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**making memory matter:  
claiming place and  
belonging in johannesburg  
and nairobi**  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how and why memory matters for religious adherents through an analysis of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Johannesburg and the Kenyan-Nubian Muslim community in Nairobi. We argue that memory—like belief—is not located in the interiority of the subject. Rather, a religious community's memory is materially produced and mediated through its engagement with matter and place, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. We introduce the concept of “material autochthony” to elucidate how these communities strategically employ material practices to critique state-led erasure of histories (“chronophagy”) and assert themselves in the political memory of the city by claiming spaces and belonging to them. Finally, this paper provides ethical insight into the care that researchers who are outsiders to the community can employ to navigate the affective and emotional dimensions of participants' memories during and after the research process.

**Keywords:** Memory, chronophagy, “material autochthony,” belonging, urban religion, african cities

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## Locating Religion(s) in African Cities

Johannesburg in South Africa and Nairobi in Kenya are two of the most dynamic, socially diverse, and distinct cities on the African continent. When comparatively analysed, researchers either couple Johannesburg and Nairobi as “twin cities” or bundle them with Cairo, Kinshasa, and Lagos as the “Big Five” African cities (Pinther et al. 2012). Established in 1886 and 1899 respectively, Johannesburg and Nairobi are indeed “twins” as their date of origin coincided with the invention of new forms of colonial urban spatial design which shaped ideas about city dwellers (Murray and Myers 2007, 8). By establishing the city with and for particular “citizens,” the state neglected the religious needs of communities whose constituents were not recognised as such. Marginalized or excluded groups were therefore compelled to fund and create religious spaces for themselves, thereby building the city from the margins (of both the state and city) (see Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2014). Today, Johannesburg and Nairobi can indeed be classified as “big” according to their populations and according to academic studies on religious vitality, innovation, diversity, and hybridity (see Dilger et al. 2020). However, the postcolonial and post-apartheid governments of Kenya and South Africa continue to build Nairobi and Johannesburg for a particular kind of city dweller, thereby perpetuating the neglect of certain religious places and neighborhoods of (formerly) marginalized groups. We ask, how have religious communities responded to ongoing attempts by the state to destroy, evict, or neglect their neighborhoods and properties? What do their responses tell us about the way claims to the city and the buildings therein operate, and what kind of methods and concepts do we need to observe and describe these claims? For the purpose of this paper, “matter” is defined as the physical material that constitutes the urban built environment, including individual buildings, entire neighborhoods, improvised assemblages and infrastructures that enables religions(s) to exist and coexist (see Burchardt 2019, 628; Knott et al. 2016, 128-129).

Our ethnographic work with members of the religious communities discussed in this paper helps address these questions. We focus on the organized space of the Dube Centre which is the premises of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in Soweto, Johannesburg and the Kenyan-Nubian Muslim community in Kibera, Nairobi. To analyze these case studies, we present the critical concept of “material autochthony,” which describes the relationship between a community’s claim to belong, and its use of memory to navigate future relationships with specific places and properties (i.e. buildings) in a rapidly changing urban landscape. To demonstrate why and how place and property are important for the way our research participants understand and express themselves as religious persons in a city, we first expound on the material conditions of Johannesburg and Nairobi as well as the political circumstances

of post-apartheid in South Africa and post-independence in Kenya. We highlight how affective attachments to place and property in Johannesburg and Nairobi provide religious actors and communities with matter to dwell with the past, challenge their exclusion from political memory, *and* claim their place in the future city. We paraphrase AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004, 407) observation that when urbanization in African cities occurs, "something else besides decay" or destruction is required to explain how it affects religion, religions, and religious people in the city.

In our case studies we conceptualize this "something else" as the state's (attempted) deletion of public memory through the destruction of its material traces, using Achille Mbembe's notion of "chronophagy" (Mbembe 2002). We consider the properties and places in our case studies as archives subject to chronophagy to illuminate how material conditions and political circumstances propel communities to create, preserve, and share memories and practices as a way to solidify their claim and belonging to the city. Second, by focusing on urban places and buildings in the city, this paper locates religious experiences and notions of belonging "beyond the officially sacred centre" (Kong 2001, 226) of buildings designated as "religious" (Chidester 2012). Both the Dube Centre and Kibera complicate what scholars of religion mean by "sacred." For instance, although the YWCA has occasionally used the Dube Centre for worship, the building is not a church. YWCA members nevertheless form a community there and act on their attachments to it as an "integrating focus," as in "implicit" religion (Bailey 1999). Alternatively, Kenyan-Nubians regard Kibera as a sacred and ancestral home(land) and continue to bury their dead and attend mosques only in Kibera, as well as perform other significant rituals as their ancestors did. However, their designation as "stateless" by the postcolonial Kenyan government and attitudes of their neighbors who are citizens undermines the claim to Kibera as "sacred."

In this respect and although different, both case studies illustrate how and why claims to ownership of, and belonging to, urban built environments render these spaces "sacred" through contestation between the community and the state and through the shifting processes of displacement, development, marginalization, and exclusion. We define these claims as "material autochthony," as discussed at length below, to illustrate and unpack how religious communities facing displacement from buildings in Johannesburg and Nairobi, or exclusion from the political history of South Africa and Kenya, use shared and suppressed memory to evidence their longstanding presence in and contribution to their respective cities and claim the places and pasts from which they are excluded. Throughout the paper, we write together as "we," with the exception of our empirical contributions in sections three on Soweto, Johannesburg (by Eleanor) and four on Kibera, Nairobi (by Tammy) to make clear

whose voice is heard at each point. We then switch back to the collective voice to reflect (auto)ethnographically on our different experiences.

