

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: IGBO-NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

Mary Winfred Eche, DMMM, PhD
St Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary
Makurdi, Benue State.

Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has had far-reaching effects on the whole of humanity. It brought about several changes in people's lifestyles. Even though it is a problem that has affected the whole world, this article concentrated on the Igbo people of Nigeria. The Igbo race loves communing and identifying with one another, both in moments of joy and sorrow. They love visiting one another, sharing their experiences and encouraging one another. Families come together to celebrate. But the coronavirus has constituted a barrier to this way of life. For example, Covid-19 dismantled this family relationship, especially during the quarantine period. The emphasis of the Covid-19 protocol is on isolation. People are to be on their own. Families are not to mingle with other families. This has caused anxiety, fear, stress, conflicts, abuse, etc. Families have been affected morally, psychologically, emotionally, financially, etc. Therefore, this paper, using expository and analytical methods, looked at the areas that the family has been affected. Finally, suggestions were made on how best to respond in this kind of situation.

Keywords: Impact, Covid-19, family, relationship, Igbo-Nigerian perspective

Introduction

There is no doubt, as affirmed by many, that the world will no longer remain the same after the menace of Covid-19 in this our generation.

Things have already started changing, some of the changes are positive, while others are problematic and negative. The attack of Covid-19 as has been accepted worldwide originated from China, precisely in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei province of China. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic in March, 2020. According to some medical personnel, coronaviruses are mostly common in certain species of animals, such as cattle and camels. According to them, its transmission from animals to humans is rare, but this new strain likely came from bats, though one study suggests that pangolins may be the origin. They are not really sure the particular animal it came from. Therefore, it remains unclear exactly how the virus first spread to humans.

According to the report made by WHO, on the 30th of March, 2021, “We have not yet found the source of the virus, and we must continue to follow the science and leave no stone unturned as we do, said Dr Tedros. Finding the origin of a virus takes time and we owe it to the world to find the source so we can collectively take steps to reduce the risk of this happening again.”⁸

It is called Covid-19 because it started in December, 2019. This disease rapidly spread all over the world in a very short period of time. Covid-19 has affected and damaged different areas of our lives. The unprepared lockdown had massive impacts on the lives of many family relationships. Many homes were shattered, marriages broken, relationships destroyed, lives lost, abuses taking place, etc. In this paper, we shall concentrate on the positive and negative effects of Covid-19 on family relationships among the Igbo tribe of Nigeria.

⁸ WHO, 2021, “WHO calls for further studies, data on origin of SARS-CoV-2 virus, reiterates that all hypotheses remain open” Available at <https://www.who.int/news/item/30-03-2021-who-calls-for-further-studies-data-on-origin-of-sars-cov-2-virus-reiterates-that-all-hypotheses-remain-open?> Accessed 12/05/20 21.

Who are the Igbo People?

Before explaining who the Igbo people are, the paper gives a clue on the meaning of the word 'Igbo'. Indeed, some scholars have tried to explore the etymology of the nomenclature 'Igbo'. This is to offer clues to their origins and common cultural identity, even though this paper is not going to dwell on that. M.D. Jeffreys, for example, argues that "Igbo" means "forest dwellers" or the indigenous inhabitants of the forest region, whereas C. Ifemesia postulates that it is associated with the ancient Igbo people (Ndi-gbo) who lived in the forest region. In his own contribution, M. Onwuejeogwu maintains that the concept "Igbo" simply means "a community of people" who shared common values and ideas⁹.

