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COVID-19 AND PHYSICAL DISTANCING: CULTURE PREYING ON CULTURE

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Abstract

Corona Virus (Covid-19), a pandemic which has instilled fear into humans of all races, was first discovered in Wuhan City in China. As at the time of this work, no known cure was discovered for the ailment. Amongst the regulatory and safety measures suggested for the prevention of the spread of Covid-19 is physical distancing. This paper expresses worry over the impact this directive may have on the people of the Southeastern Nigeria, considering their culture of social and communal living. While encouraging the people to ensure Covid-19 protocols, the paper advises that caution should be applied in such a way that the long time cherished norms and values of the people will not be eroded. This paper which will be of immense benefit to the general public, especially, the adherents of Igbo cultural practices, adopts social theory of culture. It used survey research design and critical analytical discourse to direct the research efforts on the concept of physical distancing, Various moments in Igbo cultural life that could be affected by physical distancing, Some adjustment in Igbo way of life, to accommodate Covid-19 safety measures. The paper admits the importance of Covid-19 safety measures but not to the detriment of the Igbo cherished norms. The paper recommends an adjustment and remodeling of some Igbo norms and cultural activities in such a way that they will be complaint to Covid-19 safety measures.

Keywords: Corona Virus, Pandemic, Culture, Safety, Physical distancing.

Background of the study

Corona Virus (Covid-19) is an infectious disease caused by a new strain of Corona Virus that causes humans to sick. Experts and scientist are still studying about the disease and opined that the virus developed from animals. Human later got infected through animals and those infected humans started transmitting and spreading the infection to other humans.

The disease spreads from person to person via infected air droplets that are released during sneezing or coughing. It can also be transmitted when humans have contact with hands or

surfaces that contain the virus and touching the eyes, nose or mouth with the contaminated hands.(www.africa.cdc.org/covid-19))

The Corona virus which started from Wuhan city China, spread to almost all the countries of the globe, including Nigeria. According to Igbokwe, (2020: 21)

> ... Nigeria contacted the worldwide corona virus pandemic (Covid-19) which is caused by a severe acute respiratory syndrome, corona virus 2 (SARS-COV2).
>
> The first confirmed case was announced on 27 February 2020 when an Italian was confirmed positive in Lagos the 9th of March 2020. A citizen of Nigeria was declared positive in Ewekoro, Ogun State, from that point corona virus spread in all the states in the country, including the Igbo cultural states.

Since the arrival of Covid-19 in different parts of the world and in Nigeria in particular, the stakeholders in health sector, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), collectively and in their different capacities have made several efforts to provide cure as well as safety measures for the prevention of the spread of the virus. Among the recommendations and directives provided for the prevention of Covid-19 spread is social/physical distancing and this has become controversial in several cultural areas where it has been enforced. It became controversial because it imposed restrictions on peoples way of life, including their businesses.

Some excerpts on the observance of social/physical distancing reads: Maintain at least a 1-Meter distance between yourself and others, to reduce the risk of infection when they cough, sneeze or speak. Maintain an even greater distance between yourself and others when indoors. The further away the better ... If Covid-19 is spreading in your community, stay safe by taking some simple precautions, such as physical distancing, wearing a mask, keeping rooms well ventilated, avoiding crowds, ... (www.who.int/emergency)

From the above, one can deduce the strong effect of physical/social distancing on the norms and culture of a people. The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria are social by nature. They live a communal life and have several moments in their life that require interpersonal interaction. The newly imposed life of physical distancing as against the age long life of social interaction amounts to an alien culture swallowing the existing culture of a people.

Theoretical framework

The social theory of culture basically talks about the society and the people therein. According to Clammar, (2012), as cited in Umeodinka, (2020: 59) "Social and cultural theories make effort to give explanations to how people relate to one another and or the surrounding environment".

The above mentioned theory explains people's behavior and mental process as they relate to the society and culture. While very relevant in human relationship and communication, it also accounts for the variables in individuals.

The social theory of culture is therefore regarded as a utility theory that touches all aspects of human daily living on information sharing, news, ideas, feelings etc. It also explains individual difference in relation to how those individuals are affected by socio-cultural differences.

Culture as a concept

Culture, in summary is the totality of the people's way of life. It embodies whatever knowledge someone has or what one believes in, that make one behave in conformity with other members of the society.

In the words of Hudson, (1980: 74), "Culture is a knowledge which someone acquires socially by virtue of the person being a member of a specific society ... Culture is a knowledge people acquire in their community as a result of learning".

