

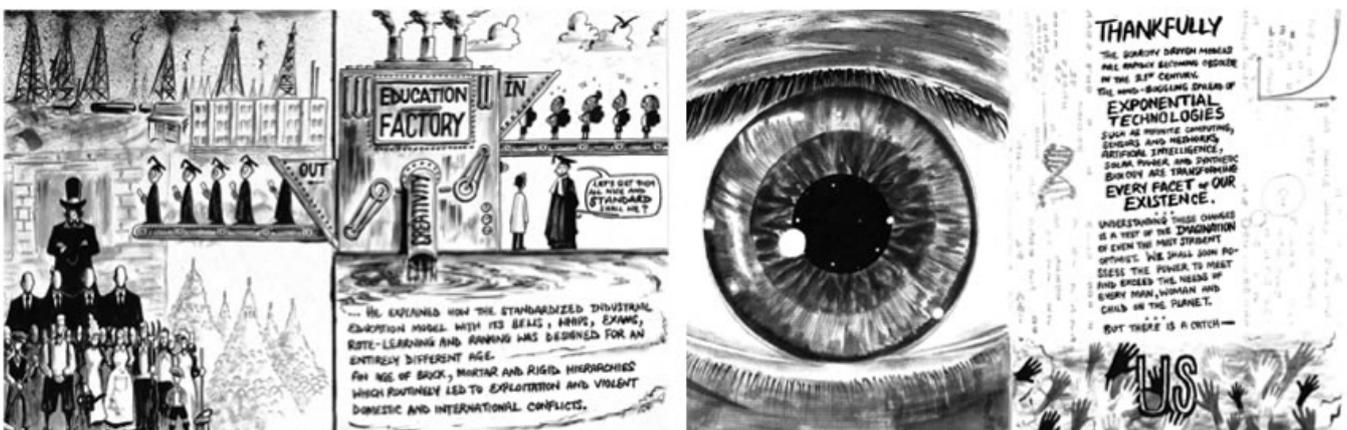


The Shape of Our Post-COVID Future

By Chief Nyamweya



When illustrating my graphic novel, *Art of Unlearning*, in 2017, I found two images especially useful in understanding and communicating how our responses to crises shape us, both personally and collectively. The two images that represented two distinct styles of social organisation cutting across diverse cultures and belief systems are **fractal** structures and **pyramid** structures. These structures are visible even in this most formidable of crises.



Fractals are patterns that are characterised by self-similarity at every scale of observation. Every individual member of a fractal pattern is harmonious with the pattern as a whole. Fractals are the

most common patterns in the natural world and can be found in the self-replicating growth patterns of romanesco broccoli, spider webs, schools of fish, swarms of birds, galaxies, lightning bolts, rivers, veins, trees, lungs and, of course, viruses. These patterns seek harmony. Leaders, such as New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, reflected such a pattern when she recognised the healthcare crisis and mobilised the trust and informed cooperation of citizens to prevent the spread of coronavirus without violating human rights.

Pyramids, on the other hand, are artificial shapes made of three straight lines and rarely occur in nature without human intervention. Favoured for their stability relative to gravity, they are some of the largest and oldest surviving human structures all around the globe, but are nevertheless young when compared to the estimated five billion years that life has existed on our planet. Pyramids are a fitting symbol of mankind's recent destructive hegemony over planet Earth. In responding to the coronavirus pandemic, a pyramid formation concentrates decision making power in a few hands because it cannot rely on the voluntary participation of the affected population at the bottom of the pyramid. An example is the Kenyan government's sledgehammer response to the coronavirus pandemic that has predictably resulted in gross human rights violations.

Exposing a pyramid scheme

A colourless summary of Kenya's history is that it is the story of a people struggling to wake up from the brutal nightmare of pyramids imposed by foreign conquerors, but all too often succeeding only in repopulating the same stable structure with an even more mendacious elite until - finally - tiny rays of hope emerge, such as a new constitution and devolution of governance from an autocratic centre. These rays of hope have introduced marginalised parts of the country to a government they had only heard of, but rarely seen.

Over the last seven years, reactionary forces in favour of reconsolidating executive power have captured the state and even subsumed opposition leadership. But where both protests and elections have failed to loosen the chokehold of Jubilee's centralised kleptocracy, a mindless pathogen has offered the most formidable challenge to its narrative. Compared with HIV/AIDS (which was a disease saddled with moralistic baggage and stigma) the relative "innocence" of coronavirus transmission through ephemeral contact between strangers has made it a much less corruptible stress test of Kenya's public health systems.

