Uncontaining Mobility: Lessons from COVID-19

2nd AMMODI (African Migration, Mobility and Displacement) Annual Keynote Lecture, 30 June 2022

Francis B Nyamnjoh
University of Cape Town
nyamnjoh@gmail.com; francis.nyamnjoh@uct.ac.za

https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v44i1.4149

Abstract

This keynote lecture argues that both the perpetrators of policed mobility and its victims can learn tremendous lessons from COVID-19's nimble-footedness, which humbles racialised technologies of containment and politics of redlining or something akin to it. The talk asserts that using technological gadgets that are very good at making it possible for us to be present in absence and absent in presence, strangers at various borders could borrow a leaf from COVID-19 on how to compress time and space in ways that enable even unwanted wayfarers to see, hear, smell, feel and touch virtually, thereby regaining freedom of movement by crossing borders undetected. The world as a whole could learn from resilient philosophies of kinship and solidarity in Africa to approach mobility in a more humane manner. Priority would be less on containment and more on accommodation of the stranger and freedom of movement.

Keywords: Mobility, Africa, COVID-19, Incompleteness, Borders, Kinship and Solidarity.

ISSN 1013-1108

1. Introduction

To what extent has COVID-19 taught those of us in positions of power and privilege to exercise greater accommodation of those we tend to dehumanise and immobilise or mobilise purely on our own terms? As borders and airports closed down in a bid to police the spread of COVID-19 reopen, what lessons in global solidarity and tolerance have we learnt? How generous to strangers, foreigners, migrants, and returning emigrants are we prepared to be, regardless of race, ethnicity, geography, class, gender, sexuality, culture, religion and related categories that inform our judgement, policies, decisions and practices about who belongs or not?

This talk explores some lessons that can be learnt from COVID-19 about mobility and the policing of mobility. The fact of a resilient racialised configuration of the world has meant that black and brown people have borne the brunt of coronavirus infections and deaths as well as the effects of radical containment measures by states. In its globalised nimble-footedness, COVID-19 opportunistically insinuated itself into intimacies by preying on sociality, comparative disadvantages, pre-existing precarities, and related physical frailties that feed from and into debilitating hierarchies of systemic inequality.

In its globetrotting ambitions of conquest, Europe has effectively employed and schooled its colonial subjects to internalise and reproduce hierarchies of race, ethnicity and geography to divide and conquer and to instil an exclusionary framework of being and belonging steeped in ever-diminishing circles of inclusion and legalities. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the fact of racial and ethnic hierarchies of humanity has meant that the Chinese and other East Asians were stereotyped and unfairly victimised as vectors at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic and Africans were in turn subjected to similar prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and physical and social distancing. "The scapegoating of migrants as the transporters of disease and economic woes" may have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was nothing new; countries have often chosen to play up the dangers and fear of strangers as a ploy to deny foreigners access to their native lands and resources and, by extension, to social visibility (Sichone 2022, 82). Countries that turn strangers (as well as contaminated insiders) away from their shores have no qualms about luring the same strangers (both offline and online) to cross consumer borders and embrace the plethora of consumer products on offer. Strangers are invited to consume and subsidise economies as long as they do so from a distance.

Zambian anthropologist Owen Sichone—who has researched extensively and written on African mobilities—reminds us that we will not have learnt the right lessons if, after two years of lockdown and the almost total grounding of international airlines, trains, trucks, and buses, we were to opt for a return to business as usual. Business as usual would entail "a return to mobility of goods and tourists, though not quite free movement of migrant workers, refugees and other undocumented migrants" (Sichone 2022, 74–75)—those whose mobility tends to be rendered invisible and marginalised by the oppressive structures of power and privilege at play (see Bjarnesen and Turner 2020). While the grounding of flights the world over saw aviation's CO2 emissions plummet by up to 60 % in 2020, it would be business as usual simply to return to flying the pre-pandemic way, missing out on the challenge to explore lower-carbon forms of transport, including the option of carbon-free planes or a world without planes (see Timperley 2022).