### **Memory, Chronophagy, and “Material Autochthony”**

A wide and varied body of scholarship on memory has explored the connections between identity, memory, subjectivity, and narrative (see Apaydin 2020; Assmann 1995; Baines 2007; Graeber 1997; Kuhn 2002; Linde 2009; Stoler 2002; Stoler and Strassler 2000; Trouillot 1995; Winter 2010). While there are different definitions of and approaches to “memory,” these studies underscore that memory is an active practice that engages both “remembering” and “forgetting” as well as multiple human and non-human actors such as the state (Stoler 2002) and matter, including archives, that function as forgettings for some but remembrance for others (Trouillot 1995). We draw on this underlying theme in memory studies and submit that memory is materially produced and mediated through a community’s engagement with matter, specifically, the built environment of the city. A material approach to memory furthermore allows us to trace and discuss how the built environment functions as a mode of memory for religious actors and communities. We suggest that religious communities’ engagement with the development of buildings, places, and spaces in their city connects them to it, in part because it encourages religious communities to engage the past. Here, Fontanari’s (2022, 525) observation of villagers in northern Pakistan proved useful. Fontanari notes that in constructing, maintaining, and naming a bridge in honor of a family or community member, the villagers transformed these activities into an act of remembrance that ties multiple generations, temporalities, and human-and-non-human relations together. In this way, the infrastructure of the bridge becomes a kind of “memory text” (Kuhn 2002) and an “expression of people’s ontological entanglement with their landscape” (Fontanari 2022, 539).

Building infrastructures is as much a way to engage the past as it is a way for religious communities to challenge their exclusion from it. Scholars of religion in urban Africa show that the material and infrastructural design of the city shapes how and which communities qua “religions” are recognized and remembered (Chidester 2000, 2012). In some studies, scholars outline how the rapid urban development of the city produced outright violence about whose religion matters (see Ukah 2016). Others propose that the innovative religious spaces produced in informal neighborhoods in Cape Town and Nairobi evidence the resilience of marginalized religious communities despite the material and infrastructural inequalities they experience (Burchardt 2019; Chidester 2000; Wilks 2022). Expounding on this literature, we submit that if the built environment functions as “memory text” for religious actors and communities, then the

existing blueprint of the city can signal to religious communities not only whose place matters in the city but whose past will be remembered as the city changes and transforms. In this respect, recognizing that memory matters means recognizing that memory is constituted through power, and that remembering and forgetting are enactments of power.

Understanding the power dynamics of memory is about who remembers, who forgets, and to what ends. These are material issues that have implications for understanding what religious communities render sacred, and why. In this paper, we define remembering and forgetting as competing political acts between the state, which selectively forgets by neglecting, building over or destroying the places and properties of religious communities, and society, which remembers by maintaining their places in some small way. We understand the actions of the post-colonial Kenyan state and post-apartheid South African state to be “chronophagy,” as presented by Achille Mbembe (2002, 23-4), and the response of religious communities as “material autochthony.” As Mbembe explains, chronophagy—the literal meaning of which is “time consuming”—describes the state’s practice of “eating” the past. This consumption of historical time is a constitutive act of violence that underpins “the power of the state ... to abolish the archive and anaesthetise the past” (*ibid.*, 23). Not only does the state “forget” by “eating” the past, it cements these forgettings in an official narrative of history, one that privileges certain actors and events. Mbembe illustrates this dual process of erasure and narrative building in the national archive to underscore how the archive institutionalizes and authorizes forgetting.

Whereas Mbembe focuses on national and institutional archives, we turn to urban places and property to illustrate how chronophagy takes place in post-apartheid South Africa and post-colonial Kenya. The form and function of chronophagy is evident in the way the governments of present-day South Africa and Kenya destroy, neglect, or appropriate property and land. Previous studies in material religion have demonstrated the significance of religious practices and orientations towards objects, places, and infrastructures, not least as they create and sustain networks of relations within and between communities and nations, whether “real” or “imagined” (Morgan 2019; Tweed 2006). This is confirmed by the testimonies of the urban religious communities in our case studies for whom neighborhoods and buildings offer opportunities to establish belonging and archive and remember their histories. For this reason, disruptive state interventions in the city limit religious communities’ ability to access and make sense of the past. Chronophagy therefore orients our analysis towards the material ways in which political memory shapes religious communities through the state’s investment in, divestment from, expropriation or destruction of “sacred” land, place, and property.

We propose the concept of material autochthony to trace how religious communities respond to chronophagy and whether their responses represent a particular “grammar” or discourse about what claims to the city and buildings mean for these communities. By invoking autochthony, we recognize a politics of belonging at play in our case studies. In African political discourse, “autochthony” has been used to enhance the dominance of “well-established groups,” in contrast to its synonym “indigeneity” which more often signals minority status (Geschiere 2011, 336-7). However, we present “material autochthony” as a heuristic to observe and map how a religious community’s struggle for and over place, space, and the right to belong shifts from a legal rights claim about who owns a building or parcel of land, to a discourse about who contributed religiously and materially to making the neighborhood, city, and the buildings therein. In such cases, memories about how religious communities live(d) in the city, neighborhood, or buildings are mobilized to invent a political discourse that can both contest and undermine the state’s narrative and thus challenge its ownership of a place and its past. In this respect, material autochthony allows us to critically situate the explicit and implicit claims of originality, belonging, ownership and/or contribution by religious communities—i.e. moves to “autochthony”—within the material conditions and struggles that motivate them. As scholars of religion, this allows us to present “material autochthony” to understand how and why urban “sacred” places, in Chidester’s (2012) sense, become resources and strategies for religious communities to claim and justify their belonging to the city and the post-colonial or post-apartheid nation.

Material autochthony is also useful to analyze how ongoing and unfolding claims to urban buildings and places in the city are improvised and enacted. Evidence of material autochthony can be observed comparatively in the responses and strategies by religious actors and communities toward the development of “the Singapore of Africa,” in the case of Kigali, Rwanda or the reconstruction of Nairobi “into a world class African region” (Nairobi Metro 2030 Strategy 2008, v; Blair and Uwiringiyimana 2015). Similarly, in the protest action and legal filings by the San and Khoi peoples in Cape Town to reject the erection of Amazon’s new US\$300 million African Headquarters, we see that rather than compete for land *per se*, San and Khoi representatives employed deep history and memory to delegitimize the entire system of private property with regards to land they deem “sacred” (London 2021). In this way, “material autochthony” has purchase for scholars who study in these contexts to map what and whom the future African city will include and what role memory plays for the religious communities there.

In the sections that follow we explore “material autochthony” through our case studies as two entangled processes: a

critique of the post-colonial and post-apartheid act of “chronophagy,” whereby the state excludes certain religious groups from political memory, and a way for religious communities to insert themselves materially into political memory by claiming place and properties. In Soweto the act of remembrance reinforces the material relationship between people and place, while in Kibera it materializes the decaying or destroyed buildings.

