



From Where to Face Death: Coronavirus and the Villager

By Alexander Ikawah



Our African cities, despite their millions of inhabitants, actually harbour very few true urbanites. Most of us are villagers, not permanently living in the city but here only to earn a living. We are to Nairobi, Kisumu, and Mombasa what New York, Dubai, and London are to our African diaspora brothers and sisters. And of course, we are to the lives of our families and extended relations back in the village what our diaspora brothers (they of the remittances) are to our economy—crucial. So we keep houses in Nairobi, but our true north is back in the place where we grew up. I believe that this aspect of our identities and the identity of our cities may have an important bearing on the way that Kenya and other African countries deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

There is a question I ask and get asked a lot that may give some insight into this dual identity villagers experience in the city. “What are you doing in Nairobi?” We understand it to mean, “What is your professional occupation?” Underneath the surface question is a recognition of the temporary nature of our city existence. An affirmation of a non-urban identity and a reminder that one comes to Nairobi for professional purposes, but is not supposed to take root here. Back home, those who take root in the city are described as “lost” to the city. After businesses were shut down and the curfew declared, the question began to bother me and the response soon became the worst answer you could possibly give: nothing. To the villager in the village, that means “nothing good”.

Normally, any villager who answers “nothing” to that question is advised to travel home. The coronavirus pandemic demands, however, that you stay away from others, especially those that you love. We have interpreted this to mean “don’t travel home”. Yet it is costly to do nothing in the city, much more costly than doing nothing at home. And even though you may stay away from the ones you love, can you, can anyone, really stay away from everyone in the city?

The housing block in which I live has been crowded since the government began to restrict movement. Nairobi is like an hourglass in that way; empty downtown Nairobi, and Eastlands housing blocks soon fill up. So the block is buzzing like a beehive all day long now, no off-peak lulls between the parents’ comings and goings when house-helpers can converse across the balconies. Stop business in the CBD and the house-helpers here have no respite from the laundry, the clotheslines above each other, each set of wet clothes dripping onto the one below. Not to mention that, in some parts of Umoja, Kayole, and Dandora, the blocks are six storeys high, all bedsitters, with shared kitchens and ablutions. Yes, there are families in these houses too. I can see COVID-19 smiling quietly to itself, sitting on a conductor’s fifty-shilling note as he hands back a woman’s change, headed deep into Umoja. How we are playing into danger’s hands.

It might be easier to social-distance in the gated estates and large spacious apartments and bungalows of places outside Eastlands. Easier for families that own a car to travel without making contact with hundreds of people every day. It is not so easy in Eastlands. In fact, there are no circumstances there in which it is possible to escape an enemy like coronavirus. Villagers living in this city are completely vulnerable to its broken infrastructure and this vulnerability has taken on a deadly turn because of COVID-19. I’ll tell you a story to explain.

My friend Vic Janam, handsome, happy-go-lucky, villager extraordinaire, invited me to his house in Tena for some rest and relaxation one Friday evening. I arrived at his house to find him deeply disturbed.

“Hebu fungua hiyo tap, observe for a minute, uniambie unaobserve nini”, he said, pointing me to the kitchen ((Please turn on the tap and tell me what you observe) I went. I turned on the tap, water flowed out. I waited. I frowned. I sniffed. I bent towards the tap to smell the water. In the name of Obong’o Nyakalaga, that water smelt like fresh shit. Not slightly, not moderately but pungently.

“Manze”, he said gravely, *“yaani na hii ndio maji mi hukunywa”*. (You mean this is the water I drink?). The sewage had entered into the water supply of the entire block.

Vic moved out. Someone else lives there now, and I am afraid that even though they may be social-distancing and obeying the curfew, they are still sitting ducks. I can see the coronavirus sharpening its teeth, swimming through the water pipes headed towards Pipeline, or Tena Estate.

My own place is not much better when it comes to water. I spent most of last week strategising my isolation and lockdown and realised that there was a gaping hole in my plans: water. My block, and several others around, gets water once a week over two days if Nyakalaga is smiling, and only for a few hours on Sunday if he is displeased. When I lived by myself, I was able to save water using a large drum. But I have a housemate now, and the drum is no longer enough for any length of lockdown. We have been buying water every week for a while. The water is brought by *mkokoteni*, and although we are lucky to have a water point nearby, when it runs dry, we genuinely do not know where the *mkokoteni* men get their water from. As I set my lockdown budget, the cost of water alone destroyed it; I had not even started listing food items. Many who have managed through sheer privilege to fill their houses with food, and who do not endure the constant water scarcity that we in Eastlands do, are online calling for a lockdown. I can tell you that, for a government without proper plans in place to provide relief, enforcing a lockdown on people with no adequate financial savings

and who rely on broken public infrastructure is not a tenable plan. It will expose millions to the flaws and weaknesses of our city infrastructure that now, in a time of COVID-19, could prove fatal if, for instance, a large section of the water supply were to be contaminated; the science says the coronavirus does travel in faeces. I can see that damned coronavirus now, waiting in the sewage, smiling behind its face mask. I do not feel safe. I do not even feel isolated.