Sichone suggests that the rest of the world—Europe and the USA in particular, given the sustained ambitions of global dominance even as they make fortresses of themselves—could learn from resilient philosophies of kinship and solidarity in Africa to approach mobility in a more humane manner. Priority would be less on containment and more on accommodation of the stranger and freedom of movement. Such philosophies may not be shared by all, but the fact of their resilience speaks to their continued relevance. Granted that freedom of movement is actually illegal until papers are verified, to embrace or reactivate such resilient philosophies of flexible mobility and accommodation of strangers is a form of rebellion.

Another lesson we cannot afford to ignore is the fact that not everyone under COVID-19-induced shutdowns and lockdowns could afford the privilege or luxury of working remotely from home, assisted digitally by technologies such as the internet, the smartphone, and various applications and social media platforms that make it possible to be present while absent and absent while present. There were those whose very lives and livelihoods depended on being mobile and mobilised to render service.

COVID-19 has given us reason to radically rethink prevalent technologies of policing mobility that are heavily reliant on sensory perception and exclusionary logics of citizenship and belonging. Could those whose mobility and belonging continue to be negatively affected by such technologies and the hierarchies of humanity that legitimate them learn from COVID-19's capacity to be present in ways that defy the logic of containment and confinement? How could those whose physical mobility is confined or contained draw inspiration from what the past two years of COVID-

19-related lockdowns and physical and social distancing have taught us? How can we leverage digital technologies for more inclusion rather than exclusion? How can we actualise complementary and hybrid forms of mobility and presence in multiple places and spaces simultaneously? What lessons have we learnt from those whose vulnerabilities, precarities and itinerant livelihoods during the pandemic precluded or severely limited possibilities of physical and social distancing? What additional forms of policing mobility have come with the COVID-19 pandemic? How innovative and humane in mobility policies have states become as a result of lessons learnt from and under COVID-19?

These questions are of especial interest for Africans and in Africa, where histories of unequal encounters with an imperialistic, colonising, recklessly mobile and winner-takes-all Europe have ensured the institutionalisation and perfection of "absurd policing of mobility of the indigenous population" (Sichone 2022, 75), sometimes disingenuously justified by the colonialists "as a means of preserving African cultures" (Sichone 2022, 76) and curbing brain drain. It is worth bearing in mind that the policy of colonial administrators to control the physical mobility of the colonised usually went hand in hand with a policy to restrict their social mobility, even as the colonialists sought to justify colonialism with pretensions of being involved in a civilising mission (Sichone 2022, 78).

The idea of bringing enlightenment to a dark continent has had the effect of pulling, confining and containing Africa down an abyss of inhumanity perfected by Europe. To confine Africans to their villages or to the status of landless labour, the way Europe has since its imperial and colonial encounters with the continent, meant that Africans could only be mobilised as devalued labour within the harsh, racially-determined labour system instituted by treasure-hunting Europeans while reserving for whites the real prospects of finding greener pastures through the freedom of movement in the colonised territories.

It is in this sense that British treasure hunter Cecil John Rhodes, in his unchecked imperialism, "worked hard to colonise lands in Southern Africa where he could resettle his compatriots in order to ease the pressure on resources in the mother country" (Sichone 2022, 75–77). Rhodes would have countries like present-day Zambia and Zimbabwe named after him (Northern and Southern Rhodesia) as part of a process of unsettling the colonised natives by turning them into strangers and settling the colonisers by turning them into natives in terms of access to power, privilege and resources. Rhodes discovered the perks of turning the tables on the natives without the

encumbrance of having to go native in the anthropological sense of deep immersion, adoption of, and even conversion to the cultures of one's community of study as a result of prolonged participant observation. This situation sowed the seeds of the pandemics of landlessness, deprivation of material resources, and alienation that plague the region, where economic freedom is yet to catch up with hard-earned political liberation. The situation provides a historical background to the resilient colonialism that provoked the "Rhodes Must Fall" and "Fees Must Fall" student protest movements across South African universities in 2015 and 2016 (Nyamnjoh 2016).

