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### **COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE DIALECTICS OF CULTURE**

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#### **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all human endeavours, namely, politics, education, culture, and economy globally. Nigeria is not exempted from the ramifying impact of the pandemic. Therefore, this article analyses the impact of COVID-19 on the way of life of selected communities in the Anambra State of Nigeria, traversing marriage institutions, family life, education, religion, and festivities. The article argues that the pandemic has greatly affected the studied communities, that is, Abatete, Ogidi, Uke, and Umuoji towns in the Idemili North local government area of Anambra. For example, traditional ceremonies like the Uzo-Iyi festival of Uke town, Uzo-Iyi of Umuoji town, Omaliko festival of Abatete town, Nwafor festival of Ogidi, and the Imo-Awka did not hold. While the article underlines the absence of conviction on the part of the studied population concerning the existence of COVID-19, it suggests the need for stakeholders to devise ways to educate the people on the necessity of adhering to the precautionary measures introduced by the government and its agencies. Equally, stakeholders should emphasize the point that observance of the rules and regulations governing COVID-19 by the people will not in any way jeopardize their cultures but rather enhance the wellbeing of the people.*

**Keywords:** Anambra, communities, COVID-19, pandemic, cultures

#### **Introduction**

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that started in Wuhan, Hubei province China in December 2019 and has now spread to all the continents (Alvarez et al. 2020). The COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan China among a cluster of patients presented with an unidentified form of viral pneumonia with a shared history of visiting the Huanan Seafood market (Peeri et al. 2020). According to Hegarty cited in (Jandric, 2020) Dr. li, Wenliang was the one who raised the alarm in the early days of the outbreak. He compared it with the ordinary flu, though he was not taken seriously and it soon became obvious that Coronavirus is far more dangerous than the flu. Still, the 33 years old Dr. Li later died of the infection on 7th February 2020.

In the meantime, the Coronavirus disease has spread to all the continents of the world which led the World Health Organization to declare it as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 as a result of over 118,000 cases of the Coronavirus illness in over 110 countries and territories around the world and the sustained risk of further global spread, Ducharme (in Jandric 2020). The pandemic has led to massive global challenges and alterations to the cultures and communities of the world. Ways of life of many communities have been altered, and some cultural traits and materials that are alien to the original cultures have also introduced to the autochthonous cultures of almost all communities in the world making it difficult for people to adapt to their new way of life. Communities are also thrown into confusion due to the fear of the scourge of this

novel Coronavirus couple with the new guidelines that are put in place for the possible containment of the Coronavirus disease. From experience in Anambra State through careful observation of happenings and chitchats with the members of the public since the outbreak of this pandemic, a lot of changes, mixed reactions, atrocities, and so on has trailed this COVID-19 pandemic, and these have a great impact on the cultures and different communities in Anambra State. Schools, churches mosques, markets, and other social gatherings were closed/stopped. There was a restriction of movements, no marriage, no burial, no meetings, and so on. People no longer go to work which paved the way for hunger which in turn contributed to increasing people's sufferings with the issue at hand.

Therefore, this qualitative study examines the state of selected cultures and communities in a COVID-19 pandemic in Anambra State using the observational method. Okpoko and Eze (2011) defined qualitative research as the collection and analysis of virtually any information that is not numerical. The choice of the qualitative study was because the paper tries to find out how the pandemic has affected the selected communities and cultures and why it is so. This is because qualitative research provides a detailed description of the perspective and context of the problem within a given context or environment. The study was able to find out that the COVID-19 pandemic has some effects on the cultures and some communities in the State. It also exposed the people's reactions to the outbreak of Coronavirus disease in 2019.

### **Conceptualising Culture, Community and COVID-19 Pandemic**

Every society has a social norm that frames the ways they act, and their total world view such as how they interact with each other, their freedom of movement, what they eat or drink, their dressing pattern, the way they see things, and so on. All these are enshrined in one concept called culture. This culture happens to be the key to the global response to community engagement in the current COVID-19 pandemic (Airhihenbuwa et al. 2020).

