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# Your Tea Leaves, Your Fortune

By Lutivini Majanja



My grandparents on both sides of the family were early converts to the Yearly Meeting of Friends, also known as Quakers. You could say the Bible, school, tea and sugar were all tied to an idea of what it looked like to prosper in modern Kenya. Part of what showed that you were prospering was: tea and bread for breakfast, tea and bread at 4 o'clock, and tea at night for the adults sometimes, and also for the watchman. My mother had died soon after I was born. Yet my father, a single parent, was providing these things for his four children. He was prospering. And tea was at the centre of prosperity, as were visitors. I was taught that you must offer tea to guests. This is how you make them feel welcome. This is how you put meaning into the words 'feel at home'.

I learnt to make tea from watching our house help. We had a specific tea *sufuria*, from which she knew, just by looking at it, what level the water had to be. The water had to be warm before the tea leaves were added, and boiling when the milk was added. I was the last born, and so would act as the *watcher of the tea sufuria*, the one tasked to stand by the cooker and watch the tea rise and rise and then call for an older sibling or adult to come and switch off the cooker. I was taught that you couldn't let the tea rise in the *sufuria* just once. You had to turn down the heat and then turn it up again, blow on the rising tea, and then stir it with the plastic sieve before finally turning off the cooker and pouring the tea into the blue enamel *birika*. There was some instruction about being careful not to stir the tea too much.

We always had our tea with bread, often spread with butter, jam or marmalade. Sometimes we'd

have bananas instead, like the Kamau family in my English textbooks. Other times we'd have boiled maize, boiled sweet potatoes, boiled nduma or makhayo (maize and beans) instead, but this would happen when we had come from Kakamega or a visitor had brought something from Kakamega, home, as my father called it.

It was always two teaspoons of sugar per cup of tea.

My father had worked at the same organization, a subsidiary of a multinational company, since before I was born. Aside from providing a salary that allowed us to live as we did, the job ensured that we had calendars, t-shirts and even tablecloths that carried the company's brand. In this way, his working in that place was a part of my identity. However, in 1988 my father had a dispute with his employer that resulted in him being forced to resign. He had just remarried, and so losing his job made for a rocky start to a new marriage.

In 1988, the exchange rate was 17 shillings to the US dollar. This mattered because the income he lost was based on this exchange rate. More on this later.

In the wake of my father's unemployment, his new marriage quickly broke down, and then he decided to sue his former employer. The turbulence meant that we moved a lot - 1989 felt like a strange nightmare. But by 1990, things had begun to settle down. My father, single again, had secured a new job, my sister and I had moved to a private primary school while my brothers attended good high schools. It seemed to be going back to normal except for the lingering court case that my father was confident he would win. From here onwards, the 4 o'clock tea was less likely to have accompaniments but it was mostly still available.

But this was the time that the Thermos flask began to be more of an everyday-use item. When we were younger, The Thermos was an item reserved for visitors. It was carried out on a tray along with newest mugs and the visitors' sugar bowl. But gradually, we started using it everyday. The Thermos was a genius hack because it meant not having to look for fresh milk every afternoon, and not having to light the cooker, saving on gas. But it also meant that the 4 o'clock tea was the tea that had stayed in the Thermos since morning.

My father met someone else, and remarried again. We moved to a house that was much closer to my school. This came in handy on days when there was no fuel or car to take my sister and I to school. But then, the job troubles returned - it turned out that his previous employer was the client of his new employer and so this new job ended sooner than expected.

In my school diary, where it said 'Father's occupation', I wrote 'businessman'. A code.

### **10 o'clock tea break**

In my first primary school, a government school, tea had been served with bread every break time. Here, in the private school, we were required to carry our own snacks -whatever your preferred to eat and drink. It was understood that this had to be junk food - crisps, chevda, biscuits, chooze and diluted juice. You could carry bread and tea but also it was the sort of snack you didn't feel proud to remove from your bag. At some point, I could no longer keep up with these requirements. Sometimes I had juice only, other times bread only. Other times nothing. I carried boiled eggs to school but was too embarrassed to eat them so I carried them back home and ate them in my bedroom after school.

But there were always some of us who didn't carry break. The ones who spent the entire 20-minute break intently focused on play or with faces hidden behind books. I may have at times made an unnecessary announcement about not feeling like eating. I doubt anyone cared really, and if they did

they never made a big deal of it. My school fees kept rising, and my parents were the loudest ones in the PTA meetings, complaining. Eventually I moved back to a government school to complete Standard 7 and 8. Here, at least, we were more than a few people who didn't carry anything for break. At least some of the my anxieties about break-time-hunger resolved.

