluem através da cidade.

## Introduction

At the workers' camp of the Geothermal Development Company (GDC) within Menengai volcano, just north of Nakuru town in Kenya, catering is provided multiple times a day. In the afternoon of 8 August 2018, food is delivered, tagged, accounted for and stocked in freezers. These products will be cooked and served to the technicians living in the company's campsite during their two-week, uninterrupted, work shift. Simiyu, a technician in his early thirties and a member of the Luhya ethnic group, works full time for GDC. While unloading a supply truck, he separates two kinds of chicken. One is clearly more yellow and the chunks of meat appear bigger and tougher. Simiyu takes one of the tougher-looking pieces and explains that this kind of chicken is *kienyeji* and eaten once a week in the campsite mess. They are more expensive than the so-called broiler chickens but are considered a real delicacy, he adds. Workers always look forward to the day when they can eat *kienyeji*. Although described as tough and therefore difficult to eat, the taste is sweeter (*tamu*). Simiyu explains that *kienyeji* chickens are also less prone to disease and are not kept in cages. While he signs off some paperwork, he recommends eating *kienyeji* as much as possible to grow strong and remain sexually potent, even at an older age. His female colleagues laugh and nod in agreement. Immediately afterwards, a discussion unfolds about the ancestors' bodily fitness and unlimited stamina, as opposed to the widely perceived weakness<sup>1</sup> of youth, the dangers of obesity and the seemingly rising numbers of cancer cases. Older men in the company say that people nowadays get sick because they do not move enough, while the younger people blame chemicals and food adulterations for people's ill health.

Simiyu's descriptions about the taste of foods, and the debate that followed his statements, echo broader concerns about a contested food scene in Nakuru, a Kenyan secondary city approximately 160 kilometres north-west of the capital Nairobi. This article elaborates on the materiality of foods produced and consumed in Nakuru and sheds light on the ways in which their perceived qualities influence how people understand the city's future. It deals with how a *kienyeji* taste – which, for now, can be loosely translated as both 'local' and 'organic' – induces feelings such as nostalgia for healthier pasts and inspires a desire for better, and therefore 'cooler' (*poa*), futures.

<sup>1</sup> Healers and herbalists define this 'weakness' as a reduction in life flow (*moyo*) because of the consumption of heated *kemikali* (chemicals) in food. This makes urbanites less sexually potent and eventually leads to a complete depletion of a lineage's vitality (Rahier 2021b).

The ethnographic material<sup>2</sup> presented allows me to contribute to academic discussions about urban futures-in-the-making (Nielsen 2014; Pieterse 2008; Salazar *et al.* 2017), yet it does so through closer attention to how '[f]ood enters, moves through, settles into, disrupts, and redesigns cities in novel ways' (Edwards *et al.* 2021: 1). I thereby emphasize how the qualities of food – both its materiality and its semiotics – induce all kinds of affect that influence how citizens of Nakuru *taste* the future. I argue that the taste of *kienyeji* foods in Nakuru makes urbanites viscerally sense pasts and futures in which they regain control of their own life trajectories and metabolisms and can become healthier citizens independent from the industrial food provisioning that the government is unable to control properly. In the words of Bethaney Turner – whose work on the new materiality of food is seminal – 'many people around the world are engaging in the development of alternative practices inspired by a *taste* for different relations for a more hopeful future' (Turner 2018: 64, emphasis added). In Nakuru, this hopeful future ultimately tastes 'cooler'.

Anthropological inquiry into future-making focuses primarily on the 'ocular' or how the future can be 'seen' or 'imagined' by the *spectaculum* of new or 'not-yet-built' infrastructures (Smith 2017; Jansson and Lagerkvist 2009; Gastrow 2017; De Boeck 2011; Appadurai 2013). De Boeck's notion of 'spectral politics' exemplifies how new urban developments and aspired futures are 'inhabiting ocular ground':

In the end, then, short-circuiting any real and tangible roadmaps for the construction of a better urban future, and confronted with the government's spectral politics, the ocular ground of billboards and advertisements in which the city seems to appear out of nothing and might well vanish again into nothing, the only place where the city can be inhabited and in which it is constantly being built, is in the place of language, in the architecture of words. (De Boeck 2011: 279)

My analysis follows 'counter-ocular-centric critiques of vision' (Petty 2021: 287) that have inspired anthropological inquiry (also see Howes and Classen 2013). This critique finds traction ethnographically as many Nakurians argue that the city's ocular excess of billboards, advertisements and envisioned urban development projects is dominated by the influence of elite cartels who decide what the future of the city may look like. An analysis of how Nakuru's moral geography and debates about socio-economic life are being steered by elites, who are often assumed to use occult forces to assert their power, is beyond the scope of this article and is dealt with elsewhere (see Rahier 2021a). It is nonetheless relevant to note that these concerns echo more general worries among Nakuru's *wananchi* (common citizens) about authority and belonging, in particular regarding who the city of Nakuru will belong to in the future. Nakurians often claim that the city is too absorbed by the influence of various 'elsewheres' – such as, for instance, Nairobi – and therefore it struggles to define a proper identity for itself as a city. Alya – who worked as a women's representative for the county government at the time of fieldwork – gave the example of billboards that do not target Nakuru's residents but rather the growing number of Nairobi

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<sup>2</sup> The research for this article draws from eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork between July 2017 and April 2021. The fieldwork on which the article is based received funding from the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (G.A005.14N).

white-collar workers who escape the metropolis to settle in Nakuru, or who visit to ‘vent’ over the weekend. This points towards ‘displaced metonyms of another world’ (Fehérváry 2002: 385) or lifeworlds experienced as being increasingly dominated by the lifeworld of others; these others include Nakuru’s ‘elite circles’, who are often perceived to hold authority over the city’s ‘spectral urban politics’ (De Boeck 2011). Some Nakurians look for alternative ways to make sense of the city’s becoming. They do so through other, non-visual, sense-making mechanisms: for example, by engaging consciously with the ‘taste’ of foods, the ‘feel’ of meat or the ‘smell’ of vegetables. Other futures, uncertain and dangerous presents, and romanticized pasts are thus not only seen or made visible through stuff but rather are tasted and made sense of in gustatory terms, prefigured through the qualities of foods that circulate in the city. Future-making in Nakuru is therefore ultimately a multisensory and synaesthetic experience induced by exploring the various material qualities of different kinds of food – the main focal point of this article.

