



# COVID-19 AND SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE (COM)PASSION OF AFRICAN WOMEN TOWARDS RESTORATION

*Benson Ohihon Igboin & Opeyemi Wemimo Adedoyin*

## Abstract

*Women are known to, and have indeed, taken unusually bold and courageous actions to remedy bad situations. The world, including the Church, is battling to find remedies and cures for COVID-19, the relentless, passionate, compassionate, and desperate efforts of women to remedy a grubby situation needs to be commended. This paper discusses at some views expressed on social media platforms, especially messages sent through WhatsApp, about how some African women have devoted themselves to find ways to how to cure or manage the COVID-19. It takes a cue from the story of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4 whose effort helped to restore life to her son. The paper also uses the netnographic method to discuss five WhatsApp videos on the experiences of women and their knowledge, which subsequently reveals their culture and behaviour. The determination to ensure the care and safety of their wards, strength to fight for justice and being the voice of the voiceless, passion to find the solution to the pandemic using both faith and indigenous ways, can be gleaned from these African women. It argues that the practical theological actions show that God uses women and responds to the faith and prayers of the faithful, and also demonstrates that God continues to inspire women and use them to bring a message of hope to the world.*

## Introduction

Since the global outbreak of Coronavirus otherwise known as COVID-19, the traditional and social media are replete with news, comments, theories, and possible cures for the pandemic, the latter generating controversies at the moment. This paper will take a critical look at some social media platforms, especially messages sent through WhatsApp, which is the source of data for this enterprise, that shows that some African women have devoted themselves very early enough to how to cure or manage the disease. Taking a cue from the effort, passion, and desperation of the widow to remedy a very bad debt situation and the Shunammite woman

to restore life to her son in 2 Kings 4, we argue that these African women's efforts at proffering a cure to COVID-19 provide interesting theological lessons and hope for a world in dire need of health and compassion.

COVID-19 is certainly not the first global pandemic Africa and the world will be faced. The Ebola epidemic is still being felt in the continent, but it has been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The global spread and coverage by COVID-19 have qualified it according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a pandemic ([www.euro.who.int/en/health](http://www.euro.who.int/en/health)). Lassa fever still has a devastating effect on Nigerians even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, however, much is not being done about it. In fact, as at 1st May, 2020 Lassa fever has been recorded in 126 local government areas in 27 states of the federation ([www.iamat.org/country/nigeria/risk/lassa-fever](http://www.iamat.org/country/nigeria/risk/lassa-fever)). Obaji Jr (2020) reports that it is only recently that COVID-19 infections have overtaken those of Lassa fever in number, but deaths resulting from the latter are still higher than the former. Lassa fever has proved to be more deadly than Coronavirus even though the media have devoted more attention to the latter. "Nigeria's health system", he adds, "could come under immense stress as it faces a two-pronged fight."

The terms 'epidemic' and 'pandemic' are used interchangeably these days. It, therefore, becomes necessary to define them. A pandemic can be defined as "an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people" (Kelly 2011:815). The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2012:2) explicitly defines these terms in the following way:

Epidemic refers to an increase, often sudden, in the number of cases of a disease above what is normally expected in that population in that area. Outbreak carries the same definition of epidemic, but is often used for a more limited geographic area. Cluster refers to an aggregation of cases grouped in place and time that are suspected to be greater than the number expected, even though the expected number may not be known. Pandemic refers to an epidemic that has spread over several countries or continents, usually affecting a large number of people.

A century ago, between 1918 and 1919, the world was confronted with what has been controversially referred to as the Spanish flu. It is argued that the flu was first detected in Kansas in the United States of America in March 1918 (Ross 2018). An estimated fifty million people died from the flu worldwide at the throes of the First World War. Earlier in 1889-90, there was an influenza that killed the majority of children and the aged; it

was attributed to “the rapid movement of humans by steam transportation by sea and land” (Prashad 2020).

Many of the accounts of the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic have Eurocentric methodologies and conceptualisations. It is not until recently that the pandemic is being deconstructed, and viewed from African contextual lenses (Oluwasegun 2015; see Heaton & Falola 2014). Ohadike (1981:379-391) looks at the food insecurity and shortage occasioned by the influenza pandemic and how the Lower Niger had to resort to the cultivation of cassava to first augment the shortage of food, and later began mass production of it for both subsistence and commercial purposes. According to him, “the speed with which this innovation was adapted clearly points to the degree of the food crisis that accompanied the pandemic influenza of 1918-1919.” Today, we observe how the prices of food have escalated and criminal activities surrounding food have risen. Ohadike’s work is a huge challenge to how the COVID-19 is managed with particular reference to food security in the era of global warming that is adversely affecting micro-farming (Ohadike 1981:382). At that time, coastal areas were most hit by the flu, and improved transportation system spread it to the hinterland. Out of about 18 million Nigerians, about five hundred thousand died in six months. Currently, the most hit areas were the over-crowded urban places and centres (Ohadike 1991:1393-1399).

