Milk and Peace - Billy Kahora

One of the things I remember most as a child is nyayo school milk in primary school as do most people who grew during Daniel Arap Moi's time and who were in their pre-teens in the early 80's. As we drank packeted school milk all through our primary school years we were fed a never-ending diet that Kenya was 'calm and peaceful'. As the calcium strengthened our bones, our brains were lobotimised of Kenya's post-independence political assassinations - two or three attempted coups that were effaced from our text books. We became believers in calm and peace. The truly nostalgic like myself came to associate packeted nyayo milk with the peace mantras, the peace choir songs on T.V. telling us to love one another.

Years later, in 2005, one of the biggest worries in the country was the ubiquitous plastic bag. This seems hysterically laughable now after the traumatic post-election death and displacement last week. Back in 2005, I was assigned by an environmental magazine to cover the plastic menace. I went to Mathare, the second biggest slum in Nairobi, in the land where where plastic bags were said to sprout everywhere like flowers. My guide took me into a kiosk and when I asked for tea the proprietor asked me whether I wanted *garatathi*. A Plastic bag. Seeing my puzzlement my guide explained that milk in Mathare came in plastic bags and because most of it was water, tea with very little milk was called *garatathi.* When I nodded, the proprietor walked outside and whistled. A woman appeared carrying two see through plastic bags with very watery milk. The proprietor handed over some money.

For a long time I could never get over that image of milk in a see- through plastic bags. These were the same bags which my research on the plastic bag story told me took 5 million years to decompose. The sight was strangely disturbing. All my childhood, the milk truck, the sound of crates being unloaded onto tarmac had spelled order. They were part of morning sounds that came with family breakfasts, rushed wearing of school uniforms, early morning traffic into the city - all I associated with a normal Kenyan morning. Order. Dew. Slight fog. Horns.

Seeing milk in plastic bags felt to me like the loss of all those things. The plastic bag milk had no licensed stamp and had clearly not been tested with a lactometer. And in Mathare back in 2005, when I thought of the years in between packeted milk and plastic bag milk, I felt the sudden breakdown of things. I did not realize how lucky we were even then. Mathare was peaceful even if a lot had broken down since nyayo milk - in 2005, like many Kenyans I still believed in calm and peace.

Nairobi, which controls at least 45 per cent of our GDP, roughly has 3 million people. 2.1 of those people live in Nairobi's slums and so-called low income neighbourhoods. Kibera, Mathare and Korogocho are three of the largest slums in Nairobi and it is no coincidence that these three areas were the most violent over the last week. Watching Mathare coflagrate on T.V last week, I suddenly recognized some of the places I'd been back in 2005 and realized another thing was lost - the idea that this country was calm and peaceful. In a week, I now realize that we have irrevocably reached a place that is incomparably more disorderly than watery milk.