

Six Feet Less than Under

By their very nature, cemeteries are depressing – stories of tragedy, loss, and our own unavoidable mortality practically seeping from the earth. But Nairobi residents who come to bury their loved ones at the Langata Cemetery have the additional burden of knowing that the cemetery has been deemed full for several years now and has become less a place of mourning and more a place of business **By Jill Craig**

Driving past the cemetery on Langata Road, nothing appears odd. Lots of grave markers and some trees – exactly what one expects to find at a cemetery. However, upon entering the front gates a fuller picture begins to emerge. Upon a ground littered with soda caps in some places, women sell drinks from small red carts, in addition to cigarettes and phone cards, to funeral attendees. If that's not convenient enough, when you pay to use the toilet facilities, an attendant can also sell you cigarettes.

A photographer sits under a nearby tree with two HP printers connected to a car battery covered in cardboard, positioned next to large canisters of ink. He photographs burials, including the family posed around the casket before it is lowered into the ground, and then sells the prints after the final rites are recited.

Walking along the main path of the cemetery, I noticed small numbered plaques beneath my feet – I had been instructed to

park my car on them. Asking both cemetery employees and other visitors, there was no general consensus as to whether those markers identify the deceased underneath or whether they are yet to be assigned.

At several points, I accidentally stepped on larger grave markers and apologised profusely to those around me. In the United States, it is the ultimate sign of disrespect to walk on someone's grave. In the Langata Cemetery, people are buried everywhere, so no one seems to take much offense since stepping on a grave is unavoidable.

Matatus zip through the cemetery at roughly the same rate at which they dominate the sidewalks of Nairobi during rush hour, showering dust onto mourners grieving their loved ones. Freelance gravediggers hack away at the scarlet brown dirt with a hoe and two pangas – the sound of the metal hitting earth making a disconcerting rhythm with the preacher's words at nearby burial proceedings.

The work of the gravediggers is made more difficult since the cemetery is full. This means that they are often only digging about 2.5 to 3 feet under for babies and children and between 4 to 5 feet under for adults

before they sometimes hit another coffin. But there is little recourse for families, who know that options are limited.

Class Distinction

The process of burying a loved one can be an expensive affair. If the person was hospitalised, those bills must be sorted, then the family must pay the mortuary costs in order to get the body released. While at the mortuary, they must buy a cemetery space from the City Council and have the body transported there.

The Langata Cemetery has one area for Christians and another for Muslims. There is also a crematorium for the slowly increasing number of Kenyans who prefer that option. The Muslim section of the cemetery is much smaller than the Christian, although 22-year-old Suleiman, the caretaker, informed me that an additional 5 acres had been procured and would be open for business very soon. With colourful flowers and flowering trees keeping watch over these graves, the Muslim section can be mistaken for a small botanical garden.

Within the Christian part of the cemetery – which I was told by a supervisor includes



some Hindus as well – there is a “permanent” and “temporary” section. The permanent section is preferred by those with a bit more money to spare for funeral expenses. Families burying here may opt to rent a tent, chairs, sound system, casket stand, and casket lowering equipment.

The permanent section plots cost KSH 25,500 for adults, KSH 15,500 for children and KSH 12,500 for babies. Here, families can buy bigger plots so that when someone dies, they will be buried next to one another. In this area, workers begin the process of cementing in the grave soon after the body is lowered into the ground to prevent the temptation of grave robbers from stealing the entire casket or just items from the body of the deceased. Gravestones made of either cement or more expensive marble can be added to the graves in the permanent section, and families can return to visit loved ones whenever they please.

A Temporary Grave

However, the temporary section is another situation altogether. Plots in the temporary

marker might not be there when they do.

I visited the cemetery with Brian Kirui, a man I knew was acquainted with the cemetery on a personal level. In 2009, he accompanied a friend to Langata to bury his 7-year-old daughter. According to Brian, they had organised for someone to dig the grave but upon arrival, before bringing the body, they discovered that it was too shallow.

They asked the officials about it, but were informed, “We found things here, we cannot go further.” Brian assumes they found another body below, but didn’t pursue the matter because he and the father didn’t want to add more stress to the family. “This is not an uncommon story amongst Nairobi residents who go to bury their loved ones,” Brian told me, staring quietly at the busy graveyard. “Now we do not have a choice. You will complain to who? So, you just go there, do whatever has taken you there and that is it.”

The families are not the only people frustrated with the system. Michael has worked as a grave supervisor at Langata for 30 years. According to him, the cemetery

can range anywhere from about KSH 25,000 to ship a body to Nyanza to KSH 45,000 to Mombasa.

Once the body is home, there’s the service to consider. In addition to the equipment that is needed at any burial, like a sound system, tent, chairs, casket stand and casket lowering equipment, the family must also provide food and drink for the guests. People come from far and wide to pay their last respects – while at the same time enjoying the free refreshments – meaning that a traditional funeral has quite a few attendees.

