



Returning the Gaze: How COVID-19 Is Inverting Colonial Imaginaries

By P. Wenzel Geissler and Ruth J. Prince



Five days after the first COVID-19 case in Kenya—a [young, middle-class returnee to Nairobi](#)—was announced, the word “corona” was beginning to go around in western Kenyan villages. We had come here to look for the sedimented remains of past epidemics and anti-epidemic interventions. We were looking for latent residuals of colonial sleeping sickness and malaria, AIDS and cancer, when this future pandemic caught up with us. At this point, people still shook hands and touched (a week later, many didn’t), and young people played with the word “corona” like it was a novel token. Sylvanus, proud father of seven and devout member of the Legio Maria Church, seemed thrilled by exclaiming the name of the new affliction, followed by somewhat surprising bursts of laughter. He rather enjoyed challenging our seriousness about the matter. He did not fear it, “No, because this is a disease for whites.”

We took a stroll along the shore of Lake Victoria facing the Ugandan border, passing a fishing settlement. It was some years since we had been there and the children ran after us in friendly excitement. Their high-pitched calls rang out like the familiar: “Mzunguuu (white person), how are youuu?” But there was an unexpected variation: “Coronaviruuus, how are youuu?” As we continued walking, the childrens’ choir shifted to a cheekier whisper behind our backs: “Corona! Corona!” which went quiet each time we turned around—probably the point of the game. Returning to the main road, the looks of fishermen and market women felt more intense than usual, though not (yet)

hostile. As we climbed in the car, Sylvanus whispered “Corona ... ” and shared a bright, disarming laughter with those around us. Driving back towards town, many eyes seemed to follow us. Young men shouted “Corona” as we navigated speedbumps. One added “bye-bye.” A mother waiting for a bus waved us away dismissively. “As if we were Chinese,” our colleague Jehu remarked indignantly.

“Mzungu” had for the moment morphed into “Corona.” White man had become a virus. As we got back to Kisumu city, the address began to carry a latent sense of threat (though the market women during the evening’s shopping were cheerful as ever). This scene was not unfamiliar. Twenty-five years earlier, when Wenzel and his colleagues from the Kenyan Ministry of Health collected blood and stool samples from schoolchildren in the area, they had been called *kachinja*, “blood-stealers” and [once were attacked](#).

Since colonial occupation, similar scares [have occurred all over Africa](#) (as depicted by the [Congolese painter Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu](#)). As we were writing this blog, [social media posts emerged](#) about COVID-19 vaccine research, one picturing French doctor Didier Raoult, allegedly warning “Africans not to take Bill Gates’s vaccine that contains poison”; another claiming that Obama promised “not to allow white people to kill Africans with their toxic vaccines.” Nothing new here—except that now, the calls for resistance, as well as the menace itself, originate from afar, and are given credibility by the faces of “international” figures appearing on one’s smartphone.

There is a [rich literature](#) on African stories about (post-)colonial Europeans and their African government-helpers, especially doctors and scientists, deploying alien tools (electricity, cars, syringes, condoms, tape-recorders, etc.) for nefarious aims. Much of this writing concedes some truth to the “rumors” arguing against their colonial dismissal as mere “misunderstandings.”

Such stories, the argument goes, reference experiences of oppression and exploitation (be it specific local situations, layered colonial histories, or the global political economy) and translate racist violence into locally meaningful, some call them “cultural” idioms. The scholarly value of these interpretations of rumor notwithstanding, there was something else at stake as the young men waved us the corona bye-bye. One quarter century ago, we could displace their accusations by means of interpretation. These were not really about the tiny blood samples Wenzel collected for his doctoral thesis as a medical anthropologist seeking to contribute to peoples’ health, but expressed an awareness of historical and global exploitation. And his respectful and critical recognition of these covert meanings served to position himself as different from the colonial agents at whom the rumors were really targeted.

Now, with the coronavirus pandemic, the white man is actually the threat they make him out to be. He, or she, is more likely than others to carry the virus. Instead of washing his hands after visiting someone’s household, he should do so before greeting anyone. The COVID-19 epidemic has an inverted directionality. It runs against both a century-old colonial narrative of Africa [as a diseased continent](#) and [millennial pandemic predictions](#) of bushmeat-eating African villagers unleashing viral threats to the world.

Now, Europe is the pandemic epicenter, even though within Europe, the disease [still follows well-worn tracks](#) of [racial and social inequality](#). Europeans, and the Kenyans close to them, bring it to Kenya, not Chinese builders and businesspeople as initially claimed (and who were the first to offer their help). The Kenyan president therefore prohibits European planes from landing and quarantines their crews. And urban, middle-class Kenyans carry the virus upcountry to forest and bush. On Kenyan TV, villagers urge their educated urban relations to stay in the city, as they threaten the lives of their elders if they come home to visit (or to shelter from draconian anti-epidemic measures).

Whites feature here as a threat in a direct, embodied way—not as mere symbols of historical

violence or effigies of the global economic order. Their touch and breath can be lethal. And yet, the epidemic also reveals the same whites as terminally weak, challenging centuries-old assertions of enlightened mastery over humans and non-humans alike. Nigerian film producer Moses Inwang's [much-shared list](#) of lessons from corona opens with "China won the 3rd world war without firing a missile," followed by "Europeans are not as educated as they appear" (a similar point was made in [The Lancet](#)), and "rich people are less immune than the poor." In other recent "African" epidemics—HIV and Ebola—the figure of the benevolent and potent white person still prevailed. Help flowed from north to south to stem an affliction perceived as originating in Africa. Now, this image is replaced by a combination of danger and impotence mutually enforcing each other, which evokes neither gratitude nor inferiority. One of the most recent [anti-vaccination trial memes](#) features a painting of an African woman wielding a knife below the face-mask of a white, male doctor, underscoring that "we're different from our ancestors."

Nairobi MP John Kiarie captures the paradox of residual power and infirmity [in a tweet from March 28](#), which warns of harrowing COVID-19 death-tolls and calls for radical action. Before his climax, "Ignore and die!" he says:

Where does this leave the European anthropologists, who departed from Kenya on one of these last planes that arrived empty at night? Our traditional interpretation of local fears as (significant) rumors no longer offers redemption—we are what they address us as. Our knowledge about what happens is not superior, nor more effective than that of those who call us "Corona." More importantly, our detached and benevolent claim to ethnographic participant observation, always from a position of privilege and relative security, is put into question at precisely the moment when true participation finally becomes inevitable.

Now it is us who "are participated" (as the old aid-worker joke went) by the pervasive virus that is in every touch—maybe in our body, maybe in that of the other. It challenges differentiation, threatening pathogenic communion. And the escape route that we had been able to count on for six decades of post-colonial anthropology is finally being withdrawn—the return flight home, in the worst case the medical evacuation at "unlimited expense."

It was the Kenyan president's ban on flights to Europe that gathered us all in the eerie silence of Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, as we boarded the flight just before the midnight curfew deadline. We got away ok, on the last plane, and did not turn into pumpkins. But, we left with a sense of an ending brought about by coronavirus. As if some irreparable damage has been done to the position of the old white man of any age or gender, and it is not yet evident what new anthropological persona will emerge from it. It is "bye-bye Corona" indeed, and maybe it was time. And yet, we know that COVID-19 has not yet fully arrived in Kenya, along with the inevitable suffering that the epidemic and the anti-epidemic measures is likely to bring about.

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