### **The YWCA and the Dube Centre**

The Dube Centre is a wide, three-story, yellow-brick building with a blue sheet metal roof, which currently serves as South Africa YWCA's national headquarters. It stands at a busy intersection on Mncube Drive in the centre of Dube, a neighborhood in Soweto, south-west of the city centre of Johannesburg. The Dube Centre's practical significance is, first and foremost, logistical and economic as it contains the YWCA's administrative offices and function rooms as well as serving as the venue for YWCA events and programme activities. Aside from these roles, it is centrally important for the YWCA in that it materially and metaphorically holds its history. The capacity of the Dube Centre to store shared organizational memory makes its material presence highly symbolic, almost monumental, and “sacred.” It has been the site of traumatic events as well as joyful ones, and it stands as a testament to the YWCA's endurance under extraordinarily harsh conditions. In this section, I (Eleanor) begin by briefly retelling the history of South Africa YWCA to provide context for my case study and demonstrate the centrality of the Dube Centre in the YWCA's moves to material autochthony.<sup>1</sup>

In South Africa, the YWCA is a distinctive organization, having developed out of the mixture of a Protestant British women's organization founded in Cape Town 1886 and a network of small-scale women's clubs active in the Transvaal, in the north-east of the country in the 1940s. In 1955, the YWCA formalized its national identity under the official name of the World-Affiliated YWCAs of South Africa (hereafter, “the YWCA”), indicating its membership of the transnational YWCA movement which is coordinated by the World YWCA secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland. The YWCA has undertaken a characteristically broad programme of activities, combining responsiveness to the material needs of Black women in local communities with adherence to universal ideals of Christian womanhood (see also Berger 2001; Hendricks 2022; C. Higgs 2004; E. Higgs 2021). Its activities have included the provision of vocational training programmes and childcare facilities, youth groups, poverty alleviation projects, and advocacy for social justice.

The YWCA remains marginal to retellings of South African history despite its longevity, its popularity during apartheid, and the relatively high proportion of its leaders who graduated into public office. In recent decades it has seen a declining number of members, incentivizing the YWCA to insert itself into, and

highlight itself in, public and shared memories of apartheid, anti-apartheid resistance, and post-apartheid “progress.” It does so in two primary ways; the first of which is by narrating the YWCA’s significance in the careers of prominent South African women, for example Ellen Kuzwayo of the African National Congress (ANC), and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka who was Executive Director of UN Women 2013-2021 and Deputy President of South Africa 2004-2008. In doing so, the YWCA seeks to demonstrate its relevance in the post-apartheid nation by identifying the contributions to civic life, gender equality, and democracy made by educated, middle-class Black women whose success is retroactively attributed to their personal and professional formation in the YWCA. Second, the YWCA engages in a connected project to collectively remember the organization’s role in nationally significant events of apartheid and post-apartheid history. This approach, in which the Dube Centre plays a significant role, foregrounds the organization’s presence in the communities in which it worked during apartheid, and demonstrates its embeddedness at the grassroots of anti-apartheid struggle. These accounts of the YWCA’s significance in national South African history are part of an ongoing process of “memory work” in which the YWCA seeks to refute and circumvent its marginalization in national memory.

The Dube Centre offers staff and other insiders the occasion to narrate the YWCA’s history by provoking retellings of shared memories, which is a characteristic means of collective identity-building in organizations and institutions (Linde 2009). Organizations’ memories are preserved as stories told by personnel when they are useful, often prompted by historical artefacts such as photographs, commemorative plaques, and publicity materials (*ibid*, 10-13). The YWCA’s past is retold in the present in reference to photographs of the highly-respected “veterans” of the movement on permanent display in the meeting room, including portraits naming and commemorating YWCA leaders who “initiated” the new Dube Centre in the 1980s, to which I return below. The Dube Centre itself serves as a historical artefact in this way, as my interlocutors recalled details of the YWCA’s history as we moved through the spaces of the building. Re-narrating shared YWCA memories through the prism of the Dube Centre allows the YWCA to offer material evidence of its authenticity, its belonging in Soweto, and its contributions to the community and anti-apartheid struggle. Authenticity and belonging, thus established, underpin the YWCA’s status as a legitimate agent of “development,” women’s rights activism, and social justice in the post-apartheid nation (E. Higgs 2021). In the process, the Dube Centre has become “sacred,” in the sense we gave above, interpreted through its singular ability to connect the YWCA to events of iconic status in post-apartheid history. The Dube Centre is thus a critical example of an urban and religiously-defined (albeit voluntary) community’s moves to material autochthony.

### **An Origin Story**

The story of the Dube Centre begins with the establishment of Dube township in 1945, in the centre of what would later become Soweto. Throughout the early twentieth century, townships were established at the lowest possible cost to the white taxpayer, reflecting the logic of segregation and racial capitalism that required Black labourers to be near to their white employers, but not in the same neighbourhoods (Jürgens et al. 2013). Dube was initially envisaged as a Black middle-class enclave, but was soon re-planned to prioritise the provision of tiny “matchbox” houses. The majority of its inhabitants lived in similar conditions to other townships, with minimal infrastructure and unreliable supplies of water and electricity. However, by the late-1950s, Dube was well-established and a small proportion of its population lived in relatively spacious, well-appointed homes set on large plots, contributing to Dube’s aura of respectability that it retained into the 1960s (Parnell 1991). Among Dube’s middle-class residents was South Africa YWCA’s founding mother and leading figure, Madie Hall Xuma. Xuma was forcibly relocated in 1959 to a newly-built house in Dube from Sophiatown, where she had lived for the previous 20 years with her husband, the political activist Dr Alfred B. Xuma (Hendricks 2022). As a new resident in Dube, Xuma professed a “dream” to construct new YWCA premises in the neighbourhood (*ibid.*, 188), beginning a three-year process of planning, negotiation, and fundraising to construct the building that would eventually be known as the Dube Centre. Thus, the apartheid state’s racist management of urban space and violent redistribution of the Black population in the 1950s constituted the conditions in which it was necessary, and indeed possible, for the YWCA to build religious “infrastructure” (Burchardt 2019) and create a community space for Black women.

