



IGBO CULTURE AND VALUES AS TOOLS FOR OVERCOMING THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper posits that that one of the most effective way of combatting the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is to fall on Igbo traditional culture as well as her core values as embedded in the major institutions and traditional core values. The study identified corruption, greed, poverty, poor governance and misinformation as the main moral challenges facing Africa in the fight against COVID-19. The benefits of reviving and embracing Igbo traditional institutions, cultures and values for curbing COVID-19 are further enunciated. It concluded that the Igbo true spiritual and moral qualities and virtues should come to the fore in the fight against COVID-19.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered virus which broke out towards the end of 2019 in Wuhan city of China (Fenner 2020). The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was on 27 February 2020. Available information indicates that the South-East where the Igbo extraction is concentrated is excluded in the record of the affected states with confirmed cases as at May 2020. As of June 2020, only one confirmed case has been recorded in Owerri, the heartland of Igboland. The seemingly minimal presence of the virus in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria where the Igbo extraction is domiciled can be as a result of the value systems of the people.

This study examines some of the core values of the Igbo that can be highlighted and applied by the public so as to curtail the ravaging effects of the pandemic. The truth remains that COVID-19 outbreak is a crucial global health calamity of the twenty-first century, and it is one of the greatest challenges that humanity has faced since the Second World War. Accord-

ing to the report of World Health Organization (WHO), the virus has affected 2,164,111 people and killed more than 146,198 people in more than 200 countries in the world as at 30 April 2020 (Worldometer April 2020). Three months down the line in Africa, the number of confirmed cases has increased to 222,000 with Nigeria recording second in the top of the list of the infected persons with above 14,000 as at 14 June 2020 (Worldometer June 2020). In addition to its upsetting effects on human life, COVID-19 is capable of drastically slowing down the global economy, increasing the high rate of unemployment, crime and poverty rates. Corroborating this, Turckur (2020) predicted that COVID-19 is likely to cause bankruptcy for many global firms because of the stringent measures needed to contain its spread, which includes restricted movements for both buyers and sellers. In the present paper, however, our main concern is to highlight how the adoption of core Igbo values can be of help in the mitigation of the frightening effects of COVID-19. Imbibing such cultures and values by other ethnic groups and nations by way of cultural acceptance and assimilation, will ensure a speedy recovery from the present global crisis.

COVID-19: Origin and Transmission

The coronavirus disease, also known as COVID-19 is a highly transmittable and pathogenic viral infection. It was first identified in Wuhan China and later spread across the globe. In fact, Corona is a Greek word for crown. The term “coronavirus” stems from the crown-like spikes on the outer surface of some species of virus. It is believed that coronavirus infections causing severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-COV2) were first witnessed in 2002 in Guangdong, China. A decade later in 2012, another of its kind emerged from the Middle East, and was known as Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-COV). Rahman and Sukar (2019:1288-93) report that MERS-COV infected more than 2428 persons and about 808 died in the process. These viruses are known to cause acute lung injury and acute respiratory distress that are fatalistic. They were initially thought to infect only animals until the world witnessed a SARS outbreak caused by SARS-COV 2002 in Guangdong China (Interim Guidance, WHO, March 2020). A Genomic analysis revealed that SARS-COV2 with its characteristic severe acute respiratory

syndrome is possibly having the bats as its primary reservoir. The intermediate source of origin and how it is transferred to humans is not known, but its transfer from human to human is confirmed globally.

In fact, COVID-19 infected over 70,000 within the first fifty (50) days of its discovery. The World Health Organization (WHO) on the 11th March 2020 named the virus COVID-19 and declared it as a pandemic. This COVID-19 virus was actually identified as a novel coronavirus. It was observed to be spreading from human to human as a result of close contact with an infected person or by being exposed to coughing, sneezing, respiratory droplets or aerosols of an infected person. It is known to be so contagious that those aerosols can penetrate the lungs through the eye, mouth or nose. Thus it is instructive to realize that human civilization has witnessed at least six public health emergencies of international concern as declared by WHO on January 30, 2020. They are the HINI in 2009, polio in 2014, Ebola in West Africa in 2014, Zika in 2016, Ebola in Democratic Republic of Congo in 2019 and the on-going COVID-19.