Urbanites’ concerns about the foods they consume are closely linked to ideas about which futures Nakuru residents consider more habitable. This resonates with Langwick’s research on ‘habitability’. She notes that, in Tanzania, ‘habitability’ works ‘through and against the politics of exposure that have shaped “late industrialism”’ (Langwick 2018: 423). A ‘politics of habitability’ questions ‘what relations enable bodies and landscapes to grow ampler, denser, more productive and more potent’ (*ibid.*: 436). In my analysis of Nakuru’s food scene, I similarly ask what kind of relationships *kienyeji* taste provokes among Nakurians who are concerned about the toxicity of imported and processed foods, and how the qualities of certain foods – and the consequent manipulation of these qualities – help to make tangible desired futures. These desired futures taste ‘cooler’ (*poa*) – a quality that refers to less toxicity and less manipulation interfering in the lives of Nakurians (Rahier 2021b) – and therefore afford more habitable bodies and environments.

### Eating in the city

Marguerite, a Gikuyu woman in her fifties and my guest mother in Nakuru, had invested heavily in starting up her layer chicken farm. In late 2017 she planned to buy around 1,500 layer chickens. It was going to take a few weeks for the chickens to produce enough eggs worth selling. Once they did, she intended to sell them locally in the neighbourhood, or in supermarkets in town willing to buy larger amounts. She bought chicks in advance, in batches of 500, and told her son to be ready to go with her to the distributor in town once she was informed that the eggs had hatched. In anticipation of their arrival, she had been stocking ‘grower mesh’ (a booster feed for chicks) and antibiotics. The *fundi* (craftsmen) had finished the cages, and Marguerite decontaminated them to perfection shortly afterwards. The preparations she undertook contrasted sharply with the way in which her *kienyeji* chickens are cared for: those chickens roam around freely within the confines of her compound, need little attention, and do not require any antibiotics. The eggs these *kienyeji* chickens produce are whiter and their meat is tougher. Above all, their eggs and meat are sold at a higher price. The biggest difference between the two is the fact that *kienyeji* chickens are considered to be ‘pure’ breeds and ‘indigenous’, compared with the broiler or layer breeds and the ‘enhanced *kienyeji*’ that are bred to generate maximum profit.

Marguerite invested in ‘Kenchic layers’,<sup>3</sup> a type of layer hen that has been carefully bred to produce a maximum number of eggs. She was aware, though, that keeping layers entails a certain risk, as they are more prone to disease than her indigenous *kienyeji* chickens.

The distinction between *kienyeji* and industrial chickens – the differences between both the birds and the perceived qualities of their meat and eggs – hints at a clear opposition between two distinct food categories and their associated tastes that circulates in the city. Whereas *kienyeji* chickens are mostly reserved for home consumption, industrial breeds produced by companies such as Kenchic, Farmer’s Choice and Muguku Farm – the three biggest companies involved in the poultry business in Kenya – are sold to entrepreneurs such as Marguerite to generate income<sup>4</sup> and to fuel the economy of fast-food joints, hotels, bars and supermarkets. Eating in the city happens along these two taste categories, which each embody an ambivalent intersection of history, meanings and practices. The taste of *kienyeji* edible items invokes, for instance, memories and nostalgia of pasts in which the entanglements of foods and (gendered) relations were configured differently, often described as healthier and more lush, as I discuss below.

The debate about the distinction between industrial and *kienyeji* foods is not only a Nakuru phenomenon; it has traction on a national scale as well. On 11 August 2019, for instance, KTN (Kenya Television Network) aired an investigation into the prevalence of throat cancer in western Kenya, in which biomedical experts were asked what they thought was causing an increase in cancer cases.<sup>5</sup> An answer was sought in the fact that tea is drunk hotter in Kenya than in other nations, but towards the end of the news bulletin, the focus changed to the dangers of processed foods, such as industrially grown chickens and preservatives in milk. A specialist in throat cancers blamed the toxicity of milk from milk ATMs, and a nutritionist warned viewers to be more careful when buying foods from supermarkets as the safety of processed foods cannot always be trusted. Her claim was reinforced by a carefully inserted excerpt of a public speech by former president Uhuru Kenyatta (the context of the speech was not mentioned) in which he stated that ‘these days, we have forgotten even our common foods of the past; today it is all about people going to the shop – processed food, processed this, processed that’.<sup>6</sup> This news bulletin illustrated wider ongoing debates about the need to return to a more ‘authentic’ and healthy lifestyle, the mobilization of a moral consciousness about what one eats in a world perceived as increasingly toxic and polluted, and how to build resilience against the dangers of consumer society. Such discourses about food safety in Kenya are closely related to ongoing debates about the

<sup>3</sup> Kenchic is one of the largest poultry businesses in Kenya and was established in 1960. The company imports chickens from Europe and rears them to produce commercial layer chicks. The birds are processed into a variety of products, ranging from whole birds to burgers and meat sold in fast-food restaurants (Keskin *et al.* 2008: 21).

<sup>4</sup> Both male and female entrepreneurs engaged in chicken rearing. For Marguerite, her layer chicken business was a way to generate income independently from her husband and an activity that kept her busy at home. Among her female friends who also had poultry businesses, similar motives inspired their endeavours.

<sup>5</sup> ‘How cup of hot tea can send you to an early grave: throat cancer attributed to hot tea’, KTN News, 11 August 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zFv7oXMJxE>>.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Siku hizi, tumesahau ata ile chakula yetu ya kawaida ya zamani. Leo ni mtu kuenda dukani’ (*ibid.*).

toxicity of everyday life, which have gained political momentum since the 1990s (Meiu 2020: 232).

Concerns over Kenya's food industry are related to vernacular understandings of the different qualia of food found in Nakuru. Simiyu's and Marguerite's descriptions of the differences between *kienyeji* and industrial chickens exemplify this. *Kienyeji* chickens can be recognized by their 'tougher' meat, 'whiter' eggs and 'sweeter' taste. These sensations embody 'visceral imaginaries' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013: 84) or images inscribed in corporeal experiences of the entanglements on which their production is based. In other words, the material, sensorial and sensuous aspects of the meat of, for instance, industrial chicken is metonymic for how urbanites viscerally experience their lifeworlds as increasingly influenced by food industries beyond their control. The notion of 'foodsensing', coined by Evans and Miele (2012), is applicable here. 'Foodsensing' as a practice 'emphasizes both the material and symbolic dimensions of food consumption practices and hints at their deep inter-connections' (*ibid.*: 3). Their research examines how the materiality of an animal body, such as free-range chicken meat, embodies the animal's quality of life: the meat tastes 'better', feels 'tougher', smells 'nicer', and so on, among consumers who have lost confidence in industrial agrobusiness (*ibid.*: 3). Before elaborating on how this relates to gustatory explorations of city futures in Nakuru, a closer look at the city's more general food scene is needed.