Drawing on the concept of incompleteness and its ubiquity and universality as a framework, this talk calls for creativity and innovation in imagination and policy by exploring and harnessing interconnections and complementarities and de-emphasising confinement, containment and hierarchies of being, belonging and relationality that underpin exclusionary frameworks of identity and identification. The talk calls for conviviality through flexible mobility and flexible citizenship and belonging. Such models of flexibility can draw inspiration from nature, for example, the seasonal migration of birds globally or the annual great Serengeti wildebeest migration across the Tanzanian-Kenyan border. Or the annual mass migration of "tens to hundreds of millions of sardines from the warm-temperate waters of South Africa's south coast to the subtropical waters of the east coast, over a thousand kilometres away" (Teske et al. 2021), which migration is known as the KwaZulu-Natal sardine run. With reference to technologies of containment and facilitation, the talk encourages the need to bring the imperative to physically cross borders into sustained conversation with other modes of mobility in which to be seen, heard, felt, smelt and tasted even when physically and socially distanced are possibilities and currency.

2. Limits of Containing Mobility

Although we live in a world where, strictly and empirically speaking, incompleteness and mobility are regular and universal, we have been cultivated and schooled in the sustained pursuit of completeness through a stubborn and violent ambition to dominate and enshrine exclusionary games of belonging. "Freedom of movement, especially by people deemed to be less endowed economically, is perceived by those who consider themselves more economically gifted as potentially disastrous and thus needing to be contained at all costs and against all odds" (Nyamnjoh 2016, 14). Our zero-sum pretensions to being and belonging drive us to use hierarchies of ever-shifting

categories such as race, ethnicity, culture, place, class, gender, sexuality and age to imagine, impose and police borders between insiders and outsiders, us and them, home and away, the civilised and the profane, and humanity and nature. With scant regard for freedom of movement and the aspirations, lives and livelihoods of those we want to exclude, we do not hesitate to use barriers such as "Border walls and fortifications, armed police, and other devices … to keep certain people out." Not only does this amount to policing physical mobility, but it also stifles upward social mobility and "prolongs childlike dependency upon parents and the state charitable organisations" (Sichone 2022, 90–91). Due to such winner-takes-all ambitions of dominance or quest for supremacy, we create, contest and recreate the boundaries of visibility, prominence and privilege through our capacity to define and confine and contain in tune with the whims and caprices that animate us. In our mobility, we name and rename the unfamiliar to render them familiar, even when we may lack the power to enforce the names.

When COVID-19 emerged, it rapidly became evident the extent to which it could be argued to be no respecter of borders, be they physical, social, political or cultural. It may have been first identified in Wuhan, China, but COVID-19 rapidly proved, through its invisible nimbleness of feet and wings, that it was not only a Chinese or a Wuhan virus. Its giant compressor ambition was no respecter of walls and fortresses, real or imaginary. Even with a near-perfect fortress-like North Korea, which heavily polices the land borders it shares with South Korea and China, the authorities announced, in May 2022, albeit two years later than most other countries (its neighbours included), its first cases of COVID-19 deaths (*BBC News* 2022; Agence France Presse 2022). In general, COVID-19 spread at lightning speed, metamorphosing almost in the blink of an eye into a truly global crisis that required nothing short of a well-coordinated collective global response. In this regard, it is regrettable that whilst the virus has spread rapidly and spared no corner of the globe, public health responses have remained rather local and national. Though, to their credit, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and representatives of African Ministries of Health held regular virtual meetings to learn lessons across borders and coordinate efforts.

Purely national approaches buttress exclusion and its hierarchies of legitimation to the detriment of humanism. COVID-19 is only the latest in a series of global challenges that are simply much too big for any single nation-state (however giant its claims to sovereignty) or world region (however advanced) to resolve. That notwithstanding, the global response has been to use the logic of ever-diminishing circles of inclusion as a blunt policy instrument, almost as if to say, "we may all be afflicted by the pandemic,

but everyone for themselves!"

Even at the best of times, states are not always efficient at policing their borders. Although, in principle, the state can reach and bring everyone in its territory under its control, its resources and technologies of confinement and containment can be stretched by both those who crave genuine freedom and may move from where the state's presence is strong to where it is weaker and those who use digital and other technologies to subvert the state's surveillance capacity. The production and dissemination of spyware and malware in cyberspace could serve the state just as they can work against the state. At some border crossings, the technologies of containment are weakened by corruption and bribes (Nyamnjoh 2019).