It was generally thought that COVID-19 is most contagious when the infected persons' symptoms are at their peak. However, scientists have proved that it is also possible to spread the virus without having any symptoms (Kandola 2020). A study by Shereen & Siddique (2020:91-98) suggests that 10% of infections are from people exhibiting no symptoms. While elders and those with chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes are most vulnerable to infection, children and young adults are major sources of asymptomatic infection. The most dreadful aspect of its spread is that the virus can be picked by mere touching the surfaces on which the infested droplet fell even hours later. The virus is said to survive on both metal and plastic objects, as long as 3 days after it drops on the surface. This explains why the public are required to stay at home or minimize their movements.

Social hygiene is absolutely necessary. The wearing of face masks and maintaining a 6-foot or 2-meter social distance is recommended by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The risk of contracting COVID-19 is higher for any one in close contact with people already infected with the disease, including health workers and care-givers. Early symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, difficulty in breathing or breathlessness, coughing, sore throat, headache, muscle pain or lasting chest pain, chills, loss of taste and loss of smell. These symptoms occur within two to fourteen (2-14) days after exposure to the virus. In this regard, the

CDC has recommended preventive measures which include, avoiding close contacts, not just with people that are positive with COVID-19, but with any person, seeing that infection can be through both symptomatic and asymptomatic transmission. Washing of hands regularly, especially after being in public places is highly recommended. Use of hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol is necessary where hand washing is not possible. Avoiding touching the face with unwashed hands and wearing a face mask, especially by people who have the virus and those with close contact with people with COVID-19 is made mandatory.

Fighting COVID-19 in Nigeria

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world to a standstill in spite of the prevailing technological advancement (Madynre 2020). This explains why discussions on how we came to the experience of this pandemic is important. With a population of 200 million, an overstretched health care system and inadequate workers and equipment, coping with such a dreaded infection in Nigeria will definitely pose a huge challenge. Women, children and the vulnerable in Nigeria will feel the challenges more than others.

With Nigeria's peculiar socio-economic challenges that range from high population, poverty, shortage of healthcare workers, health care infrastructure and facilities, the report of the first case of COVID-19 was welcomed with serious worry. Strict intervention measures were introduced in Nigeria to counter the pandemic. These include lockdown of churches, markets and all forms of social gathering, social distancing must be applied where people must meet, increased personal hygiene was encouraged as people must provide facilities for constant hand washing with soap and running water. Coughing and sneezing were not tolerated. If they must be done, such persons were mandated to cover their mouths and noses with tissue or sneeze into their elbow. Later, a compulsory stay-at-home for 3 weeks was introduced as part of the intervention measures. Good-spirited Nigerians and Organizations began to donate huge sums of money as palliatives to cushion the harsh effects of the stringent measures imposed on Nigerians in the fight to prevent the spread of COVID-19. To confirm the brotherhood values, many business men and women of the Igbo extraction participated in the donation of the palliatives.

Although there is the existing moral decadence in Nigeria evident in vices such as greediness, selfishness, corruption and violence, the outbreak of COVID-19 seems to deepen the problem. Among these are the vice of ‘I will not die alone’ mentality. This attitude has led some who contracted the virus to refuse self-isolation, instead they mingle with others to ensure that more people are infected (Muoghalu 2020).

Misinformation is another moral challenge in the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria. Misinformation in some places has created panic leading to making rash decisions. Many people on hearing that chloroquine is effective in the treatment of COVID-19 embarked on self-medication which resulted in the development of very serious health challenges. Misinformation has led some Nigerians to believe that COVID-19 does not exist. Some peddle the rumour that blacks in tropical Africa cannot have the virus. Others believe that it is the disease of those who travel by air. The fact remains that COVID-19 is a serious disease that must be tackled with seriousness and focus. Most carriers of the disease may be asymptomatic or with mild illness, and they will pose a great risk to those who are more susceptible to disease and death. People like the aged and those with some underlying diseases like diabetes and high blood pressure are believed to be at high risk.