### Nakuru's food scene

Nakurians such as Marguerite are part of a boom in Kenya's chicken industry, which is 'predicted to increase from 54.8 thousand metric tonnes in 2000 to 164.6 in 2030, and from 6 to 30.5 thousand metric tonnes in Nairobi' (Carron *et al.* 2017: 91). Nairobi thereby leads the country's chicken production in terms of broiler chicken and egg consumption and serves as the final destination for most poultry across the country. Nevertheless, other Kenyan cities – in particular Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu and Nyeri – are also experiencing booms in poultry farming.

Although it is one of the biggest and fastest-growing economies within reach for *wananchi* such as Marguerite, the chicken industry is subject to a lot of criticism. Rumours about the toxicity of broiler and layer breeds and the inferior quality of their meat circulate widely in Nakuru. Some Nakurians argue, for instance, that layer and broiler breeds are genetically modified, even though GMOs (genetically modified organisms) were officially forbidden in Kenya at the time of fieldwork.<sup>7</sup> Others compared broiler chickens with the conditions of the Kenyan state, which they defined as tasteless (*hazina taste*), weak (*hazina nguvu*) and fake (*ni fake*) in its reliance on foreign products instead of the strengths of Kenya's own produce and citizens.<sup>8</sup>

*Kienyeji* foods are often described as having a more 'authentic' taste. A closer look at the etymology of the idiom *kienyeji* is relevant here. Derived from the stem *-enye*, meaning 'to possess', the suffix *'-ji'* adds a location to the equation and brings its

<sup>7</sup> On 3 October 2022, the ban on GMOs was lifted, paving the way for GMO cultivation and importation.

<sup>8</sup> Major infrastructural projects realized through Japanese or Chinese construction tenders, such as the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) and tenders for road construction, fuel ideas about (toxic) outsiders harming Kenyans' bodies (see also Rahier 2021b).

meaning close to ‘the ways of those who possess a particular place’ (Holtzman *et al.* 2004: 68). *Kienyeji* therefore links ideas of authenticity with notions of belonging. But in colloquial Swahili, *kienyeji* is also often jokingly used to refer to informal arrangements, bootleg technology or the ambivalent position women from the village occupy in the imagination of men. Some men perceive them as unspoiled, authentic and pure, but also illiterate, backward and/or tough.<sup>9</sup> Besides *kienyeji*’s reference to the chicken industry – denoting chickens indigenous to Kenya – the idiom is also used to refer to a variety of other edible items, such as vegetables and milk, which can be either industrially processed or *kienyeji*, meaning locally produced. Many Nakuru residents grow *kienyeji* vegetables in their gardens for their own consumption or purchase *kienyeji* greens from a *mama mboga* (vegetable vendor), allowing them to avoid imported foods that many consider contaminated by too many chemicals (*kemikali*).

Despite the preference given to *kienyeji* foods, they are nevertheless becoming a rare delicacy in most urban centres in Kenya and are therefore priced higher. Whereas statistics show that there were four times more *kienyeji* chickens than broilers in 2009, the opposite is noticeable from 2012 onwards: by then, the number of broilers was 1.6 times more than that of *kienyeji* chickens (Carron *et al.* 2017: 91). Nakuru’s ample land, its suitable climate for agriculture and its history as Kenya’s breadbasket, feeding the country, make it an epicentre for debates about the value of *kienyeji* foods. Unlike in other urban centres, these foods are more readily available in Nakuru and restaurant customers get to choose, for instance, between *kienyeji* or broiler chicken. In most other places in Kenya, that option is not available: you eat either one or the other. *Kienyeji* chickens are mostly associated with village life, while broiler breeds are what feed the cities. Nakuru’s pivotal position in between the capital, Nairobi, and the countryside – considered highly toxic and idyllically pure respectively – means that these two ‘opposing’ tastes coexist in close proximity in the city.

Debates about the quality of foods in Nakuru are in line with broader regional concerns with changing diets and lifestyles. Anthropologists (Holtzman 2009; Schmidt 2020; Geissler and Prince 2010; Leakey 2007 [1977]; Owuor and Olaimer-Anyara 2005; Brückner 2020) have studied the dietary changes elsewhere in Kenya and observe food as ambivalent, entangled with histories, meanings and practices through which change is understood. In this regard, Holtzman’s (2007; 2009) work on Samburu taste is thought-provoking. Holtzman examines taste among young men coming of age (*murrans*), who describe certain edible items, such as food aid, as ‘gray foods’, ‘symbolically empty, nutritionally inferior, and not very palatable’ (Holtzman 2007: 442). Such foods have become symbols of change, denoting a world in which Samburu have become increasingly dependent on purchased foodstuffs that cause corporeal and social maladies such as diminishing well-being and vitality, as well as increased selfishness and moral decay. Geissler and Prince (2010) observed similar stances towards certain foods during their research among Uhero communities in

<sup>9</sup> Kenyans also actively play with this image. This is most noticeable in the rising number of (mostly female) Kenyan YouTube influencers uploading content about ‘authentic’ village experiences, often titled ‘A (typical) day in the village’. Authenticity refers here to an invented past, echoing Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) notion of ‘invented tradition’ or Birgit Meyer’s (2015) ‘epic genre’. How this relates to the online commodification of the idea of ‘the rural’ among city dwellers is beyond the scope of this work and will be dealt with elsewhere.

western Kenya. They elaborate on attitudes regarding the consumption of maize. Although maize symbolizes ‘progress’ for Uhero, elderly members of the community argue that the consumption of maize has led to moral and physical ‘weakness’ and widespread death among younger people (*ibid.*: 161).<sup>10</sup> Older Uhero link the consumption of industrial foods such as cooking fat and packaged milk – which are both said to contain unknown ingredients and come from factories – to the exploitative labour regimes many of them experienced as migrant workers (*ibid.*: 162). However, they do value these foods for everyday cooking or to serve to visitors; the latter demonstrates how these foodstuffs evoke connections to the wider world. What these foods lack, however, is the ritual and relational significance of homegrown foods, which continue to be used for important life events such as dowries, death rituals or birth customs (*ibid.*: 162).