Other ways of mitigating the control of the state include crossing borders into more accommodating situations or settling for the elusive grey (betwixt and between) zones. Without implying it is an easy option by any means, Sichone suggests "seeking refuge across state borders by those who insist that freedom of movement is freedom itself, mobility is freedom and to accept regulated movement and settlement marks the beginning of becoming captured dependent" (Sichone 2022, 78). Implicit in this argument is the premise that although it is in the nature of states to confine and contain, there is an element of relativity and degree that could be beneficial to people shopping between and across states for inspirational policies and practices on freedom of movement. Nimble-footed Africans who take incredible risks crossing the Sahara, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic to explore other opportunities are a good example in this regard.

In addition, research increasingly focusing on South-South migration, such as the work by the Migration for Development Equality (MIDEQ) hub, recently featured in a special issue of *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* (Crawley, Garba, and Nyamnjoh 2022), would suggest that there are more options on the menu for those determined to assert their right to freedom of movement. There is much to be gained in studying mobility in Africa in terms of popular resistance to the violence of the colonial state and its emphasis on narrow nationalism through confinement and containment. Ordinary Africans determined to cross borders even at the cost of losing their lives is a reminder of the Berlin Conference that resulted in the arbitrary partitioning of Africa, with scant regard to the need for congruence between polity and culture. It also speaks to Pan-Africanism as an inclusive aspirational project that takes incompleteness and mobility seriously and refuses the logic of confinement and containment that has served Europe's ambitions of global dominance. Above all, it

supports a logic of relationality that encourages taking seriously a world of crooked lines, in which to insist that the only mobility possible and acceptable is in straight lines is quite simply to seek to pass for reality an uncherished unilinear figment.

The paucity of imagination beyond the local and the national is contradicted by the capabilities of a virus that thrives on inequalities and a freedom of movement about which the overwhelming majority of the world's population can only fantasise. Due largely to its viral invisibility and insensitivity to various technologies of confinement and containment and regimes of detection, detention, and deportation, COVID-19 has proven, it could be argued, more aggressive at border crossings than capital, privileged forms of labour, the frequent flyer elite, consumerism, or any world religion has ever been. Like a cockroach meandering in the perforated luggage of an undocumented and underprivileged wayfarer at a heavily policed border crossing, COVID-19 has, with fascinating ease and deadening silence, demonstrated a debilitating ability to neutralise borders (physical, social, cultural, bodily, and ideological) that others hold in awe. Only digital technologies, in their current possibilities, come close in their capacity to cross borders and subvert the sovereignty of states in a remotely comparable way (see Nyamnjoh and Brudvig 2016).

There is nothing as frustrating for those whose power, privilege and supremacy depend on the meticulously choreographed production and articulation of borders as to be challenged by a stranger or an enemy whose mobility they cannot police. European colonialism across the world would hardly have been the outstanding (albeit astounding for the colonised) success it turned out to be for Europe had the colonial authorities not invented and imposed the concept of illegal migration on colonised peoples in order to nullify their freedom of movement and cheapen their labour. Colonialism would not have been possible had Europe accepted that "all human beings are equal and that they should be allowed to move and live freely" (Sichone 2022, 83). Simply by defining the colonised as lesser than human or not fully human, Europeans were able to write their relevance into the present and future of the colonised and to discipline and punish their colonial subjects with physical and social immobility and trickle-down munificence of little gift parcels of humanity and visibility. The triumph of colonialism was and remains for Europeans "to make a fortress of the geographies they inhabit" home and away through "the magic of visa control and deportation" and, if need be, by subcontracting and "paying other governments to keep the migrants away" from their borders (Sichone 2022, 75–76). "Founded upon supremacist ideologies, influx controls undermine international solidarity by keeping freedom of movement a privilege that

can be extended to the invited guests only" (Sichone 2022, 91).

