

COVID-19, VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN AFRICA: A CALL TO AWAKEN AFRICAN MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract

Covid -19 pandemic is a very harsh experience to the world at large and Africa in particular. The strategies to prevent it are at the same time uncomfortable for all and sundry. This harsh experience and falsehood on the part of some agents to distribute relief materials and support from higher and more advanced countries and wealthy institutions, bodies and individuals have made people in different parts of the continent to demonstrate and destroy lives and properties. Based on this finding, the study advocates for the need for Africans to awaken their moral consciousness the way their forebears did in the distant past. It recommends that African studies that can add value to the moral psyche of upcoming African leaders should be made compulsory in both secondary and tertiary institutions. Religious bodies and few academic departments should not be left alone in course of embarking on house-to-house teachings of moral education especially when the Covid-19 problem must

have gone. The research introduces historical and hermeneutical research method. Data were gotten from both primary and secondary sources. Data generated were analyzed with phenomenological method of data analysis.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Moral Consciousness, Violence, Social, Inequality, Africa*

Introduction

COVID-19 in the world cannot be analyzed in some hesitation or rush. It is a pandemic that feeds all and sundry with direct experience. No one should discuss the menace with doubt. Facts on the ground are for sure direct actions and effects. More so, it is an experience that demands for some relaxation and articulation if one would narrate the herald without omitting the most relevant information on the importance of the lessons from the outburst of COVID-19.

Nevertheless, COVID-19 catastrophic experience had prompted the governments at international, national, state and local levels to support the masses, the world and less privileged individuals in different ways. Agencies, cooperate bodies, richer individuals also threw their supports. These assistance were coming on the ground that there was global lockdown on human activities which necessitated economic incapacitation in the world. Therefore, those who depended heavily on daily businesses to earn their daily living never found it easy to cope with life. In the midst of all these challenges and supports, it was also discovered in this paper that some African countries have failed in considering the plight of their fellow brothers and sisters. Such people saw the supports provided for the Citizens as an opportunity to enrich their treasury. Some saw it as an opportunity to at least hoard/loot enough food for the sustainability of their family's source of feeding. Mrs. Nneka Nwoye Iriemene (personal communication, 17 April, 2020) said that in her community, in Anambra State, some rich persons provided palliatives for the poorer masses in the community, some of who dwell in the rural villages at the movement, but people assigned to share these relief materials

seem to have failed to distribute the palliative equitably. The case here is not that supports given were not shared or disbursed at all. But the issue is that more than half of what was offered to the populace was withheld by people in charge of sharing

In Nigeria, so many were not aware that certain people in political power were given COVID-19 support funds in form of loan to disburse. Members of the National Assembly were said to have received such funds/financial assistance for the citizens of Nigeria in their respective constituencies, but the real poor people were not given that money. Hon. Chijioke Kingsley (personal communication, 11 September, 2020) explained that he was directly called by the House of Representatives' member, representing his Federal Constituency, who is a People Democratic Party member, called him few days back to send his account details so that he can remit COVID-19 loan to him. According to Hon. Chijoke, he said that in less than an hour he sent his account details, he just received ₦500,000 (Five Hundred Thousand Naira) alert. We can see that both politicians and other masses on the streets have lost their moral consciousness. This beneficiary of the ₦500,000 (Five Hundred Thousand naira) Palliative/loan was seriously involved in the P.D.P. (People's Democratic Party) campaign for the election of this House of Representative Member's election in 2019. At this level, it could be observed that politicians used such funds to recognize their party and political allies at the expense of the entire members or electorate of their electoral constituencies. For other individuals, their interest is on securing food and resources for the survival of their immediate families. This act contributed to people's annoyance to embarking on violence. In so many rural settings in Nigeria for example, there were personal and group fights mostly at the point or spot where those palliatives were shared. Mr. Mathew Ilo (personal communication, 14 August, 2020) complains that his share of the COVID19 palliative given to their community by a Philanthropist was taken back from him by leader of the group he sent to share it. According to him Mathew, he fought the leader in charge of the sharing collected part of his share of the palliative shared at the spot, and that he will commit the man to their village deity unless he gives him the remaining part.

