



Pandemonium! The Pathology of a Pandemic

By Sam Opondo



I. Pharmakon

The recent exposure of our bodies to foreign bodies has also exposed the cracks and limited sympathies that form the body politic. The COVID-19 pandemic has made us aware of a world that we all share. A world whose wounds, scars, fissures and pressures do not open up to an outside. A world where bodies and borders fold back into themselves, revealing the things that animate the current order, as well as that which is yet to come.

As we are told to distance ourselves from other human and non-human beings, let us remember that there are things that the act of distancing cannot prevent. That there are many separations and intimacies, as well as wounds, that it cannot heal. As we are encouraged to wash our hands and to stay at home, let us revisit the cultures of the home and dynamics of homelessness too. With critical care and compassion, with renewed passion and attention, let us question some of the presentist tales on retail and see the pharmakon — the remedy, the poison, and the scapegoat — that they entail.

For the past two years, the Kenyan political imaginary has been mediated and saturated by a dynastic handshake. A handshake whose supposedly reconciling touch has created new political alignments and theistic rearrangements. Like other diplomatic gestures aimed at repairing democratic fissures, the handshake has generated reports and initiatives of conjecture. For some, it

is a breath of fresh air. For others, it is a political chokehold and a cause of breathlessness. For some, the handshake is a pay cheque.

With the current emergency measures being declared against the backdrop of an immunity politics of touch and breathlessness, we should be wary of the emergence of untouchable officers who suspend or act outside of the law. But there is a doubleness to this untouchability. While it signals to the impunity and fear that marks our immunity present, it also calls upon us to apprehend, embrace, and agitate with the millions that our political habits have abandoned and rendered precarious – the so-called “untouchables” whose everyday life and vision of the future is marked by hunger and breathlessness of one form or another, the millions for whom the curfew and other emergency measures carry the forces of life and death in equal measure.

In this time when faces sit behind masks or, as we have seen, so many black skins move without masks, we need to question the official protocols behind the disposal of the breathless dead in undignified ways. We need to heed the calls of homeward-bound travelers who are subjected to the familiar tools of repression while some –untouched by the familiar brutality of runcus and teargas –remain “safely” bound within their homes. As the home-bound people moralise and cheer on the few armed men who enforce the curfew against the so-called “undisciplined masses”, remember that home – that assumed space of safety – also causes premature death for others. Remember that on these streets some people do not need to commit an infraction; their very existence, their everyday movement, their way of being, is now an infraction. Today it is them, tomorrow it might be you.

It is during this time – when habitual forms of touch, breath, intimacy, or even desire can be fatal – that one must find ways of touching and connecting to others in other ways. Beware of the fear of exposure to foreign bodies that makes one fearful or suspicious of foreigners. Beware of the war metaphors and mobilisations that urge people to withdraw into themselves, cut the ties and veins that connect them to others, and plug the nodes and portals through which contact and contagion take place. Beware of the calls to take the politics of touch too literally, such that one cannot be touched by the plight and joy of others. It is when we are all masked up and everyday touch becomes lethal that one must remember the touching words of Frantz Fanon at the end of his *Black Skins, White Masks* where he calls upon us:

[...]to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world...Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?

II. Care/Carefulness

In these times where we are called upon to shelter in place and distance ourselves from others, let us also distance ourselves from our habitual ways of being and the selves that they hold in place. Undoubtedly, the emergency modes of care and immunity generate regimes of carefulness that guarantee life and safety, but certain forms of carefulness also stand in the way of solidarity and attunement to the wailing and mumbling of the world.

With the recognition that solidarity is both a gift and a sacrifice that binds, we must ask what it means to stand with another without producing micro-fascisms and architectures of enmity that reduce difference to identity while subjecting it to dominant regimes of recognition. At what point, we might ask, do solidarities become sodalities or even a kind of new modality of being with others based on limited sympathies and forms of fear?

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As we witness abandoned African migrants being profiled, evicted, abused, and expelled from Guangzhou in China while African states receive personal protective equipment donations from China and test kits and masks from Jack Ma and as we see people of Asian descent being spat on, wailed at, and attacked on U.S. streets based on the notion that they are the originators and carriers of SARS-CoV-2 virus, how are we to respond? How can we attend to the double challenge that calls upon Africans at home to condemn the violence against fellow Africans in China as well as that which is waged against the Chinese and other Asians in the U.S.— a place where fellow black people are already disproportionately exposed to illness, injury, and death? How are we to ensure that we do not excuse or reproduce these violences here at home or anywhere else for that matter? Whither the spirit of Bandung? Insofar as this geography of pain and therefore ethics is concerned, Africans, it seems, are the behemoth that sees multiple sides of the violence, debt, gifts, and betrayals that summon us to condemn, mobilise, and sympathise simultaneously. Tragic as it may be, awareness of these layered precarities provides an orientation that remains crucial for negotiating and navigating the world of separations that is emerging in the wake of the pandemic and its related pandemonium.