Could the strangers at our borders borrow a leaf from COVID-19 on how to regain freedom of movement by crossing borders undetected? That would be something to explore, given how successfully COVID-19 has humbled states the world over and their propensity to resort to the blunt instrument of detection, detention and deportation in the bazaar of mobility to which many are called but few are chosen. Perhaps, the freedom of movement we seek could be achieved through resorting to hybrid modes of existence which have become part of everyday life under prolonged lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19. Increasingly, with the aid of digital technologies and their growing ubiquity, we have learnt to outsource to digital gadgets (smartphones, internet) and their multiple applications some of our requirements to be present in person. Some of these gadgets are very good at making it possible for us to be present in absence and absent in presence. We are able to compress time and space in ways that do not necessitate in-person presence. We can see, hear, feel and touch virtually, and even when we cannot smell, feel or touch in person, we can resort to archived memories of what it smelt and felt like in the past when we were physically present. Family and community members in the diaspora can attend weddings, birthdays, funerals and other social gatherings via Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and related technologies of virtual intimacies instead of travelling long distances that require repeated COVID-19 tests and risking quarantine, costly delays and prolonged stays in hotels.

While it is true that the category of people most affected by migration curbs is least likely to afford the gadgets needed to adopt hybrid modes of existence, it could be argued that the hybridity suggested does not have to operate at a common homogenous level and that solidarities and interdependencies across categories could facilitate and extend such possibilities of hybridity to include those who do not necessarily enjoy the same purchasing power. Put differently, one does not have to consume first-hand or first-rate to benefit from the possibilities of hybridity in cultures that privilege sociality and solidarity. What is more, many an ordinary African who believes in the Divine, the living dead, magic and/or *juju* would find lots of parallels between these traditional technologies of self-extension and self-activation and modern digital technologies such as the internet, the cell phone, the smartphone, AI and 5G (Nyamnjoh 2019).

If we could bring these technologies and the knowledge of combining them efficaciously that we have acquired under the COVID-19 pandemic, we would be in a better position to challenge states and their obsession with policing our freedom of movement. This is all the more the way to go, especially when we consider that

only a small global elite ever get to travel beyond their countries of birth and primary citizenship. International migration, despite the grossly disproportionate media attention it receives, especially in Europe and North America, amounts to less than 4% of the world's population. This means that if people move or are allowed to move, their mobility tends to be within the borders of the state (Sichone 2022, 75–76). Even then, the practice is for states to make it difficult for their own citizens to circulate freely. This is just as true of postcolonial states, which have uncritically reproduced the same colonial policies and administrative practices that subjected the mobility of the endogenous population to the whims and caprices of the colonial project and its labour expectations. In Africa, for example, "Police checkpoints and roadblocks constantly remind citizens that even mobility within national borders, which is their constitutional right, is only grudgingly tolerated by the postcolonial state", a situation that COVID-19-related regulations have only compounded (Sichone 2022, 88).

COVID-19 has mostly exacerbated the victimhood of vulnerable populations in and around big cities and often to the detriment of custom, as Leslie Bank and Nelly Sharpley argue with regard to urban-rural interconnections in livelihoods, culture and healthcare in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa (Bank and Sharpley 2022). Most people, forced to balance between saving lives and saving livelihoods, were thrust into a very precarious existence. In South Africa, doubly affected by colonialism and apartheid and one of the countries hardest hit by COVID-19 on the continent, women, especially those who live in townships and commute to forage for subsistence in the cities, have been particularly affected. Pumla Dineo Gqola observes that, while it is possible for employers to socially distance by working from home, "this does not extend to the women who clean their houses, who are not able to work away from the physical sites of their jobs. Working-class black women in domestic work and similar employment are obliged to travel long distances almost daily" (Gqola 2020).

To the homeless and the unemployed, working remotely from home has been as much an aspiration as the hope to survive the pandemic. Everyone has been challenged by the prolonged immobilisation during the pandemic, with many frustrated by the inability to give the dead a decent funeral, especially when this has involved having to travel across national and provincial borders to the hometown or home village of a deceased migrant who died away from home. Equally challenged have been people who earn their living by crossing borders on a regular basis and who have had, in some instances, to bear the brunt of rising anger among nationals frustrated with joblessness and the threat of hunger. Nationals tend to perceive foreigners, wrongly or rightly, as

taking advantage of scarce jobs and/or spreading COVID-19 and crime. Hence, far from radically disrupting established hierarchies of inequalities in livelihoods, COVID-19 has mostly preyed upon and, in many instances, exacerbated existing victimhood and vulnerabilities among populations whose confinement and containment predate the pandemic (Angu, Masiya, and Gustafsson 2022).

