

African Culture and Covid-19 Pandemic: The Absurd Reality

OKOROAFOR Philomena Ayenoya

Dramatic Arts Department

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State Nigeria

08030401725

okoroaforphilomena@yahoo.com

Abstract

The sudden outbreak of the corona virus in the early 2020 led to the declaration of an emergency in the health sector worldwide. It paralyzed the economic, social, educational and religious activities. The origin was traced to Wuhan in China and gradually spreads its tentacles to the entire world; not exempting race or class. The nature of the virus rages like wild fire in dry bush. Research shows that it attacks the human lungs and entire respiratory system. It has also been shown that the survival rate is low, especially in the western part of the world, but the African /blacks have not recorded the death rate as compared to their white counterparts.

According to Pramath Kakodka (2020), there are many parameters of the clinical and management of the Covid-19 that need optimization. He explained that a hindrance to this development is the vast amount of misinformation.

This paper sets out to discuss the role of the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Nigerian traditional values amidst absurd reality. This is achieved using the absurdist theoretical frame work. The theory as propounded by Albert Camus (1913 -1960) expresses what happens when human existence lacks meaning or purpose, and there is a communication breakdown. The paper also articulates a 'disconnect' of the African man from his traditional values vis-a-vis the danger inherent. The result shows that the futuristic implication is a continuous degradation /deterioration of African traditional values and morals.

It is pertinent therefore to have a reconsideration of strategies to redeem the African traditional values and morals by incorporating such into curriculum of both lower and higher schools. (Allan: 2020)

Key words: Absurdity, reality, disconnect, values

Introduction

The Corona virus name is originated from Latin Corona, meaning crown or wreath (Tang and Wang: 2020) which itself is borrowed from Great Korone, which means garland or wreath. The corona is coined by June Almeida and David Tyrrel who first observed and studied human corona virus. The corona

word was first used in print in 1968 by an informed group of virologists in the *Nature Journal* to label the new virus family (Tang and Wang: 2020). The name refers to a characteristic appearance of virions by electron microscopy, which has a fringe of large, bulbous surface projections creating an image reminiscent of the solar corona or halo (Mbosowo et.al.:2020)

Corona Virus is a disease that is very infectious and deadly, caused by the SARS –Cov 2 virus. It is contagious and spreads easily. It can spread through contact with infected person's droplets, also by breathing in the virus while at a close range with infected person. It has also been established medically that touching contaminated surfaces is also an easy way of contracting the virus, through touching of eyes, nose or mouth. It is also of note to state that it thrives stronger in an enclosed or crowded area. The disease was first detected in Wuhan China in late 2019.

The name Covid-19 is derived from the name of corona virus disease and the year it broke out (2019). The nature of the virus is that it attacks the lungs and causes respiratory malfunctioning in human. Africa recorded its first case in Egypt on 14th February, 2020, while Nigeria recorded her first case on 27th of February, 2020.

The World Health Organization officially declared the Covid-19 as an epidemic and an emergency in line with Omoni: 2020 when he postulates that the outbreak of a disease can be declared a pandemic when the infectious disease can spread beyond geographical boundaries and leads to a high mortality rate. Since the outbreak of corona virus, the African continent has undergone different phases; from fear of the unknown through to choice of determination. This is so because since the outbreak, so many commercial activities had been grounded and lifestyle had been changed. Omoni: 2020 in his study observes that;

... a pandemic also affects the social, economic, and political dynamics of a region. The outbreak like COVID-19 that occurred earlier include severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). The corona virus disease 2019 is considered deadlier than other two viruses and has affected more people over a particular period as compared to the other two outbreaks. (Omoni: 2020 p9)

His study noted that there were 8,437 cases of SARS which broke out in 2002 and 2,499 cases of MERS. While COVID-19 in just a matter of time, has had explosive cases of more than 3million cases and is increasing. It is also reported that COVID-19 had, in five days of its emergence, surpassed the preceding pandemic records (Allan Smith: 2020 p.110)