These costs can cripple regular Kenyan families – a 2004 report in the *Journal of Human Development* found that families in rural areas who had declined into poverty cited funeral costs as a reason 63 percent of the time. While today it is becoming more common to forgo expensive burials – out of practicality and necessity – the phenomenal statistic goes a long way in explaining how important it is for Kenyans to show respect for their deceased loved ones. Family is key; they will always be connected and it is imperative to do well by them. If they cannot

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section are KSH 7,000 for adults, KSH 4,500 for children, and KSH 2,000 for babies. It is here that Nairobi’s poor go to bury their dead. Most Kenyans would prefer to be buried in their home villages up-country, but due to the high cost of transport and funeral expenses, they remain at Langata. In this section, Kenyans are buried in graves denoted by makeshift wooden crosses that are occasionally stolen by people in need of firewood. In exchange for the cheaper plot, the families of the deceased know that the grave will be flattened within the next five years to make room for the next resident. City Council officials do not keep records of who is buried where in the temporary section. Few families return to visit – they are not encouraged to do so since the grave and/or

has been full since 2008. He says sometimes he will dig a grave for someone, but will hit stones underneath. “Relatives often become upset when they think their loved one is being buried on top of someone else.”

The Up-Country Funeral

Kenyans are moving into urban centres at a high and ever-increasing rate. But while more and more people live in Nairobi, ‘home’ is actually up-country, where their families come from and, quite often, still live. When someone has passed on, it’s typically ideal that he or she is buried there rather than in the city.

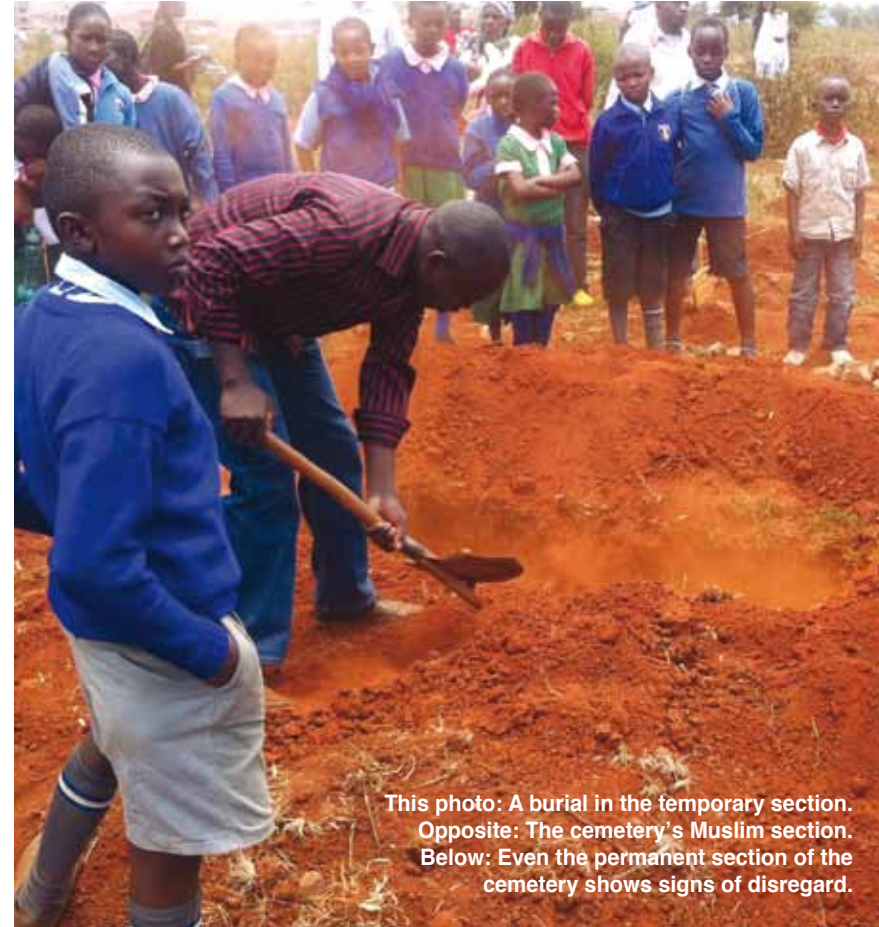
However, the expenses of being buried up-country are enormous. Families must first transport the body long distances. This

bury the person up-country, they will do the best they can in Nairobi. And that often means the overflowing grounds of Langata.

Tragedy – The Temporary Section

Brian and I approached a burial service in the temporary section of the cemetery; I was a bit hesitant at first to observe someone else’s mourning process. Brian assured me that in African culture, anyone is allowed to witness a burial.

One of the attendees asked me where I was from and how I was enjoying Nairobi. Given the current circumstances, I responded that some days were better than others. She informed Brian and I that the deceased girl



This photo: A burial in the temporary section. Opposite: The cemetery’s Muslim section. Below: Even the permanent section of the cemetery shows signs of disregard.