Around us there were sugar shortages, and the absurdity of only being able to find sugar cubes, which couldn't be rationed quite as easily. And there were times we switched to direct-from-the-farm milk suppliers because this milk was *thicker* and could *stretch* much more.

## **Recycling tea**

In 1992 all of my siblings and I were in our teens. I was the only one not yet in high school. Every beginning of term my siblings would undergo an extreme scrutinising of school shopping lists. *Do you really need 5 bars of soap? Didn't I buy you a shoe brush last term? Are you sure toothpaste costs that much?* That kind of thing.

The tea and bread were never enough when they returned home for the holidays. The price of milk had leapt from 2 shillings to 3.50 shillings and it kept increasing. The price of bread had leapt from 4.75 to 6 shillings and then the government officially reduced the loaf size from 500 grams to 400 grams. This created all kinds of tension in the house. I learned to wake up extra early so that I could get the good bread slices - the crust, or the accidentally thick slices. At times we had to manage things by working out a roster of some kind, predetermining how many slices each person got and who got the extra slice if there was any. Sturungi (black tea) days instead of milk tea days became the norm. Jam was a Sunday breakfast delicacy or a thing that was offered to guests only and then it was disappeared for good. There was always the awkward moment when we had been told that there was no more margarine, or sugar, but a visitor arrived and these things appeared out of unseen stores. These were the times I hoped that the visitors would decline the extra slice of bread, already bluebanded and jammed because later it might be mine.

The visitors who saved us are the ones who showed up with milk, tea leaves, bread and margarine. For them and for ourselves we staged a dicey performance, pretending that we already had the sugar, the tea leaves and the milk we needed for making their tea. We were meticulous in arranging the tea cups on trays and providing them water to wash their hands. We might have even faked running to the kiosk for the extra ingredients that we didn't actually have the money to purchase.

## **Deep freezer tea**

Around this time, we had switched from cooking with gas to cooking with the kerosene stove or charcoal cooker. It just made more sense. In the happy event that there was gas, then this was strictly reserved for reheating food and anything that cooks fast like tea. Especially tea for visitors.

We were growing, our appetites had increased, so it meant always having a lot of tea around. But the tea was still always prepared with that one 500 millilitre packet of milk from childhood, sometimes getting really translucent. But we always prepared a lot of it, and leftover tea was good - it was there to be sipped later to soothe our teenage hunger pangs, and could be served to unanticipated odd-hour visitors, or added to new tea for next time. At about this time that this strange innovation took hold at home. Deep freezer tea.

Until this disruption, leftover tea would sit in the kettle or the flask. If it went unconsumed until the end of the day, it was transferred into an old empty Kimbo tub or any other plastic container and stored in the fridge. In this new order, we learnt that tea in the freezer did not give off that stayed-in-the-flask or recycled tea whiff. It was important, as such, that once breakfast was done, that it

was quickly removed from the flask and let to cool off before being stored in the freezer. We'd always been having the old leftover tea mixed with new tea. Now, especially in the afternoons, the kitchen counter constantly had defrosting blocks of tea. There was the regular panic of having forgotten to take the tea out of the freezer. At times it was the unappealing blandness of two separate batches of defrosted tea combined. If you mixed the not-yet-defrosted frozen tea with the fresh tea on the stove you ran the risk of burning the tea. Burnt tea is terrible. The freezer can't save it. Nothing can. Of course, our visitors always got tea made with fresh milk. Of course there were times I got reprimanded for mixing in old tea, or burning tea that was intended for visitors.

## **Rituals of visiting**

When I was about 12 years old, I accompanied the adults in my life on a visit to a friends' house. We'd travelled to this house with a girl, my age mate, and her mother. At this house, we'd sat on the sofas and waited to be served. We stared at the wall that had photos and pictures of the host family. The host brought out the jug with warm water, the basin and a hand towel. We washed our hands in turns and watched quietly as the tray of cups, sugar and the kettle was brought out. Our host then went around asking us what we would like to have. *How many teaspoons of sugar?* When it got to my age mate's turn, she said she didn't drink tea. She asked if she could have cocoa instead. The rest of us were all tea and two teaspoons of sugar takers. The host returned to the kitchen to seek out the girl's preference and then returned to report that there was no cocoa. She asked the girl if she could take soda instead. The girl's mother, somewhat angry, said that her daughter was just pretending. She insisted that cold water was all the girl needed. The host suggested that they could buy soda but the girl's mother was firm. No need to spoil her. While we sipped our teas with buttered (not margarined) bread, the girl ate her bread with water. This scene stayed with me for years. I could never understand why her mother had to be so harsh. Now I look back and think how maybe these adults knew something about what this *servicing visitors' good tea* was costing our host.