Without a public healthcare system to support the estimated 83 per cent of Kenyans subsisting on daily earnings as informal traders or workers, and with no defence against a virus that is unforgiving of poor sanitation, the absence of a massive outbreak in Kenya to date is a miracle. Kenya has one of the steepest pyramids in the world, and this architecture is the root cause of the corruption and inequality that is only half-heartedly tinkered with.

A good faith redress of these deficiencies has been rendered impossible by a conspiracy between Kenya's mainstream media and primitive elites (PEs) - as Darius Okolla aptly calls them - that suffocate public discourse with an eternal soap opera that is divorced from the lives of ordinary Kenyans. The coronavirus is a temporary short circuit to this deluge of distraction force fed to the public in the name of news. The stunning impact of this short circuit remains unmistakable, even as the media defaults to its diet of superficial tribalised trivia about Jubilee in-fighting.

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What the virus has exposed is a kind of schizophrenia in Kenya's governance that is not academic.

On one end of the schizophrenic spectrum is a warm veneer of civility conveyed in the PR savvy personality of Health CS Mutahi Kagwe. On the other extreme, is the cold state machinery behind the PR that ended the life of 13-year-old Yassin Hussein Moyo in his own home with a stray bullet, and brutalised commuters in Likoni, risking further spread of coronavirus. One might be forgiven for asking whether we are trying to heal the patient or pull the plug. Inured to criticism, the Jubilee administration has proceeded to transform what began as a healthcare crisis into a militarised feeding frenzy. Enconced in private luxury, which until recently included trips abroad for medical treatment, the PEs have been hitherto insulated from the pain of a disemboweled public health system. No more.

Now that commercial airlines are a deadly escape route, a sober movement that recognises the urgency of reform must force an uncompromising demand for accountability that is not distracted by the public relations of an illegitimate regime. If truth is the first casualty of war, as Aeschylus said, then the “war” against coronavirus is unlike any other traditional war we have fought. It is a war that requires less tear gas and more ventilators; less policemen and more nurses; less misinformation and censorship and more transparency and science. All of these are disciplines that are alien to any autocratic kleptocracy. Misinformation, such as Donald Trump’s disinfectant prescriptions, or the insistence of for-profit evangelical churches on large gatherings, or the Chinese government’s censorship in the weeks following the outbreak, have all proved lethal. There ought to be no need for Kenya to conduct any further experiments in misinformation without learning from these fatal errors.

The Kenyatta pyramid scheme, and the quasi-religious political tribalism that has fueled it, is obsolete for even this most rudimentary task of sustaining human life and dignity.

The virus is a fractal

The most striking feature of the global response to the coronavirus pandemic is how much it has depended on global solidarity across artificial national boundaries despite continual territorial confrontations. It is quite likely that if any one nation develops a vaccine against the coronavirus in the future, even its enemies’ desire to keep their own citizens alive will overshadow any prejudices. This open exchange of knowledge is most apparent in the medical and scientific communities, an example being Cuban and Chinese doctors coming to the aid of Italy long before many of Italy’s own neighbours moved into action. The insular reaction of the great pyramid of the United States now stands as a cautionary tale.

Like all natural forces, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, viruses are blind to our cherished social pyramids as they spread, yet our resilience to the economic shocks that result from this disruption are not. There has been a stark class divide in the degree of disruption to livelihoods, education, negotiating power and law enforcement. We are in the process of discovering the extreme asymmetry between the advancement of biomedical understanding of the coronavirus pandemic versus governments’ willingness to do what is necessary to match this challenge with the most fractal response available.

Closing the gaping chasm between hard-won scientific understanding on the one hand, and the intractability of our political institutions on the other, is the central challenge of the pandemic in Kenya. This means integrating deep cultural understanding of our diverse communities with lessons from the most proactive responses to the pandemic around the world. Our standard Anglo-Saxon benchmarks will not be available this time around.

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of biomedical understanding of the coronavirus pandemic versus governments' willingness to do what is necessary to match this challenge with the most fractal response available.