Within and between states, COVID-19 has exposed the limitations of humanity and belonging articulated narrowly around exclusion and a hierarchy of citizenship premised on ever-decreasing circles of inclusion. It has shown that when the chips are down, many a human community has opted rather to unravel than to rise to the challenge of kinship as a permanent work in progress. In this regard, we have come across something like a morally depleted version of the Skull in Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (Tutuola 1952). The Skull can only activate itself into The Complete Gentleman it desires to be by borrowing body parts from others and can only hang on to its borrowings by recognising its debt and indebtedness to its lenders. Not to recognise and service the debt is to insist on an autonomy of being and action that is quite simply illusory. It is to suspend ethics and morality when challenged to acknowledge the interconnections and independencies that make us who we are and that legitimate our claim to a shared humanity. It is to jeopardise community, society and sociality as a basis of the possible and the universal in our project to be human. It amounts to claiming completeness when challenged by the reality of mobility and encounters that make composite beings of us and demands nothing short of the humility of incompleteness. Debts like slavery reparations, genocidal wars, when repaid, will narrow the gap between haves and have-nots as they economically should, after which the upside-down worldview will be unsustainable.

Postcolonial Africa has not been in a hurry to question inherited colonial hierarchies of race and ethnicity. Nationalism has remained narrow and informed by ever-diminishing circles of inclusion. Minority clamour for recognition and representation is often countered by greater and sometimes aggressive reaffirmation of age-old exclusions informed by colonial registers of inequalities amongst the subjected. Studies are crystalising myriad accounts across the continent of how the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare these contradictions.

Here is an example from Senegal. How COVID-19 affected articulations of belonging and citizenship in Senegal gives us food for thought on kinship as a permanent work in progress, something not to be taken for granted. Kwame Onoma's research shows, in Senegal—where attitudes of ambivalence (celebration and vilification,

embraced and distanced) have long characterised relations with southern Europe-based emigrant Senegalese—that responses to COVID-19, in its early days especially, included the stigmatisation by a section of the population of return migrants as vectors of the disease and a desire to have such *Modou Modou* (as they are popularly known in Senegal) confined in Europe as the country grappled with how to contain the virus with quarantines, lockdowns and border closures (Onoma 2021). The *Modou Modou*, according to Onoma, are male Senegalese migrants who originate mostly from the centre-west region and from cities and who have usually "headed to Italy and Spain, and, more recently, the United States of America, China, and Latin American countries such as Brazil and Argentina" (Onoma 2021, 656). Their relative financial success, despite their hardships as migrants, is often reason for people back home "to bestow on them a privileged social standing at the expense of men who have not migrated" (Onoma 2021, 659). This situation attracts envy, intra-family tensions and the suspicion that "jealous people who had old scores to settle with these migrants were using COVID-19 to humble them and keep them away" (Onoma 2021, 660–661). Thus, "For some Senegalese COVID-19 related bans on commercial flights, border closures, lockdowns, and quarantines were akin to previously deployed maraboutic spells that curbed the disruptive influences of these migrants on their home communities by confining them to Spain and Italy" (Onoma 2021, 662). These migrants, in their nimble-footedness, yearn for flexible mobility, as they are desperate to get to Europe to make money and desperate to return to Senegal to regain status and humanity.

As Onoma argues, the *Modou Modou* were stigmatised despite the fact that such emigrants are a popular fascination and often celebrated as heroes in popular music and film and by their families, local communities, and the state. This is understandable because these migrants "often see their travel as voyages in search of employment and resources to invest in Senegal and eventually return home" (Onoma 2021, 656). So their belonging and citizenship as Senegalese were not in question, despite the stigmatisation as a health risk by some of their compatriots. What was in question was the perceived threat that their status as returning emigrants posed to the communities in the hometowns and home villages to which they were returning. As the reasoning went, to protect these communities, such returning emigrants ought to be kept at a distance even if their Senegalese citizenship and community membership were not in doubt. Those *Modou Modou* with work and residency permits regularly visit Senegal and "remit money to care for their families, renovate and build houses for them, provide public services in their communities, and invest in many sectors in the country" (Onoma 2021, 656). The

fact that Spain and Italy, where most of the *Modou Modou* are based, in those early days, were among the most COVID-19-afflicted countries globally only further fuelled the stigmatisation of those of them attempting to return to Senegal (Onoma 2021, 660).