## **Tea as consolation**

Throughout the 90s my father never again secured full time (permanent) employment. It helped that my stepmother had a stable job that provided housing. It made it possible to stay in Nairobi even after we had lost the house he'd once owned. My father tried all sorts of ways to stay afloat. He was a taxi driver; an air travel agent, whose office also offered photocopying, printing services and telephone services; he ventured into politics; became a management consultant; and a computer instructor. Sometimes home entertainment was a practice round for a presentation on a slide projector, or watching training videos such as *The Unorganized Manager*. Sometimes, I'd come home from school and find him playing his old records - Franco, Tabu Ley and taking tea. Some days he'd be excited about the political events, the rise of multiparty democracy, or about whatever was showing on our very unclear CNN broadcast on our illegal connection of KTN. The court case that we'd thought was ending soon, was still going on and some days he was in a bad mood, playing dirge-like nostalgic music as he talked about the court proceedings.

There was the first time we had sturungi and rice for supper. There were not enough money to buy cooking oil and sukuma wiki. There was only rice and ugali flour in the kitchen cupboards. Rice was the better option.

When my father eventually moved out of Nairobi, my siblings and I remained because school was in Nairobi. I was in Standard 8 when I moved in with relatives. It was a bit of a shock to notice that they didn't ration sugar as we had. At home we'd adapted to having sugar mixed in the tea while it was still in the sufuria, or going without sugar at all. At my relative's house, we had tea and bread and it felt so weird to carry break to school again. A different universe.

## **Of breaking habits**

I had missed the first day of high school because of a delay in getting money to sort my school fees and shopping. I had missed the class orientation session. At the 10 am break time, on my first day in high school, I went looking for my Form 2 roommate to ask her where the tea was served. She laughed and explained that in the school, break time was not for tea unless you had a doctor's note. Those students who had notes from their doctors went to the dining hall and drank from their packets of UHT milk and their Marie biscuits. The rest of us, normal students, just studied or basked in the sun until break time was over.

In December 1997, my sister and I met my father in town, with our packed bags, as we were going to travel to Kakamega after court. I had just completed Form 3. Until then I'd always seen these losses and cutbacks that had happened to my family as an isolated situation. That morning though, we met my father along with former colleagues and friends who were there to accompany my father to court. They were all dressed in suits that had been bought around the same time, a while back. Faded. They had this look of trying to appear okay when it was evident that things had gone awry for all of them. They were jovial enjoying their tea at Trattoria restaurant, a short distance away from the high court. As if drinking tea in such a place was their normal routine. As if it was the kind of place they had always belonged. And yet it wasn't. We were all smelling victory. I imagined that my father would come out of court and we'd be able to afford anything. However, that afternoon, the judgment was postponed. And it was postponed many times over until 2003 when it felt more like a release than a victory.

This part, my father tells me over a cup of tea: He sought audience with Chief Justice Cocker, Chief Justice Chesoni, and Chief Justice Chunga. He was always being told, write a letter. He wrote letters. He eventually got his judgment in 2003, but the victory was partial. His compensation was handed over at the USD/KSh exchange rate of 1988 rather than 2003. Still, it was something.

## **Tea as reparation**

I keep trying to create a tea recipe that will be mine. It started when I bought a batch of chai masala that was just tasteless. I then purchased the unprocessed ingredients separately - dried cloves, cinnamon sticks, cardamom seeds, black pepper, fresh ginger. I'm trying to determine what the perfect proportion is. Some of it comes from that place of not wanting to experience the wateriness of tea, the burntness of tea, and the memory of scarcity it evokes. It comes also from wanting an elaborate reason to justify standing so close to the cooker to just watch the tea.

I'm lactose intolerant but have refused to accept it. I take milk often and then regret it. I go off milk and then get back again. I feel a little anxious when the milk runs out at the wrong time of the week. When the Finance Bill 2018 was passed I went and stocked up on milk because I'd like to believe that when I stop taking milk tea (if I ever do), that it will not be because I cannot afford it.

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