Okereke (2004) notes that culture is derived from the Latin word 'Cultura', meaning the cultivation of the soil. Jahoda (2012) notes that it was only in 18th –century France that the single term culture began to be used and to acquire the sense of training or refinement of the mind or taste. It was rapidly extended to refer to the qualities of an educated person and has retained that meaning until today (Jahoda, 2012). Sociology and anthropology view culture broadly to include anything that human beings do that does not have a biological basis: all human phenomena that are not the product of biological inheritance. Thus, the social anthropological concept of culture takes care of not only behaviour that is refined" and "proper" or civilised" but all learned behaviour whether the behaviour is material or non-material, covert or overt, thriving fashions of the moment or faded shibboleths of the ages. Included in the concept are all imaginable pieces or patterns of behaviour, any attitude, value or belief, any skill that human beings learn as members of a human group, plus the manufacture or use of any material item that derived from these human abilities (Okereke, 2004). E.B. Tylor (In Okereke, 2004) in his book "Primitive Culture" defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society".

Ruth Benedict (Baldwin et al. 2006) defines culture as a pattern of thought and action, of which the total is "more than the sum of their traits". At the same time, many authors see culture in terms of the whole way of life. Culture affects every one of us every day in many aspects of our lives. It is, therefore, the framework that informs us

how to respond to events, objects, outbreaks, and people in our environment without conscious thought. To Baldwin et al. (2006), culture is a sign, an empty vessel waiting for people both academicians and everyday communicators to fill with meaning.

Based on the preceding, it becomes imperative that a new way of life be introduced to fit into the scourge of this COVID-19 pandemic for peoples' survival. To the evolutionary theory, culture exists for man to survive in a harsh environment and such a harsh environment could be this COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging the communities of the world.

To this end, anything that man discovered and that is useful becomes part of their culture. Culture, such as wearing of face/nose mask, social distancing, lockdowns, and so on came up as a result of necessity (COVID-19) to safeguard the members of the public and to prevent community transmission. Hence, the need for the adjustment in the indigenous culture to avoid distorting the communities because anything that affects the community, affects culture and anything that affect the culture affects the community because there is no culture without community and vice-versa.

Community, according to Cohen (2013) is a cultural field with a complex of symbols, whose meanings vary among its members. It can mean anything from a small and defined geographical area to a group of persons who interact in a face-to-face manner. A Community can also be seen as the people living together in one geographical area usually held together by the same principle and ideology or the same cultural identity. Since these people live together and do things in common, anything that affects one member will likely affect other members in the community, and that is why there are some guidelines and precautionary measures mapped out for this Coronavirus disease outbreak because the virus is highly infectious to avoid total transmission and fatality.

Airhihenbuwa et al. (2020), said that Coronavirus is the Ebola of the rich and requires a coordinated transnational effort. It is a global pandemic and Harris in Qiu et al. (2017) note that the internationally accepted definition of a pandemic as it appears in the Dictionary of Epidemiology is "an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people" It is not particularly lethal, but it is very contagious. Peeri et al. (2020) note that COVID-19 is a new strain of Coronavirus not previously identified in humans. According to Singhai (2020), the virus originated in bats and was transmitted to humans through yet unknown intermediary animals in Wuhan Hubei province, China. Rothan and Byrareddy (2020) maintained that Coronavirus disease is caused by SARS-CoV2 and represents the causative agent of a potentially fatal disease of great global public health concern. Based on the large number of infected people exposed to the wet animal market in Wuhan city, China. It is suggested that this is likely by the zoonotic origin of COVID-19. They also note that Coronavirus is one of the major pathogens that primarily targets the human respiratory system and that the previous outbreaks of Coronavirus (CoVs) include the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-CoV and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)-Cov which have been previously characterised as agents that are of great public health threat. This Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Coronavirus. According to Singhai (2020), this novel Coronavirus spreads faster than its two ancestors, the SARS- CoV and Middle East respiratory syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV), but has lower fatality.