African's should be mindful of social inequality in dealing with people. All fingers are not equal. This problem of not recognizing social inequality among Africans has been found in this study as a factor that always trigger violence especially during the upsurge of COVID19 pandemic Civil Society Organization on the response to COVID19 pandemic in Nigeria, 2020: 9) laments that:

The enforcement of the lockdown has led to breakdown of law and social order in some states (especially those on lockdown), as characterized by human rights abuses, extra judicial killings (such as that of the young man, Ifeanyi Arunsi, killed in Ehem Ohafia area of Abia State on 17th April), and assaults (such as that of Ms. Tola Azeez who was beaten at Odo ori market, Osun state on 18th April). Also, there have been reports of extortions and collection of bribes to break the lockdown or curfews, thus endangering people's lives through the continued spread of the disease. The troubling trend armed robbery, gang violence threats and Harassments of people especially in Lagos State and the F.C.T has led some members of different communities to form adhoc vigilante groups as a measure to protect themselves, their families, and members of their community, which, if not controlled, may lead to reprisal attacks, tilting towards more violence.

With what this body is saying here, there are situations and scenes that showed that COVID-19 pandemic caused violence in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular.

In all, the study observes lack of moral consciousness among African as a serious problem combating fairness in the people's lives. It therefore, aims at awaking the African people's moral consciousness for fairness in every facet of their wellbeing. The research adopts historical and hermeneutical research approach primary and secondary sources of data collections were utilized. Data gotten were analyzed with phenomenological method of data analysis. It finally recommends among other things that African studies that can add value to the moral knowledge of the growing African leader should be made mandatory in secondary and tertiary academic institutions.

Conceptualization of Terms

The concepts designed for definitions and explanations are COVID19, Africa, moral consciousness, violence and social inequality. World health organization (2020) admits that COVID–19 is the name given by the world health organization (WHO) on February 11, 2020 for the disease caused by the novel corona virus SARS–COV2. It started in Wuhan, China in late 2019 and has since spread worldwide. COVID-19 is an acronym that stands for corona virus disease of 2019. Historically, according to WHO, on December 31, 2019, a strange new pneumonia of unknown cause was reported to the Chinese WHO country office. A cluster of these cases originally appeared in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei province in China. The infection were found to be caused by new corona virus which assumed the name “2019 novel corona virus” (2019 – COVID). It was later given another name “severe” acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2” or SARS – COV2 by the International Committee on taxonomy of viruses on February 11, 2020. It was renamed SARS – COV2 because the virus is a genetic cousin of the corona virus which caused the SARS outbreak in the year 2002 (SARS – COV). The unofficial name for the virus is COVID 19 virus. In fact World Health Organization and its embodied International Committee on Taxonomy of virus have provided every information needed in this study to elaborate on the meaning, origin and nature or characteristics of this virus disease.

According to Macdonald, (2019: 1-2) Africa is discussed thus:

The word “Africa” is an evocative one that conjures up different images for different people for some, it’s an irony – tusked elephant standing before the snow – capped peaks of Mount Kilimanjaro: For others, it is a mirage shimmering on the horizon of the Avid Sahara Desert. It’s also a powerful word – one that speaks of adventure and exploration, corruption and poverty, freedom and mystery. For 1.2 billion people, the word “Africa” is also synonymous with the word “home” but where does it come from? No one knows for sure, but in this article, we take a look at a few of the most likely theories.

The major theory that has given classical explanation to the origin of “Africa” is the Roman theory MacDonald (2019:3) continues thus: “some believe that the word “Africa” came from the Romans, who named the land they discovered on the opposite side of the Mediterranean after a Berber tribe living in the cartage area (now modern – day Tunisia).