Again, and owing to biocolonial and biopolitical concerns, the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus across the globe has led to new discourses on African lack and excess. In some of these narratives, the low incidence of the COVID-19 disease in Africa is attributed to the systemic disconnectedness of Africa from the rest of the world. In other discourses, Africans are said to be immune to a virus that is ravaging humanity at large, given that they are a species apart from humanity.

Within this second figuration, imagined African immunity serves as evidence of a superhuman or subhuman status, thus legitimising the creation of drug trial regimes or resilience-based systems of abandonment based on the notion that Africans will always adapt to conditions that other human beings cannot live in. Either way, the African scene — just like the camps and refugee holding centers in Bangladesh and Europe, Gaza, and prisons in the U.S. — is seen as an exceptional incubator of disease. Accordingly, the abandoned, displaced, walled-off, or exploited collectivities are considered to be the source of enduring threat and fear to the isolated, who might remain uninfected yet but is still affected by the disease. As COVID-19 reveals connections and disconnections that are often disavowed and living conditions that should never have existed in the first place, further moves are made to separate and contain the refugees, prisoners, Palestinian, and African carriers of difference rather than abolish the apartheid orders and structures of exclusion that make the prospect of disease in these places so lethal.

The fear of an impending catastrophe when the virus finally reaches these zones of abandonment - where political and health systems, as well as living conditions, aren't conducive for the enforcement of social distancing or other measures required to contain the spread of the COVID-19 disease - tell us a lot about the "abnormality" and pathology of the spaces that we take as normal. The gaps — which in reality are a gaping abyss — remind us of the violence and partialities that partition a world that should be shared and held in common.

When we are called upon to clean the world, our homes, and ourselves, let us heed the words of Françoise Vergès who, in an essay on "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender" carefully illustrates the gendered dynamics of care and cleaning and the intricate economy and circulation of exhausted

bodies that work in spaces of everyday life. Accordingly, our solidarity and our cares should lie with those who are rendered most vulnerable, superfluous, and injured by racial capitalism, patriarchy, and neoliberal logics today.

While the economy and ecology of care and cleaning are now recognised as essential to containing the spread of COVID-19, the periodic clapping and heroic chants still overlook the scars, hunger, sleeplessness, and liquification of the skins and hands of the people who clean the world. It also renders mute the very essential people that one claims to be talking about and does not protect them from being disposable or easily replaceable.

Beware of the narratives that commoditise and moralise, rather than politicise, the realm of care. Beware of the sacrificial fetishisation, rather than politicisation, of the labouring body that makes it difficult to contest the practices and dispositions that continue to lay so many lives to waste. Beware of those who turn the space of care into an extension of the policing apparatus or those who proclaim their individual freedoms to move and transact “normally”, thus putting undue pressure on already overstretched caregivers.

While the language of care is sometimes mobilised to speak of sustaining and rejuvenating practices of self-care, we have to ask ourselves what it is that causes the exhaustion that we are being rejuvenated from and what we are returning to in this re-energised state. In the time of the pandemic, the “care of the self” and the philosophical injunction to know oneself is not something that can be closed unto itself or cordoned off from worlds that any human being is entangled with. With this eroticism of carefulness, the condom – that erotic membrane mobilised to keep the outside outside in the wake of an earlier pandemic – is now joined by masks, gloves, and other membranes. The whole body becomes “condomised” and “sanitised”. The world becomes “moralised” as borders are enforced, as body parts and prostheses are sanitised, and as the fear of the other and suspicion of the self increase.

In New York, they have produced a guide to taking care during sex in the age of COVID-19:

Kissing can easily pass COVID-19. Avoid kissing anyone who is not part of your small circle of close contacts. * Rimming (mouth on anus) might spread COVID-19. Virus in feces may enter your mouth. *Condoms and dental dams can reduce contact with saliva or feces, especially during oral or anal sex. *Washing up before and after sex is more important than ever. Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. * Wash sex toys with soap and warm water. * Disinfect keyboards and touch screens that you share with others (for video chat, for watching pornography or for anything else).