The world was set in a state of confusion regarding how and what biomedical protocols would be applied in curing the Spanish flu as is also the case with finding a possible cure to the Coronavirus now. Biomedical and indigenous medicines seemed incapable of addressing the devastating effects of the flu on human lives. In addition, there was a strong suspicion that the colonial authorities were bent on depopulating the Africans to appropriately manage the ‘remnant’ population. Phillips (2014) lucidly recounts the situation at that time in the following submission: “In this inauspicious situation most have resorted to traditional herbal or folk remedies, practices and deterrents .... However these usually proved as ineffective as biomedical treatment that, anyway, was still viewed with suspicion by many Africans because of its association with the apparatus of colonialism.” There is repetition of historical events and the same argument and suspicion are still being held today. There are reports that Africa would be hit the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic with the obvious disregard for herbal cure, especially the one developed by Madagascar. While the Spanish flu raged and ravaged humanity, the human quest for healing

did intensify as many prophetic and charismatic churches, which emphasised divine healing, were birthed. According to Isichei (1995:199), “It is no coincidence that a number of Christian prophet movements were founded during the 1918 flu pandemic, which made the limitations of both western and traditional medicine painfully apparent.”

In fact, the mission churches placed heavy emphasis on colonial measures to the pandemic, which seemed to be antithetical to the faith of Nigerian Christians. Prophetic prayer meetings spontaneously began to address the flu; this subsequently led to the establishment of some of the African Initiated Churches. Amongst the prophetic leaders of that era was Miss Sophia Odunlami who later married Mr. J. L. Ajayi. She claimed to have received a cure to the disease, which drew many to her ministry as the Lord was using her greatly. “She even prescribed in prophecy, that the use of rainwater mixed with lime juice would heal the epidemic influenza in the 1920s. It seemed to work and this attracted more people into the group” (Obisakin 2007:53). Odunlami continued her itinerant campaign, preaching holy living and obedience to the word of God. Her campaign was reported to have convinced the people of the power of God to heal more than the orthodox or indigenous medicine. “Influenza victims were cured by heeding to Sophia’s prophetic warning and particularly through the use of her sanctified water for drinking and bathing.... To say that the same atmosphere which blew the wind of epidemic could also almost at the same time harbor rain with healing virtue, was to them something beyond human explanation.” (CAC News 2020). This point cannot be lost in favour of those who argue that indigenous cure to COVID-19 should be sought and utilised rather than wait for western cure or vaccine. There is the general belief among Africans that the cure to any disease is found in one’s environment; one only needs to look carefully and study the cosmos to get the cure (Igboin 2018). Ignorance of this fact, they argue, always leads to the maxim: the weeds that would have cured one’s ailment end up growing on one’s grave (Adodo 2017). Ojo (2004:466) describes Odunlami as “a charismatic leader, a prophet and a visionary” who “helped to break down restrictive cultural barriers that confronted ... women, and thus created more opportunities for women in church life in the early twentieth century.”

What is critically impressive from the foregoing is that Odunlami was a woman in the midst of crowded men, who was mightily used by God to proffer a solution to the influenza pandemic. In a patriarchal setting

where women are hardly given space and opportunity to operate and demonstrate their powers and elixir, Odunlami did not only stand to contest that setting and won, but also ensured that women and men were given salutary respect therein. The same setting has a bearing with the Jewish culture, which relegated women. The study of the Bible shows how women intervened in critical moments of history to save lives, for instance, Deborah stepped into leadership as a judge in a position upheld and occupied predominantly by men and led her people to freedom (Judges 4-5). The underlying principle we want to evince here is that these women were relentless, passionate, compassionate, and desperate to remedy a grubby situation that confronted them. In the next section, we shall examine two women in light of these principles (rather than context).