The vice of extortion and exploitation prevalent among Nigerians will be a key challenge in this critical period of lockdown. Even when the government ordered that all should stay at home, some felt they could not obey the order so they had to bribe their way out by paying some money to those at the checkpoints. Market men and women saw the pandemic as an opportunity to maximize their profits. The quest for survival demanded that people pay any amount just to buy the necessities such as food and drugs. Consequently, people were being exploited.

It seems the government did not put in place a coordinated response in the fight to contain the disease in Nigeria. There was little or no concerted control from the Federal government and the Nigerian Center for Disease Control and Prevention as coordinators in issuing out information and ensuring the implementation of decisions. In Nigeria’s case, the states seem to be making independent decisions. While some states shut down their schools, markets and boundaries when positive cases of COVID-19 broke out in Nigeria, some other states were complacent.

Using Igbo Values as a Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Historically, the Igbo as a people are known to have descended from Eri, a divine figure who, according to Igbo folklore, was sent from heaven to begin civilization. Another account presents Eri as one of the sons of Gad, a tribe in Israel, who travelled down from Israel to establish the present day Igboland. In Nigeria, the Igbo inhabit an area referred to as Igboland. Muoghalu (2020:6) describes the Igbo as a cultural group of people that live in the east of Niger, South–East Nigeria. Geographically, the Igbo are found in two major sections along the lower River Niger. They live in a section that constitute the five states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. These are Abia State, Anambra State, Ebonyi State, Enugu State and Imo State. The Igbo also found in some minor parts of Delta, Rivers and Benue States. Other minor Igbo communities are also found in parts of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea (Obichere 1982:207). Owing to the transatlantic slave trade, the Igbo found themselves in other countries of the world such as Jamaica, Cuba, Barbados, Belize, the United States of America among others (www.igbodefender.com). Today the entire Igbo population is estimated to be about 40 million, with about 2 million immigrants in the United States since the late 20th centuries. This explains why Asikogu (2019:42-51) describes them as a vibrant group who are versatile with very business acumen and who are also great travelers, and one can hardly go to any part of the world without seeing an Igbo person.

Culture is an indispensable aspect of a human society. It is therefore important to discuss its meaning generally, before focusing on Igbo culture. Every distinct human society has its unique and original culture, which is often accompanied by its religion. Idowu (1973) opines that culture and religion are inseparable though they are distinct from each other. Tylor (1871) defines culture as that complex whole which includes belief, knowledge, arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society. I personally perceive culture as the beliefs, attitude and behaviour a group of people in a given environment have come to accept and identify with as their way of living.

Africa is said to have diverse and many religions as well as cultures, yet all African religions and cultures have common features and backgrounds. Hence, it will not be out of place to regard Igbo culture as representing the African culture. It is believed that no culture is inferior

or superior to the others, but some cultures can dominate others due to their philosophy, ability to improve human life and innovation (Keesing 1981:459-62).

Cultures that are non-innovative and non-protective of its traditions do end up giving way to other cultures (Adekola & Midala 2018:156-7). Culture changes partly because of the dynamics of humanity. The human is the only living species that constantly changes its surroundings and by doing so ends up dropping some of her traits and picking up new ones.

Madu (2014) observes that cultures must necessarily interact. Thus, there must be a mix of cultures; a situation of diffusion, assimilation and a rejection of cultures among people of different cultural backgrounds. This is inevitable as no singular culture can sufficiently satisfy the needs of its owners. When a culture comes in contact with another culture, some consequences that are both positive and negative usually result. The colonization of the old African society by Europe resulted in cultural consequences that are both positive and negative (Obukar 1965). Europeans have introduced into Africa new and improved techniques of agriculture, new and improved medicines and medical services, western education and religious style of worship, western training and employment, new methods of transportation by road, air, and water and these have influenced some African cultures. Other positive impacts of the western contact are seen in the areas of democracy, telecommunication and military prowess (Adekola & Midala 2018:158). These apparent gains do not rule out the fact that the western people have negatively impacted Igbo culture as well as the entire African culture. For instance, capitalism with its characteristic exploitation, alienation, unequal exchange (low wages, slave labour and high taxation), and what Donovan (1984) identifies as the imposition of loss of personal identity, fear, insecurity, and loss of personal integrity have led to the breakdown of African traditional and family values.