Uhero and Samburu lived experiences with processed foods share similarities with the lifeworlds of many urbanites in Nakuru, whose stance towards processed foodstuffs was similarly ambiguous. Processed foods such as broiler chickens and other items found in supermarkets and restaurants not only taste ‘bitter’ (*-kali*), carrying the taste of violence and deception by the food industry; they are also visceral references to connectivity with the wider world. Supermarkets play into this phenomenon and sell, for instance, ‘gift boxes’ during the Christmas holiday period containing staple foods such as maize flour, sugar, cooking oil and salt. It is a Kenyan custom to bring such items from the city when travelling upcountry to visit family in the villages. The opposite also holds true. Compared with the food market in Nairobi, *kienyeji* foods are less scarce in Nakuru and therefore cheaper than in the capital. It was not uncommon for Nakurians to send *kienyeji* food parcels to family in Nairobi. Marguerite, for instance, often sent fresh *kienyeji* foods from her rural home to her daughters in Nairobi. The food she prepared at home in Nakuru was also always made with vegetables that she felt and argued could be trusted, either from her own land just outside Nakuru town or bought from people she knew. These homegrown commodities viscerally connect village, town and metropolis and reinforce family ties between villagers and city dwellers. Marguerite’s example also adds substance to why Nakuru serves as a fertile ground where anxieties regarding industrial foods can flourish: the city has long been known to play a pivotal role in the rural subsidization of urban residence. It is therefore not surprising that the various qualia of foods and their tastes are mapped onto Nakurian space–time constellations that are characterized by urbanites’ memories of rural childhoods, and sometimes by the movement of people from the capital city to Nakuru to be closer to their rural home while still benefiting from the advantages of a city.

Over the course of my fieldwork, concerns about the decline of *kienyeji* foods gained momentum in Nakuru because of the prospect of accelerated urban growth – the town was soon to acquire official city status.<sup>11</sup> People expected that this change would generate a mushrooming of new supermarkets, bars, hotels and restaurants serving processed,

<sup>10</sup> Compared with the use of millet and sorghum, maize gives higher yields but has less nutritional value (Geissler and Prince 2010: 161).

<sup>11</sup> During fieldwork between 2017 and 2021, the Nakuru county government was heavily investing in the upgrade of the city’s infrastructure (road, sanitation, public transport, etc.) in anticipation of achieving city status. Many Nakurians were sceptical about this envisioned change in status as they feared that the cost of living in Nakuru would rise and the rather ‘ambient’ town would become a copy of what they considered ‘toxic’ Nairobi. On 3 June 2021, the Kenyan senate approved the conferment of city status on Nakuru.



industrial meals. It is against this background that the discussions below should be interpreted.

### Bitter tastes

The different qualities and associated tastes of *kienyeji* chickens, as opposed to broiler breeds, that Simiyu and his colleagues pointed out in the introductory vignette highlight the language many Nakurians use to talk about the changing taste scene. The processed and industrial foodstuffs that fuel city life are not only considered unhealthy; they are also not ‘sweet’ (*hazina utamu*), taste ‘dull’ (*zinaonja flat*) or are considered too ‘bitter’ (*zinaonja kali*).<sup>12</sup>

There are many ethnographic examples of how notions of ‘bitterness’ can imply ‘bad’ as opposed to ‘good’ qualities, or a combination of both. Among Gikuyu and Masaai communities, ‘bitter’ herbs have medicinal value and are often used for healing purposes (Leakey 2007 [1977]; Johnsen 1997; Rahier 2021b). Esei Kurimoto (1992: 61) gives a summary of the way in which, among Kipsigis communities in Kenya, members of a clan who are known to specialize in cursing are called people of the ‘bitter tongue’ or ‘bitter mouth’ (Komma 1992: 150, cited in Kurimoto 1992: 61). Among Bari, Lotuho, Lokoya and Lulubo peoples in Southern Sudan, the power of the king is often referred to in terms of the ‘bitterness in his stomach’ (Simonse 1992: 418, cited in Kurimoto 1992: 61). Another well-known example is Shipton’s notion of ‘bitter money’ (Shipton 1989), where it is not money itself that is ‘bitter’, but rather the sociality and the relational entanglements undergirding it.<sup>13</sup>

Although expressions relating to Nakurians’ concerns about food often oppose ‘bitter’, ‘bad’ ‘industrial foods’ to ‘sweet’, ‘good’ *kienyeji* foods, most consume non-*kienyeji* foods on a daily basis, and these categories are closely entangled and ambiguous. Concerns about the toxicity of processed foods did not nullify their symbolic connection to notions and aspirations of ‘progress’ (*maendeleo*) and ‘modernity’. As much as interlocutors often argued that supermarkets, restaurants and bars, as hotspots for processed foods, were to be avoided, the expansion of the city’s hotel and supermarket industry simultaneously signified the much appreciated growth of urban Nakuru. As with Samburu communities (Holtzman 2006: 371), processed foods appear simultaneously as markers of both cultural decay and the triumph of modernity.

### The loss of control

During fieldwork, the bitterness of foodstuffs was most often discussed when describing foods that had been subject to publicized food scams. The sale of toxic sugar is one example. In June 2018, national newspapers reported that a thousand bags of illegally

<sup>12</sup> Although the preferred translation of ‘bitter’ is ‘-chungu’ in Swahili, ‘kali’ was more commonly used in colloquial language; ‘kali’ is polysemic, meaning, among other things, ‘sharp’, ‘fierce’, ‘bitter’, ‘acidic’ and ‘severe’. Healers and herbalists would refer to certain herbal shrubs as being ‘bitter’ or ‘kali’.

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt (2017: 280) provides an updated account of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ money among Luo communities and argues that ‘[p]esa makech (bitter money) has been replaced by the more diffuse notion of *pesa marach* (“bad money”), which, instead of describing one specific type of money, functions as an overarching category under which several types of money are subsumed, among them *pesa mabandia* (“fake money”), “wicked money” and *pesa nono* (“free money”).

imported sugar that had been seized by the authorities from warehouses in Nairobi contained toxic levels of mercury, copper and lead (see, for example, Lime 2018). A host of similar scandals caused many other food items to come under public scrutiny: plastic rice and toxic fish imported from China; cat meat being used by street vendors to make samosas; aflatoxin in maize; the use of formalin in local spirits such as *chang'aa* or *kumi kumi*; and high levels of sodium metabisulfite sprinkled onto meat by butchers to preserve their merchandise for longer (see, for example, Obonyo 2013). When referring to these cases, often in the context of wider discussions about the nebulous aspects of industrial food production, some urbanites would wrinkle their noses as if the bitterness of these foods was felt just by talking about them. These food scams added flavour to the argument that many Nakurians do not trust what they see (see also Smith 2023). Plastic rice looks like normal rice but it is only when you explore the other qualia of foodstuffs that the trickery and cunning (*-janja*) of the food industry become evident; hence, this is why taste often appeared to be a more reliable sense for verifying the qualities of foods.

