



Reflections of Githeriman in the Age of Coronavirus

By Arkanuddin Yasin



The Government of Kenya's hollow but public relations-savvy response to the coronavirus crisis has been wanting. The control initiative began following the appointment Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe to the Health Ministry in late February 2020. As the growing number of confirmed COVID-19 cases resulted in a worldwide pandemic, hysteria and public restrictions, the Health CS issued sterner directives that included fines and the threat of a jail sentence against those who failed to adhere to self-quarantine.

On the ground, however, there are signs of disorder. There have been [reports of healthcare workers](#), unable to secure even the most basic face masks, judiciously scampering to safety at the sight of potentially infected patients. Nurses at the Mbagathi Hospital, which is serving as one of the designated national isolation centres, [staged go-slows](#) protesting lack of adequate training and protective equipment.

On 25 March the government announced a dusk-to-dawn curfew as a public control measure. On the first day of the curfew, on Friday 27 March, Kenyan citizens caught in the disruption of public transport as they tried to make their way home, met with police violence. Given an opportunity to show heroism, the administration was instead overwhelmed by its true nature, revealing its malevolent villainy. Two hours before curfew, police officers [pounced on the unsuspecting public at](#)

[the Likoni Ferry landing](#), unleashing indiscriminate brutal violence on women, old men, children and labourers trying to get home. This was only the beginning.

As the night wore on, video footage of the violence meted out on the public by the police—including footage taken by the police themselves—flooded social media. Public floggings of even those workers providing vital services that the government had exempted from the curfew—such as food delivery—were rampant all across Kenya. On the fourth night, a 13-year-old boy, Yassin Hussein Moyo, was shot dead by a police officer while standing on the balcony of his family’s apartment.

The bungling and ineptitude of the COVID-19 response by the Kenyan government has revealed that that which we are socially conditioned to call “our government”—that presumes a complex, omniscient and omnipotent establishment—is in reality dysfunctional. The coronavirus is revealing the truths of all levels of our incorporeal reality: our ideological system, our hegemon, our economics, our institutions and even our individual beliefs.

Sitting in Nairobi’s Eastlands, social distancing has turned out to be a cruel joke during this entire fiasco. It is an attack on the last human community we have. The one we were compelled to form after British colonialism took away our clans, our villages and our land; dumping us on that concrete public transport intersection called the city. The last human front is our neighbour.

The success of the British colonial enterprise in atomising our African societies in order to dominate us, by secularising our values and inculcating individualism into us, left us completely unable to defend ourselves against not only European aggression and plunder, but also against all predation. We have no defences, not just against economic predators like China but now apparently also against non-human threats like pandemics. “United we stand, divided we fall” is not a saying, it is an aphorism.

The colonial administrative infrastructure that was implanted by imperialism, disrupted and replaced our nuclear and extended families, our clans, our villages and our tribes through the systematic erasure of all avenues of communal bonding. Tribal social rituals were banned and children were separated from their families and herded into “Church Missionary Society”-run schools for re-education. Entire villages were condemned to concentration camps during the years of emergency. The colonial government, under whose auspices these violations took place, revealed itself to be nothing more than a policing infrastructure. The ideals of nationhood, property, healthcare, education all polydactyly, dysfunctional malformations masquerading as fingers. The Government of Kenya does not have a clenched fist, for a clenched fist could one day hopefully open into a gentle palm; it has a bludgeon.

We do not know our neighbours. Well, at least not intimately. We form extended families of convenience, to survive the harsh economic edge of these concrete jungles, but now capitalism has come for even that relationship.

Now everyone, including my neighbour, is a potential threat to my survival and that of my family. We are being compelled to teach suspicion and mistrust of even our neighbour’s children to our children, because how do you explain “social distancing” to a six-year-old boy? Children comprehend absolutes, not relative relations.

Meanwhile Twitterati elites with refrigerators choking with supplies frothed at the mouth, endlessly calling for lockdown. It is “us”, the *hoi polloi* who live in the bowels of the city—in Dandora, Mathare, Kawangware, Kibra—that the Twitterati elites are demanding that the government lock down.

Us, the Twenty-shilling Githerimen

As I read their tweets, I remembered a moment two years ago when an old man walked up to my friend's food stall outside a Mosque in Dandora, a working class residential neighbourhood located next to Nairobi City's garbage dump site. He politely asked for 20 shillings. What for? To buy *githeri* (a mix of boiled maize and beans). He had not eaten in two days. A plate of *githeri* was all he needed to get him through the day and night, and he could not afford it. From a position of privilege, many cannot perceive the economic value of 20 shillings nor imagine the economic microcosm in which it can have value, let alone how a man can be incapable of raising it. The Twenty-shilling coin is one of those irritating bits of loose change that we dump in the cup holders of our cars and use to pay parking boys or get rid of persistent beggars. Many do not consider the actual value of the coins; they are only good for handing out as small tips around the city.