### **The (Com)passion of a Widow and the Shunammite Woman**

The account of the Shunammite woman's relentlessness, passion, and desperation is another way of re-reading the stories in 2 Kings 4. There are two critically scintillating and theological accounts of women's relentlessness, passion, and desperation to salvage extremely bad situations. The first describes her as a widow: her husband left a huge debt for the family. At the threat of the creditor to enslave her two sons until she could pay or wait for the year of Jubilee, she makes a desperate effort to find a solution: she reaches out to the prophet who gives her instructions on what to do. Ordinarily, such instructions appear non-scientific, unreasonable, and illogical, particularly in a postmodern world that takes rationality as the ground norm of reality and truth. But the result is that she does not only have enough money to offset the debt, but also much more to cater for her family. The point is that unorthodox means has a place in reality. Hence theological, spiritual and cultural matrixes are important in addressing COVID-19. In relation to Africa, and as we shall explore shortly, Adan (2020) avers:

The origin of an individual as well as the alienation from the experience of our past is extremely useful to us. This epicenter no matter what history it derives from, serves as a pillar of personal development, which contributes to civilization. In truth, history has its versions, that these versions have their specific interests. If African civilization has been able to dominate the world despite the Mesopotamians and the Greeks, it is thanks to a well-built culture and to betray it was to ruin itself, this is shown with the victory

of the Romans. Following multi-year observations of academic success in African schools, the best among them are those attached to their cultures.

Adan argues that there are cultural resources to understand, analyse and proffer solutions to issues that press for attention. Although he does not suggest a relegation of other people's culture, he strongly makes the point that the primary obligation of culture is that it helps to address all human challenges in their peculiar ways.

The second story has to do with the popular Shunammite, who is described as a wealthy, influential, compassionate, hospitable, faithful but barren woman. Her compassionate nature is shown in how she takes care of Prophet Elisha to the extent of suggesting to her husband to construct a chamber for the prophet to which he can retire whenever he passes by. This act endears her to the prophet who, when he comes to know that she has no child, prays for fruitfulness. Consequently, she conceives and bears a son. It is this son that gets suddenly sick; he has an attack on the farm and cries to his father. Some have suggested that "the cries of the boy, the part affected and the season of the year, make it probable that he had been overtaken by a stroke of the sun. Pain, stupor, and inflammatory fever are the symptoms of the disease, which is often fatal" ([www.bibles-tudytools.com](http://www.bibles-tudytools.com)).

Although the son's father sends him to his mother at the time of the attack, it is no time for the Shunammite woman to quarrel. She does all she can to stabilise her son who eventually dies. She thinks that breaking the news of the death of her son to her husband who had sent the son to her in the first place will distract her faith; all she focuses on is taking positive action that will result in resuscitating her son. Hence, she runs to Mount Carmel to meet Prophet Elisha. She has an implicit faith that Elisha's prayer will be answered by God, consequently, she stops at nothing to see this done.

The import of the two stories to us is that they both emphasise the fact that women can, and have indeed, taken unusually bold and courageous actions to remedy bad situations. Reading these stories in a literarily culturally relevant manner as conceptualised by David Adamo, Justin Ukpong and Chris Manus, we argue that in this COVID-19 era, there are African women who have devoted themselves to proffering solution to the pandemic in a local, family context rather than engage in spreading fear and death sentences in the social media. Before we discuss some of these

African women, clarification of our research method – netnography – is in order.

## **Research method: Netnography**

Recently, there has been a bulge in the use of the Internet, not only as a means of communication, a transaction of business, organising and executing conferences, and so on, but also as a veritable means of effectively conducting research. Netnographic method as it has come to be defined has to do with utilising the Internet as a source of generating data and analysing rooted in participant observation, which is the digital form of ethnography. As an established approach to qualitative research, netnography is coined from the words Internet and ethnography, and thus, it shares many features with ethnography (Kozinets et.al. 2014:262). According to Kozinets et al (2014:262), netnography is a “technique for cultural analysis of social media and online community data.” They add that “natural in orientation, it approaches cultural phenomena in their local contexts, providing windows on naturally occurring behaviors” (Kozinets et.al. 2014:262). Carefully analysed, netnographic method can, and does, lead to such description of the “lived online experience of cultural members” (Kozinets 2014:263).

Although face-to-face interactions have their very important role in generating data through discussion, online means such as Twitter, WhatsApp, blog, Facebook, LinkedIn and so on have also provided amazing mass of information despite their cross-posting. These social media meeting instruments can be in form of text, audio, video and so forth. Although viewed as a complex aspect of netnography, these instruments can help to garner diverse data and categorise into geo-local context (Kozinets 2014:263), even though they do not exactly happen within a particularly defined space, as we shall be utilising in this paper. The complexity here will be navigated because we are quite familiar with the context – both cultural and religious – of the WhatsApp videos that we shall analyse shortly.