### **Objectives of the Paper**

The objective of this paper is to examine the effects of COVID-19 on cultures and certain communities in Anambra state. To find out whether the pandemic affects their cultures or they ignored the pandemic while they go about their normal ways of life. It also aims to find out the people's perception of the pandemic. The significance and the importance of the study lie in the fact that it will help the government and policy-makers to know the proper ways of sensitising the public on the need to adhere strictly to the precautionary measures to save lives first because culture cannot exist without society and that it is only when people are alive that they can talk of their culture. To find the best way of reporting the COVID-19 cases so that people should be certain that the virus is real with evidence of the patients in hospitals, they contracted the virus possibly how and where they got the virus. The mixed feelings about its existence will reduce and people will be more careful. Still, on the contrary, if people are not carried along well, it will amount to total fatality should this virus spread like wildfire as it did in the European countries.

### **Methodology**

The study was based on a qualitative ethnographic research design, and the data used in the paper were obtained from direct first-hand information and Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and In-depth Interview (IDI) as supplementary methods because the study wished to examine and describe the COVID-19 and the dialectics of cultures and selected communities in Anambra state. However, the researcher used participant observation as the main instrument of data collection in the study. The researcher visits the study communities regularly and stays with the study participants. Participant as an observer aspect of participant observation was used in this study where the researcher adopted different strategies which include a conversation with varying degrees of formality, from the daily chitchats, which helps to maintain rapport and provide knowledge about the happenings in the communities, to prolonged unstructured interviews. Furthermore, the researcher also picked one research assistant from one of the communities who was properly trained and helped in conducting FGD. The participants for the FGD and IDI were selected through contact and they fell between the ages of 30 and 70. FGD was conducted in one of the communities, which comprise 10 participants, five male, and five female. Several IDIs were conducted in each of the communities. The choice was to represent each community and also because of funding.

The data analysis method adopted for the study was narrative and descriptive. Its advantage lies in allowing the researcher to narrate and describe field experience. The researcher began the analysis of participant observation, together with unstructured in-depth interviews during the process of data collection. The data gotten after each fieldwork were coded and grouped for further field activities. The researcher first created files, placed the excerpts from the field notes into separate data files, transcribed and translated interviews, ranging from daily chitchats to prolonged ones. Also, for the analysis of the data got through FGD, the researcher transcribed and translated the tape for a group session, listened to the tape with the transcription in front to address the connotations of some comments. The researcher also gave codes to the transcriptions based on similarities and differences and finally aligns them with the data from other instruments.

### **An Overview of Norms/Values of Selected Communities in Anambra State**

This qualitative study was carried out in Abatete, Ogidi, Uke, and Umuoji towns, all in the Idemili North local government area of Anambra. They are all Igbo-speaking communities with some similarities in their tradition. They are semi-urban communities that still maintain part of their indigenous culture. The inhabitants are interdependent on each other and share a common belief, so most of them find it difficult to adapt to the new normal. Their people are mostly traders and peasants. The communities are all patriarchal societies with much preference for a male child and the man's decision is final although there is room for the opinion of women. The Uke and Umuoji people respect their traditions so much. At the same time, Ogidi and Abatete due to their contact and closeness to major markets and cities now borrow some alien cultures but still keep some of their cultures. They have major popular festivals they are known for which serve as a unifying force every year because their sons and daughters do travel home for the festival. Abatete is known for its Omaliko festival every June. Ogidi is known for the Nwafor festival around July, Uke for their Uzo-Iyi while Umuoji is also known for the Uzo-Iyi festival. There are many markets in these communities, mostly on each of the four Igbo market days on which ceremonies like traditional weddings and burial are not allowed to be fixed. For instance, you do not do burial and other traditional ceremonies on Eke day in Abatete and Uke because their major market day falls on Eke day. There are many schools both public and private in these communities, and the towns have many elites in different fields. However, there are some people who are not graduates and few uneducated people who find it difficult to come to terms with this pandemic called Coronavirus disease. Most of the local people were not aware of similar cases of Coronavirus like the 1918 - 1919 Spanish flu when these measures such as the use of face masks, social distancing hand washing, and so on were first introduced. They had no idea that such a thing has ever happened before and that is why some of them said that Coronavirus is a scam, and some thought it a sign of end time, and that is why it is difficult for them to understand the reason behind the introduction of those measures.