The traditional Igbo culture stems from the Igbo philosophy and cosmology (Muoghalu 2020). Their moral philosophy is based on the actions and relationships carried out in reverence and fear of Chukwu (the Supreme Being) chi (divinities), Muo (spirits) and erim (ancestors). The norms and values of the Igbo are chiefly dictated by the people's allegiance to these supernatural beings. For instance, the Igbo have what is called ground norms (omenala) which stipulates moral codes that guide their lives. The

Igbo also have a sense of covenant called *Igbandu* and a sense of the sacred (*nso ala*). Nzomiwu (1999) avers that any action which is in tandem with or fits into the pattern outlined by the ground norms (*omenala*) is regarded as right and just. Anyone who fulfils the requirements of the *omenala* of the society in both vertical and horizontal directions is regarded as a just person.

In his 1999 Odenigbo lecture, Chinua Achebe, making use of Okonkwo as a character in his book, *Things fall Apart* reveals the Igbo culture by presenting Okonkwo as strong, devoted, hardworking, honest and wealthy. In the person of Okonkwo, the values of the Igbos are detectable as well (Diala 2019:38). Values are the ideal aspect of a culture. Each culture has its own ideals that are affirmed by the people that uphold it. The Igbo greatly affirm strength, devotion, hard work, honesty and wealth. The Igbo live communal lives with a long chain of connectivity known as the extended family system, which includes father, mother, children, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins, grandparents, great grandparents, the dead relatives and the unborn (Agulana 2011). The Igbo place much values on respect for elders, large family, religion, inheritance among other things.

To the Igbo, family is the main heart throb of human existence. This informs why great importance is attached to children. The more children a person has, the more recognition is accorded to him or her in the society. A woman who is able to give birth to twelve children for her husband is celebrated with a live goat or cow (for wealthy families). Large families are needed for the labor they provide on the farm, and in the chain of food production.

The Igbo have *omenala* which stipulates moral codes that guide their lives. Their traditional lives are also underlined by prohibitions and taboos. In the words of Ilogu (1985), Igbo traditional ethics is characterized by three main features which are; custom (*omenala*), prohibition and taboo. Prohibitions includes those prescriptions that should not be found in the conducts of the Igbo such as do not kill another member of the community, do not commit incest, do not steal, do not mistreat strangers. In Igbo culture, taboos are means of social control. Though they do not strictly come under ethics, contravention of any taboo results in disrupting the social equilibrium that exists between the living and the dead, sacred and profane, and they result in causing negative upheavals in the community. Taboos (*nso-ala*) or things forbidden embraces everything

that could be considered as sin. Apart from inculcating a sense of spiritual and moral values, which are the hallmarks of Igbo culture and religion, taboos observance also promote the needed sense of mutual responsibility and communalism, that are the two concepts on which Igbo culture and religion are solidly built. Incidentally, having a sense of mutual responsibility, solidarity and communalism are the needed tools for the successful combat against the effects of COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of crisis, all must choose solidarity and cooperation over the pursuit of individual interest.

Igbo culture is laden with a sense of sacredness. This explains why the ethics of the Igbo is based on religion. The Igbo world is believed to be created by Chineke (the God that creates) or Chukwu (the great God). He is believed to be the author, creator and sustainer of heaven, earth, animals, humans and vegetation. In fact, Chukwu is the source of life. Life to the Igbo is the chief good. Hence, they name their children Ndubisi or Ndukaku meaning "life is the ultimate" or "life is greater than wealth". Based on such an idea of life, anything can be sacrificed to secure and protect life. In times of plagues, as in COVID-19, the Igbo person is prepared to give up anything in order to retain life. Life is sacred and every other person is regarded as a brother, irrespective of lineage and descent. Cleanliness is held in utmost importance in Igbo culture. Its importance is based on the fact that it is one the lifestyles that ensures life and longevity, traditionally, days are set aside for environmental sanitation in various communities in Igboland. Cleanliness is also an issue to consider in the character of a lady to be married. Considering the prescriptions of the WHO in the fight against COVID-19, cleanliness or hygiene is paramount. Therefore, adopting the attitude of personal hygiene and environmental sanitation as a culture is key in the fight against COVID-19.