Culture functions well when it satisfies man as well as takes care of one's various social needs. Social life cannot be meaningful nor develop its riches without such satisfaction. (Igbokwe, 2013: 276)

Man primarily is a cultural animal, for he is both a creative and a creator of culture. Bail, (1997), as presented in Igbokwe, (2013: 276), describes culture to imply, "Man's behavioural pattern, including habits and capabilities; culture is characterized by sociality. In society, man acquires the values with which he learns to socialize with others and make contribution in his society".

Humans are social creature, this can be observed from several things they do among themselves. Clammar, (2012), as cited in Umeodinka, (2020: 58), shares the same view when he said "... they co-habit and form common habits and behaviours, shop in the same markets and exhibit some characteristic shopping behavior ..."

The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria are socially cultured people. The greater part of their life is spent under social moments and communal living. Their way of life overtime have become their habit, as well as taken the greater part of them. Talking about already acquired habits and culture, Arinze, (1982: 193), posits,

> To the Igbo the introduction of social/physical distancing as a new order will not only make them feel insecure, but will eat up their well cherished norms and values, which had become part of their lives over the centuries".

It can be deduced from the above citation that any imposition of a strange way of life to a people will definitely give them a feeling of a fish drawn out of the water.

Aspects of Igbo Cultural Life That Could Be Preyed On By Physical/Social Distancing

The Igbo family system

Family, according to Webster online dictionary, is a social group made up of parents and their children. Family could further be described as a group of people living together.

Anozie, (2003: 99) explains, "Ezinaulo putara ulo ma o bu ebe o bula di, nwunye na umu ha bi dika ndi nwere otu nkpuke"

"Family means a home or place where the husband, wife and children live together under a roof"

It is important to point out the fact that the type of family system adopted by Igbo culture is the extended family system, where the husband, his wife/wives and their numerous children live together as one family. The family also is made up of nephew, nieces, daughters of the family married to other places and their children including all the blood relations.

In this extended family system, the husband, wife/wives and their children live together, cook and eat together, hold discussions and interactions in a special way. (Anozie, 2003: 100)

From the above descriptions of a family, it is interesting to point out where it was described as "a social group" as well as the activities that go on in the family, like living together under a roof, cooking and eating together, closer discussions and interactions in a special way.

If these activities have been the way of life of a people over the years and all of a sudden there came an imposition of social/physical distancing, which literarily and practically severe them from coming together and holding their activities that hold them as a family, then the people's culture is endangered.

The Igbo culture of Hospitality

The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria are very hospitable. They have unique ways of receiving visitors. In receiving a guest, the Igbo as part of greeting methods go as far as handshake and embrace. These two methods of greetings go a long way in portraying intimacy and deep feelings between the people involved.

Osuagwu, (1978: 150) describes,

> ".... otu uzo ha ji ekelekwa ekele bu site n'ibi oma. O buru na mmadu ahu enyi, nwanne ya o bu onye oma ya o bula, o nwere ike kele ya site n'ibi ya oma. O na-egosi anuri ha nwere n'ihukorita onwe ha. Nke a na-abukarisi ndi o bu na o teela aka ha ahubeghi onwe ha. Otutu oge o bu umu nwanyi na-aka eme nkea. Nwoke na ibe ya na-ebi oma nwanyi na ibe ya na-ebikwa oma. Nani nwoke na-nwanyi ndi bu nwanne bu ndi nwere ihe ibi oma. E nwere ike ibi oma n'uzo, n'ahia ma o bu n'ulo.
>
> One way through which they greet is embrace. When one sees one's friend, brother, sister or anyone one is in good terms with, one can greet him or her by hugging. It portrays the joy they have in seeing each other. This is mostly for those who have not seen each other for a very long time. More often than not women are seen hugging each other. A man can hug a fellow man and a woman can hug a fellow woman. Only a man who is related to a woman can hug her. People can embrace on the road, in the market or in the house.

In Igbo culture after greeting the visitor, the next thing that follows is kola nut presentation.

Kola nut presentation is one of the most surviving cultural practices of the Igbo man. It is the first thing presented to a visitor before he utters his reason for the visit. Osuji, (2009: 44), describes kola nut as "a symbol of peace, respect, goodwill, acceptability, settlement of quarrel and anything that stand for love and unity".

From the above citation, it is clear that kola nut and its presentation has formed the integral part of the culture of the people. An aspect of kola nut hospitality that is of much concern to the paper is the presentation of kola nut.