The Igbo people, occasionally referred to as Ibos, are the oriental people of Nigeria. They are the third-largest ethnic group in Nigeria. Their indigenous language is also called Igbo. The native Igbo states in Nigeria are Anambra, Abia, Imo, Ebonyi and Enugu States. "The Igbo people also occupy more than 25% of the population of Rivers and Delta States"¹⁰ located in Southeastern Nigeria, with a total land of about 15,800 square miles (about 41,000 square kilometres). Igbo people are socially and culturally diverse. They have many interesting customs and traditions, with a population of over 40 million throughout Nigeria. They consist of many subgroups. Although they live in scattered groups of villages, they all speak one language and different dialects. The one language makes it easier for them to understand one another. Igbo tribe is one of the biggest and most influential tribes in Nigeria. They are well-known for their entrepreneurial endeavours, both within Nigeria and around the

⁹ John N. Oriji, (2011). *Political Organization in Nigeria since the Late Stone Age: A History of the Igbo People*. Palgrave Macmillan, USA. Pg. 5.

¹⁰ Osita Fabian Chinedu (2020). "Impact of Covid-19 on the survival of Igbo owned businesses in Nigeria: the nexus" *International Journal of Financial, Accounting, and Management (IJFAM)* ISSN: 2656-3355, Vol 2, No 2, P.123.

world.¹¹ In the midst of the so many interesting things to say about the Igbo people, the paper is concerned with an aspect of the Igbo tribe, which is their family relationship and how Covid-19 has affected it. Therefore, the paper will discuss the concept of family first, its relationship and effects.

Igbo Concept of the Family

Believing that, universally, the family is an institution cherished by every culture, so, it is applicable to the Igbo people. The Igbo tribe sees the family as a very important institution in the lives of its people. All relationships, according to Igbo culture, emanate from the family. Igbo people have what is called immediate or nuclear family. There are also the polygamous family, which was common in the South-East in the past, and the extended family. The immediate family consists of the man, who is the husband/father, the woman who is the wife/mother and the children. Part of the immediate family also includes the man's servants, and other dependants.

The polygamous family setting involves one man with multiple wives: "Polygamy is part of Igbo culture and is well accepted and acknowledged by our people as a man's legitimate right, if he so chooses to have multiple women as mothers in his household",¹² while

¹¹ Adejoke Adeboyejo (2018), "An Introduction to Nigeria's Igbo People" in Culture trip. Available at <http://theculturetrip.com>Africa>Nigeria>. Accessed 14/05/2021

¹² UIU-LA (2018). "Igbo Family Structure". Available at <https://www.uiulosangeles.org>post>the -igbo-family-structure>. Accessed 16/05/2021.

Umu Igbo Unite- Los Angeles Chapter ("UIU-LA"), chartered in April 2017 is a local chapter of the national Umu Igbo Unite organization, and the first chapter on the west coast. Umu Igbo Unite is a U.S.-based, 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that consists of a wide range of professionals and college students of Nigerian Igbo heritage who reside in the United States. UIU-LA was created to bring Igbo

the extended family comprises, as the name implies, the immediate or nuclear family and all the in-laws, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, stepbrothers and stepsisters, etc. Most often, the extended family is a strong support for each member of the household. This is because some members of the nuclear or polygamous family may not be so rich, some might have lost their husbands or wives, in which case some children may be orphans, etc. But among the extended family, there might be persons that are capable of taking care of the above-mentioned persons, which brings to fulfillment the popular Igbo saying that “*Igwe bu Ike*” (which means that there is power in number). Part of the meaning of ‘*igwe bu ike*’ implies the high value which Igbo people place on the extended family setting.

In as much as every member is important in the family, the father remains the head of the family. Three considerations are to be considered for further understanding of Igbo family life. These are the three kinds of family settings that are common among the Igbo people. The various family members have the specific responsibilities they carry out in the family. Such responsibilities are enumerated below: The father represents and speaks on behalf of the family in public forums. It is his responsibility to cultivate, grow, and develop the family wealth and resources. He serves as the family priest and spiritual leader and teacher of Igbo culture and traditions to members of his household. It is the father’s responsibility to lead by example, correct deviant members of the family when they go wrong, and provide for the needs of his household. The mother’s role is that of inspiring and fuelling the father with ideas to move the household forward towards progress and development. She is expected to preserve the family wealth and resources. It is the responsibility of the

youths and professionals together, establish a sense of community and educate members about the rich Igbo culture, while giving back to local communities and ensuring the younger Igbo generation in LA have role models to emulate.