Different versions from different sources on the origin of Afri and its name. But it is worthy to note that the most popular is Africa. More so, it is thought that the Romans called the region Afri – Terra, meaning “the Land of the Afri”. Later, the idea would have been taken to become contracted to form the single word ”Africa”. In a different version, some historians suggest that the suffix “-ica” could also have been used to mean “the land of the Afri”, In which the same way that the Celtica, which is a Zon of modern or present day France was named after the Celtae or Celts that lived in the territory. Invariably it could also be taken that there is the possibility that the name was at the same time a misinterpretation of the Berber’s own name for the place where they lived. The Berber’s word Afri means of the cave, and could also be referred to as the place of the cave dwellers. The point and fact very glaring here is that the name Africa has been in existence since the Roman era, even though it could initially be referred to as North Africa only.

There are other theories that try to examine the meaning, origin and the people of the continent known today as “Africa”. Historians have propounded the Phoenician Theory, the Weather Theory, the African Theory, and the Geographical Theory. All these theories are targeted towards providing concrete and elaborate information on the people and their geographical setting. The continent is very vast in ethnicity, race, geography, culture and religion.

Moral consciousness on the other side of the coin is a combination of two words which include: morality and consciousness. Morality according to Emmanuel Kant in Agha (2003:39), he posits that:

The autonomy of the will is that property by which will is a law unto itself, independent of any property of the subjects of

volition. He went on to say that the principal of autonomy is: “always so to choose that in the same act of willing the maxims of this choice are formulated as a general law ... It stands to reason therefore that by mere analysis of the concepts of morality we became aware are that the principle of autonomy is the main principle of morals.

The points Agha and Kant are making in this context is that morality involves the principle of autonomy of the will or willing. By this, it means that the actor chooses what he wills. Titus (1957:181) postulates thus: “What actions constitute standard of moral judgment to which human conduct must conform so as to be regarded as right or wrong? In the general sense, the word right implies conformity to custom, law, conscience and some external authority”. The fact that arouses the interest of this paper as it concerns morality is the consideration of human act as it affects right or wrong in conformity with law, custom and most importantly conscience. The major basis of moral judgment is conscience.

Consciousness has been defined by Summers (2001:285) as: “The condition of being awake and able to understand what is happening around you; your mind and your thoughts ...” Summers has more meaning attached to consciousness but the one stated here protects the interest of the study. The idea of what one has in mind and though and the ability to awake and understand what happens around someone summarizes the word consciousness.

It appears that morality is lying inactive in the minds and thoughts of Africans. Therefore, the research finds essence to awaken that moral awareness in Africans’ minds and thoughts.

Violence is another term that requires clarification. Jacquin (2005) defines violence as an act of physical force that cause or is intended to cause harm. The damage inflicted by violence may be physical, psychological or both. Violence may be distinguished from aggression, a more general type of hostile behaviour that may be physical, verbal, or passive in nature. Jacquin gives a very wide coverage of the meaning of violence. Violence in her definition connects to harm and damage/destruction. COVID-19 issues in Africa

caused some injuries and took lives of African people in areas where violence was instigated.

Social inequality according to a sociologist Mr. Eze Wilfred Ugwu (Personal Communication, 14th November, 2019) has to do with the state or condition where everyone in a specific environment or society do not have equal status in terms of knowledge, material wealth, contacts etc. In Africa, people are placed both at higher and low cadres in different spheres of evaluations. The work reflects on the relationships between individuals of unequal status that motivated violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Areas of Violence: Causes and Implications among People of Different Social Status in Africa During COVID-19 Pandemic

In Africa, some countries are economically richer than the other. The same inequality is applied to lower units in African continent. Individual human beings are also of similar differences. Ordinarily, it is expected that the mindset of a poor individual in most un-conducive periods in life, generates anger. An adage simply states that a hungry man is an angry man. The rich at the same time is expected to always understand the plight of the poor amongst them in any given society and consider them most during harsh periods. But there seems to be a disconnection in application of this two dimension of understanding among these two groups that always metamorphose into violence. This disconnection was obvious in Africa during COVID-19 menace.

In Lagos there was demonstration by the wives of Lagos State Electric Distribution Company. In Kano State a similar scenario took place. Most of these anti-COVID-19 guide adherents in Nigeria perceived it as a disease for the elite rich and politicians. Nwaubani (2020:2) reflects that: “many Nigerian’s gloat that COVID-19 is mainly targeting the country’s elites, especially politicians, despite warnings that the life- threatening respiratory illness could hit the poor as well. The Nigeria Centre for Disease control has recorded more than 600 cases since end of February, most of them people who had been abroad, and those they had interacted with.” The point here is

that the higher in class who can afford to travel abroad can contact and get affected. Violence against the authority is not a solution.