Constructed under the leadership of Xuma and Phyllis Mzaidume, Transvaal YWCA’s “General Secretary,” or manager, the Dube Centre project was beset by tensions about the ownership of the building. These tensions arose in the context of the overarching apartheid-era legislation governing land ownership, leasehold tenure, and zoning, including the Native Urban Areas Act (1923) and the Group Areas Act (1950), which restricted where and under what material conditions Black South Africans could live. The process of constructing the Dube Centre also surfaced tensions that revolved around the degree of independence white YWCA women were willing to grant their Black colleagues.<sup>2</sup> The state-mandated white “Advisory Committee” overseeing the activities of the Transvaal YWCA, and the Johannesburg YWCA club whose fundraising efforts had contributed towards the Dube Centre’s construction, were each reluctant to allow the Dube YWCA club to take *de facto* ownership of the premises. The understanding in 1962 that Johannesburg City Council would be “the real owner of the building”<sup>3</sup> is

ironically what allowed these tensions to finally be relieved, as no YWCA faction had the power to contest apartheid legislation. The YWCA's subsequent attachment to the Dube Centre has its roots in these tensions; the apartheid state's denial of recognition of the organization as the building's legal owners, as legitimate inhabitants of the city, and as full citizens.

The Dube Centre was opened in 1963, the same year in which Soweto was officially named (Figure 1). On February 16th at an opening ceremony for the Centre, Xuma unveiled a commemorative plaque bearing her name; a gesture of consecration (Figure 2). Funds for construction and furnishings had been raised by the Transvaal YWCA, other YWCA branches around the country, a grant from the Gordon Gray Trust, a British charity, and the internal grant making schemes of the World YWCA network.<sup>4</sup> The construction of a new, community-oriented building in Dube was framed as a demonstration of the YWCA's commitment to the neighbourhood, its members' skill in fundraising, and their tenacity in completing the project despite many obstacles.<sup>5</sup> The Dube Centre's existence also reflected the relationships of solidarity made possible by South Africa YWCA's membership of the World YWCA, which was a significant source of support for its work during apartheid. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Dube Centre enabled the YWCA to express its belonging in the city through a success story in which the voluntary action of Black women materially improved the



**FIG 1** Undated photograph of the Dube Centre. The sign partially visible on the right of the photograph reads "Zenezele Y.W.C.A." (image courtesy of the World-Affiliated YWCA of South Africa.).



**FIG 2**

Staff and leaders of World-Affiliated YWCA of South Africa pose with the commemorative plaque laid by Madie Hall Xuma at the opening of the Dube Centre in February 1963. Left to right: Mrs Rathebe (Johannesburg YWCA club president), Ellen Kuzwayo (Dube Centre staff), Mrs Shuping (Dube Centre treasurer, caretaker, and cook), Mrs Molepo (YWCA president), Mrs Hlatswayo (YWCA member), and Mrs Molanda (building committee chairperson). (Image courtesy of the World YWCA, Geneva, Switzerland.)

neighbourhood: it was “a symbol of the best efforts of the YWCA in [Soweto].”<sup>6</sup> However, this narrative of success in the face of adversity was to be interrupted by political violence in the mid-1970s.

***“Right in the Middle of the Strife”***

By the mid-1970s, the Dube Centre was serving as the headquarters and administrative office of the World-Affiliated YWCA of the Transvaal, as well as being a vibrant hub of community action through its own programmes and as a venue used by other community groups for meetings and social events. Two pivotal historical events during this decade subjected the YWCA directly and indirectly to state violence. On 16 June 1976, the now infamous students’ protest in Soweto was violently disrupted by the police and security forces of the apartheid state, and in 1977 a public funeral was held for Steve Biko after his death at the hands of the police. In both events, the Dube Centre played a supporting role through which the YWCA has since been able to stake a claim in the foundational narratives of anti-apartheid resistance as a grassroots community organization. During the students’ protest, the YWCA provided

“hospitality” to children, whether protesters or simply caught up in the events. The Dube Centre’s location placed it “right in the middle of the strife,” amidst fires that burned down “all” neighbouring buildings, and precipitated a six-week power cut.<sup>7</sup> With schools closed as a result of the students’ protests, the Dube Centre offered a space for “hundreds” of local children to shelter in safety, aligning itself with Sowetan parents and responding to their concerns. The YWCA observed that its interventions in summer 1976 had cemented its position in the social landscape, noting: “we have made the community of Soweto aware that this Centre is meant to cater for their needs.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1977, perhaps in recognition of the organization’s profile in the community, state violence was directed at the Dube Centre itself. After the news that police had killed Biko on 12 September, Sowetans, YWCA members, the Black Consciousness Movement, and anti-apartheid activists grieved. The YWCA had given permission for the Black People’s Convention to use the Dube Centre as the venue at which mourners could gather to board buses to King William’s Town (now Qonce) to attend Biko’s funeral on 25 September. Police descended on the gathered crowd and attacked them with tear gas, whips, dogs, guns, and sexual assault. Violence was also directed at the YWCA’s premises (Kuzwayo 2004; Piliso-Seroke 2020). The Dube Centre was badly damaged with all 55 windows smashed by the police, furniture broken, and documents stolen from “the filing cabinet and drawers... in the General Secretary’s office.”<sup>9</sup> The damage was significant and required the YWCA to raise scarce funds to complete the necessary repairs. In then-YWCA leader Ellen Kuzwayo’s words, “For as long as the damage [to the Dube Centre] remained, so were the sad memories of Steve [Biko]’s death fresh in the minds of Soweto residents” (2004, 58). The damage done, and the YWCA’s role in the event, was recorded in letters circulated transnationally within the YWCA movement, and later incorporated into its identity narratives through organizational memory as well as individual memoirs by Kuzwayo (1985) and Joyce Piliso-Seroke (2020).