mother to set and uphold standards of morality and purity in the family. She has to make the household homely and comfortable for every member of the family, including occasional visitors. Finally, it is her duty to love the father and children of the house, cook their meals, especially when the children are still very young. It is also her duty to maintain the cleanliness of the home. For the children, according to Igbo culture and tradition, children and dependants are expected to serve and remain under the mentorship of father and/or mother. Male children and dependants are supposed to be under the mentorship of the father, while the females are supposed to be under the mentorship of the mother.¹³

Igbo Family Relationships

The Igbo people love being with one another. They love staying together, eating and drinking together. They love celebrating themselves. They hold many festivities and cultural performances, which bring them often together, such as, new yam festival (iri ji ohuru), annual masquerade festivities (igba mmanwu), burial rites, iwa akwa festival, ekpe festival, the famous August break celebration for women and other social gatherings. Few of the listed festivities will be briefly explained. They travel far and wide to attend these ceremonies.

Yam Festival: This is mostly celebrated between August and October. Many Igbo sons and daughters travel back home to celebrate their annual yam festival. The essence of this celebration is to “officially present the newly harvested yams to God and the ancestors of the land. The festival is also an avenue to thank God for sustaining the life of the farmers, the indigenes of the land and the farm product (yam) through a successful planting season.”¹⁴ Masquerades come out

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mazi Ogbonna (2019). “The most important and celebrated festivals in. Igbo Land”. Available at <http://www.ekwendigbo.com>ar-aa>entertainment>item>. Accessed 17/05/2021.

whenever there are serious festivals like those mentioned in this paper and more.

Today when people are celebrating, they will invite soldiers or police to guard the place to make sure that there is peace and order. Masquerades were used for such purposes in the past. “While entertaining through dances and exhibiting extra-human feats, the masquerades would walk up to certain individuals and loudly expose any bad habits, crimes or misbehaviour of that person. As people would always take corrections from these exposures, the masquerades were effective in keeping up with traditional norms and values in the communities”.¹⁵

Iwa Akwa: This is an initiation into manhood. This is one of the most beautiful Igbo festivities. It is celebrated on every 3-years interval. It is a cultural heritage of the people of Imo State. It is mainly celebrated in Obowo Local Government Area of Imo State. The initiation is also held in other neighbouring towns like Ihitte /Uboma, Ehime Mbano, parts of Ahiazu Mbaise and other communities. Iwa Akwa takes place between the ages of 26-30 years. After the initiation, members are then eligible to pay taxes, partake in communal discussions and decision making of the community. The essence of this ceremony is to give the young men who have gone into the initiation to manhood the opportunity to make their contributions in social, cultural and political affairs of the community. In this stage of life, they can now sit with elders, wine, dine, discuss issues as they affect the community and suggest solutions. This affirms the Igbo saying that ‘nwata kwo aka, osoro okenye rie nri’; meaning that if a child washes his hands clean, he joins the elders to eat. Having made these preliminary discussions, the paper now discusses how Covid-19 has affected the above relationships among the Igbo people.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Impact of Covid -19 on Family Relationships

As of today, there is less tension as regards Covid-19 compared to 2020 and early 2021. The concern of this paper is to analyse the effect of Covid-19 on the Igbo family relationship during the lockdown in Nigeria. There was so much emphasis on the compulsory staying at home of everyone in order to decrease the chances of getting and spreading the virus. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended and still recommends that people should avoid attending crowded events because such events and gatherings increase people's risk of getting and spreading Covid-19. "Stay at home" became the slogan, so that one could protect oneself and others as well. The worst part of this was that it came without adequate preparation from both the government and the people. It indeed, it caused a lot of havoc in the family circle. Parents and children were psychologically, socially, financially, emotionally, morally, etc., affected, but the level of impact differs from one family to the other. What is obvious was that Covid-19 was very difficult to manage. It came with a shock; therefore, it created worries and damages as well. We shall now discuss some of the effects of the pandemic on family relationships among the Igbo people of Nigeria.