Theoretically, netnography enables researchers to have access to community members’ knowledge, which subsequently helps to understand their culture and behaviour. Since netnography is a cultural research that portends towards “human understanding,” it is thus saddled with “maintaining an anthropological preoccupation with the human, socially grounded,

epistemologically self-critical, axiologically attuned with notions of social betterment.” (Kozinets 2015). In other words, netnography does not have to dehumanise and decontextualise; it strives to enliven the human experience within a cultural, social, axiological and epistemological space. Any interruption of this space is not netnography.

Specifically, this paper utilises WhatsApp messages as its mainstay of data generation. Many studies have categorised WhatsApp as part of netnography, that is, an online version of ethnography. In a study carried out by Udenze and Ugoala (2020), it is observed that WhatsApp platforms create unique means of identity creation, meaning-making, unite in community building and sense of community consciousness and national patriotism among Africans and their Diasporas. Another study also reveals how WhatsApp platform can also stimulate discussions and arguments, influence and mobilises members to community action and development, generate commitment and unity as well as friction. But the underlying point is that since it has become sometimes increasingly difficult for physical meeting, WhatsApp has provided a veritable alternative where community can meet and make enforceable decisions (Azmi et.al. 2018).

The two studies above focused on group WhatsApp platforms where different people largely agree to come together for a common objective. In this paper, the messages we are going to analyse are however not sent to the group where these African women are members. Rather, they are messages circulated to different groups and individuals. What is of paramount interest in these WhatsApp videos are the context and contents of the messages, and the compassion that were laden in them, as well as the passion for family/human health and restoration during this COVID-19 era.

## **Analysis of the WhatsApp Videos**

In this section, we shall analyse five videos out of many released by African women in different parts of the world as a demonstration of their compassion and passion for the restoration of health to the community in the midst of COVID-19. These women’s compassion resonates in the very words and actions depicted in the videos. The videos would be analysed based on two prongs: intersections between faith and indigenous medicine and awareness creation within the context of addressing the coronavirus pandemic.



**In the first video** of two minutes, thirty-nine seconds, a Nigerian woman who introduced herself as Prophetess Dupe Oluwaniyi, and asks that her video be spread widely, and says she desperately prayed to God for a cure since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. According to her, the Holy Spirit finally revealed to her a herbal plant called siam leaf, whose botanical name is ‘*Chromolaena odorata*,’ famously referred to in Yoruba as ‘ewe Akintola’, ‘ewe Awolowo’, or ‘eweagatu’, and in Iuleha, Edo state ‘oken-igbuan;’ a popular weed found in Africa. She also gives instructions on how people should administer the leaf as follows: Squeezing the liquid from the leaves and drinking it, putting the leaves in water and boil, to be taken hot. She backs up her discovery with biblical passages such as Ezekiel 47:12 and Revelation 22:2. She mentions something that is instructive, namely, that the leaf is a remedy for Africans that might contract the disease. In fact, medical science has shown the properties of the leaf as having an array of medicinal and healing potencies (Vijayaraghavan 2017:1007-1016; see Sirinthaporn & Jiraungkooksul 2017:35-38).

**The second video** is a woman who is elegantly adorned in Catholic Women’s uniform, holding a portable statue of Mary, and her rosary, praying fervently in Bini and English languages over a pot of herbal leaves of various kinds, to be used against the virus by her family. The contents of her prayers include the Lord’s Prayer, and instructions on the use of the herbal concoction and praying God to let the concoction work in protecting her family against the virus. Despite the obvious low educational qualifications of this woman, she uses the opportunity to call on every woman to take up intercession for their families; she then turns to prophecy declaring that Coronavirus would be called “corona vanish” with the help of “Mother Mary.” The raising of the image of Mary is important in a Catholic context. The belief in the *theotokos*, that is, the Mother of God, carries a deep theological meaning. For example, Mary is prayed to thus: “Heal Thine ailing people, O All-merciful Queen! Bless the minds and hands of our physicians, that they may serve as instruments of the All-powerful Physician, Christ our Saviour. We pray before Thine icon, that Thou mightiest truly live with us, O Sovereign Lady.” Thus, for a woman to show concern for healing is not just significant, but praying to a higher woman (Mary) to intercede for her is more of a demonstration of faith.

**This third video** shows a Nigerian nurse who works in America. Being moved by the apparently inadequate and inaccessible medical facilities in Africa, especially among the poor in the rural areas, she released this video

in which she carefully gives traditional medical ways the virus can be prevented and managed. According to her, almost every household in Africa has what it takes to address the reality of COVID-19. She instructs African families that making use of such items as clean water, salt, ginger, lime, lemon, mango leaves, mint leaves, pepper soup spices and turmeric can serve as a prophylaxis for the disease or as first aid. All this boiled should be taken in a frequency of 30 minutes. She also suggests steam inhalation, a method used to relieve congestions in the respiratory tract.