In Nairobi, the Genge music group Ethic released their songs Quarantei and Soko, each articulating the violence, sex, and exuberance that accompanies this moment and that, unfortunately, reflects some fantasies and actual realities of urban sex life.

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In this time of care, and carefulness, in this time of sorrow, grief, lamentation, and burdens of the mind, let us take care of each other. Let us also be wary of the insidious moves that seek to take

charge of politics, popular imagination, and desire or fear in the name of freedom. Let us beware of those that prey on vulnerable others and generate fantasies of male domination. Let us beware of the moralists who use these Nairobi scenes of excess to generate a moral panic that normalises and regulates or defines what counts as “proper” desire for everyone. For in the exceptional moment of enclosure, for in the search of a cure, a new “curia” can curate an order of heteronomous morality (unquestioning rule following) where their “orders” and even playful seductions re-order individual and collective life in the service of religious, misogynistic, capitalist, and even fascist ideals rather than amplifying an ethics of care predicated on a radical altruism and attention to more life-affirming practices (sexual or otherwise).

III. Exceptions/ Exemplarities

As we receive the communication on immunity and calls to wash our hands in order to prevent the spread of this microbial “agent”, remember those excommunicated from the sphere of ethical concern. Remember that the dry taps and inability to observe the stay-at-home orders or to even self-isolate in cramped living spaces are not geographical accidents; they are not the historical outcome of poor choices by the poor. They are the material manifestations of old and new structures of exploitation tied to the legacies of colonialism and neoliberalism as well as resilience governance in Kenya today.

When we encounter the unwashed hand or the overpriced jerrycan of water, remember the washed money and the laundered conscience that is baptised in holy water every week. Remember the attritional violence and white-collar crime which, unlike its red-collared counterpart, kills millions slowly, and with a clean conscience. Remember the dataism and algorithmic life that is becoming part of the Kenyan reality as a result of blockchain governance, biometric registration, Safaricom FinTech futures, and the popular and expert ethnic arithmetic, as well as Cambridge Analytica’s psychographics that supplement the idea of insurmountable differences or tyranny of one sort or another. Remember how the Moi era involved patterns of surveillance where the right to know every detail of individual life coincided with the sovereign right to rule in exclusion of others.

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While resisting technophobic conspiracy theories is necessary, one must recognise how the desire for more elaborate regimes of outbreak analytics and Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response Systems (IDSR) can help contain the spread of COVID-19 but also set the stage for other biopolitical and immunitary forms of governance that target and eliminate the dissenting political body. The crisis, as we come to see, is not one of immunity alone but also of community and its dynamics of superfluity. Let us question our limited sympathies and the discourses on responsibility and discipline that dictate how, or for whom, one must care, be accountable to, know, and even mourn.

IV. Spectacular/ Spectral Handshakes

With the disappearance of the handshake here and elsewhere, let us not forget how this habitual gesture became so common - how it has been banned and reinvented over time, and how it has shaken the world so many times. Remember Mussolini’s anti-bourgeois campaign that replaced the handshake with the fascist Roman salute just after the First World War and the devastation of the Spanish flu. Remember the Boy Scouts’ friendly left-hand handshake invented by Baden-Powell (now buried in Nyeri) as he colonised the Ashanti and subjected King Prempeh to the British crown.

The “genius” and deception behind British geopolitics and the colonial handshakes behind it is illustrated in Nicholas Rankin’s reflection on figures like Richard Meinertzhagen, who is well-known for his love of birds, his execution of the Haversack Ruse in Gaza, and the assassination of Koitalel Arap Samoei in Kenya. The killing, the fatal sleight-of-hand, took place when Koitalel reached out for a conciliatory handshake with the colonial officer who, in familiar anti-diplomatic fashion, denied him the privilege or immunity guaranteed to emissaries and shot him at point-blank range. Meinertzhagen also decapitated Koitalel’s body and took his head, his ornaments, and adornments as trophies of this colonial conquest.