Psychological Impact: By nature, the Igbo man is brave and bold. He loves life and does everything to protect it. He does not fear challenges or threats. He takes responsibility for his actions and works hard to take care of his family, relatives and friends. The average Igbo man sees himself as a king in his own house, so nothing shakes him as such. But this braveness of the Igbo man was shattered by Covid-19. The emergence of Covid-19 caused a lot of disorganization in the society. This was caused by self-isolation, quarantine, social distancing, the news of the spread of the virus and the death of some of the infected persons. The above-listed points drastically reduced social interactions, leading to various forms of psychological disorder. Many persons suffered from depression, tension, anxiety and severe stress which led to increase in cases of high blood pressure. Many, out of fear, developed non-existent illnesses that led to spending of

thousands of Naira, only to discover that there was nothing wrong with them, apart from the fear of dying. This is because the Igbo man and woman cherish life so much and will not want to lose it.

Social Impact: The social impact on family relationship is like the two sides of a coin, the positive and negative. As earlier mentioned, the Igbo man is business-inclined and so the slogan ‘stay at home’ became a serious issue. He could not tolerate himself staying at home doing nothing. It was a big challenge. Apart from being an industrious person, the Igbo person enjoys being with others. According to Aristotle, man is a social being. The Igbo person, as a social being, interacts with others on a daily basis and depends on communication for his continual existence and survival. Even in the business enterprise, interaction is inevitable. Other resources of the business cannot be properly coordinated without effective communication between those involved in this enterprise. This is also because man is a relational being. This means that communication or interaction and other social activities are indispensable in man’s daily activities. “Communication is an indispensable component in human lives and existence and no society has been known to exist without it. However, the presence of any outbreak or pandemic poses a threat to human existence and inversely affects his social life, interactions and relationships”¹⁶. Such is the case with the covid-19 pandemic.

On the positive impact, since Igbo men are mostly business-inclined, they hardly give enough time to their family, to the extent that sometimes, children are not close to their fathers because they rarely have time with them. Covid-19, therefore, brought increase in social interactions within the immediate family. At this time, fathers can have time with their wives and children due to the stay-at-home guidelines.

¹⁶ Mirian OC, Danjuma YM, Amaonyeze NB (2021) Impact of Corona Virus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic on Social Lives and Interactions of Nigerian Citizens. Arch Med Vol.13 No.3:15 , P.1

Moral Impact: In some cases, the obligatory stay-at-home directive led to domestic violence and abuses. Cases of illicit sexual relationships were all over the air, involving the married or unmarried, and the underage. There were cases of stepchild abuses by the father and stepbrothers, even abuses of one's own female child, etc. All sorts of atrocities took place. It was so bad to the extent that on the 10th of June, 2020, the Nigerian Minister of Women Affairs, Mrs Pauline Tallen, called on law enforcement agents to expedite investigation and prosecution of rape cases, as they spiked during the lockdowns. Her call was followed up by protests over sexual violence in Nigeria. She also said that rapes had reached an “alarming rate”, three times the typical level, as women and children were locked down with their abusers. Every state in Nigeria was affected, she said. In addition, Cece Yara foundation's report of May-August, 2020 has this to say, we recorded an increase in the number of child sexual and physical abuse reported to the Foundation as a result of the lockdown measures imposed by the authorities. An average of 15 child abuse cases was reported per week as against the 2 to 3 cases reported pre-COVID 19. The reason for this could not be far-fetched as children were locked-in with abusers and there is limited access to schools and other safe places¹⁷.

Financial Impact: Igbo people are known for their struggle to survive, no matter the situation. They are hardworking and abhor laziness. They are highly gifted in diverse areas. The source of their financial strength is based on this spirit of ‘we must survive no matter the condition’. The development of their homes, families and communities through business endeavours has always been the trademark of the Igbo people.