Baines (2007) observes that the Soweto uprising of 1976 has been incorporated into the “national master narrative” of resistance to apartheid—rising to the status of “the foundation myth of the post-apartheid state” (Baines 2007, 291). Similarly, Biko’s high-profile activism, his murder, and the outcry after his death are pivotal in the history of Black Consciousness and symbolic of the violence and injustice of apartheid. Cementing the YWCA’s status in retellings of these stories has had the effect of positioning the Dube Centre, and by extension the YWCA, at the heart of Soweto and the anti-apartheid struggle. Until 1977, the YWCA expressed material autochthony through framing the Dube Centre as a vital contribution to the community and the social infrastructure of the township. Starting in the late 1970s, the YWCA instead presented a damaged Dube Centre, under attack by the apartheid state, as evidence of its social and

political relevance. The World YWCA movement's active solidarity with the South African YWCA and its anti-apartheid stance temporarily brought international attention to the Dube Centre, publicising the events described above, and adding weight to the association between Soweto and the YWCA. The YWCA's moves to material autochthony on the basis of the Dube Centre's entanglements with such events were thus facilitated, in part, by international public knowledge of what happened. This catalyzed a new mode of memorialization of the YWCA as intrinsic to the community and the struggle; a move to material autochthony that underpins the organization's stories, claims, and memories in the present.

### ***The Dube Centre, Memory, and Memorialization***

Memory matters for the YWCA as an organization, because like belief, memory is not isolated and individual. Rather it is materially mediated through the YWCA's engagements with the Dube Centre as a place and as a "memory text." After the events of 1977, the old building was considered no longer fit for purpose. In the 1980s it was rebuilt in its current form (Figure 3). The new Dube Centre was constructed thanks to the fundraising efforts led by the YWCA's then-manager Joyce Piliso-Seroke, mirroring the earlier efforts of her mother, Maud Piliso, who had worked with Xuma on the construction of the original Dube Centre in the 1960s (Hendricks 2022; Piliso-Seroke 2020;



**FIG 3**  
The Dube Centre after reconstruction in 1988. (Image courtesy of the World. YWCA, Geneva, Switzerland.).

Seymour-Jones 1994; Tshabangu 2015). The Dube Centre now stands both as evidence of survival in the face of attempted destruction, and also once again as a success story of the YWCA's contribution to the community.

The Dube Centre is stocked with the YWCA's and Sowetans' memories in a manner that resists the archivization, collection, and containment characteristic of "chronophagy" (Mbembe 2002). Its surfaces display memory prompts, including the ghostly presence of the former Dube Centre and the events to which, through it, the YWCA bore witness (Figure 4). These prompts require interpreters who have learned the stories of the organisation's past in order to understand their meaning. Mbembe suggests that state archives embalm public memory, fixing it in time and place, and indexing it according to its utility for the state's projects (*ibid.*, 23-4.). In contrast, the Dube Centre's



**FIG 4**

Commemorative photographs are displayed in the Dube Centre. A portrait of former treasurer and "veteran" of the YWCA Glorina Mohohlo (top left) sits alongside "before" and "after" photographs of the building.

legibility for incorporation in memories and histories of anti-apartheid resistance depends on its visibility and accessibility to the communities it serves; both Dube, and thereby the larger areas of Soweto and Johannesburg, and also South Africa YWCA. Key YWCA personnel—its leaders, “stalwarts” and “veterans”—are particularly important narrators of the organization’s history, as a result of their ability to “read” the Dube Centre as a surface on which memories are inscribed. Each re-telling of the YWCA’s history through the prism of the Dube Centre is an occasion for implicit and explicit assertions of material autochthony.

In post-colonial Kenya and post-apartheid South Africa, a certain Christianity is memorialized in national discourse as the source of both (colonial, apartheid) oppression and (anti-colonial, anti-apartheid) resistance. Christianity’s memorialization in the “national master narrative” (Baines 2007, 291) of anti-apartheid resistance is a feature of post-apartheid chronophagy. To the extent that Christian resistance takes centre stage in the memorialization of anti-apartheid struggle, it overshadows and subsumes the participation and resistance of non-Christians, particularly Muslims and practitioners of “traditional religions.” Because it is a Christian organization, this facilitates the YWCA’s efforts to resist marginalization. Under the seeming neutral prefix of “post”—post-colonial and post-apartheid—the continuing struggle for stability and legitimacy of other religious communities and collectives is more easily elided from the dominant national memory.

### **Kenyan-Nubians in Kibera**

Whereas in South Africa the YWCA can claim a place in the hegemonic narrative of Black Christian resistance to apartheid, in Nairobi the Kenyan-Nubian community find themselves partially excluded from the post-colonial community and national memory in Kenya. This exclusion is on account of Kenyan-Nubians’ *de facto* statelessness which will be discussed later in this section.<sup>10</sup> What is important to note for now is that alongside their exclusion from political history and Kenyan citizenry resides a growing worry that the rapid urbanization of Nairobi will result in the eviction of the Kenyan-Nubian community from, and the destruction of their homeland, Kibera. This direct challenge to their homeland as well as the political challenge to their belonging by the Kenyan government of the day, compels the Kenyan-Nubian community to mobilize matter as a means to preserve and narrate their history on the one hand, and claim belonging to Kenya, Nairobi, and Kibera on the other.

Located approximately seven kilometres from the central business district, Kibera is as old as Nairobi and occupies prime real estate in the city. Approximately 185,777 people, affiliated to Christianity, Islam, Traditionalism, and African Instituted Churches, are reported to live in Kibera (Kenya National Bureau

of Statistics 2019a, Vol. 1, 20; 2019b, Vol IV, 422; Republic of Kenya 2019). Named by Nubian soldiers who settled there in 1907, Kibera is regarded by descendants of these soldiers as the homeland of the Kenyan-Nubian community. That Kibera is an ancestral homeland did not prevent the Kenyan government from bulldozing a third of the neighborhood in July 2019 to erect a highway for city commuters, leaving approximately 30,000 Kiberans unhomed, unemployed, and religiously adrift in just a few hours (Golla 2018). The highway, now functioning, runs through the heart of Kibera and formed part of the “Nairobi Metro 2030,” an urban development plan to transform Nairobi into a “world-class African metropolis by 2030” by erecting highrise buildings, expansive expressways, and the multi-billion dollar “Silicon Savannah” project in Nairobi (Government of Kenya 2008).