During the presentation the host puts the kola nut in a dish and presents it to the visitor. The visitor will receive the kola nut and return it back to who gave it to him with a saying "oji eze aloghachi" which means that kola nut usually returns to the host. In the case of large gatherings, the kola nut is passed from hand to hand, according to kinship relations, and after this movement it returns to the host (elder) for blessing. After the kola nut is blessed, what follows is sharing of the kola nut to all people that gathered.

From the above explanation, kola nut does not come out in isolation, it is usually presented to guests be it in the family, kindred, village or town gatherings whether formal or informal.

The point this paper intends to present in relation to the topic of this work is that kola nut hospitality, which is part of Igbo way of life is usually a communal act which involves gathering of people. The introduction of social/physical distancing to a society that have lived with the norm since their life, will not only infringe on their right of existence, but a surest way of killing their culture.

The Igbo cultural festivals

The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria have many cultural festivals which they celebrate annually or bi-annually, as the case may be. During the celebration of these festivals they not only invite their sons and daughters, both at home and abroad to come home, but also extend their invitations to in laws, friends, relations, as well as lovers of culture and tradition. Most of these festivals like Iri ji (New yam festival), Mmonwu (masquerade), Iwa akwa (Initiation to adulthood), Iru Mgbede (Marriage preparation) require people coming together at the designated venues and arena.

Iri ji (New yam) festival

In Igbo traditional society, before a farmer eats the yam for the first time in a year, he performs some kind of ceremony to celebrate the eating of that yam. There are many reasons for that celebration, including the fact that yam is the king of all crops and highly celebrated, and as such a farmer needs to purify himself before eating the yam. Again it is believed that if the farmer respects the yam, then the yam will in turn increase its yield. The primary motive for Iri ji festival is to thank and appreciate the Almighty God for His blessings of life and sustenance for the farmers as well as for the bumper harvest and great yield of yam crops. A farmer may do the planting and may not be alive to harvest it. Also a farmer may plant seed yams, but flooding, draught, outbreak of pestilence and other natural disaster may prevent the crop from bringing any output. All these and more contribute to the reasons for this highly revered festival in Igbo culture.

In establishing the fact that a cultural festival of this nature entails gathering of the people, Osuji, (2009: 113), explains:

> New yam eating festival is characterized by exchange of visits and gifts, excessive feasting, slaughtering of cows and fowls and eating of yam prepared in various forms ... Today it is most universally observed Igbo festival and that is why the event is punctuated with several activities as part of the main programme. These activities may include symposium, excursions, football, or wrestling competitions. ... It is an occasion to celebrate new yams and enjoy the season with friends, in-laws, well wishers and kits and kin.

From the above citation, several activities are mapped out as features and high points during the Iri ji festival and none of these activities can be done in isolation.

Ezeuko, (1986: 54), explains:

> "... oriri iwa ji kacha ha niile ekpo oku n'ala Igbo, ma burukwa nke otutu obodo so eme. Mmemme a na-emeka e zisaa ikwu na ibe, ndi enyi ka ha bia sonye n'oriri na onunu n'ubochi ahu. Ubochi a na-abu ubochi inwe anuri. Egwu di iche iche na mmanwu di iche iche na-aputa n'ubochi ahu. Ihe ndia nile na-eme ka obodo kpoo oku ma nyekwa ndu ohuru n'ime mmadu.
>
> Iri ji festival is the most prominent in Igbo land as well as involves many communities. In this festival, invitations are sent to relations, friends and well wishers to come and join in merriment that day. All these bring life to the community as well as renew people's life.

Buttressing the nature of Iri ji festival as a communal gathering of people, Osuagwa, (1978: 12-16), says,

> ... emume iri ji n'ala Igbo na-ewu ewu ebe o di ukwu. O na-abu oge umunne, ikwu na ibe ndi no ebe di iche iche na-eji erute ulo nwee nnoko di iche iche. ... Ndi ogo, ndi enyi, na ikwu na ibe di iche iche e ziri oku na-abia na ehihie na-eru. Onye na-abia o kporo ndi ezi na ulo ya burukwa mmayi. Ebe niile aburu mmadu mmadu".
>
> …iri ji festival is very popular. It is a period when brothers and sisters, friends and relations from different locations, come home for a special get together. In laws, friends and all other invited relations usually come at noon. As they come, they come along with their family as well as wine. Everywhere is filled with people.
>
> Iri ji ohuru is no doubt an Igbo cultural festival of numbers, the rule of social/physical distancing can never work effectively around the festival arena and any attempt to enforce it will translate to clamping down on the celebrants and guests and this will result to suppression of the culture of the people.

The Igbo culture of marriage

The culture of marriage in Igbo land is as old as Igbo themselves. Because it is very important aspect of Igbo culture, it is handed from generation to generation. To show the importance of marriage to the Igbo, any man who has attained maturity but refuses to marry is not accorded his due respect, because he cannot be taken seriously.