Meinhertzhagen saw war as a metaphor for hunting, which he enjoyed immensely. The only difference for him was that in war you hunted men rather than animals. In Quetta, he used a polo mallet to bludgeon to death a worker who had mistreated his ponies. He then bribed the police to cover up the cause of death by claiming the man had died of the plague. Nearer home in Tanganyika, Meinhertzhagen and his troops searched the German latrines for soiled documents, which acted as “filthy though accurate information” in the service of the British Empire. He also killed birds and put them next to watering holes in order to deny his enemies access to the water, which was marked as poisoned. This man’s blood-soaked fingerprints and the spectre of his deceptive and man-hunting methods are felt from Kenya to Tanzania, Quetta and Palestine.

Beware of the ghosts and methods we summon when we hope to contain today’s deaths and maladies. Beware of the new manhunts, the surveillance, the handshake betrayals, the civilizing missions, the colonial logics of discipline, non-contamination, and the politics of water, toilets and toilet paper, that is sometimes never too far away from profiling, carceral, and other colonial practices. Beware of the desire for “tough” maternal and paternal love and discipline based on the notion that the only language Africans understand is that of brute force. Beware of the notion that the protection the collective is always achieved through sacrifice, punishment, and disregard for the meaningful practices, intimacies, and the little pleasures and compassion that define human and communal dignity. Beware of the interplay of customary norms and governmental exceptions, as well as the quest for a new normal that is to be built on negation rather than negotiation, or conversion without any space for conversation.

When the nostalgia for “the handshake” returns, remember how Fides, that old pagan mark of trust, reliability, and conciliation, became the ritualised sign of Christian pacification. Remember Romeo Dallier who “shook hands with the devil” in Rwanda and even “smelled him”.

Let us not forget those who refused the handshake and watched as opportunity slipped through their fingers. Remember sister Farah Alhajeh who sued and was awarded 40,000 Kronor by a Swedish labour court for discrimination after the translation company Semantix ended her job interview in May 2016 due to her refusal to shake hands with male workers because of her Islamic faith. If Alhajeh was lucky, this was not the case for an Algerian woman who, also citing her religious beliefs, refused to shake hands with the male official at the end of her citizenship ceremony in France, which led to a denial of her citizenship application. The court hearing her appeal supported the denial of her citizenship, noting that she had not assimilated into French society in spite of having been married to a French man for six years.

It is not surprising that now, owing to the COVID-19 outbreak, both countries have banned the handshake that was hitherto considered an indispensable part of their cultures. It is also not surprising that as part of a long-standing biocolonial hexagonal imagination, French doctors Jean-Paul Mira and Camille Locht suggested that new COVID-19 vaccines be tested in Africa. For the two medics, Africa is nothing but a zone of experimentation and insurmountable difference rather than a place of shared humanity.

As private hospitals turn away the sick, recall how the golden handshake of SAP-induced voluntary early retirement led so many to a hand-to-mouth existence. And remember the crafty business deals and pyramid schemes that emerged in that era of Goldenberg-induced uncertainty. Remember the era of privatisation that commodified life, normalised African privation, and gave birth to the side-hustler and the sufferer.

V. Banalities

So let us reassess the idea of the gentleman's handshake and all the promises, bodies, and hearts that it has broken. From the unwelcome lingering or limp fish-like handshake to the firm grip that promises too much, duplicity and the sleight of hand has often accompanied this gesture. Here, inattentiveness to the lives of those who are not at the table where the agreements take place is the rule rather than the exception.

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As we are all told to wash our hands, remember there is a lot more to wash and that not all can do it the same way. Remember the dry callused hand whose labour is denigrated as the "farmhand" is called upon to be resilient. Question those tender manicured hands that have been washed, sanitised, and made supple by the softening touch of the business tender and laundered money. Beware of the soft blood-soaked hand that has just signed away the commons and now asks us to clap as he gives back the scraps as acts of personal charity or captures the commons as part of a glittery public-private partnership (PPP).

Beware of the sovereign handshake from the hand that remains unwashed after a bout of butt-scratching anger.

VI. Embracing Humanity/Animality

On ambitious and superfluous presidential handshakes, remember the U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) who shook hands with 8,513 people during the 1907 New Year's Day White House celebration. But this shaker of hands was also a shaker of the world. He was a conservationist. In the company of his son, a team of naturalists, taxidermists, and African porters and guides, Roosevelt's African safari expedition, taken shortly after his retirement, trapped, shot, classified, and chronicled over 11,000 animals from British East Africa, Belgian Congo, and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The collected specimens were donated to the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum where they serve a pedagogical function. The collections educate some on nature conservation, others on the legacy of man as sovereign knower with dominion over nature, while others are reminded of the destruction of man, knowledge, and nature arising from a colonial order of knowledge and its ideal of man-the-collector and classifier.