The bitterness of processed foods not only implies the actual physical sensation of a bad taste, like a texture or mouth feel. Similar to Shipton's (1989) analysis of 'bitter money', it is also closely linked to the entanglements in which one can get caught up if one is not cautious about the things one consumes. Such a perspective has resonances with Mol's discussion about her dislike of granny smith apples (Mol 2008). For Mol, these apples came to taste of violence because of their origin in Chile, and therefore their link with the Pinochet dictatorship (*ibid.*: 29). Eating an apple, Mol claims, is an everyday phenomenon that is radically situated and made possible through webs of relationships. The embodied experience of a bitter taste is equally radically situated; it is a deeply gustatory feeling of dislike towards the relationships implied in eating industrial foods, and it evokes a visceral understanding of blame towards the dominant food industry, which is perceived as negatively impacting body and mind (Rahier 2021b). For some Nakurians, the city elites operating these businesses want to 'eat money' (*-kula shilingi*) and do not care about the health of common citizens. 'As government is often complicit in the production of these "fake foods", you cannot know if they really check these foods for quality,' claimed Njoroge, who tried to consume only *kienyeji* foods. Nakurians' worries about the 'bitterness' of processed and industrial foods thus echo anxieties about the loss of control over food production. Marguerite, Njoroge, Simiyu and many others in Nakuru grow their own *kienyeji* foods to bypass the trickery involved in the Kenyan food industry, even though they could not confirm whether their homegrown foods actually contained fewer chemicals or toxins than the processed items from supermarkets. In fact, closer observation of the seeds Njoroge used revealed that they were equally processed and from an industrial – if not GMO – source, as the packaging clearly stated that they were 'chemically treated'. Nevertheless, Njoroge was convinced that his crops, chickens and lifestyle were healthier and more *kienyeji* than those in Nakuru's urban centre, because he had the ability to control the foods he produced and to 'know' (therefore 'see' and 'taste') where they came from.

Njoroge's concerns were thus not solely about the quality of the foods, but also about the way in which industrial processes of food production are occulted: that is, they are brought into the invisible realm of capitalist modes of production

behind the closed doors of industrial processing plants. This is in sharp contrast to his free-roaming *kienyeji* chickens. John L. and Jean Comaroff referred to such forms of ‘occultation’ as ‘mysterious techniques . . . whose principles of operation are neither transparent nor explicable in conventional terms’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 297). Industrial food processing here is understood as prone to market forces that promote the use of chemicals in order to cut costs and to make a ruling business class rich at the expense of the health of *wananchi*. Njoroge cannot be sure about the safety of the foods he eats because their production processes have been rendered invisible in ways that resemble Kenya’s increasingly ‘occulted economies’ of the 1990s, through which, as Blunt (2004: 297) noted, ‘[s]tate agents, institutions, and artifacts became suspect, rumored to be the very mechanisms by which Satan collected the life force of Kenya’s regular folk’ (also see Rahier 2021b). Brückner (2020) captures well how the consumption of scarce *kienyeji* foods in Nairobi has similarly become a way to resist the growing dominance of industrialized food production. She followed women who cultivate and share knowledge on African indigenous leafy vegetables<sup>14</sup> and understands their culinary practices as a form of resistance based on more ‘sustainable, solidarity-oriented and careful relationships and livelihoods’ (*ibid.*: 45). Brückner argues:

The motivations for these ways of provisioning from a trusted seller or from distant farms did not seem to be primarily economic. Rather it was important to know how the food was cultivated, who worked the soil and who provided care for and raised the vegetables. (Brückner 2020: 53)

The preference for a *kienyeji* taste can be seen as a form of ‘resistance’ or ‘counter-hegemonic’ practice that is influenced by the shared distrust felt by many *wananchi* towards the ruling political and business classes, who are perceived to be complicit in food adulterations. But it is not only about this. It is often less determined by class and more personal and affective than that. The case of Nyatichi – a thirty-year-old Kisii woman – illustrates this well. When the smell of Nakuru’s many fry houses hit her nostrils during one lunch hour, she felt a certain disgust. She argued that it made her stomach turn because, to her, it smelled like chemicals (*kemikali*): a sharp, ‘bitter’ (*kali*) kind of sensation that slightly burns one’s eyes and nostrils. It was nothing like the food her mother used to fry. Nyatichi bought non-*kienyeji* foods<sup>15</sup> regularly, yet cooking *kienyeji* reminded her of her upcountry childhood. Her late mother cooked *kienyeji* vegetables from their family farm, which, Nyatichi confided, was why they lived a strong and healthy life. For her, cooking *kienyeji* entailed a conscious act of remembering other kinds of relationships between bodies and substances, and between people. The focus here is not solely on ‘taste’ as the result of food triggering tastebuds that ‘learned’ to respond to the consumption of certain foods based on ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1977), but on the act of tasting as an unfolding of encounters, socially, morally and materially, and across time. This tasting is a reflexive experience

<sup>14</sup> Brückner (2020: 45) mentions vegetables such as the spider plant (*Gynandropsis/Cleome gynandra*), African nightshade (*Solanum scabrum*), amaranth (*Amaranthus blitum*) and cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*).

<sup>15</sup> These include foodstuffs from supermarkets, such as spaghetti, broiler chicken, seasoning cubes and processed minced meat.

embedded in sensorial engagements with the pressures of contemporary life in a fast-changing, unequal and often precarious urban context.

### Rekindling taste for cooler futures

Njoroge often bragged about his healthy, *kienyeji* lifestyle. Living at the edge of Menengai volcano has many advantages, he argued. His family has access to lush land to fetch firewood and they have ample space for their cows to graze. They do not depend heavily on provisions from town. Days usually start with *kienyeji* eggs cooked to perfection by Njoroge, who likes showing off his cooking skills to visitors. When I told him about Marguerite's chicken farm, the story was received with a lot of scepticism. He agreed that rearing broilers could be a lucrative business but claimed that nothing equals the taste and quality of *kienyeji* foods. Not long after Marguerite had invested in her broilers, Njoroge showed me a new cock he had bought at a very affordable price. 'But,' he added, 'there is something I have to admit.' The cock appeared to be a broiler breed, which, due to the extreme living conditions of an industrial 'product', had become very weak and was therefore sold at a reduced rate. Njoroge explained that he would give the cock *kienyeji* foods and let it roam freely within the confines of the compound. Over time, he hoped to see the chicken become a healthy-looking *kienyeji* version of itself and become part of the *kienyeji* coop he already owned.