### **Effect of COVID-19 on Cultures in Selected Communities in Anambra State**

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa was announced in Nigeria on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. The 44-year-old Italian citizen who arrived the country via the Murtala Muhammed International Airport on 24 February aboard a Turkish airline from Milan, Italy later moved to Ogun state before his morbidity that led to the referral to Infectious Disease Hospital (IDH), in Lagos and his subsequent diagnosis (Oyeniran & Chia, 2020). On March 9, 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, a Nigerian citizen who contacted the Italian citizen (Odunayo,2020). The virus then spreads to all the 36 states of the federation with total confirmed cases of 55,005, 43,013 discharged, 10, 935 active cases, and 1,057 deaths on 6 September 2020 (Covid19.ncdc.gov.ng). This has a lot of social-cultural influence on the behaviour, stress, and coping of the people in the society.

According to (Qiu et al. 2017), there have been several significant pandemics recorded in human history, including smallpox, cholera, plague, dengue, AIDS, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The impacts of the pandemics included limited travel, and the closure of schools, markets, and sports. They note that movement,

including visiting families, carrying goods to the market, was restricted by the military checkpoints. A study carried out by (Wen et al. 2020) on COVID-19: to determine the potential effects on Chinese citizens' lifestyle and travel found out that COVID-19 greatly influenced the Chinese cultural values and lifestyles. Collectivism is said to be a Chinese distinguishing feature which frames Chinese individuals' lifestyle choices. For example, Chinese travellers have traditionally preferred all-inclusive package tours or group travel when visiting popular destinations, Chen et al. Huang et al. and Wu & Wall (Wen et al. 2020). They enjoy travelling during public holidays, such as the Spring Festival, to reunite with families, Wu & Wall in (Wen et al. 2020). The Chinese also enjoy dining together with others, whether during special occasions or to connect more casually but the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely changed their lifestyle. In another study on lessons from the Ebola epidemics and their applications for COVID-19 pandemic response in sub-Saharan Africa (Afolabi et al. 2020), the introduction of the new normal ( the precautionary measures ) such as the promotion of regular hand washing, use of hand sanitizers, and social distancing seem to be challenging to practice on a continent where the significant large population resides in urban slums, informal settlements and townships with poor access to water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure. It was also revealed that the lockdown in response to the Ebola virus disease (EVD) and the COVID-19 pandemic had also been challenging, as social distancing is contrary to the culture of regular body contacts.

In Igbo land precisely in Anambra State among the Ogidi, Abatete, Uke, and Umuoji people who formed the study area of this work, there is this culture of collectivism and interdependent in the sense that, they do certain things in common like visiting of neighbours to know how they are faring, borrowing what you do not have from others who in turn depend on other people on what they lack, identifying with the bereaved family/burying the dead, they also eat together when they meet any of their people eating, they hug each other as a way of greeting especially among the women, do village meetings together and so on but the new social norms introduced as precautionary measures such as wearing of face/nose masks, frequent hand washing, restriction of movement, a system of greeting, and social distancing adversely impacted on the indigenous culture of some communities in Anambra State to the extent that most people in the village find it difficult to adapt. For example, people were told not to hug/embrace each other which is a norm among the women in these communities to greet each other. These women see it as something introduced to tear them apart and ignored the rule of social distancing until it was dawn on them that the virus disease has entered Anambra State which made some of them to key into the new norm while some still insist on adhering to the old way of life adding that there is no such disease in the state. The men are not left out in this mixed reaction because many of them do not believe in the existence of the virus in Anambra State.