Marriage procedure in Igbo culture, ranging from the initial interaction between the suitor and the maiden, from investigations to knocking at the door, from the several visitations to the final right of marriage, payment of dowry and the lavish merriment, (Ihe nrisa) all require person to person interaction and coming together of kinsmen, friends and well wishers.

Anozie, (2003: 94), says,

> Ihe gbasara mmadu ilu nwanyi na nwa agboghobia ilu di bu nnukwu ihe nwere nsopuru puru iche n'ebe ndi Igbo no. O naghi abu emume gbasara naani nwoke choro ilu nwanyi na nwanyi o choro ilu. Mmeme e na-emetuta ndi umunna niile, nweekwa ike metuta ndi ogbe niile mebere otu obodo. Okwu chikoro nkowa niile onu bu okwu ndi Igbo a na-asi na otu onye anaghi alu nwanyi.
>
> The issue about man marrying a woman and a maiden marrying attracts much respect and regards to the Igbo. It is not an occasion for the suitor and the bride alone. This ceremony involves all the kinsmen, it may also involve all the villages that made up one community. The Igbo saying that summarizes this statement is "marriage is not for one person alone".

At any stage of marriage in Igbo culture the suitor selects his parents, brothers, sisters and kinsmen to accompany him. At the stages of marriage visitations progress, so also the number of people that may accompany the suitor increases. The climax of the marriage ceremony is usually the Igba nkwu, ihe nrisa, or ibu mmanya ukwu (as they are called by the different dialect areas). This stage of the marriage rite ceremony extends invitations to all and sundry to attend and it witnesses the greatest crowd of people and gathering since the first stage of the marriage rites and visitations.

Osuji, (2009: 22) explains,

> The ceremony before the prospective wife finally leaves her parents house for her new marital home is known as Ihe nrisa. This is the ceremony that turned out to be the culmination of several months or years of investigations, inquiries, negotiations, haggling and hard bargaining, endless visits, reciprocal and mutual understanding ... lavish merriment was just as its name implies eating, drinking, singing and dancing featured in the occasion.

The above citation further exposes the long term interactions and close contacts involved in the process of marriage, which means that and ideal marriage procedure cannot be carried out without people coming together at several stages.

Igbokwe, (2020: 136), confirms,

> Haggling usually takes much time, at times the hagglers disperse and reassemble again. When they reached a compromise, excitement usually fill the air, there will be handshakes among the men folk and women will embrace, these are accompanied by ululations and chants of victory. After all these, the bride price will be handed over to the parents of the bride, and what follows is Ihe nrisa, people are entertained lavishly.

The above citations have been able to paint a vivid picture of stages, processes and procedures of marriage in Igbo traditional society. The points to note from the foregoing is that marriage as a culture of the Igbo requires several visitations, again those visitations are made by group of people who interact, do handshake and embrace. What the revelation implies is that social/physical distancing, which is one of the recommended safety measures against the spread of Covid-19, if applied or enforced during marriage ceremony in Igbo culture, will surely make a mess of these age long procedures and possibly bring undue change in the cultural practices from what and how they should be.

Before marriage in Igbo culture, certain initiations rites that are done in order to prepare a young man for marriage, all require gathering together, interactions dancing and merry making. Iwa akwa, which is a programme organized to prepare a young man for marriage, requires assembling these young men together in a particular place or designated seclusion where they will be given orientation about married life. Iwa akwa ceremony or festival which is also used to receive them into adulthood as well as prepare them for family responsibilities, requires converging together and finally, they are taken to the market square where they dance as well as receive gifts and compliments from their well wishers.

All these cultural programmes can hardly be celebrated under physical distance order.

Burial/funeral rites in Igbo culture

Igbo culture recognizes the inevitability of death. As a people who live communal life, with the spirit of being their brothers' keeper, they share in their brothers' joy and sorrow, as the case may be. Burial in Igbo culture is not an isolated or one man affair, especially when it concerns an adult. Once death is being announced on somebody, families, friends, relations and other sympathizers will start coming. From that moment till the burial, and even after the burial, to console as well as accompany the bereaved family.