The above vignette demonstrates that Njoroge does not adhere to an essentializing definition of *kienyeji* and its opposite. Rather, he argued that he could transform his broiler cock into a healthy *kienyeji* by exposing it to another lifestyle, one that would eventually alter its material characteristics into those of a *kienyeji* chicken. This example bears witness to broader ideas about how memory is stored in and remembered through substances and the senses (Seremetakis 1993: 4) and how, through altering substances, memories can also be altered: the dullness of the broiler chicken is transformed into the vigorous, potent taste and quality of a *kienyeji* chicken through being nurtured in a way not influenced by the industrialized processes of agrobusiness. As Seremetakis (*ibid.*: 4) puts it: '[T]he senses defer the material world by changing substance into memory.' By manipulating the qualia of the broiler chicken, Njoroge viscerally imagines better, more habitable and – as I discuss below – 'cooler' (*poa*) futures.

Key for how these visceral imaginaries take shape is the *kienyejification* process of broiler chickens (and by extension also, for instance, dairy cattle) into so-called *kroilers*.<sup>16</sup> Taste is thus flexible and the distinction between *kienyeji* and broiler is never absolute. Njoroge owned second- and third-generation *kroilers*, which are a mixture of broiler and *kienyeji* chickens. Second- or third-generation denotes the fact that interbreeding happened two or three generations ago, while resulting offspring had again been bred by mixing the *kroiler* with pure *kienyeji* breeds. The traces of broiler chicken in the *kroiler* lineage make this breed appear a bit fatter and its meat a bit softer, yet

<sup>16</sup> *Kroiler* is a contraction of 'broiler' and '*kienyeji*' and is used to refer to mixed breeds. The idea of mixed breeds is also commercialized under the brand 'kuroiler', an improved breed of *kienyeji* chicken originally produced in India. Besides Kenya, the 'kuroiler' breed is also found in Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa and parts of West Africa (also see Ngeno 2015: 11).

they are viewed as mostly *kienyeji* and are therefore considered healthier and more immune to diseases.

The modification of chickens – and ultimately ‘taste’ – demonstrates ‘agency’ and ‘resistance’ to the dullness of ‘big food chains’.<sup>17</sup> With the prospect of a growing market economy based on industrial, processed foodstuffs, some Nakurians assert the desire to regain control over their being and becoming future selves as well as the future of the city. Some do so by enlivening the dull taste of industrial chicken. The *kroiler* exemplifies the future-oriented aspects of gustatory explorations in Nakuru: by interbreeding, some qualities associated with aspects of an imagined lost past are speculatively reassembled with qualities associated with imagined industrial presents to inspire more desired futures in which *wananchi* are again in control of their lives. *Kroilers* thereby materialize many of my interlocutors’ aspirations for a future in which more fruitful relational entanglements with others and with the environment are created and lived: hence, a future that is more habitable (Langwick 2018), less dependent on food industries, and tasting less of the violence and trickery of food companies and city elites.

### The taste of authenticity

It was the end of January 2019 when two clients visited Njuguna – a healer and herbalist living within Menengai volcano – for the first time. They were suffering from swollen legs and stomach issues. After having visited several hospitals without any improvement, they decided to follow a friend’s advice to consult Njuguna. Their body language betrayed excitement and nervousness while they waited patiently for Njuguna to prepare a herbal concoction. Meanwhile, they discussed how fresh and healthy the air smelled in the volcano.<sup>18</sup> They told me that the smell was nothing like the toxic air of Kenya’s cities. A few minutes into the conversation, Njuguna brought us some roasted corncobs. The taste of them reminded his clients of healthier times that they had spent at their rural homes (*shambani*, literally ‘in the fields’). The sweetness of the corncobs provoked nostalgia and longing for what they imagined as the healthier rural lifestyles of the past. In the past, they explained, chickens did not get sick because they were stronger and healthier, while today’s broiler breeds are injected with hormones and chemicals (*kemikali*) because they are prone to diseases, and these make people ill. They concluded that people are being misled by agrobusinesses and have lost their ‘customs’, falling victim to the perils of a market society. It is, however, not only the trickery of the food industry that makes them weak, they argued, but also the fact that most urbanites have lost the ‘taste’ (*ladha*) of customary foods and their significance.

The conversation illustrates how eating *kienyeji* often provokes nostalgia for better imagined pasts. Njuguna’s clients shared memories of what they considered a

<sup>17</sup> This interpretation is in line with Turner (2018: 64), who argues that this resistance to the dulling of ‘big foods’ seen all over the world aims ‘to secure more sustainable modes of living’ and ‘commonly manifest[s] through forms of playful tinkering with food and tastes that require attunement to their more-than-human and relational configurations in order to prompt reflections on the fragility of human exceptionalism’.

<sup>18</sup> Njuguna is a Gikuyu healer and herbalist who operates from Menengai volcano in Nakuru. The volcano borders Nakuru town to the north.

'sweeter' (*tamu*) and 'cooler' (*poa*) time that were aroused sensorially through the taste and material properties of Njuguna's *kienyeji* corncoobs. In this romanticized past, foods embodied productive social relations, could bear ritual significance and were the direct outcome of the harmony between people and land. Resonating with Bloch's argument that 'in all societies, sharing food is a way of establishing closeness, while, conversely, the refusal to share is one of the clearest marks of distance and enmity' (Bloch 1999: 133), the sweetness of Njuguna's *kienyeji* corncoobs provoked nostalgia for what Langwick describes as 'relations that enable bodies and landscapes to grow ampler' (Langwick 2018: 436), in strong contrast to the toxic relational entanglements perceived to lie beneath 'bitter', industrially processed contemporary foods.

The visceral imaginaries a *kienyeji* taste provokes are also grounded in moral claims to the purity of foods. Njuguna, for instance, was convinced that his foods were not only good and healthy but also politically, spiritually and materially 'clean' (*safi*); this feeds the idea of an idyllic, 'authentic', pure – and hence 'cleaner' – lifestyle that contrasts with an unnatural hyper-technologized and toxic present. He made clients touch vegetables from his garden to emphasize their 'strength' (*nguvu*). He also used biblical images to describe his *shamba* (plot), claiming that it was his 'personal garden of Eden' where crops grew that were nothing like 'the poison from supermarkets'. He argued that food production moved from a highly seasonal and cyclical process of preparing the soil, growing the crop and harvesting over time, to an overnight, hormone-boosted and enhanced 'fast-farm' product, giving the example of neighbouring large-scale farmers who, in his words, 'spray tomatoes in the evening to ripen them overnight so they can harvest in the morning'.