¹⁷Grace Ketefe, (2020) “Help to Stop Child Sexual Abuse in Nigeria” Cece Yara Foundation. Available at <https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/sto/child-sexual-abuse-in-nigeria/reports/subid=155356>. Accessed 19/05/2021.

According to history, the Igbo people at several times had demonstrated a strong will and desire to develop their environment and economy. The source of their economy was mainly based on three sectors. They are: agriculture, non-agricultural production, such as delivering of newspapers to customers, babysitting, acting of movies, etc., and trade. According to history, they were said to have a high literacy rate more than other tribes in Nigeria, a factor which contributed to their occupying most of the strategic positions in the Nigerian civil service before the Nigeria-Biafra War.

Due to the loses they incurred during and after the war, most of them resorted to trading. The contributions of the Igbo people to the Nigerian economy, their host states and communities over the decades have attracted comments about their character and entrepreneurial spirit. I have heard people say that any village in Nigeria that has no Igbo man doing business is terribly bad. It does not matter how remote the village is and how meagre the business is. This implies that the Igbo can survive and prosper anywhere that human beings are. In view of that, Olanrewaju (1999), in his paper, “the Igbo Entrepreneur in the Political Economy of Nigeria”, says that the Igbo people, when compared to other major ethnic groups in Nigeria, dominate the entrepreneurial activities, especially in the areas of micro, small and medium enterprises. The distinctive characteristics the Igbo entrepreneurs have over others is the determination and perseverance with which they carry on, despite the civil war experiences and unfavourable economic policies meted out to them.¹⁸

All the efforts of the people were badly affected by coronavirus, with its attendant policies, especially the restriction of movement order in Nigeria, which was for the good of the citizens, to avoid the spread of the virus. The restriction on movement orders included ban on inter-state travel (except those on essential duties), ban on mass gatherings of

¹⁸ Osita Fabian Chinedu (2020). “Impact of Covid-19 on the survival of Igbo owned businesses in Nigeria: the nexus” *International Journal of Financial, Accounting, and Management (IJFAM)* ISSN: 2656-3355, Vol 2, No 2, P.123

people, and closure of markets, worship centres, social gatherings, schools, offices, etc. This restriction of movements and closure of markets and offices seriously affected the businesses of many Igbo people. They lost their goods; some of their goods were seized or stolen; some materials and goods got spoilt because of the lockdown. Many are still suffering from the adverse effects of Covid-19 on their businesses. The economic impact of the pandemic has affected family relationships in the following ways:

- a) The loss of joy and happiness in the family: The joy of a family is greatly affected by their financial situation. When there is lack and poverty, people are bound to be sad, as hardship increases. Many well-to-do families were badly affected. When a man has no money as he ought to, he gets angry at little provocations, which leads to domestic violence.
- b) Paying of school fees at reputable universities and colleges became difficult. Children were withdrawn from such schools and registered at low-income schools. This affected children's happiness too and their relationship with their parents.
- c) Increase in ill-health and death: Some families lost their breadwinners and other members to Covid-19 and other forms of illness. This is the worst scenario as regards the covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

From the analysis made above, it is obvious that the emergence of Covid-19 was traumatic and destabilized many families. The quarantine period made people's lives to become more difficult and challenging. Family relationships were put to the test and some problems naturally occurred. It negatively affected the daily routine of every family which led to severe changes in their lives. Lives cannot remain the same, based on the effects of Covid-19. Igbo people like social gatherings, attending tribal meetings and weddings, travelling from one country of the world to another. These were greatly reduced because of the pandemic. It is necessary to note that although the pandemic had several adverse effects, it also had some positive

effects, since it led to the cutting down of excesses in people's lifestyles and the discovery of alternative ways of doing things. Journeys were cut down and people used modern means of communication to pass information and to hold meetings online. Business trips have reduced. Orders are being placed for goods and they are being delivered. This has reduced the rate of road accidents and road mishaps. These sudden changes, known as the new normal, will gradually become part of life.

One of the advantages of rational beings is that they can easily adapt to situations. Despite the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on family relations among the Igbo people, many have adapted well by readjusting their lives.

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