As Kiberans explained during fieldwork research in 2019, the image of Nairobi as a world-class city in the making is less a statement of pride than an illustration of the urban precarity they face about their future in the city. When I (Tammy) returned to Kibera about six months after the bulldozing, I observed how the raze exposed and hardened unresolved religious and political questions among Kiberans about who “really” belongs in Kibera: Kenyan-Nubians for whom Kibera is their homeland, all residents regardless of religious affiliation, or non-residents of Kibera whose cosmopolitan lives are prioritized before the needs of Kiberans. Moreover, who has the right to determine this question? The government of Kenya? Taxpayers? Kenyan-Nubians who, despite their statelessness, regard Kibera as their homeland *and*, paradoxically, own land in Kibera, or perhaps the residents for whom Kibera is a home but not a homeland? These questions are longstanding and ongoing yet illustrate the various actors and their material positions which informs how I analyze material autochthony in Kibera and over time (Figure 5).

This section focuses on the kinds of claims and motivations that Kenyan-Nubians who participated in my research present about who belongs in Kibera and to whom Kibera belongs. These claims, I argue, illustrate how, why, and what Kenyan-Nubians past and present regard sacred—Kibera itself and private property—and underscores how the sacralizing of land and property facilitates Kenyan-Nubians’ ongoing project to represent themselves as both a religious community and as Kenyans. By focusing on this religious community alone, I do not suggest that Kenyan-Nubians’ claims are valid or that their argument is sound compared to other religious communities in Kibera who also experienced loss due to the bulldozing and continue to live in fear of unannounced razes. Rather, the way in which this community has and continues to deploy memory to substantiate their right to land and belonging in Kibera provides a useful examination of how a religious community invents and deploys religious myths and rituals to compete for land and the right to belong in the city. Unlike the YWCA case above, the



**FIG 5**

SOPA Images Limited/Alamy stock photo. 22 July 2022. "the construction of Kibera -Southern Bypass Interchange Road in Nairobi, Kenya. Life inside Kibera Africa's Largest Slum."

examples in this section illustrate how the Kenyan-Nubian community utilized aesthetic and embodied strategies in addition to material resources of place and property to establish and maintain their presence as a stateless community.

### ***Building Kibera and the Nubian Identity***

The battalion of Nubian soldiers who first settled in Kibera around 1907 was perhaps the first in centuries to settle permanently in one place. Owing to the long history of Nubian Kingdoms enslaving men in southern Egypt to produce armies that could be traded with Egypt and later, private patrons, battalions were mobile and underwent a constant change in personnel (Johnson 1989, 76). As a result, these soldiers neither derived from nor shared a single past or identity. Rather, what made these soldiers "Nubian" was their corporal lineage and political status as stateless. This meaning of "Nubian" changed in the late nineteenth century when a battalion of one-thousand Nubian soldiers based in Uganda pledged allegiance to the British Crown and their captain, Frederick Lugard (Bentley and Lugard 1892, 19). Lugard admired their military skills and considered these soldiers to be "intelligent" and "more dependable" than "African troops" (Lugard 1922, 574-575). This racist distinction between Nubian and African soldiers continued throughout colonial rule in Kenya (until 1963) and shaped the

landed reality of Nubians who were allowed to occupy land in present-day Nairobi due to their claimed superiority to Africans and service to the Crown (see Wilks 2024). What is noteworthy is that the parcel of land occupied was located outside the municipality of Nairobi which allowed Nubian soldiers to use the land without colonial regulation (East Africa Protectorate, 1917). In this regard, both the classification of Nubians by the colonial regime and the material opportunities provided to soldiers legitimacy and physical resources to construct a distinct religious community of Muslim adherents, but ultimately rendered their religiosity dependent on the recognition and resources of the colonial state.

Eventually, this parcel of land became known as “Kibra” to Nubians which means “forest” in Kinubi (de Smedt 2011, 4). Yet, if naming Kibera enabled soldiers to instantiate themselves, burying their dead according to the tenets of Islam further entrenched this connection and transformed Nubians into Muslims and Kibera into a home *and* homeland. As Nairobi developed during the colonial period (1899-1963), more land was needed to settle white farmers and indentured laborers from the Commonwealth. Over the course of nearly forty years, District Commissioners tried unsuccessfully to relocate Nubians from Kibera which proved both expensive and untimely as later generations of Nubian soldiers were conscripted for the First and Second World Wars (Parsons 1997). These attempts at resettlement renewed among later generations of Nubian soldiers the claim that Kibera is their homeland and that their military service to the Crown evidenced their legal and moral standing as members of the colony whose right to belong mattered. Throughout the colonial period, then, Nubians of the day tried unsuccessfully to prove to colonial officials that to be Nubian and belong in Kenya is tied ontologically, physically, and politically to Kibera.

The Nubian community’s resistance to their displacement from Kibera and the potential destruction of their homeland was not unique to colonialism. To the newly independent Kenyan government (1963-present), the history of Nubians as descendants from Sudan and loyal to the British Crown was at odds with the emerging national identity premised on ethnicity. Because the Kenyan government has and continues to doubt Nubians’ indigeneity to Kenya, the latter’s claim to Kibera as both their homeland and private property was equally refuted. To galvanize their claim to Kibera, the Nubian community embarked on various projects to represent themselves as an indigenous ethnic group, including the change to “Kenyan-Nubian.” As the Chairman of the Kenyan Nubian Council of Elders exclaimed during the interview, “*the Nubians have a stake in Kenya that cannot be moved. You cannot shift this [...] it has got to be Kenyan-Nubian!*” (Interview with the Kenyan Nubian Council of Elders. 11 February 2019). Many Kenyan-Nubians with whom I spoke in 2019 explained that “Kenyan-Nubian” is more than a

new political identity; it is also a moral duty to their forebearers to continue to resist the government's plans to repossess their homeland. In other words, to be Kenyan-Nubian is to action an inherited past in the present so that future generations of Kenyan-Nubians may continue to live and practice their religion in Kibera. Kibera, then—the land and material environment—is not a place but a living memory of, and engagement to the past.

### ***The Materiality and Embodiment of Memory in Kibera***

It surprised me that given the multiple definitions of “Nubian” over the years—soldier, Muslim, Kenyan—participants premised the memory of the soldier as the primary means to continue the unfinished task of their forebearers: that is, to secure their material claim to Kibera and political belonging to Kenya. What historical representation of “soldier” would participants invoke and emulate, then, I wondered? The “precolonial” stateless soldier, or the soldier who served the British Crown in two World Wars? And, how does the memory of the Nubian soldier work when Kenyan-Nubians have not been conscripted since independence in Kenya?