Socialism and solidarity are natural values in the traditional Igbo culture (Okeke 2015:115). These values are expressed in their attitude of helpfulness, collective responsibility, cooperation, interdependence and reciprocal obligation. The value of reciprocity is expressed in the Igbo maxim that says - *aka nri kwo aka ikpa, aka ikpa akwo aka nri, aka abuo adi ocha* - meaning, "if the right hand washes the left hand, and the left hand washes the right hand, both hands must become clean". Seeking the well-being of each other is a unique value in Igbo culture. A typical Igbo person is willing to share part of his inadequate meal with his neighbor without feeling that he has done something extraordinary. Julius Nyerere (1968)

corroborates this value of sharing and attributed it to the belief in common human descent and universal brotherhood. This culture of seeking each other's wellbeing informs why individuals among the Igbo are supportive of others during the lockdown to ensure that nobody around them dies of hunger. To the Africans and the Igbo in particular, the sense of common good is a core shared value (Okeke 2015). This is commonly expressed in Igbo maxims like, *biri kam biri* meaning "live and let's live", *egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ye ebela, nku kwaa ya* meaning "let the hawk perch while the eagle perch, may any one that refuses the other a space be violently dewinged".

Unity and solidarity are regarded as cosmic values in Igbo culture. The Igbo usually demonstrate the power of unity and solidarity with the broom. A community can hardly be defeated by war, plague or hunger when they are united. The basis of this solidarity and unity is love. To the Igbo, fidelity is the soul of life and it is highly cherished. Fidelity means keeping chaste and being true to what you profess. Without fidelity, a covenant relationship (*igba ndu*) is meaningless. The antonym for fidelity is infidelity which also means corruption. In the present Nigerian political and economic situation, and with the COVID-19 pandemic, corruption can be a serious cog in the wheel for a successful eradication of the plague. An Igbo person believes that there is a covenant relationship between him and his relatives to which he must be true and sincere. Such covenant relationships are also called *erim*. The concept of *erim* is premised on the fact that no one is expected to engage in any act or conduct that will harm his or relatives. Thus in a situation of an outbreak of an infectious disease, an Igbo can quietly opt for self-isolation just to ensure the safety of his neighbour. That is why the traditional Igbo value of fidelity should be their watchword. In a speech, Uzezi (2020) says:

"I joined the medical profession because I wanted to save lives and just be like my father. The oath I took when being inducted into the profession and my determination to help people in need have been my biggest motivation during this crisis" (<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/press>)

Igbo traditional political system is built along the principle of egalitarianism which recognizes equality among citizens. This system of egalitarianism is quite different from kingship arrangement, though the Igbo recognizes title holders such as the *Nze* and *Ozo* who are respected solely on the basis of their hard work and achievements. Adopting the values of

equality of citizens and universal brotherhood of the Igbo cannot be over-emphasized in this period of a pandemic. No single individual is more important than the others, therefore, equal medical and economic attention should be given to every COVID-19 victim, irrespective of status, race or sex.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left a terrible impact on the society globally ranging from loss of human life, unprecedented challenge to public health, shortage of food supply and reduction in the global workforce. The lockdown has led to sudden economic and social disruption and tens of millions are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, especially in the developing countries including Nigeria. As many enterprises face existential threat, the joint research of WHO, ILO, FAO and IFAD discovered among other facts that up to half of the global 3.3 billion workforce are likely to lose their sources of livelihood (WHO, 13 October 2020). In fact, the report has it that there is a geometrical increase in the number of undernourished people because no income means no food and less food means less nutritious food. In Nigeria as well as other African nations, loss of livelihood will result in the increase in the number of vulnerable children. Igbo culture recognizes, respects, and has values that aim at protecting the family. Nigeria and the global society should give priority attention to such values to ensure the safety of children and women in the on-going pandemic, since they are the major constituents of the family.