In consonance with Allan: 2020 study, precedence shows that the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic has had a severe economic, social and global impact. Its dread shut the doors of so many activities and events such as worship centers, party houses, event arenas, stadia, etc. It

may not be out of place to say that it has caused some companies, industries even sole ownership ventures to shut down permanently. Restriction of movement and lockdown syndrome negatively affected the economy and other spheres of the world. Every activity was grounded, not only in Africa, but the whole world. This lingered on for months in Nigeria before a gradual relief of curfew was introduced. Even with the relaxation of the curfew, there was emphasis on restriction of movement, use of face masks and washing or sanitizing of hands. Despite strict restrictions, the virus still wax stronger by the day. Its presence in the country caused havoc that left prints in the history of the nation. This includes death of many people including some prominent individuals. With that, it would not be despicable to say that the virus is indifferent to power or class. This study therefore appraises some of the modalities put in place by The World Health Organization, to contain and curtail the virus, and to analyse the 'disconnect' those modalities have created in the existence of the African man with his traditional values. These include quarantining, social distancing and use of nose mask.

Effect of Covid-19 Protocols on the African Culture/Traditional values

Africa is a unique continent due to its diversity in culture and traditional values. These vary from country to country. Even within the same country, the richness of culture is domiciled in individual ethnic group. The cultural/traditional values cannot be swept aside as they are laid down practices from generation to generation. These include such practices as songs, folktales, art, and general way of living (food, dressing, entertainment etc). Most importantly, many of these songs have their words and meanings derived from stories of myth or tales about the existence of the village, clan or city, more still, events or actions that took place in the olden days for instance, the Yoruba songs like "Moremi Ajasoro", "Yoruba Ronu", and so many others. Storytelling, Songs and display of different types of Masquerades are integral part of African cultural and traditional values. Analyzing the importance of songs and folktales in the history of the African man, Akporobaro states that;

Folktales and songs continue to persist and have their memorable nature and moralistic interest. Even though some may appear to be immoral or antisocial in nature, they can still be seen to be a source of moral and humanistic value. (Akporobaro: 2004 p. 71)

Other traditional forms of entertainment include dancing and Masquerading. The Yoruba setting of the Western Nigeria is also known for different types of masquerades, embodying different spirits. The Egungun festival is not new in the history of African traditional history. In Uzairue of Edo State, there are different types and categories of masquerades and dances, depending on the festival or occasion. The masquerades that parade at the demise of an elder who held a prominent position before passing on are called *Ikphe Nekwha*. Also dances like '*Pirori*', '*Okha Ukpuke*', etc. There are so many masquerades that feature at different occasions such as initiation into manhood, new yam festivals, and other notable traditional festivals.

However, since the emergence of the Covid-19, all the social activities that feature masquerades have been suspended because of the fear of contracting the deadly Covid-19. People cannot cluster or stay in group again. Unfortunately, the African arena for performance is always circular; where the people are gathered round the action. This development has negatively affected the African entertainment sector. And if care is not taken, they may die naturally. Remembering when we were growing up, in the cool evening especially when the moon is bright, our grandma normally told us stories and children from the neighborhood would join. That would always make all growing children who had interest to finish their house chores early to be able to join as sometimes, those stories may be told in series. In other words, it also served as morale booster to children. Unfortunately, with coronavirus, children cannot sit together again, even in classrooms, they are arranged to sit some meters away from each other. This has also created a great “disconnect” among children. The things that are sources of bonding no longer exist or practiced as a result of social distancing. The usual family visitations have also been affected as families are now restricted to their homes. Stressing the importance embedded in the function of folklore, Bascom: (1965) explains thus;

The mythological system of a people is often their educational system and the children who sit listening to an evening tale are imbibing traditional knowledge and attitudes no less than the row of sixth

Most importantly, folktales and myth are strong traditional sources where moral values are inculcated in young children; even youth grow to imbibe most moral lessons which they have learnt in group or individually.