Given that the spread and effects of COVID-19 in Africa were, relatively speaking (and surprisingly to many in the West), far less severe than its devastation in the West and elsewhere, it would be of interest to quantify the number of Europeans and North Americans that sought refuge in Africa during the pandemic. In view of the pandemic's capacity to problematise and endanger even taken-for-granted kin relationships, Onoma suggests that "Our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on social relations must go beyond narratives of rupture and transformation to tease out continuities and the complex intermeshing of multiple concerns that shape how people participate in, make sense of, and react to pandemic era changes" (Onoma 2021, 662).

Notwithstanding its homogenising and overly positive undertones of social dynamics in Africa, there is much to contemplate in Sichone's argument that "freedom of movement and equality" are core African values, and with them comes a commitment to extend hospitality to migrants and refugees on an equal basis, including their integration and assimilation. With incompleteness and mobility as universal attributes of being human, it is easy to understand the expectation, within communities where such a value system is held high, for strangers and refugees "to be welcomed and be allowed to find work and improve their skills as full members of the society" (Sichone 2022, 84). Hospitality to strangers should also be encouraged because "migrants are more likely to create wealth and jobs than to be parasites on the host society" (Sichone 2022, 89). Such gestures of humaneness based on kinship as an ideal should not imply a lack of awareness of the ever-present risks that come with reaching out to strangers. Rather, these gestures speak to the need to rise beyond the temptation to normalise hostility towards strangers (Sichone 2022, 84). In resilient solidarity ideologies in Africa, what is foremost concerning how strangers are treated is "kinship, not hierarchy or even security concerns" (Sichone 2022, 91). In other words, ubuntu and the humility of incompleteness are paramount, and taking the stranger in is integral to the enrichment we seek and is sought of us through encounters. After all, we know what we become when we normalise predation.

COVID-19 has also reminded us of the solidarity, sociality and humanity that we have been schooled by colonialism and capitalist relations of commodity exchange to ignore or to caricature. The realisation that one, as an individual or as a community, is only possible through the humanity of others is a core philosophy of personhood in

Africa and among Africans who can still exercise freedom of motion. Through the sociality and solidarity Africans crave and forge, there is an openness to strangers, visitors and outsiders that emphasises a shared humanity and the need to protect and promote it. COVID-19 reminds us of this. Notwithstanding its invisibility, COVID-19's mode of travel and privileged crucibles of self-propagation remain the human hunger for kinship, sociality, intimacy and ubuntu. In other words, COVID-19 depends on the human capacity to seek activation and potency through relationships with one another.

Our insistence on policies of physical and social distancing ought to be seen not as an excuse to turn strangers into enemies but rather to recognise and provide for our common humanity. Thus, far from using the COVID-19 pandemic as "a convenient reason for restricting movement by demanding vaccination visas and/or putting foreigners into quarantine centres", as has tended to be the case, acting in recognition of a common humanity should suggest otherwise. We need to realise "that we are in this together," regardless of race or status, and that "unless everyone is safe, nobody will be free from the threat of infection or re-infection by mutant variants, and even new viruses" (Sichone 2022, 83). These resilient forms of sociality and conviviality across Africa and beyond are not easy to unlearn or suspend, especially in densely populated places and spaces of poverty, vulnerability and precarities, where the most likely physical and social distancing possible is the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. We can ill-afford to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic in isolation from other pandemics such as prejudice and poverty. It could be argued that, in addition to rights and ideology, mobility, in some instances, is largely driven by poverty and inequality.

Thus, as Sichone argues, the world stands to benefit from a sustained reactivation and popularisation of resilient values of ubuntu, kinship and inclusive personhood. At the core of these values is hospitality as "caring for travellers and other strangers," not out of a profit motive but because of a duty to protect in kinship (Sichone 2022, 83–84). Such hospitality challenges us to embrace our incompleteness as individuals, communities, societies, nation-states, cultures and civilisations and explore inclusive frameworks of being and becoming in tune with the universality of mobility and enrichment that comes with encountering and interacting with incomplete others who may or may not be like us.

This resilient and popular hospitality challenges us to disabuse ourselves of superiority syndromes and the tendency to limit gift exchange "to the most intimate of relations" and treat gifts from strangers with "angry suspicion" (Sichone 2022, 89).