According to Chiara, et al (2015:1) summarizes social inequality thus:

As distinct from income or wealth inequality is currently poorly understood and at best, unevenly measured. We conceptualize social inequality as the relative position of individuals along a number of dimensions that measure achieved outcomes and, innovatively, expectations about future outcomes. Using data from 12 Central and Eastern European countries, we find that cross national patterns of social inequality differ significantly from patterns derived from income inequality measures. Moreover, our measure of social inequality is much better correlated than income inequality with other country differences such as higher levels of economic performance and human development and stronger political institutions.

What Chiara Binelli, Mathew Loveless and Stephen Whitefield are saying are not far from the view of Mr. Wilfred Ugwu. The specific fact in Chiara B et al is that the social inequality on both current and expected income, human development and political sphere of life should be considered. When these ideas cut across Europe, Africa and so on, they seem to mutually marry.

During the ENDSARS protest in Nigeria, there were increased violence in different parts of Nigeria on the discovering of locked or looted palliatives. Examples are Plateau and Lagos States. In Lagos, Kojo (2020:1) laments thus: “And now a warehouse full of COVID-19 medication and food has joined the list of unfortunate victim of this situation. Some thugs discovered and broke into the warehouse, stealing and making away with all the content in the Monkey Village of Maza Maza Lagos.



Looted COVID-19 palliatives in Lagos State discovered

In Plateau State, Sahara Reporters write that, “Acting on a tip-off, it was learnt that the hoodlums stormed the warehouse said top belonging to the state Emergency/Management Agency and pulled down the doors before carting away the palliatives. The discovering and carting of suspected looted palliatives during the ENDSARS protest was witnessed in other states like Ondo, Kaduna, Cross River etc.



Looted COVID-19 palliatives in Plateau State discovered

In this research, there are factors that are projected as the possible causes of violence between the elites and common masses, the rich, politicians and poor in Africa During COVID-19 pandemic. They include: misconception of migration opportunities influence of immoralities and negligence of human right in the continent, degradation of Africa traditional values, poverty and futuristic anxiety.

Firstly, most Africans misconceive their migration opportunity. Traveling from one part of the world to another appears to be perceived as an opportunity to arrogantly express unnecessary distinction between one another. Some who can travel to Europe, America, Asia e.t.c. feel they have acquired economic, health, and social safety. Those that succeed in gaining political power at a higher ranking use migration opportunities as an avenue to siphon/embezzle public funds and remit them to their independent personal bank account overseas. Those on legitimate enterprises embarking on trade of international commodities or products. Some established pockets of industries abroad. All these negatively affect Africa people's local contents. Okafor (2019: 95) concurs to this when he asserts that:

It is not surprising, that in all these enviable developments, Africans are still negatively affected economically. African countries appear to have failed to take advantage of this migrant interaction. So many aspects of the traditional economy of Africans were discouraged to be developed. European and other countries within America and Asia will come; extract raw materials and go back home for production. Any means of making Africans produce marketable products by Africans are discouraged by both migrants and Africans. Africa has become more interested in trade than production. However, African environment has been prepared as dumping ground irrespective of the scope of any international or world policy on business or commerce.

If majority of African migrants had planned to attract raw material and other resources far and wide, to industrialize African nations, it will go a very long way to make Africans develop interest in building Africa in divergent capacities. When wealth circulates reasonably, foreigners will be interested in Africa. Politicians will be discouraged from looting pieces of wealth or items in their custody. Travelling outside Africa will not be a source of arrogance and so on. But because this migration misconception exists, gains of migration are lost, people continue to mismanage unforeseen situation like that of COVID19 embarking on looting in such condition because they have

international hideouts to hide the looted resources, et cetera. This provokes the anger of independent countries citizens. This anger, unfortunately results to violence between low and high cadre personalities in the continent.