Photographs: Brian Kirui, Jill Craig

was 13-year-old Monica Njoki, who suffered from epilepsy and had recently been admitted to Kenyatta National Hospital. After a few days, she was given her discharge papers, but committed suicide by jumping to her death from a seventh floor window at Kenyatta. Originally from the Rift Valley, Monica and her family had moved to Nairobi after post-election violence had engulfed her home. The lady providing this information employed Monica's mother as her house help.

A funeral service in the Christian section involves the minister reading scripture and wishing the family of the deceased comfort in the coming days. There may be some singing and then quiet reflection. Once the body is lowered into the ground, emotions become more intense as family members realise this is the last time they will be near their loved one. If a Luo has died, it is tradition to sob loudly to pay final respects to the dead.

The photographer took pictures of Monica's family and friends gathered around the casket in its last view of sunlight. Two men then clumsily lowered her casket into the grave with a couple of ropes, before shovelling dirt over it. Mourners assisted by symbolically tossing in handfuls of dirt.

As this burial was taking place, all sorts of other activities were going on nearby. One group of mourners was gathered with a casket containing a child. Apparently, there had been a bureaucratic glitch regarding which grave had been assigned, so the group was waiting patiently in the blazing sun until something could be figured out. Near Monica's burial was a gravedigger hacking into the soil to make room for someone else's casket while his associate walked around to various pre-dug holes with a piece of rope to determine which caskets could fit where.

At one point, a group of approximately 25 to 30 boda-bodas came zooming into the temporary section of the cemetery like a crazed motorcycle gang. The minister conducting Monica's service had to raise his voice to be heard above the roar. I was told later that these guys were attending the services of a colleague who had been killed in a road accident.

The Controversy

Of course the cacophony and chaos of burials in Langata does not sit well with some families. They are, after all, buying the plots from City Council – shouldn't there be no confusion as to which plot is designated to

their family member, shouldn't their loved one not be buried on top of someone else's?

In 2010, the Nairobi City Council allegedly paid about KSH 283 million for roughly 120 acres of land around Athi River on the outskirts of the city to be used as a new cemetery. It was worth about KSH 24 million and did not have a title deed. Roughly a third of the money went to the seller and the rest was unaccounted for.

According to a report by Tristan McConnell of GlobalPost, the land was supposed to be easy to access and have enough topsoil to make sure a body could go 6 feet under. Instead, officials bought 120 acres of grass, rock, and black cotton soil along a rough road close to a slaughterhouse on the far outskirts of the city. Councillors relied on a forged valuation from a fictional office at a defunct government department to set the inflated price.



Former Nairobi Mayor Godfrey Majiwa, former Deputy Town Clerk Geoffrey Katsolleh and other senior government officials were implicated in overvaluing the land. Majiwa and Katsolleh were acquitted in August 2012 of charges of conspiracy to defraud the City Council of Nairobi. The magistrate ruled that they were not directly involved in the tendering process; Majiwa only signed a sale agreement. The money was never recovered and no one was held responsible. Because the land was unusable as a cemetery, the Athi River location was never utilised, and no alternate location was procured. So the bodies keep piling up.

The Cemetery as a Livelihood

However, there are some grateful that the cemetery hasn't moved. It provides a workforce of salespeople with a place to market their goods, and it's location near Kibera lets some of the slum's residents earn a fair living while being able to walk to work.

When the brutal noontime heat had crept up, I bought a cold soda from a lady selling drinks near a burial service. Mercyline lived in Kibera and had been working in the cemetery for seven years, every day except Sundays and Mondays. I wasn't sure if the proximity made up for the macabre nature of her workplace, but it was a job and Mercyline felt fortunate. We were soon joined by two of the funeral service workers, Anne and Gideon, who drove the hearse mini-bus to the cemetery, set up the canopy under which guests could sit, the sound system for the speeches, the stand for the casket, and the lowering equipment to put the casket into the grave.

Twenty-eight-year-old Anne looked like she could have done modelling work. Instead, she started 11 years ago in the funeral business, driving dead bodies around Kenya to their final resting places, helping to set up these burial services, and lowering the caskets into graves. Anne was a Kamba and was quick to inform me that Kambas – especially the women – are very much afraid of death. She on the other hand was not. Years ago, she said, she was lowering a casket into the ground while a group of Maasai women had watched, horrified, from some trees. Anne said they were shocked to see a Kamba woman working with the dead. But, Anne told me that she had an 8-year-old daughter she had to support by herself, and well, "It's an honest living."

Since it first opened in 1958, tens of thousands of bodies have been buried in Langata Cemetery. Exact numbers are impossible to determine, given the lack of records in the sprawling temporary section. The cemetery on-average hosts up to 10 burial services per day. As Nairobi's population continues to increase from its current estimated 3 million people, this will only put more pressure on the already bulging cemetery.

Unless a solution is found, Nairobi residents have little assurance that their final resting place will be a peaceful one. **D**