**The fourth video** is from a female lecturer, Mary Wilson in the Faculty of Health and Allied Sciences, Koforidua Technical University, Ghana. Wilson explains that “recent research has proven that COVID-19 can only live up to 15 minutes when subjected to temperatures of about 56 degrees Celsius.” She says that the coronavirus trapped in the nose region can be killed when one takes a hot bath or using steam for up to 20 minutes twice daily. She informs the public that one of the ways doctors are attending to COVID-19 patients is the use of hand-dryers in preventing or managing the disease. Since the average Ghanaians cannot afford sauna bath which costs GHC30,000, which is about 2 million Nigerian Naira, the cheaper alternatives such as African tradition called Ipun in Ghana or aromatherapy that involves hot steaming by covering the patient with a thick blanket for close to 15 minutes per session would be effective in eliminating the virus. Given that Coronavirus is a respiratory tract infection (SARs), she thus recommends the use of ‘neem leaves’, which should be boiled and at the instance of symptoms such as cough or cold. She then admonishes the public to observe healthy, sanitary procedures and “pray because God is the only one who can heal this virus.”

**The fifth and final video** is that of Dr. (Mrs.) Ambassador Arikana Chihombori-Quao from Zimbabwe. She is a medical doctor and an activist. Chihombori-Quao is known for her fearless, outspoken advocacy against mistreatment of Africans by the West. She is described as “just a fine, proud African mama deploying her talents, time and treasure to global health philanthropy and projecting Africa under Providence created a political launch-pad for her aspirations” (Okeregebe 2020). She was AU Permanent Representative to the United States of America, who was sacked in 2019 for her powerful speech that called for African unity against the neo-colonial pillaging of Africa and particularly pointing out France, which is taking over US\$500 billion annually from Francophone Africa. However, in the video under review, Chihombori-Quao decries the grubby

ways the Chinese are treating Africans in China, particularly how “Africans are being forced to take COVID-19 test simply because they are Africans. In many cases, these individuals did not meet the criteria for testing” and in some other cases Africans are quarantined beyond the normal specified period. She thus calls on the President of China to take these allegations seriously and investigate them and bring those who are culpable to justice to continue to maintain healthy diplomatic relations with Africa.

Interestingly, apart from the Catholic woman who wears a white blouse in a blue-dominated wrapper, all others wear red-coloured dresses. The colour red signifies though not limited to strength, determination, passion and love. The theological significance of red – the blood of Jesus – cannot be addressed here. The determination to ensure the care and safety of their wards, strength to fight for justice and being the voice of the voiceless, passion to find the solution to the pandemic using both faith and indigenous ways, can be gleaned from these African women.

## **A way forward**

We have argued that women are not only by nature compassionate, passionate and desperate in finding solutions to challenges, but also go out of their way to demonstrate their compassion to their family, community and the world. These virtues have been deployed by both women in our text (2 Kings 4) and contemporary African women in the face of COVID-19. This in fact could account for the reason Christopher Dime, having examined God’s virtues, concludes that God may be more feminine than masculine as patriarchy would not want us to believe. Dime (2004) analyses such attributes as compassion, love, mercy, blessing, humility, empathy and so forth vis-à-vis women’s nature. He says that these virtues are more profound in women than men when compared with how God dispenses them to humanity. Thus, from the various countries of Africa and in the diaspora, different women of different educational, social, spiritual, political statues, exposures and qualifications have in an uncanny way, demonstrated these virtues without calling a conference. Of additional interest is that all of these women freely shared their remedies to COVID-19 in a capitalist, consumerist world that demands a token for acts that should ordinarily be gratuitous.

## Conclusion

In a world that is beleaguered by COVID-19, a pandemic that has brought developed and developing world to their knees, where advanced medical facilities and knowledge have failed, conspiracy theories are widespread and diplomatic relations have gone sour, hopelessness and political intrigues have taken a central stage, messages conveyed by these women are an elixir in themselves, and their recommendations an invaluable resource for healing, which efficiently combine spirituality and nature. This resonates with African healing thought that encapsulates wholeness in body, soul, and spirit. These women have called African and humanity's attention to the fact that the cure of any disease is within a particular environment; we only need to look inward (Igboin 2018). Their faith, prayers, and practical theological actions in the similitude of Sophia Odunlami have once again shown that God does not discriminate against women; He responds to faith and prayers of the faithful. It also demonstrates that God, at the critical moment, inspires women and uses them to bring a message of hope to the world. Finally, as depicted by the widow and the Shunammite woman, women can go the extra mile to bring healing to an ailing world.

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