Where was his family? His brother? His sister? His children? It is much easier to profile him as a drunkard. The only feasible rationale for not possessing 20 shillings is that he must have drunk it all. Or that he must be a loser who he didn't work hard, didn't save, didn't invest in his future, didn't apply Robert Kiyosaki's Rich-Dad Poor-Dad Cash-Flow Quadrant. Alternatively, he is profiled as a wife beater who terrorises his children. A man with no source of livelihood, no land title loses his identity. When he can no longer work, he loses his worth in an individualistic capitalist society and is reduced to begging for survival.

During the 2017 general elections, [a man queuing to vote while eating his *githeri* from a polythene bag had the Kenyan middle class tickled no end](#). Plucked from obscurity, Martin Kamotho (The Githeriman) became an overnight sensation in a bizarre reality-show complete with media coverage. A few months later, he fell from grace, shamed as a man who had returned to his old alcoholic ways.

The old man who came looking for help at the food stall didn't have the good fortune of random events conspiring to turn him into an overnight national sensation. He and millions of other githerimen, women, children and families remain unseen, invisible to the middle class. There is a world of *githeri* people living at the bottom of Nairobi's urban existence. They are homeless or living in squalor. At night they sleep on the pavements outside buildings along River Road and Juja Road, along the hidden river beds of Ruiru, under bridges in the city, any nook or cranny that a man can fit into to shelter from the rain. They are invisible only because their humanity has been denied.

The world may be deliberately blind to what it owes them but it sees them very clearly when it has something it wants to take from them. Politicians rally them to harvest public opinion, corporate CEOs reiterate their value, echoing C.K. Prahalad's *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits*. Safaricom PLC, a leader in mining this fortune, it is said, experienced a 400 per cent leap in traffic when it introduced the twenty-shilling scratch card. Therefore, capitalism's blindness is not congenital; it conveniently perceives only what is profitable unless compelled otherwise.

But those were "normal" difficult economic times, when 20 shillings was hard to come by, compared to the present reality of a society careening uncontrollably towards political and economic devastation. We are all hurtling towards our nadir at a sustained pace, oblivious to the oncoming apocalyptic rapture. This existential threat has revealed that our fates are intertwined, we are one, and the world has to acknowledge our existence as people, as human beings, and not simply as labour, voters or markets.

Public intellectual David Ndihi has proposed that, in the wake of the restriction of movement, the socio-economically vulnerable should be allowed to flee the urban jungle to their rural areas as a means of decongesting the city. But many cannot even exercise that option. Capitalism in Kenya has

now evolved into the dystopic future described by H. G. Well's 1895 classic, *The Time Machine*. We now have a steadily growing population of Morlocks, generations of parents and children born in the bowels of the city who know no other home and have nowhere to run.

Capitalism and imperialism have hollowed us out completely. The destruction is almost irreparable. Capitalism has wreaked devastation on us all as a society in addition to the poverty of kinship brought about by the secular individualism of our social lives. Capitalism has pushed us into gaping chasms of economic disparity not only among the social classes but among members of a single family. I distinctly remember the collective gasp when the media revealed the poor dwellings in which the brother of the former President Kibaki's lived before he died.

Individualism undermines, directly and indirectly, the purpose and synergy of every possible group formation: filial, commercial and political. And, therefore, it undermines the very existence of society. If man by nature is a social animal, individualism is not just directly antithetical to his nature but is also pernicious.

Capitalism, it is already apparent, is incapable of organising itself for the well-being of any living creature or ecosystem, let alone its primary host—man. The presumed most powerful man on earth, [the President of the United States of America, was ineffectual in procuring basic medical equipment](#) or in organising his government to respond to the pandemic. Democracy and its ruling class have been revealed to be nothing but enablers for capitalist extraction. Everything we have been taught about modern life and purpose has proven to be not just false, but insidiously detrimental to society and self.

There is global consensus that it is time to rethink both our social and economic system generally. But for Africa it is time to go even deeper and reconstruct our basic social structures, our bonds of kinship.

During the Ebola crisis in West Africa, afflicted and affected people were completely dependent on their families for care. The same happened throughout Africa at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

But in spite of our experience, we have allowed capitalism and individualism to corrode these bonds and units of social cohesion. We only recognise them in times of crisis, because Africa has not developed state institutional infrastructure to compensate for this loss. It is time to reconstruct them from the ground up. And not in some workshop-based imperialist-funded aid agency project, but through an organic socio-political indigenously-driven initiative.

On January 29 2020, Dr McFie argued on a local political TV show, NTV AM Live, that democracy as a political system has failed because it is fundamentally flawed. He asked quite pointedly, where, in what vital productive human enterprise has the democratic process been used to determine leadership? He explained the rigorous process used to recruit business leaders and asked why, in the more important domain of governance, such processes cannot be considered. He then went on to propose that Africa needs to look to its history, to explore for the purpose of adoption, the processes through which people rose to become elders and leaders, to find our way out of the mess we are in.

I would argue that this crisis compels us to go deeper, to reconstruct our families, clans and tribes from the ground up, complete with the layers of leadership at all levels—clan, tribe, nation—upon a cogent set of spiritual beliefs.

We now have no choice.

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