Another preventive measure that has been noted to negatively impact people is the use of nose mask. In recent time, some miscreants hide under the use of nose mask to carry out unimaginable acts. And when such actions are carried out, they are not easily identified. It is also important to note that since the emergence of Covid-19, more youths have engaged themselves in criminal activities such as rape, stealing etc. Before the outbreak of the virus, anyone seen wearing a mask in whatever form would attract attention, because such person would be an instant suspect. But as a result of the Covid-19 protocol, everybody is expected to wear the nose mask. It therefore creates easy avenue for people with bad intention to carry out their action.

Covid-19 Pandemic and the Absurd reality

The absurd refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent meaning in life and the silent answer of the universe in which a harsh truth arises, that is, there is no inherent meaning in life

Since the emergence of corona virus, there has been a limit to how people relate socially. It is noted that measures were put in place to curtail and contain the spread of this disease, this is very commendable. It is a way to prevent the spread of the virus. But the fact remains that there are some of these measures which this study marks as threat to the African cultural and traditional values. Social distancing and masking are alien terminologies in the African setting. Social distancing method also include quarantines; travel restrictions, closing down of malls, schools, entertainment centers not exempting worship centers (churches and mosques), and the use of nose mask. The African setting is peculiarly known for communal living. The Hausa people of the Northern Nigeria, prior to the insurgence have enjoyed a life of peace, and very cheap and affordable lifestyle. A normal Hausa man will extend so much love to a fellow counterpart just because he can speak Hausa. They live in groups, feed in group and are always ready to render a helping hand at no cost. This peculiar lifestyle can be noticed in every Hausa setting in every state where they settle. In a nutshell, they live in settlements. This is as a result of display of love gained from everyday interaction amongst people of the same setting. This is also a resultant factor to having Hausa quarters in almost every state of the country. These quarters are referred to as *Angwa Hausawa*. They freely share everything in common, believing that everything come from God. The Yoruba of the West and the Ibo of the East of Nigeria respectively, also in their own ways have their lifestyle identities which are also tailored towards a peaceful coexistence of a people with common goal. With the emergence of Covid-19, People are forced to stay apart with the introduction of social distancing. Social distancing as defined is the practice of maintaining a greater than usual physical distance from other people. Though social distancing is a measure put in place to treat the ravaging covid-19, it has also caused a negative impact on the nation. One may wonder how social distancing is discussed in relation to the present situation of the country. It is imperative to note the saying which states that "idleness is the devil's workshop". When people are made to stay separated from each other, the love bond which existed gradually fades. Everyone is forced to live a lifestyle which is alien to the African man and this lifestyle accommodates so many negative things. This has resulted to the rise in heinous crimes in Nigeria. There is a total disconnect from the cultural and traditional values. Absurd and unimaginable things have replaced virtuous values which existed from time immemorial. A few of these disheartening incidences include the gross increase of ritual killings, kidnapping, illicit drugs, robbery, rape (even on minors) etc. Recently, there were trending photographs of young boys between the ages of 14 and 16 years old who fled to Benin, because they want to learn how to engage in internet fraud popularly called "yahoo yahoo". Also, about three (3) secondary school girls were paraded for suspicious of planning to kill another girl because they needed her head for money ritual. However, all the mentioned instances are just to buttress the increase in vanity which man pursues, and the result of the 'disconnect' (loss of affection and love) created by the human separation of Covid-19 protocol. In recent time, tracing back to the Covid-19 emergence, more cases of rape, ritual killing and armed robbery have been at an alarming rate. The youth have taken to so many unspeakable acts. Human Right groups have cried out to government for

intervention. The Committee for Defense of Human Right (CDHR), as reported by Punch Newspaper (23rd Feb., 2022), Ogun State Chapter staged a protest over what it called incessant occurrence of ritual killings. According to them;

These are crimes against humanity. These are crimes that we all must act against. ... we call on critical stake holders to act now, put things at the necessary measures that will curtail excesses in our society so that right to lives of the people will not be deprived of them.