In some social gatherings, you find out that social distancing is not maintained in places like markets, commercial vehicles, and some ceremonies unless there is a law enforcement agent around. The researcher observed that the people both traders and buyers at the major markets in Anambra state; the Onitsha main market and the Eke Awka market are among the major defaulters of the government directive COVID-19 guidelines. People go about freely without face masks, no social distancing, nobody cared about hand washing, sanitizers, and so on and this made the Anambra State Government shut down the popular Eke Awka market for two weeks to serve as a deterrent to others. This action compelled compliance. In some communities, this norm is recognised, and people adhere to them. In such communities, you find out that their

culture is being tampered with because some traditional ceremonies like the Uzo-Iyi festival of Uke town, Uzo-Iyi of Umuoji town, Omaliko festival of Abatete town, Nwafor festival of Ogidi, and the Imo-Awka did not hold again although, the Imo-Awka festival took place, but not as it is being done other years but the other ones were severally affected. Most of the study participants were not happy with the development stressing that the constraints of the COVID-19 have upset their existential drudgeries and projections. Even the businessmen and women especially bars and restaurant owners were seriously affected because some of them that prepared for the festivals incurred a lot of debts. After all, what they prepared was no longer sold out to anybody. The festivals unite each community as their indigenes do travel home yearly for the festivals, but there was no such thing again due to the lockdown. Social-cultural gatherings like meetings were stopped, marriage institution was disrupted (no opportunity for intending couple to get married), people no more go to work which prompted hunger to set in and frequent chaos in the family between parents and the children. Children no longer go to school due to school closure which exposed some of the children to some social vices like stealing, fighting, immoral behaviours, etc. People mourn and bury their dead loved ones alone because everyone now sees each other as stranger thereby introducing this culture of individualism and independent attitude which a typical Igbo man is not used to and which if not checked may affect the autochthonous culture of the indigenous communities should this COVID-19 remain in the country.

There are no developmental projects anymore because people were no longer allowed to stay together and those in the city that normally return during some ceremonies (wedding) or festivals could not travel home for their re-union or mass return, and this adversely affects the communities. Burying a dead member also became a tedious task because you find out that people out of fear of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) no longer come out to condole or identify with the bereaved family and to even assist them as they normally do, only the family members now take up that responsibility. Thank God for the eased lockdown because some village men and women who are ignorant of what is expected of them during this pandemic would have died of hunger because some of them think that people are not allowed to leave their compound even to go out to their farm work.

Communities were also thrown into turmoil as a lot of bad people now use this COVID-19 pandemic as an avenue to defraud and cause havoc to the members of the public. They will act as government officials enforcing the use of facemask patrolling around the towns and communities in the State extorting money from the defaulters and kidnapping some defaulters to take them to their office for defiling the use of face mask order, a lot of people were kidnapped. Some were lucky to come back alive while some did not return. Based on the foregoing, it is evident that COVID-19 has some impacts on the cultures and communities in Anambra State and Nigeria.

#### **Mixed Reactions about COVID-19/ Discussion**

The findings of this study showed the incredulous attitude of the people toward the reality of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). People are not happy with the way things are going due to the pandemic, especially its effects on cultures of the land which according to an IDI participant "scattered things for them". The findings of the study further revealed that the pandemic had several changes in the cultures of some selected communities in Anambra state. Some of their cultures were halted, and some adjusted to curtail the spread of the virus especially the annual festivals which they

always look up to. It also exposed the mixed reactions that trailed the COVID-19 pandemic and then called on the stakeholders to find the best and possible way of educating the populace on the need to be law-abiding and to know that the precautionary measures introduced are to the interest of the masses and not in any way to jeopardise their cultures.

