

Mathare Futurism

From Beggars to Masters of Our Own Fate

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| Kenya |



Mathare, Nairobi | photo: Kongo Peter

The bulk of my age-mates in Mathare can be distinguished by a common denominator - a history of begging and absolute dependency. This has, over the years, crippled my generation and impaired community liberation in substantial ways. We have been molded into a voiceless generation of dependent victims, constantly awaiting outward help to change our circumstances. Like in ghettos around the world, NGOs appear to be Mathare's only relief to structural issues. They give the impression of filling up the vacuum created by a retreating State. And sometimes they are. Clearly, the State has completely abdicated its traditional duty and continues to neglect these marginalized urban areas. More often than not, however, the NGOs' real contribution has been to defuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. We have thus ended up becoming an NGO-ized generation, one that society prefers to label as lazy and entitled.

An attempt at tracing the pedigree of dependence brings in memories of how thousands of us were taught how to be professional beggars before we studied ABC! At the time, I was a mere 3-year-old boy with the whole world before me. Mothers and aunts were the best teachers for this skill set. They would carefully discern potential targets from afar and then tell us to wear 'the sunken face' as we made our approach. At least that is how it was set up

for my family and many other families around. You were also required to stretch your hand towards the random stranger the same way a customer does when asking for change. This stretching of the hands was then supposed to be followed closely by the words:

"Anko saidiaa, saidiaa anko ...!"

"Help me uncle, uncle please help ...!"

This was the surest way to solicit for a few much-needed coins out of their pocket. For some reason, these tactics had a fair success rate, in that we would go back home with quite some cash for food and a few other amenities. The kid who managed to bring home the biggest share was rewarded with little favors here and there. Naturally, as naive as we were, we would get jealous and try 'working' to earn the extra perks of our labor. Then came Missions of Hope International (MOHI), a charity NGO that moved to our neighborhood offering free education, a feeding program and, get this, spiritual nourishment.

Parents could not afford the thought of missing a spot for their children. It was how a multitude of my peers would leave the streets to pursue new possibilities. Now, more kids had a fair chance of accessing education, unlike before when the number of people I knew who'd made it beyond primary school was countable! With time, however, more and more organizations were set up around us, attempting to address issues from HIV/AIDS awareness to women's empowerment, to food insecurity and so on, a good number of which were briefcase outfits obviously erected to siphon off grant money or as vehicles for tax avoidance.

The dark side of charity is that it never provides sustainable solutions to systemic inequality. It offers as much instant gratification to the giver as it does the receiver, but its implications can be grisly. This missionary zeal is only capable of cushioning the people's angst, altering public psyche and blunting the edges of political consciousness and resistance.

So, no - I refute that my generation is comprised of the casually lazy and entitled type. It has been hyper-normalized for young people in Kenyan poor settlements to be educated yet

unemployed, deliberately violated, and, preferably, silenced. As a matter of fact, a team of fellow young people I work with at the Mathare Green Movement (MGM) is fiercely determined to defeat that purpose. We are focused on making explicit links between social and economic inequalities in Nairobi with a genealogy of environmental apartheid, a thought that sprouts profoundly from the reflection of why Mathare has no trees, while just on the other side of the river, the upper-class neighborhood of Muthaiga is lavished with greenery. Part of how Mathare is treated is because of its disheveled environment. Someone said to me that should social movements lack the dynamic of the youth, they are sure to die. I could not agree more.

In view of the current political landscape, young people, especially male youths, continue to be profiled and victimized every single day without their voices being heard. It is a war that the State seems hell bent on waging against my generation; the very State that has neglected us and hushed our attempts at speaking up. In his article, *“Extra Judicial Killings in Nairobi and Community Based Response,”* Brice Jacquemin (a Belgian masters research student I met in January 2018) argues that the police do not perform police work. Rather, they are a force of social control. They play out the role of the ‘reasonable’ man in an unfair, unreasonable war. I realize that it is easy to twist that statement into an indictment of all the police. That would be a falsehood. In the murky waters of brutally corrupt urban policing, of course there are a few of those doing some valuable work. Yes, the police force is also an institution faced with a myriad of issues, such as inadequate funding, repression, and so forth. But it is necessary to shift our attention away from the positive work done by a few individual policemen, and examine the policing culture in a much broader political context.

Mathare is surrounded and socially controlled by an unmitigated force, the legacy of colonial institutional omnipresence. You find police stations at every entrance into the valley: Pangani Police Station to the West, Muthaiga Police Station to the North, Huruma Police Station to the East and the Moi Airbase military barracks to the South. According to a participatory action report documented and launched by the Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC), between 2013 and 2016, the police killed over 800 young people in Mathare and

other informal settlements around the country.

The police are predatory. Cases of abuse and extreme brutality are devoid of any trace of humanity whatsoever. They are the symbol of a society that thrives off victimizing an entire generation. A society that taught us how to beg, hands us scraps without opportunities, yet does not condemn injustice and or the State's abject failure at governance.

The urgent need to navigate harsh existential realities as the youth of Mathare has consequently forced us to employ clever tactics on how best we can avoid any sort of foul encounter with officers on patrol. You must carry your national ID card every time you leave the house. Failure to provide the document upon demand would mean sour negotiations that may lead to aimless harassment or even apprehension for apprehension's sake! Even more bizarre is the fact that the most notorious killer cop is generally known by face and by name, yet no one dares say his name out in public without a feeling of paranoia coursing through their body. It is as though he sees and hears everything. Most people believe he does. Imagine. No one man should have all that power - having an entire community on their knees.

Over time we have also invented a nickname for him. *'Mjamaa.'* That way, everybody can say his name without raising tension, including women who are commonly the first informers whenever he is around, appearing in a nondescript Probox car. It helps us look out for each other. *Mjamaa* is notorious for causing mayhem in youth bases. Once, he aimed his gun and shot at a sound system that was playing music during a funeral ceremony for a young man he had recently executed. He disrupted the fundraiser immediately, hurling countless insults, saying:

'Thugs' deserve to die and to bury themselves after!

Free movement is also very limited in our own neighbourhood. A young man must not walk around freely at night: should you go out partying in the wee hours, you can only return home at your own peril. For those in dreadlocks like me, the risk is enormous! It serves as one of the key features, among many other codes of dressing, frequently used to profile

potential suspects. According to the police, dressing a certain way only puts you in the guilty-until-proven-innocent category. As though there were a signature look for criminals.

This includes wearing of shiny chains, certain shoes, and caps. The reasoning behind it is alarmingly disturbing; cops are actually convinced that unemployed youth cannot afford to wear decent chains and shoes without committing some kind of crime. Why a simple hairstyle or elegant outfit should be used to distinguish thugs is way beyond me.

Coming together as MGM compelled us to apply different forms of advocacy in an attempt to build consciousness in society. We coined the term '*Mathare Futurism*,' to describe our imagination of possible realities and our work to design a new future for Mathare. As the majority of us are artists, our approach uses art, music, words, and trees as our symbols of power.

We not only green our environment, we also feed the community through the planting of fruit trees, provide natural medicines through the planting of medicinal trees, make the community beautiful with ornamental flowers, and commemorate the lives of those we have lost to police killings in Mathare by planting trees in their memory. We thus offer healing to a wounded people, to the family and friends of the victims. Trees are a symbol of regeneration and we intend to nurture our lives together with the community, using trees as totems of resilience. Their survival amid forces working against their growth is illustrative of how we shall rise, no longer as beggars but as the masters of our own fate!