And then there is the elephant in the room, or should I say, the elephant in the country; a government no villager trusts anymore. The incumbency has at the moment coopted the opposition and presented itself as a single head, making it collectively even more untrustworthy than its individual parts. The villager normally knows how much to trust their guy, and how much to mistrust the other. Now, with the opposition coopted and few powerful voices offering honest criticism and pushback against possible corruption and bureaucratic mistakes, the villager must take instructions from an inscrutable monolith that has never in the history of its existence truly had our best interests at heart.

I watched footage of people being beaten along Mombasa Road hoping to see a policeman pause to sanitise the tip of his *rungu* but no, it was brutality as usual. If the coronavirus is the enemy we are fighting, what is the point of ordering a curfew then putting (how ironic) the security forces to work spreading the disease? And even as penalties are discussed for people who willfully or otherwise cause the deaths of others through COVID-19, will we see another set of our political leaders accused of crimes against humanity at The Hague if specific outbreaks of COVID-19 are traced to the orders they will have given? And will “their people” defend them? Because that is precisely the scale of suffering careless governance and enforcement of ill-thought-out directives could cause at this critical time. The villager is expected to believe that this monolith cares for them and is doing its best to help them survive this pandemic. Except that we know this is bullshit. We know because the instructions the government is giving are already killing us even before the coronavirus does.

As the Kenyan government fights to contain the coronavirus pandemic, it might do well to broaden its gaze beyond the confines of Nairobi and other cities and towards the villages. As I mentioned earlier, that aspect of our identities and the identity of our cities that embodies this urban/rural duality of residence may have an important bearing on the way in which Kenya and other African countries deal with the pandemic. Those who fight will tell you that where you stand when you face your enemy, the ground you choose, is a critical strategic choice; it can mean life or death. So far, the government seems to have chosen to stay and fight in the cities—in these transitory spaces where the villagers are at a great disadvantage and the government is in almost complete control. Yet we know the enemy left the cities long ago, cases are already popping up out in the countryside.

It seems to me that the choice to wage the war from the cities, primarily Nairobi, is not a strategic choice for the government but rather, the only one. After decades of mismanagement and embezzlement, the country’s health system is weak and resources of the kind required to manage the crisis hopelessly inadequate and hopelessly centralised in the cities. The villages are defenceless. How do you choose where to fight from? If we are only as strong as our weakest link, it is time the government casts its eye towards the villages to begin public sensitisation campaigns, training of health personnel, recruitment of volunteers, and equipping the health facilities for containment. So far, its efforts have been feeble at best.

Travelling upcountry from Nairobi is eye-opening, and perhaps a little shocking. Social distancing is a vain hope outside Nairobi city. If the villagers are having trouble with social-distancing in Nairobi, that cosmopolitan space where travellers come from every affected land, upcountry villagers seem completely oblivious to the need for it, moving around and associating mostly without taking any precautions. It seems that outside the city, there is a belief that COVID-19 is still a faraway Nairobi thing, that if it is to come this way, there will be loud warning and ample time to take precautions

and change social habits. From the conductors at Kisumu's bustling terminus, shouting and calling, leaning their faces into the vehicle, to the hawker who came to hiss at my window, touting his wares, "Sweetsssss, creditsssss, power banksssss", and who recoiled when I hurriedly drew back, clicking his tongue before walking to the next window, they all seem oblivious to the dangers of coronavirus. I could imagine it, that evil bug, sitting on the tip of the hawker's tongue, jumping onto my face with every sibilant hiss. I'm not ashamed to say that I pulled out my little clear plastic bottle and sanitised my face.