Without incompleteness, life and living would be impossible. In our self-acting and self-extending mobility, we must make ourselves available to be eaten as we are eating (Nyamnjoh 2018). Unlike "commodity exchange," which "turns strangers into enemies, slaves, refugees, stateless people, and even second class human beings who must wait for the leftover vaccines, surplus corn, egg powder, and sunflower oil only when the first class citizens of the world have had their fill," the kinship model of hospitality Sichone proposes prioritises "gift exchange," which "turns strangers into relatives" (Sichone 2022, 89–90) through an emphasis on inclusion, not exclusion. This "belief that all human beings are equal fits more neatly with ideologies of solidarity than supremacist notions that deem others as unfit to use the front door or even to enter the house or country that they have approached as migrants or refugees in search of safety" (Sichone 2022, 83–84). We need the prescience to open up to mobility as a necessary response to the permanence of incompleteness in motion. We are challenged to break ranks with ambitions of completeness through conquest, confinement and containment and to embrace the humility of incompleteness and the potential for conviviality that comes with mobility as something available to all and sundry in a universe perpetually on the move. And with mobility and encounters at the service of incompleteness comes debt and indebtedness.

References

Agence France Presse. 2022. "Kim Jong-Un Calls In the Army to Respond to North Korea's Covid-19 Crisis." *The Guardian*. 16 May. www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/16/kim-jong-un-calls-in-the-army-to-respond-to-north-koreas-covid-19-crisis.

Angu, P, T Masiya and K Gustafsson (eds). 2022. *South African-Based African Migrants' Responses to COVID-19: Strategies, Opportunities, Challenges and Implications*. Bamenda: Langaa.

Bank, L and N Sharpley. 2022. *Covid and Custom in Rural South Africa: Culture, Healthcare and the State*. London: Hurst & Company.

BBC News. 2022. "North Korea announces first death from Covid-19." *BBC News*. 13 May. www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61432084.

Bjarnesen, J and S Turner (eds). 2020. *Invisibility in African Displacements: From Structural Marginalization to Strategies of Avoidance*. London: Zed Books.

Crawley, H, F Garba and F Nyamnjoh (eds). 2022. "Special Issue on 'Migration and (In) Equality in the Global South: Intersections, Contestations and Possibilities."

In *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies*. www.mideq.org/en/impact/zanj-special-issue.

Gqola, PD. 2020. "On Movement, Human Rights and Covid-19." *New Frame*. 26 March. www.newframe.com/on-movement-human-rights-and-covid-19.

Nyamnjoh, FB. 2016. *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa*." Bamenda: Langaa.

Nyamnjoh, FB (ed). 2018. *Eating and Being Eaten: Cannibalism as Food for Thought*. Bamenda: Langaa.

Nyamnjoh, FB. 2019. "ICTs as Juju: African Inspiration for Understanding the Compositeness of Being Human Through Digital Technologies." *Journal of African Media Studies* 11 (3): 279–291.

Nyamnjoh, FB and I Brudvig (eds). 2016. *Mobilities, ICTs and Marginality in Africa: Comparative Perspectives*. Cape Town: HSRC.

Onoma, AK. 2021. "The Allure of Scapegoating Return Migrants During a Pandemic." *Medical Anthropology* 40 (7): 653–666.

Sichone, OB. 2022. "Mobility as Freedom, and Hospitality as Kinship: Reflections on the African Potentials for Using Solidarity to Manage Global Challenges." In *African Potentials: Bricolages, Incompleteness and Lifeness*, edited by I Ohta, FB Nyamnjoh and M Matsuda, 82. Bamenda: Langaa.

Teske, P, C van der Lingen, CD McQuaid and L Beheregaray. 2021. "South Africa's massive 'sardine run' leads fish into an ecological trap." *The Conversation*. 3 October. https://theconversation.com/south-africas-massive-sardine-run-leads-fish-into-an-ecological-trap-168413.

Timperley, J. 2022. "Aeroplanes are incredibly polluting, but could we ever live completely without them?" *BBC News*. 24 May. https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220519-what-if-we-all-stopped-flying.

Tutuola, A. 1952. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. London: Faber and Faber.