Secondly, influence of immoralities and negligence of human rights in Africa is also a contributory factor. Immoralities are a common place in Africa. There are illegal killings, stealing in indifferent forms, cheating of many kinds etc. Most of these immoral actions involve violation of human right in different African countries for example Okwueze and Kanu (2003 : 28) assert that:

Right to life and security of persons is universally recognized. To this end, section 33 of the 1999 Nigeria constitution states: Every person has right to life, and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life... The history of deprivation of life in Nigeria started on a large scale with violence in Western Nigeria after 1964 /65 elections. Many people lost their lives at that time. This helped to invite the military on the Nigerian political scene, an act that led to further abuse of rights to life in the country.

We can see that in the world all over, every man has the right to life. Okwueze and Kanu have examined the Nigerian experience. As it is to Nigeria, so it is to other African countries. There are also so many other human rights violated in Africa. These violated are mostly caused by immoralities in the lives of Africans. During the COVID-19 observations and rules, countries like South Africa experience violation of right to life, where a lady was arrested for going to buy drugs for her sick child, in a neighboring pharmaceutical store. In Rivanda, Soldiers on duty raped girls. These are violent acts that could trigger further violence response in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and rules.

Thirdly, degeneration of African traditional values contributes to the menace. Mr. Geoffrey Nwafor Okafor (personal communication, 20 May, 2020) explains that during the COVID-19 lockdown, elders and title holders in his community were met by some government delegates to help and organize the community members for maintenance of order and strict observation of guiding rules against

the spread of the COVID19. The people that came for the sharing were directed on their arrival on how the community addresses the order of primogeniture in doing their things. Those sent decided to do the sharing according to serial number they have in their list. The action according to Mr. Geoffrey Nwafor generated some violence in form of fighting and alterance of abusive statements. Though, the situation according to him was later calmed down. This havoc arose because of the negligence on the traditional values. More so, most of the disobedience and atrocities committed during the pandemic experience were condemned by various African traditional values. But because Africans of nowadays do not to respect traditional values of African state, it ignites affected violence between lower and higher profile individuals of divergent capacities.

Fourthly, poverty is a factor. Among African nations, the rich gets richer, while the poorer lives and gets poorer. Azkukwe (1996: VI) observes that:

Poverty, for instance is said to be operating in a vicious circle. Poverty leads to poor education which in turn limits the employment opportunities to low jobs only. A low job will lead to poor nutrition and poor health which may result in poor output. This poor output may lead to a low social status which in turn may develop into social deviancy and crime. This deviancy may lead to political apathy and low political power. to political apathy and low political power. This low social power minimizes the chances of getting a fair share of the resources in society, which goes to reinforce poverty, and the circle continues.

In fact, Akukwe just summarized every facet of the effects of poverty in any social setting. Because people are poor and hungry, the people are invariably angry, because a hungry man is an angry man. Anger in return encourages violence. Therefore, where people lack reliable resources base, in a circumstance that they were offered something, and attempts were made to deprive them the little made available during the COVID19 lockdown will possibly attract violence

Finally, futuristic anxiety is among the causes of violence experience in the COVID19 pandemic. People did not know when the

virus will disappear. There were information on increases in new cases Some that saw resources, palliatives and other provisions made available for the common men under their control tried to loot them in case the virus last for a long or in case no drug or vaccine will be discovered for immunization or treatment. Some saw certain provisions, and resources within the pandemic as an opportunity to save for the future plans, even though the disease might be tackled soon.

The COVID-19 violence introduces some implications to the lives of African people. Education of the younger generations was jeopardized Mrs. Chika Ewulum (personal communication, 11 October, 2020) asserts that COVID-19 has contradicted academic calendar in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular. She continues that while some parents could afford to bring their wards back to school at the emergence re-opening of schools, others could not due to their involvement in violence at COVID-19 lockdown. According information within the nation, a state like Rivers state has not even re – opened upto the end of October, 2020. Some families in Africa had their members involved in one sort of violence or the other generating from the COVID-19 lockdown and its related rules. At the end of their violent cases, some became totally weak financially, and could not pay for the necessary social amenities.