Right to life is a fundamental right of the people. It is germane to the survival of any nation, economic growth, and even our peaceful coexistence (<https://punchng.com>)

The 'disconnect' created by social distancing, quarantine, and total lockdown has further intensified disunity, dishonesty, insecurity and inhumanity in the Nigerian society. The entire land is purged with insecurity, blood-shed etc. This leads to the question where lies the human heart? Where is the love we share? Estrangement which is alien to African lifestyle has replaced the memorable communal lifestyle. Every household to itself, as boarders are closed, so also are doors of individual houses closed for the fear of the deadly virus, thereby creating room for alienation and disregard for humanity. No one to be trusted. Everybody becomes a suspect or a potential Covid-19 carrier. This has created a vacuum in the social, economic, and religious life of people. The closure of religious houses has further increased degeneration in the manner in which some people perceive God. Because the constant preaching of God's words has reduced, the fear of God begins to diminish.

The paper therefore states categorically that, even though Covid-19 safety measures are necessary, the side effect on traditional values is very devastating. The absurdity is that, the African cultural and traditional values continue to struggle against unforeseen forces. As Camus presents a man in *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) who continuously pushes a boulder up the mountain, only to set it roll down again, so is the struggle for survival of the cultural and traditional values.

Harnessing the nexus of Covid-19 preventive protocol and the Unemhe people of Edo and the Osu caste of the Ibo

Covid-19 has not been the first pandemic that has struck in Africa as well as the world entirely. Pandemics and plagues like HIV, Cholera, bird flu e.t.c. have at one time or the other broken out. Research had it that some of these pandemics like HIV have claimed over 32million lives since 1980 (Ngewman: 2020). In cases of outbreak of any pandemic in recent time, it's a common practice to separate the affected victims from the other people. This can be likened to the banishment of people in the olden days when victims are sent to the evil forest. This practice also has traces to the Unemhe people of Edo who were cursed by His Royal Highness, Oba

Egbeka (1370) as a result of incessant war and attacks on neighboring villages. They were banned from buying and selling, or relating in whatever form with people of Edo. They were sent out to settle in another location. Same can be related to the Osu caste of the Ibo in Eastern Nigeria. While these sets of people were sent to isolation places, they were able to reason and settled into either farming, fishing, art and craft, blacksmithing, weaving and so many things to sustain their living. Though banished, they also contributed to the economic status of the nation. In fact, with time they became owners of their settlements. Relating this to the present act of quarantining, it is pertinent to state that the government may not have had foresight of creating avenue for isolated victims of Covid-19 to engage themselves in one activity or the other to be able to sustain their living. The Western countries were capable to sustain their victims. They were able to provide food, medical attention and comfort zone for them. Unlike most African countries that went as far as embarking on lockdown without prior plans for the citizens. While the little efforts made to provide relief, materials became futile when many of such relief materials were locked up in several warehouses.

It is pertinent to state that the act of quarantine is the most devastating deal. The victim is isolated from everybody, and is placed in confinement. Even medical advisers advised that it may result to psychological depression which may result in mental torture. The Dictionary defines it as “the feeling that you have no connection with the people around you or that you are not part of a group”.

Conclusion and recommendation

From the discourse it is established that the outbreak of Covid-19, necessitated the preventive measures which despite the importance, there are some established reasons which indicate that they also have negative impact on the African culture and traditional values. It is also noted that some of the preventive measures could have been looked into in the African way instead of adopting the Western pattern hook, line and sinker. Since the African government is not buoyant as his Western counterpart to implement certain protocols, such as complete lockdown or poorly quarantining of affected victims, other means could be introduced in order to make the procedures implementable. Though the African countries are not as badly hit like the Western countries, this has generated some arguments among some people that the pandemic was a scam; the government is using the pandemic to generate money from the World Bank, that the pandemic was just a flu which is not strange to Africa, and so many unimaginable propagandas. This erroneous propaganda could be seen as absurd. This absurd thinking is also translated into the introduction of the Covid-19 vaccine. Many people refused to be vaccinated believing that the vaccine was a way to eradicate the black race, or implanting of chip into the human system. It is however noted that as a result of all the erroneous beliefs, people in the recent time do not observe the so-called Covid-19 safety protocols. In a nutshell, people have decided to exercise their freedom of choice. A choice to overlook the dreaded coronavirus, and

continue with normal lifestyle. However though free, the consequence is that man puts his life at risk.

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