As I write this, I'm on my third day of the recommended fourteen days of self-isolation. I came home via Kisumu, travelling in the same vehicle with two young women, cousins, both from the coast. I was sitting in front of them, pretending not to listen to their conversation. They too were running home to face the danger from the comfort of a loving place. The younger one, hair cut short, had been let go in a hurry by a boss who had promised to pay her wages before she travelled. Twice, she lied on the phone to him, asking the driver to turn off the radio and pretending that she was at the bus stop waiting for his cash transfer. He kept promising to pay. Between the calls, she narrated how two days before, she and her colleagues were laid off without warning, with the promise of payment within a day. She had nothing then, not a coin, and realised she would have to travel home immediately. She waited, but the pay didn't come. Broke and desperate, she approached an aunt living at the coast whom she had not visited in a long time to borrow the money for the fare. She narrated how her aunt had told her off for being a bad villager, not visiting until crisis struck. In the end, the aunt bought her a ticket to Nairobi where she received more help from family. She had spent every single coin she could get just covering the distance between her workplace in Mombasa, and the village. I couldn't help thinking that we were leaving behind millions like her, struggling to survive the untrustworthiness of a corrupt government, unscrupulous bosses, violent partners, the uncertainty of lockdown, and the brutality of curfew, without the financial means to make a different choice.

I am in my *simba* now. The only sounds I can hear are the chickens clucking outside, the wind whistling through the trees, the tap-tapping on the iron sheet roof, the cooing of a pair of turtledoves up a tall tree. No neighbours, no gunshots, no sirens, no breaking news on someone else's television making me anxious and tense. I left my house in the city after the curfew was announced and people were clobbered by police on the first night. I headed for the village as soon as I could. So I am home. I feel safe. I feel isolated. I am ready to face the coronavirus now, or just death. It is safer to wait, to fight from here, than in the city.

We must admit as villagers that we occupy the bottom rung in a classist society that is a colonial legacy and that our political elite rely on to continue enriching themselves at our expense. What are we going to do about it? And, more urgently, what are we going to do about the coronavirus? Because here at the bottom of the ladder, we are truly alone; everyone else, even the city's broken infrastructure, perhaps even the water we drink, is our enemy; the government that we call our own certainly is.

As citizens, villagers or not, we must admit that the great wall of state violence and unaccountability behind which our leaders have hidden for so long to misappropriate national resources and enrich themselves and their elite friends must fall. Even up in their ivory towers, the coronavirus now stalks. I can see it, sitting on a deputy governor's shoulder, on a statehouse security man's dirty hand as he opens the limousine door, I can see it waiting to meet the president, as it did the British prime minister.

Until the government proves otherwise with its actions, most of us city villagers are deeply vulnerable, not just to COVID-19, but also to a predictable oncoming wave of crime, hunger, and police brutality. Tragically, these are things we are used to, but the circumstances of this pandemic

beg the question: is there ever a scenario, however unique and coincidental, in which our government can enforce its directives without using brute force and callousness against us? Because we are facing an existential threat whose very presence in our midst was caused by political inaction and the ignorance of our leaders, because we are aware just how much the coronavirus pandemic is not our fault as African villagers, because we are being murdered on our doorsteps by our government just for trying to survive, we need to reevaluate our values and our political culture. If it doesn't kill us all, let us make sure that that wall of unaccountability crumbles in the dust forever and is never built again. These men and women occupy their positions because of us; we must demand that our lives come first. Not the economy, not whatever city, but our lives.

And so I came home despite the warnings, as I know many wise villagers did. But I didn't come to die here. I came to face death. I simply chose for myself where, like we may all have to if this situation worsens. After watching the last few weeks unfold and seeing the government's response, I could not trust it to choose for me, for it is clear, as it has always been, that my life is not the government's priority at all. For me the city was simply no place from which to face such a threat, not in the current state of its infrastructure, of its leadership. If death is unavoidable, the city is definitely not the place in which to die. Now my heart goes out to every villager still stuck in the city, so vulnerable and so far away from home, as death draws ever closer.

My decision is not without danger or personal sacrifice. It has been strange, almost surreal, the little things that must be done differently in order to keep us all safe now that I am still in self-isolation. Like not being able to hold my mother, not even her hand, after not seeing her for so long. Strange having to stay indoors as my nieces play outside, like some registered sex offender, when we have shared so much joy and laughter before. The gifts I brought them lie unpacked, on the edge of my bed. There is an old utensils rack that we have had since I was a child, now rusty and tilting to one side. It stands just outside my door all day, just inside all night. I put my clean plates there, on the top rack, and close the door. My sister heaps bread, nduma, ugali, rice and *ndengu*, whatever is in the hotpot tucked under her arm. We talk through the glass, or through the partly opened door. I am careful to face inwards. I take the food after she leaves. I am supposed to eat it all. I try. And behind the closed door, I think and I write. And we all wait.

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