Today, when some Kenyans decry the loss of safari tourism revenues, or when we look at big and small game hunters from other parts of the world, let us not forget the history and geography of this ecological catastrophe. Those who walk through the museums should remember that collection and theft are never too far away from each other. Let us remember the foundational con game that this conservationist performed and the cruel history of some of our knowledge practices and the fetishes that seek to capture the wild.

Beware of foundational conservationists like Teddy Roosevelt and Madison Grant who created public parks in the U.S., developed xenophobic policies, and caged and killed non-human beings in order to “conserve” them while preserving “their” ideal of man. Beware of today’s eco-fascists who see man as the virus on the planet and whose nihilistic desire for green spaces involves the elevation of white races and the idealisation of blood and soil in a world without us.

But Teddy Roosevelt was a man of contradictions. In a change of heart during a Mississippi hunting trip, he refused to shoot an injured bear that a guide had dutifully tied to a tree so as to please his by then exhausted master. The presidential pardon for the animal became an icon of pity, and thus the Teddy Bear was born.

Today, Western children and some Westernised Southerners go on a veritable teddy bear hunt to distract them from the COVID-19 lockdown. These, and other stuffed animals, adorn home and shop windows for children to spot as they walk around their walkable neighbourhoods.

However, others wait for the African peak of the pandemic so that teddy bears, trauma bears, and other stuffed animals may be sent to Africa as part of humanitarian teddy bear diplomacies or marketing campaigns, such as the Swedish “Teddybear Airdrop Minsk 2012”. Receive the bear, anticipate the bear hug for those seen as bare life, and beware of the bio-expectations they entail. These icons of sentimentality sometimes disavow the lived and material conditions of things or the simple fact that the night of bombs and gunshots is followed by the day of teddy bears, often sourced from the same place. Note how after the abandonment, after the disparaging remarks, after the deportations and incarcerations, comes the teary embrace — albeit for just a short while.

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As one embraces and beholds the teddy bears in this time of zoonotic transmission of novel viruses, let us also remember and scrutinise the other things and knowledges that are going viral. The knowledge and conspiracy theories that are the rage of our age have many analogue precedents. For instance, the 1 April 1972 issue of the British peer-reviewed journal *Veterinary Record* carried an article about the diseases of *Brunus edwardii* — a species “commonly kept in homes in the United Kingdom and other countries in Europe and North America”. The article, which also carried sketches of the teddy bear (Brown Edward), warned that “the public health implications of this fact are obvious, and it is imperative that more be known about their diseases, particularly zoonoses or other conditions which might be associated with their close contact with man.” Beware of the hoaxes. Pay attention to the nuances. Let us read the stories of the animal and us and heed the reality of the animals in us or the animals that we are. Feel the disavowed animalities that make up our humanity.

The hand, we are told, is one of the things that makes the human being human. With the opposable thumb we get the tech of life, ranging from the fist, to tool handling skills, and all manners of gesticulating habits of crafting and communication. But hands are also carriers of difference. The privileging of dexterities and discrimination of those without hands or with limp limbs is part of the order of things.

Ours is the age of thumbs. The “all thumbs” awkward one of yesterday is now the master of the phone texting keyboard and drone controls. With the interruption of rhythms of work, school, and

life, new forms of mutuality, aid, and care become imaginable in this new dispensation where we are told to keep our hands to ourselves. As we compose our worlds anew, beware of the pedagogies of apartness. Beware of those who speculate and gamble away the collective futures. Also remember those who have shown the commoner their middle finger as they feed off of our hands, bite them, and now try to keep us all at arm's length— for our own sake, for the sake of others, but mostly for their own sake.

In the age of public notices and jeremiads, in a time of conspiracy theories and public orders, this lamentation on what we all see but sometimes shake away is a call for us to recall and recompose the things that we already know and experience. These are things that the invisible microbe forces us to look at and hold in our hearts even as the invisible hand tries to inscribe us as man-the-buyer and alienates our labour as the labouring hand becomes more restrained.

In a time where everyday touch, even when it does not bear any arms, is said to be potentially fatal, a time where touch is being virtualised for some and others have the rungu waving over their heads, remember that the ties that bind can be cut, created anew, or extended to generate a more life-affirming humanity with the possibility of a deeper mutuality.

But this time can also be captured by the forces of disaster capitalism or worse, those of disaster fascism.

So Beware! Be aware ...

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