This moral duty to emulate the virtues and corporeality of the soldier, that I considered initially to be an internal practice, shifted as I listened to and observed how Kenyan-Nubian participants employ memory both intentionally and habitually and individually and collectively in their everyday lives. Many engaged in this memory practice by speaking nostalgically about a bygone or imagined Kibera. A few participants, for instance, used only what they claimed to be the “original” placenames of the villages in Kibera to describe how these places looked and functioned in the past, like Laini Saba which means “shooting range” in Kinubi (Interview #26, 25 February 2019). Another elderly woman remembered Kibera by the many crops her family grew in their *shamba* (‘cultivated plot of land’), by the trees she passed en route to school, and by the goats that her neighbours occasionally struggled to rescue from the river (Interview #10, 19-20 February 2019). The same woman also presented several squared and creased black and white photographs during the presentation which depicted Kibera as unrecognisably spacious and without the many tightly sandwiched mobile *dukas* (‘shops’) or canopy of electricity cords hanging over her house.

These memories, experiences, and visual representations of former Kibera, while subjective, illustrated to me how Kenyan-Nubian participants understand themselves in/and the world around them, a materially informed understanding they perceived to be intentionally produced by their forebearers and essential to preserving “the Nubian way of life” (ibid.). This understanding further revealed how the physical and material landscape of Kibera both animates and enables the social and religious principles and practices of Kenyan-Nubians which clarified to me what is at stake for the community's sociality and

religiosity should the neighborhood change physically and materially. As I familiarized myself with the neighborhood and community during fieldwork, I began to observe how Kenyan-Nubians of different ages and genders express and enact memory, not only through experience and place names, but as an embodied and aesthetic practice.

For example, young Kenyan-Nubian men performed and preserved the memory of their ancestors by emulating a Nubian dress style, staining their nails and palms with *henna*, a plant-based dye, donning a different *kofia* (brimless cap) to “other,” notably Somali Muslim men, and peppering their conversations with Kinubi words (Interview #9, 14 February 2019). For these young men, their daily attire, conduct, and comportment provided foremost an embodied commitment to preserve the traditions of their religion, especially in the context of—and indeed, to circumvent—rising national discrimination against Kenyan-Nubians following the terror attack in January 2019 that al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for. Many of these young men considered it their duty to demonstrate to their non-Muslim neighbors, politicians, and the international community that Kenyan-Nubians from Kibera are respectable Muslim men and that Kibera is a place of peace and tolerance *because of* the enduring moral practices and principles performed by the Kenyan-Nubian community.

I gathered over the course of conversations with Kenyan-Nubian identifying participants that their memories, experiences, and aesthetic practices were therefore as much a means to revive and relive the past as they were ways for participants to speak critically about the present. One can see, therefore, that Kenyan-Nubians employ memory to tangibly and visibly evidence their history in Kibera, to articulate their claim to land and belonging and present a legible religious community, identity and set of practices that will hopefully endure as both Kibera and Nairobi undergo changes known and unstated.

### ***The Shifting Grounds of Belonging: Material Autochthony and the Future of Kibera***

Speaking of an uncertain future provided interlocutors an opportunity to label who and what caused, in their view, the physical and moral ruination to Kibera. Participants insisted that the longstanding neglect by politicians, majors, and ward councillors to service Kibera as well as the unannounced bulldozings was evidence that through material destruction and decay, governmental officials intended Kenyan-Nubians to abandon the neighborhood, disregard their claim to Kibera as their homeland, and slowly lose their traditions and practices. When I initially invited participants to elaborate on why government officials would target Kenyan-Nubians this way, I starkly remembered how a young Kenyan-Nubian woman scoffed at the question and exclaimed “*Are you serious? Look at what they did here!*” gesturing to the then-in-progress highway that bypassed Kibera (Fieldnote, 25 January 2019).

Her retort illuminated two points to me, foremost that my question was insensitive to the gravity and urgency of Kenyan-Nubians' situation. Secondly, I later understood that while the erection of the highway indeed affected 30,000 Kiberans of different religious and ethnic identities, the participant's response to her question revealed how a politically and religiously marginalized community has, over time, learnt to read the state from the margins. For a community who largely cannot vote until they have been successfully vetted and, as a result, struggle to secure a Kenyan-Nubian representative into public office, reading and making sense of the government by its grand development projects in Nairobi and Kibera constitutes a mode of political engagement and survival. Questions like the one I presented, thus, discount the political efforts and experiences of the community.

Over time, I began to ask all participants *"how would you explain to someone like me [an outsider] why the changes taking place in Kibera affects someone like you so much?"* This question would allow me to understand if, and to what extent, the respondent's identities and identity politics shaped how they interpreted and responded to material destruction in Kibera and Nairobi. I found that the changing material environment in Kibera and Nairobi overwhelmingly solidified the class, ethnic, and religious boundaries between Kenyan-Nubians—who, despite their statelessness, are the community owners of a parcel of land in Kibera and the primary propertied class in the neighborhood—and non-Kenyan-Nubian Kiberans who are recognized citizens but own neither land nor property in Kibera (see President of the Republic of Kenya. June 2, 2017).

This phenomenon revealed the emergence of a new layer of material autochthony in Kibera, one in which the security of a community land deed to 288 acres of land in Kibera appeared to legitimize their belonging in and to Kibera. Because they perceived themselves as an influential landowning group, some Kenyan-Nubians with whom I spoke stated that the community should be thought of and approached as influencers of urban development and city planning in Nairobi. Although my study did not address this question, it left me to question what it means for religious coexistence and vitality if a religious community operates as an urban developer? That said, given that the security of this tangible material—land—shifted how Kenyan-Nubians perceived themselves in relation to the state as no longer adversaries but contemporaries, it changed how I observed what counts as material autochthony in Kibera. The debate no longer centred on who in the past—Kenyan-Nubians or the Kenyan government—'made' Kibera and should therefore be allowed to own it, but who should be invited to participate in the state-led Nairobi Metro 2030 development of Kibera and Nairobi; citizens who do not own land or Kenyan-Nubian

landowners who are majorly stateless? As this shift in land politics informs how material autochthony in Kibera is informed and plays out, it will be interesting to observe to whom and to what extent will the memory of Kibera matter? Perhaps it will energize other religious and identity groups in Kibera to evidence their histories and contribution to place-making in order to claim land in the neighborhood, or perhaps the memory of Kibera will matter to residents in bordering neighborhoods of Nairobi who face displacement or destruction of their sacred spaces and in protest, mobilize around a group of stateless actors. Or maybe, the memory of Kibera will matter to those with a handful of photographs preserved in between the pages of a book.