Njuguna's reference to the speed with which industrial tomatoes are produced also hints at how agrobusiness instils a different temporality: one deprived of slowly maturing (socio-material) relational entanglements. This resonates with Weiss's (1996) analysis of the temporal and spatial dimensions of food consumption among Haya communities in Tanzania, where 'eating slowly' – like the slow process of brewing and consuming banana beer compared with faster distilled liquor – is part of a moral gastronomy. Homegrown *kienyeji* foods thus materialize a conjunction of morality, authenticity, politics, geography and temporality in deeply corporeal ways. At the same time, Njuguna's *kienyeji* food is also 'an icon of the process of endowing ... a form of wealth that objectifies the past's provisions for the sustenance of the future' (*ibid.*: 137).

Furthermore, *kienyeji* taste reminds Njuguna and his clients that 'relations between plants, people, and place have not always been as they are, but were reorganized through colonialism and continue to be stabilized through large-scale (plantation) agriculture' (Langwick 2018: 421). The idiom *kienyeji* linked foodstuffs to ideas about how the past provides for more significant future relationships. This was illustrated by Njuguna's comments about a passion fruit vine that grew on his land. He explained that this vine had been planted by his father when he first moved to Nakuru from Nyeri, after life there had become too expensive and land increasingly scarce. Along with many other Gikuyu families, Njuguna's family moved to the Nakuru region as part of resettlement schemes that were implemented after Kenya's independence in 1963. Farms that were put up for sale were bought by cooperatives looking for land for Gikuyu families displaced from their ancestral homes in central Kenya during the

colonial period. Referring to Mau Mau, Njuguna argued that ‘the ancestors’ had fought for the land on which he now grew vegetables:

Their bones were strong, not like the bones of people who eat these ‘fake’ foods from town. Mau Mau fought for our land, and their spirits are still here in this soil. When they died, they would grab a bit of soil in their hands as a tribute to the land they died for. That is what makes vegetables grown in this soil so strong. They are *kienyeji*, *bwana* [sir].

Njuguna’s descriptions of such celebrated pasts, like those of many others, are of course based on idealized, sanitized images of times Nakurians imagine as healthier, when relations between individuals, land, plants and animals were more meaningful, more spiritualized and more rooted in kinship. Such references often surface in everyday conversations in terms of the diminishing bodily ‘strength’ (*nguvu*) of youths and their loss of direction in life.<sup>19</sup> At Easter in 2021, during a *choma* (barbecue) at Njoroge’s place, his best friend Kirima explained this perceived loss well. Provoked by the taste of *kienyeji* mutton perfectly grilled over the course of the afternoon, Kirima explained that he was going through a divorce and had been struggling to make ends meet ever since he had left Nyeri for Nakuru.<sup>20</sup> In the past, he reminisced, issues like divorce, youths not finding jobs and addictions would be discussed on a community level during a *mwaki* (Gikuyu, ‘fire’).<sup>21</sup> Village elders would come together around an open fire to share roasted meat and drink sheep soup. While the food was shared, problems were publicly discussed and solutions debated.<sup>22</sup> Kirima explained:

The issues we are facing nowadays are caused because we lost connection with all of this; relationships fostered around the fire of the hearth, the meat of the sheep [*kondoo*] brought and slaughtered by the village elders, our indigenous spirituality, our connections to the land. Society has been reduced to individual survival.

The sharing of a meal to reinforce intergenerational connections, village sociality and the maintenance of a proper life flow (*moyo*) is no longer valued, Kirima bemoaned. Njogu – a member of the Gikuyu council of elders (*kiama*) – similarly concluded that almost all such activities had been deprived of the cultural values that were once passed on by older generations.<sup>23</sup> Describing how certain foods embody ‘authenticity’,

<sup>19</sup> This is a topic of discussion that is widespread across contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, inspiring anthropological work on the region over the last few decades (see Sanders 2003; De Boeck 1998: 25; Geissler and Prince 2010: 2; Holtzman 2009: 2; Ferguson 1999).

<sup>20</sup> His ancestral home was in Nakuru but he lived with his wife in Nyeri, where he was – together with Njoroge – a porter carrying provisions during ascents of Mount Kenya. He moved back to Nakuru due to the divorce.

<sup>21</sup> Meetings called *mwaki* referred to groups of households who shared embers to relight fires (Middleton and Kershaw 2017 [1965]).

<sup>22</sup> Also see Leakey (2007 [1977]), Kenyatta (1938) and Middleton and Kershaw (1965).

<sup>23</sup> He considered this the main reason why youths increasingly ‘lose direction’. The task of the current generations of elders, he argued, was to rejuvenate ‘customs’ among Nakuru’s youths. One of these customs he often referred to was the sharing of meat as a way to strengthen and maintain good social relationships.

Njogu explained that, during *mwaki*, the meat of rams (*ngoima*) would be shared between the attending members. This meat is always 100 per cent *kienyeji* and serves as an ‘entry token’ for younger men who want to join the *kiama*, to move up the hierarchical steps towards *kiama* eldership. Njogu and Kirima both perceived the decline in *kienyeji* foodstuffs as a direct attack on these older forms of intergenerational sociality.

References to an imagined past society with fewer industrial and processed foods were thus linked to memories of the sharing of meals as an embodiment of more productive (kin) relations. Nakuru residents idealized these relations as more durable, ‘cleaner’ (*safi*) and authentic, unlike the deception perceived to underlie many food businesses (also see Rahier 2021b). Here, Birgit Meyer’s (2015) example of the ‘epic genre’ is insightful for understanding how this longing for authenticity can take shape. The ‘epic genre’, a new film genre in Ghana, portrays an imaginary past set in green, lush villages characterized by abundance and purity. This, however, is a hybrid, invented past that speaks to an urban audience that has never known real village life. In such romanticized and sanitized portrayals, ‘tradition’ becomes an ‘aesthetic commodity’ to be consumed, echoing the ‘broader commercialization of culture in the neoliberal era’ (*ibid.*: 280). In Nakuru, the taste of *kienyeji* foods similarly induces ‘epic images’ among urban dwellers about lush pasts characterized by the abundance of ‘life’, healthy ancestors, and less reliance on the toxic relational entanglements in which contemporary food industries in Kenya are perceived to be rooted. The material qualities and sensorial affects of *kienyeji* foods trigger moral claims about authentic social relations that probably never existed as such, but the desire for which reveals much about people’s understandings of their contemporary lives, their society and their aspirations for ‘healthier’, ‘better’ futures. Through a sense of taste – as I have outlined it here as a material engagement with the qualia of food production and consumption – *kienyeji* foods therefore do temporal work that revolves around and invokes desires to revert to imagined past relational and cultural values in which the practice of sharing a meal is an embodiment of life’s generative capacities, and is understood as opposing the entangled corporeal and social affects of the perceived immoralities of contemporary social and political life in urban Kenya.

