

Continue



Mathare valley nairobi

Mathare valley slum nairobi kenya. Valley view school mathare nairobi kenya. Mathare valley. Mathare valley nairobi kenya.

I grew up in Mathare, a slum that has transformed from a low-density area into Kenya's most densely populated region with over 68,000 people per square kilometre. I began my education at Action Child Mobilization Centre, a local school where teachers were mostly from four school leavers. Despite the challenges, we adapted to learning amidst loud music and commotion from neighbours' houses. As a resident since childhood, I can attest that Mathare is not only a place of struggles but also beautiful stories. The area has produced talented footballers, musicians, and athletes like Dennis Oliech, Conjestina Achieng, Bahati, Willy Paul, and Eko Dydda. However, the world often focuses on our challenges rather than our successes. When people mention Mathare, they often associate it with the Mathari Mental Hospital, Kenya's only national psychiatric referral hospital. Some even ask why we live among "mad people," assuming that everyone in Mathare is mentally challenged or an escapee from the hospital. I once tried to explain this to a friend who dismissed my words, saying, "Every market has its mad man; Mathare is where all are mad." This stigma was so acute that, in high school, I stopped sharing my background with peers to avoid ridicule. Any unusual answer would be attributed to my upbringing among mentally challenged people. Today, I'm writing the untold story of Mathare, a counter-narrative about the place I call home from an insider's perspective. It is the beautiful story of a former quarry that became an urban bastion against oppression by colonial governments and four regimes in Kenya since independence. I'm sharing this piece because only we can tell our own stories to the outside world. "The struggle for memory and recognition is intertwined with the fight against oppression," says Comrade Gacheke Gachihi. Mathare's history dates back to the early years of colonial rule before World War I, when a stone quarry operated in the area. The quarry supplied building stones and ballast for Nairobi's upscale neighborhoods like Eastleigh and Muthaiga. After World War I, people began settling in Mathare, including those displaced from the Karura Forest by the colonial government. These early settlers were concentrated in low-lying areas, giving rise to Mathare and the surrounding slums. The area grew gradually, with different sections named after local leaders. Today, Mathare is one of Nairobi's most densely populated slums, home to over 500,000 people from diverse ethnicities and nationalities. Its proximity to the city center and nearby Eastleigh made it an attractive destination for job seekers from rural Kenya. By the late 1920s, Mathare was a hub of makeshift housing and labor pools. As anti-colonial movements gained momentum, Mathare became the epicenter of organizing against colonial rule due to its strategic location. Meetings were held in Mathare to strategize resistance against the colonial government, amplifying the agitation fueled by radical elements who had fought alongside whites during both world wars. Residents protested against punitive measures like the hut tax and unfair zoning, prompting British authorities to feel threatened. In 1952, the struggles began to escalate further... In 1952, then-Governor Sir Evelyn Baring declared a state of Emergency in Mathare, leading to the destruction of many homes. This was prompted by intelligence suggesting local support for the Mau Mau movement fighting for Kenya's independence. Despite this, residents remained defiant and continued to serve as a hub for anti-colonial activities, with key figures like Pio Gama Pinto playing a unifying role. After independence in 1963, Mathare's population swelled as more people flocked to the city, but the government failed to address the area's dire living conditions. The slum continued to expand, leaving residents without basic services and access to planning. In 1982, the failed Kenya Air Force coup led to a brutal crackdown on Mathare residents, resulting in over 200 civilian deaths, many injuries, and widespread trauma. Despite ongoing neglect under subsequent governments, the resilience of Mathare's residents has endured, shaped by their legacy of resistance. In June 2007, the streets of Mathare Valley were filled with tension as police officers from the General Service Unit unleashed violence, rounded up citizens, and demolished hundreds of shacks. The crackdown followed the killing of two police officers and the theft of their guns on June 4th. This was a terrible time for young men in the valley, especially those wearing dreadlocks, which were used to identify members of the banned Mungiki Sect. Young men were forced to lie on the streets, beaten, and then made to wade through the polluted Mathare River in search of stolen arms. The police executed over 30 young men, some in broad daylight, under orders from former Minister John Michuki and Inspector General Gen. Muhammed Ali. On one fateful day, gunfire echoed around us as tear gas grenades were fired at our school. As panic spread, some classmates fled to safety while others washed their faces with porridge. I witnessed a haunting scene that has stayed with me forever: a man lying face-down on the ground, his back being poked by officers' bayonets, crying and pleading for mercy. The memory of this blood-soaked soil remains vivid in my mind. Later that afternoon, I saw Inspector General Gen. Muhammed Ali criss-crossing the alleys, escorted by heavily armed officers. It was unusual to see a high-ranking government official in the depths of Mathare Valley. I knew that the next few days would be hellish, and they were. The people of Mathare endured nights of violence at the hands of state agents, leading to more deaths and injuries. My cousins had to be sneaked out before the door-to-door search started, as over 30 people died, hundreds were injured, shanties were demolished, people were displaced, and trauma was left in its wake. This kind of reaction from law enforcement has been seen during election times, where police officers disregard human life. Uhuru Kenyatta's Jubilee government has exacerbated the situation in Mathare. As poor youth, we have been criminalized by the same system that oppressed our grandfathers and fathers. Young men with dreadlocks like those worn by Kenya's freedom fighters are targeted for arrest and brutality. The streets of Nairobi have been plagued by police brutality, with reports of arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings rising to alarming numbers. According to Missing Voices, a staggering 105 people lost their lives or vanished between January and July 2021 at the hands of law enforcement officials. The majority of these incidents occurred in low-income neighborhoods like Mathare. The plight of young people is particularly concerning, as they are often framed for petty crimes and subjected to enforced disappearances. Their bodies may later be found in morgues or dumped elsewhere, a grim reminder of the police's brutal tactics. As someone who has personally experienced arbitrary arrest multiple times, I can attest to the sense of terror that grips the youth of Mathare daily. The trend of extra-judicial executions shows no signs of abating, and it is this injustice that drives me to continue fighting for social justice. I have dedicated myself to the Ruaraka Social Justice Centre since graduating from college, rather than pursuing an internship or job, in response to these injustices. A systematic approach is required to address the systemic oppression of generations of Kenyans. The Mathare Social Justice Centre was established by visionary leaders like Gacheke Gachihi, who recognized the need for a community justice centre and network of social justice centres throughout the country. This grassroots movement has replaced one-day protests with a systematic approach, empowering communities to educate themselves and ultimately liberate themselves from exploitation and oppression. As a pen-wielding warrior, I am committed to protecting Mathare's rich history and heritage, which stems from its critical role in organizing the masses against colonialism and successive regimes. It is now our generation's responsibility not to betray the struggle but to bring it to fruition. Mathare remains home to various progressive groups, including MYSA, Mathare Roots, Mathare Green Movement, and MSJC. This once again places Mathare at the forefront of the struggle against oppression, faithfully carrying on the legacy of our freedom fighters whose blood waters the seeds of our freedom. Pioneers of change. The term Mathare is now a badge of honor for me, symbolizing the power to overcome adversity. As we look to the future, this phrase no longer holds shame but instead serves as a catalyst for positive transformation. From the streets of Mathare to the world at large, the social justice movement has emerged. May the unyielding spirit of freedom fighters continue to guide us towards a more equitable society. Appreciation This article would not have been possible without the valuable contributions from Comrade Kimani Antony of Kiamaiko Community Social Justice Centre, Comrade Samuel Kiroo of Ghetto Foundation, Mr Zaangi of Muungano wa Wanavijiji, and Comrade Gacheke Gachihi of Mathare Social Justice Centre.