### **Our Ethical Responsibility in Field Research and Memory-work**

Using ethnographic methods to identify and study how material autochthony operates in African cities requires careful and caring consideration of the traumatic and nostalgic memories that research participants share. When we, the authors, met in 2019, we reflected on our experiences of doctoral research in Kenya, and our shared interest in the ethical challenges we face and are complicit in when requesting research participants to remember and reflect on a difficult event to outsider-researchers. Although our outsider status was differentiated by our respective nationalities, our racialized positions, and our resulting (in)ability to move through the city/ies, we recognise that we both benefited from learning about a place, past, and people through participants' memory and nostalgic reflections. Critical dialogue and reflection on this insight highlighted the ethical complexity of writing about the intimate stories that participants shared and reinforced our research practice and ethics in the following four ways.

Firstly, it pluralized our ethnographic lenses thereby, enhancing our comparative analysis as scholars of religion(s). With the benefit of previous research and personal experience, we were each familiar with aspects of the national and urban context in which the other's research was located and thus viewed Nairobi and Johannesburg with the benefit of these different positionalities, memories, and temporal vantage points. Second, we identified a shared hermeneutic of suspicion that we had each applied during fieldwork. Participants' conversations about the past reinforced our research practice in that we continued to ask during fieldwork who or what existed "before," whenever we entered a building or navigated the city, which revealed the layering of material (and) memory in those places. Third, these intimate stories of the past illustrate to us the various functions that recollection provides participants; it can offer a space for participants to criticize the status quo or provide religious testimony of how their faith enabled them to

endure. Retelling these narratives as scholars demands careful attention to their details because by publishing them, we produce versions that can be understood as (more) authoritative. We may therefore contribute—however marginally—to the negotiations of memory, belonging, and material autochthony in which they are utilised. Finally, our outsider status also compelled us to consider the dissemination of our research, particularly how we write about two urban African contexts without flattening these histories, communities, their experiences and realities for the sake of comparative analysis. We bring the stories of Kibera and the Dube Centre together to illustrate both the shared realities of urban religious communities who negotiate their precarious belonging in and to the city and to highlight the localized manifestations of memory work in each case.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper we invoke memory not as a private and personal reflection on the past, but as shared practices through which urban religious communities literally and figuratively reconstruct their pasts and hold them together. Memory includes acts of forgetting and investing (in) the past, and these acts are performed by both the state, which selectively forgets as in an act of chronophagy it consumes the past, and communities which remember in opposition or resistance to the “national master narrative” (Baines 2007, 291). Together, these competing processes produce the material conditions for religious communities in Johannesburg and Nairobi to demonstrate what counts as sacred; namely, the Dube Centre and Kibera. Our concept of “material autochthony” describes how religious communities in Johannesburg and Nairobi critique post-colonial and post-apartheid chronophagy by claiming neighborhoods and buildings as a way to insert themselves materially into political memory. Through (re)deploying memory and matter, Kenyan-Nubians in Kibera and members of the YWCA based at the Dube Centre (re)produce the past, the city, and themselves in ways that resist marginalization and erasure.

The Dube Centre and members of the YWCA, and Kibera and the Kenyan-Nubian Muslim community may represent two of many local places and people in African cities beset by concerns of displacement, destruction, decay, and forgetting. Lacking support, resources, or recompense, this paper showed how religious communities mobilized memory to emphasize their material contribution to the Dube Centre and Kibera and challenge their exclusion from both political memory and the future of the city. We showed that while memory mattered for participants by their generosity of time to sit with us and reflect on the past, walk us through the place and building, or shared advice, references, and information that enriched our

knowledge of the place, its multiple lives, and many residents over the years. We hope that by privileging what participants count as places and practices of religious significance, scholars of religions in Africa may begin to locate and examine religion, religions, and the religious in flux, ruins, incomplete pasts, and spaces “that do not fit neatly into official accounts” (Garbin and Strha 2017, 5).

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## notes and references

<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic data on which this paper is based was collected during my fieldwork in Soweto in 2019 and early 2020, prior to the declaration of the coronavirus pandemic. I spent several weeks with the YWCA in Soweto, conducting informal interviews and shadowing key personnel at work meetings and YWCA events. This ethnographic data is supplemented with archival research conducted in the World YWCA archive in 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Rosalie Oakes, Advisory Secretary to the World Affiliated YWCA of South Africa, to Janet Thomson, World YWCA Secretary for Mutual Service and Extension, 03/05/1962; Letter from Oakes to Elizabeth Palmer, General Secretary of the World YWCA, 16/08/1962. World YWCA archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Oakes to Palmer, 25/09/1962. World YWCA archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Oakes to Thomson, 03/05/1962; Letter from Oakes to

Thomson 03/05/1962. World YWCA archives, Geneva, Switzerland. .

<sup>5</sup> 1963 Annual Report of the World-Affiliated YWCA of South Africa. World YWCA archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>6</sup> Oakes, R. 1963. “Epistle From South Africa.” The YWCA Magazine (February 1963): n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Minutes of the 1975-76 Annual General Meeting of the World-Affiliated YWCA of South Africa. World YWCA archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Joyce Piliso-Seroke, National General Secretary of the World-Affiliated YWCA of South Africa, to Palmer, 29/09/1977. World YWCA archives, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>10</sup> Kenyan-Nubians are *de facto* (in practice) stateless, meaning that their Kenyan citizenship is not issued at birth. Instead, Kenyan-Nubians are granted citizenship upon successful completion of a process called ‘vetting’ which Kenyan-Nubians begin at eighteen years old.

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