### The future’s taste as a synaesthetic experience

Different sense-making tools underlie discourses about food and the future in Nakuru. The taste of bitterness (*kali*), sweetness (*tamu*) or coolness (*poa*); the sensations such tastes provoke; the tactile descriptions of the weakness or strength of certain kinds of meat; and images of, for instance, broiler chicken having red, uncooked, bones – these are all references that illustrate the multisensory nature of eating in the city. To fully understand how Nakurians imagine their future, we need to move beyond ‘vision’ as the most important – if not the only – sense-making tool through which pasts and futures are imagined and constituted in Nakuru. An overemphasis or singular emphasis on vision as a privileged modality for knowing (Matherne 2016; also see Sutton 2010: 211; Stoller 1989: 23; Borthwick 2000; Howes and Classen 2013) falls short of capturing the power of ‘tasting’ (*-onja*) time – past and present – in Nakuru. A broader sensorial approach that includes vision among other corporeal senses such as taste, smell and touch might better reveal how pasts and futures are viscerally experienced,



constituted and lived through multiple senses. This is a perspective that speaks against the numbing and erasure of the multisensory realities that co-constitute futures-in-the-making.

The example of *kienyeji* food in Nakuru developed in this article illustrates how memory and aspiration, past- and future-making involve ‘multiple interacting sensory registers’ (Sutton 2010: 218). Food serves as a vehicle through which both ‘imagined pasts’ and ‘envisioned futures’ are constituted multi-sensorially. This may also demand that we move beyond conventional understandings of the five human senses, just as taste itself has been revealed as being a complex, entangled, and at once corporeal and imaginative process. Interoceptive senses, for instance, such as the stomach and gut, serve as metonymic frontiers through with the toxicity of urban life is experienced and metabolized (Rahier 2021b). Images of past and future relations between bodies, environments and substances are similarly given shape, texture and affect through the act of tasting; hence, they constitute a gustatory praxis evoking corporeal experiences that generates ‘pictures’ of what a future may look like or what a past may have been.

Furthermore, the memories of one sense can also be ‘stored’ – or rather *real-ized* – in others (Seremetakis 1993: 4): idealized and sanitized ‘images’ (sight) of the past are manifest in the ‘taste’ (gustatory) of ‘sweeter’ meat, and imaginings (sight) of lush futures are animated by the desired ‘touch’ (tactility) of food. So the meat of Njoroge’s *kroiler* feels stronger. It is by means of multisensory explorations and modifications of foodstuffs that urbanites become self-reflexive and generate aspired futures. The nostalgia embedded in *kienyeji* foods generates possibilities for future relationships in a synaesthetic way. This is a kind of nostalgia that invokes ‘a sense of future’ and an ‘experience, however imaginary, of possessing the means of controlling the future’ (Battaglia 1995: 78). It is this kind of nostalgia embedded in the entangled materialities and socialities of *kienyeji* foods that ‘enables or recalls to practice more meaningful patterns of relationship and self-action’ (*ibid.*: 78).

### Conclusion: tasting cooler futures

When Njoroge talked about his life on the edge of the volcano, he considered himself lucky. Away from the immediate hassle of Nakuru’s urban centre and surrounded by the lushness of the volcano, he said that life for him was *poa* (‘cool’ or ‘good’). The Kiswahili idiom *poa* is of relevance here. *Poa* denotes both ‘good’ and ‘cool’,<sup>24</sup> and, in addition to sweet (*tamu*), it is an important quality of *kienyeji*. Herbalists as well as healers, for instance, use the verb ‘cooling’ (*-poesha*) to describe how to remedy too much ‘heat’ or urban toxicity (see Rahier 2021b). The ethnographic material presented in this article shows how the relevance of ‘coolness’ also expands to debates about future habitability in the sense that the aspired futures – corporeally experienced through the consumption of *kienyeji* foods – taste of ‘coolness’. Explorations by Nakurians of the material qualities and qualia of *kienyeji* foods are metonymic of their visceral aspirations of a ‘cooler’ life, with less interference from unpredictable markets or unfamiliar others. This longing for a ‘cool life’ hinges on what Giddens defined

<sup>24</sup> When you ask someone ‘*Mambo?*’ (‘Problem?’), the answer is ‘*Poa*’ (‘Cool’, and by semantic extension, ‘Good’).

as the interconnection between ‘extensionality’ and ‘intentionality’, or ‘globalizing influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other’ (1991: 1). ‘Modernity’, Giddens argued, removed space from place and cultivated relationships between distant others, relationships that increased one’s reliance on ‘trust’ in the course of orienting one’s activities (*ibid.*: 1). In Nakuru, trust in food politics is lacking among many residents, provoking a contested food scene that echoes broader concerns about the city’s future becoming. The taste of *kienyeji* and Nakurians’ synaesthetic explorations of the material properties of homegrown foodstuffs allow them both to practically aspire to a ‘good and cool life’ (*maisha poa*) and to assert control and meaning over their life trajectories in a world that is perceived as increasingly toxic and polluted.

Just as tasting *kienyeji* materializes pasts when entanglements between bodies, landscapes and substances were imagined as lush and more potent, so substance and bodies, and the futures they index, can be altered. Njoroge’s remaking of his broiler chicken into a *kroiler* is exemplary. As substances and bodies are altered, cooler futures can be sensed, forged and made imaginable. For many Nakurians, the taste of *kienyeji* therefore ultimately materializes a desire to have a more ‘response-able’ (Haraway 2014: 256–7) attitude towards the future. In this way, tasting *kienyeji* foods affords an ability to envision – and therefore to cultivate, to taste, to feel, to smell, to touch – future responses to a world perceived as increasingly caught up in toxic entanglements. *Kienyeji* foods thus *real-ize* the entanglement of various temporalities and their associated (contested) multiplicities as they appear in Nakuru and show that the materials and stuff that constitute urban lifeworlds are not passive and inert, remaining in the background of urban life, but are ‘always an active participant in the making of cities’ (Fontein and Smith 2023).

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