Fortunately, for those who are willing to learn, this is the first time in human history that we know so much about a pandemic. During the Black Death of the fourteenth century, the biggest cause of death was a basic ignorance of its origin in rat fleas, which led to the burning of poor old women who were described as witches and the scapegoating of Jews. Similarly, when the Spanish flu emerged just a century ago, the influenza virus that felled tens of millions of people could not be identified in time to "flatten the curve". In contrast, within just two weeks of the coronavirus outbreak, scientists were able to identify the correct virus genome and share it online, enabling the development of tests as well as the search for a vaccine. For laypeople like me, this boiled down to basic preventative information that features diagrams of a funny looking tentacled ball - hardly the face of an existential enemy of humanity.

Although the efficacy of tests is still being improved, and the development of a vaccine may be over a year away, these are still remarkable feats of human understanding only made possible by unprecedented knowledge sharing in a fractal pattern. Human beings are phenomenally creative when they share knowledge and engage distributed decision making. It is within our power to resolve this crisis if we channel resources to public health in particular, and public goods in general, using the kind of fractal distribution that has been made possible by the 2010 Constitution.

This will necessarily include a robust public education system that would cultivate the next generation of healthcare workers and creative thinkers who do not require coercion to respond collectively to any crisis. Education, you will notice, is absent from President Uhuru Kenyatta's so-called Big 4 Agenda. With less than 10,000 doctors, Kenya is nowhere near the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation of one doctor for every 1,000 people. And of the few doctors that we do have, many are siloed in foreign research entities with narrow mandates, unable to share data that might be useful in the war against coronavirus.

The existence of information silos that are blind to one another is typical of pyramids and is a feature not only of the healthcare system, but of all knowledge creation in both the arts and sciences within Kenya's neoliberal administration. Silos are perfect for running a police state where a paranoid dictator does not want his left hand knowing what the right hand is doing privately. But well into the 21st century, where both viruses and information spread at an exponential rate, it is hard to imagine a worse way of managing our shared knowledge.

The war of the future

If you had a hundred dollars for every person in the world infected with COVID-19, you would still not have the amount of money that Kenyan taxpayers have lost to corruption during the tenure of the Jubilee administration. Let that sink in. The billions blend into quantum gibberish in the brains of all but the most tenacious economists such as David Ndi.

If the war against coronavirus becomes yet another fundraiser, as early indications suggest, it will be especially demoralising to public health workers risking their lives to serve Kenyans in the midst of chronic underfunding. Kenya is less a poor country than it is a country with poorly allocated wealth. No one knows how much longer the long suffering Kenyan people will accept abuse, but as Chairman Mao once wrote, "A single spark can light a prairie fire".

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Our precarious economy cannot sustain lockdowns and curfews forever, and we might not have to wait until the next election to discover the elastic limit of the people's tolerance of impunity. In the words of the Kisii based musician *Smallz Lethal*, aka *Omoisiomobe*, following his release from arrest as well as the release of a new song *I'm Offended*:

Sisi kama mayouth tunasimama as one voice. This time round, hatuendi kuyamaza. Mayouthman wamebonga na wamesema kila mse ako offended, and that is a fact. Si hata mayouth pekee yake. Ni watu in general... Lazima [hawa] wakuwe accountable. We sio superstar. We sio msanii. People are pocketing millions, why are you arresting me? Mimi mnanipatia 1600 shillings after six months kama county. Alafu unakuja kuniarrest unaexpect nitoe wapi pesa za kulipa bond? Ju ni mapesa tu makarao wanataka. Mayouthman wasimame. There's no other time to do this apart from this time! Now that we are speaking, and now that people are hearing. The voice is louder!

Smallz has thrown down the gauntlet. In the meantime, as a thinking human being and as a creator, I have the same job that I have always had: to create learning tools and experiences for a new generation of fractal thinkers so that they might see beyond the mediocrity that leeches on our potential as a nation. In them, I see a fractal community that fuses critical thinking with the ethical use of technology to build alternative realities.

Our health and our imagination is our greatest resource, not buildings. Even in our darkest hour, we are not without the power to imagine together, and it is the existence of this shared imagination that repudiates the world that they try shamelessly to pull over our open eyes. We, the inheritors of history, are seeing for the first time the clear peak of Mount Kilimanjaro from the windows of a city in lockdown, and beginning to wonder what it would be like to rise to those heights.

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