In this present state of global crises from the COVID-19, people and nations must choose solidarity and cooperation over and against the pursuit of individual interest as found in Igbo culture. The Igbo are known for their close-knit relationships in which everyone is one another's keeper. The world must unite under the banner of mutual trust and inclusiveness in the face of the deepening COVID-19 crisis. According to Angela Merkel, the Prime Minister of Germany (2020) "As virtually no nation was spared by the COVID-19 pandemic, no country can solve this problem alone. We must work together". So our leaders in Nigeria must be committed to cooperation in international relations and to transparency, accountability and continuous improvement of the health care facilities.

There has to be a good sense of honesty and fidelity in our dealings with one another as individuals and as international bodies if the world will contain with challenge of COVID-19. This aligns with the Igbo culture that values brotherhood and sees a fellow human being as a person that deserves care because we all have common descent. The traditional Igbo

culture of truthfulness must be upheld in Nigeria and globally if the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic can be won. This principle agrees with the position of the United Nations when she launched ‘Verified Initiatives’ on 20 May 2020. Through the ‘Verified Initiative’, the UN is encouraging the world to check the advice we share about COVID-19 to our friends, families and social networks with the goal of saving lives. This is because the world can only contain the virus if every person has access to accurate, reliable information.

Nigeria’s government should launch a social media campaign to spread information about COVID-19 among vulnerable communities such as elders, disadvantaged people, illiterates and those in hinterlands as well as those with disabilities. Nigeria government should also team up with advertising agencies, actors, writers and comedians to highlight simple actions that can keep one safe, such as frequent hand washing, staying home, especially when sick, avoiding unnecessary social gathering, and not touching one’s face with unwashed hands. Poor governance, corruption, greed and in-transparency can only be abated with the moral values of fidelity, hospitality and universal brotherhood on the part of decision makers and the entire nation. Efforts should be made by the government to increase her supply of essential services by recruiting more health workers, as well as delivering and distributing vital medical supplies such as respirators, protective equipment and diagnostic tests. Nigeria and other nations should most importantly fight the vice of misinformation, and efforts should be made to rebuild trust and cooperation within and among nations. Responses of the Nigerian government to the COVID-19 pandemic should be comprehensive, equitable and inclusive so that none is left out or neglected. In a situation of pandemic as COVID-19, those who suffer most are usually women and children. These are the core groups that constitute the family.

Conclusion

The Igbo culture of communal living needs to be imbibed by Nigerians and the entire globe. With the grave impact of COVID-19 on the entire world, the Western culture that views the community as a mere secular institution must be replaced with Igbo culture that, according to Agulana (2011:139 61), conceives a community as having sacred unity with living members, its ancestors and the unborn children so that all can be their

sister's keeper. Indeed, Igbo culture sees community as supreme over individuals, accords equality to all citizens, and recognizes universal brotherhood and inclusiveness, and these values are needed more now than ever in Nigeria and the world over. Among these are values of brotherhood, socialism, and an extended family system where everybody cares for one another. Respect and care for the elderly and general respect for life. It has been recommended in this paper that the norms and values of the Igbo chiefly dictated by the people's allegiance to these supernatural beings should be upheld by all. Also, it will take strength, devotion, hard work, and honesty to fight COVID-19. Solidarity and cooperation should overtake individual interest. Caring for the life of all is important because of the principle of egalitarianism which recognizes equality among citizens. Life is sacred and every other person should be regarded as a brother or sister. All should adopt the attitude of personal hygiene and environmental sanitation as a culture is key in the fight against COVID-19. Moreover, the world can only contain the virus if every person has access to accurate, reliable information. All these values are regarded as cosmic values in Igbo culture. As Igbo culture recognizes, respects, and protects these groups because of their flair and values for large families, Nigerians and the entire world should give priority attention to the lives and safety of their citizens in this COVID-19 pandemic.

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