Violence in the African societies during the incidence of COVID-19 among the people affected people’s health, lives, property, their relationship and social interaction with one another, resource bases and so on.

The Need to Awaken African Moral Consciousness

Most African traditional values promote moral consciousness of the aboriginal mostly on the fundamentals of living together as brothers and sisters in peace and order as one community. But due to modern trends of growth, people became highly individualistic and can get involved in different violent encounters, basically to actualize his or her personal aims or interest no matter how it affects others around him. This manner of living encourages the spirit of separation

and violence as against peace for all and sundry. Adibe (2009:15) states thus:

Traditional Religion was the bedrock of Igbo Communal life. But the Modern pluralistic community orientation with divergent religious world-views devalued the Igbo communal life... they uphold the need for the maintenance of proper links of relationship in human kinship as well as relationship between man, nature and the ancestral spirit. They see goodness primarily as a means of realizing the social morality of the group.

What Adibe is pointing out here is applicable to so many African nations, ethnicity, communities etc. The African religion had remained the strong room for provision of traditional values that enhance order, peace and harmony. It discourages violence at all levels and circumstances. Africans are traditionally at alert to avoid anything capable of motivating immoral consciousness among her sons and daughters. But unfortunately the present pluralistic nature of African societies has become a barrier to the lifespan of African moral consciousness. This paper therefore, call on the need for Africans to arise against those distracters hampering their rise and tenacious adherence to their traditional moral awareness in their psychological beings.

In fact, with compliance to African moral observances and practices, violence on critical conditions like COVID-19 era, would not occur at all. The traditional African society had been peaceful because people avoid all sorts of immoral behaviour as contain in various traditional moral values. Though those traditional African moral conducts are in the people's minds, but it is very weak and dormant. Nevertheless, This African moral consciousness should be awoken to be able to curb, and control violence to the barest minimal state. The violence experienced in this era of COVID-19 and beyond would not have happened.

Recommendations

1. Africans scholars and researchers should devote more time on researches that will trace most possible causes of immoralities in the continent.
2. Trips to typical rural and traditional settings should be equipped by every community in Africa to build at least a viable cultural centre for the young and old.
3. There is need for every community in Africa to have published document(s), in form of constitution where does and don'ts of the people will be listed and implications explained.
4. Traditional worshippers should avoid unnecessary compliance to every tenet of modern development to be able to make African tradition, religion and culture very relevant to the present world.
5. Those penalties for immoral acts, especially those that trigger violence among the populace should be pragmatically enforced with their relevant penalties which could be either spiritual or physical.
6. Relevant academic departments and religious bodies should be doing house to house teaching of African moral values.

Conclusion

It is not doubtful that this period of COVID-19 and its accompanied lockdown and rules really created violent atmosphere throughout Africa. The continent like every other continent has people of both low and high status. The difference in social classes affects the possibility of a class of individuals overweighing powers against one another. In the course of displaying these actions the citizens are left to witness various sorts of violence in various African environments.

The pluralistic nature of the African environment is a factor that incubate the misconception of migration opportunities, futuristic anxiety etc as some of the causes of the violence among the elites and the common or poor masses. The unpleasant scenario has affected the education sector, health etc. Finally, Traditional African moral Consciousness had been too useful in curbing and eradicating violence in the traditional society time immemorial. This moral consciousness

should be awakening by applying the recommendations stated above, and beyond to establish a violence free society in any circumstances for the contemporary Africans.

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Interview

1. Hon. Chijoke Kingsley, Politician, Enugu State, 50 years, 11/9/2020
2. Mrs. Nwoye Nneka Iriemene, Teacher, Anambra State, 48years, 17/4/2020
3. Mr. Mathew Ilo, Driver, Ebonyi State, 33years, 14/8/2020
4. Mr.Eze Wilfred Ugwu, Retrieved Civil Servant, Enugu State, 58years, 14/11/2019
5. Mr. Geoffrey Nwafor Okafor, Civil Servant, Imo State, 7 years, 20/5/2020
6. Mrs. Chika Ewulum, Teacher, Anambra State, 41years, 11-10-2020