There are several reactions to the existence of this Coronavirus disease in Nigeria, particularly in Anambra State. Based on the findings of this study through daily observation and discussion with some members of the public from cities, towns, in commercial vehicles, and among the public school teachers, most of the study participants from the in-depth interviews (IDI) and focused group discussion (FGD) strongly believed that there is nothing like Coronavirus in Nigeria, especially in Anambra State. They said that the government is using it as a strategy to get the fund. One of the IDI participants said that “our leaders are not real, that the virus is real outside Nigeria but not real in Nigeria. That he was in Lagos on August 3 to pick one of his aunties who came from the outside country but was shocked when people who are supposed to be in isolation were being tested and allowed to go, that even some offered money to the officers without being tested to avoid staying long on the cue. He stressed that if really the virus is here, that it will spread like wildfire considering the crowd and attitude of Nigerians in this pandemic. Therefore the virus is not here”. Another person said that the government offered the religious authorities a bribe to shut down churches and mosques in the name of containing what is not even in Nigeria. Some teachers I was communicating with told me that they were ordered to halt everything even the first term exam and asked to close and go home because of Coronavirus disease when Anambra has not even recorded any case but that they are surprised how they are ordered to resume school now that they said Anambra has a lot of COVID-19 cases. In their word, “this whole thing is irony”. Thousands are saying that they have not seen any COVID-19 patient and that the government keeps on increasing the number of confirmed cases in Anambra State without mentioning names or even towns of those patients or where they contracted the disease so that everybody will be at alert.

Currently from the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) report on the 6th September 2020, Anambra State has recorded 221 cases of this COVID-19, 181 recovered, and 19 deaths (Covid19.ncdc.gov.ng). There was a time around June when Anambra Government reported that ten people in Idemili North Local Government Area had contracted the disease and people were anxious to know who they are or at least the towns in Idemili North where the virus has entered for proper measures to be put in place, but this did not happen. In Anambra State, you hardly see people maintaining social distance or wearing facemasks. Many only wear a face mask when they see the government officials enforcing the order or in the cities or gatherings where it is compulsory. The bus drivers also are not helping matters. They always have their buses filled up with few wearing facemasks. At times you see people mocking those who maintain the COVID-19 guidelines that they are making a caricature of themselves by abiding by the COVID-19 guidelines when they know full well that there is nothing like Coronavirus disease in Anambra state.

### **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations**

There have been cases of significant pandemics recorded in human history. The crises related to these pandemics have had negative impacts on health, the economy, and culture among others. The pandemics have infected millions of people resulting in



widespread serious illnesses and deaths. Although the prevailing Coronavirus is in Nigeria, the number of casualties and deaths is nothing to compare with their counterparts in America, Europe, and Asian countries. The fact that Nigeria does not have better medical facilities or communication advantage more than the countries in the aforementioned continents, calls for further studies to unravel the mystery behind it. Could it be the warmer temperatures that have slowed down the spread of the COVID-19 in Nigeria? Or is it the public health intervention programme or any other thing else? The COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious threat not only to the population of the world but also to its culture. The custodians of each culture should be informed, and should in turn explain their people that things will normalise once the pandemic is over. The reporting of the COVID-19 cases should also be done in such a way that everyone is carried along and not to misinform the members of the public. This paper, even as it ex-rays the impacts of COVID-19 on cultures and communities in Anambra State, also suggests to the government, and stakeholders to look for a better strategy to make people understand that the Coronavirus is real. The low level of compliance with laws on the control of the pandemic underlines the point being made. Worse still, some of those who once believed in the reality of the virus, now have mixed reactions and questions its existence because in their words, “everybody is supposed to have contracted the virus if it is really in Anambra State considering the carefree attitude of people in their interaction with each other: no social distancing anymore; no nose masks even in the market, churches, social gatherings...”

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