Funeral ceremony is for everybody in Igbo land. Even if somebody has dispute with the other, that dispute will never extend to death. The Igbo believe that when two persons are in dispute, when one of them dies and the other refuses to attend the funeral, it becomes a common feeling that the one that did not attend the funeral is the cause of the death (Ezeuko, 1986: 18). Osuji, (2009: 164) further reveals,

> Another important aspect of Igbo tradition is burial. Since Igbo are highly cohesive and each family is built on extended family system, there exists the concept of togetherness amongst Igbo communities wherever they may be found... The death of any member of the family is the concern, not only of the immediate family, but that of the entire members of the community including

> friends and well wishers living far and near, particularly if the dead person is a mature person.

At any burial scene, irrespective of the age of the deceased, some people are seen crying and lamenting, in the same manner people try to hold and console them. Burial ceremonies, especially those of adults feature chanting of songs, prayers, dancing and other cultural displays that are common in the area. Eating and drinking are not left out in such funerals.

Igbo traditional games

Traditional games are part of those things The Igbo engage in, to show their happiness and leisure. It is only when someone is happy or in need of happiness that one engages in games or watches people who are playing games. Traditional games have much impact on the life of an average Igbo man. The Igbo traditional games include, moonlight games and wrestling, among others. All these games require people coming together either in the night during the moonlight or in the day.

Uzochukwu and Ewelukwa, (2012: 374), explain,

> "Egwu onwa bu nnokorita ndi mmadu na-enwe n'abali mgbe onwa na-eti. Egwu onwa bu otu n'ime egwuregwu e nwere n'ala Igbo site n'oge gboo. O bu site n'aka ndi nnanna anyi ha ka onodu igwu egwu onwa ji ruo anyi aka. Umunwoke, umuokorobia, umuagbogho na umuaka nwere ikike igwu egwu onwa"
>
> Moonlight games involve coming together by the people during the moonlight. It has remained one of the age long games cherished by the Igbo. Moonlight games are inherited from the fore-fathers. Moonlight game is for everybody, the men, young men, maidens and children.

From the above citation it is clear that traditional moonlight game, which is characterized by people coming together at a designated area at night under the moonlight has been an age long cherished behavior, which has been transferred from generation to generation and consequently has become part of the people. Any attempt to introduce a strange measure like physical distancing will make a mess of the games, by making them loose their tastes.

Summary

This paper looked into Covid-19 pandemic and physical/social distancing which is most controversial amongst other safety regulatory measures given for the prevention of the spread of the virus. Physical or social distancing which amounts to people staying at a recommended distance away from each other has raised a lot of controversy among different sectors of human living. It affected education, where schools were shut down. Worship centers were under regular surveillance, concerning the number of people that will be in the centre and how they will be spaced out. Then economically, businesses were closed down and movements restricted. The paper sees the restriction as a threat to the existence of most aspects of Igbo cultural living. The Igbo by their nature are socio-cultural people, and that is to say that the activities of their life are predominated by interactions and mixing up with people. The paper highlighted some activities like the family existence, the Igbo hospitality life, starting with the Igbo manner of greetings, especially handshake and embrace as well as the

kola nut hospitality, which features the presentation, praying, cutting, sharing and eating of the kola nut. Igbo festivals and ceremonies like new yam festival, marriage ceremony and burial ceremony were highlighted to buttress the fact that most of these Igbo ways of life cannot be lived in isolated manner.

Conclusion

Igbo culture is social by nature. Virtually all other ways of life involve interaction with one another, coming together and sharing things in common. The physical/social distancing approach to the prevention of Covid-19 spread portends danger for the Igbo culture. Before now there were out cries concerning the extinction of some aspects of Igbo cherished norms and values, the imposition of physical distancing will automatically stifle and suffocate the surviving culture of the Igbo. It amounts to a foreign culture preying on the indigenous culture of the people.

Arinze, (1982: 193) posits,

> "It is difficult to change habits especially in cherished religious matters. Cultural adaptation to social gatherings like marriage, music, burial, etc are likely to create for those accustomed to the old order an atmosphere of insecurity. They doubt the orthodoxy of the new and bold (imposed) ideas".

In the Igbo traditional community, if anyone is dictated to be affected by infectious disease, the person is properly isolated and taken care of, pending on when the person either recovers or dies. It is not in the interest of the people to allow a measure that will wipe out their existing culture, norms and values which they have committed a lot to resurrect. Other Covid-19 safety measures like washing of hands, which Igbokwe, (2020:) described as already being practiced in Igbo culture, wearing of face mask, closing of mouth with the front elbow while coughing or sneezing, will perfectly work for the adherents of Igbo culture, as ways of preventing the spread of covid-19.

Recommendations

Having given an insight on how physical/social distancing, as a Covid-19 preventive measure will adversely affect Igbo cultural life, the writers recommend as follows:

- Government through the health officers and the Centers for Disease Control should ensure proper testing and identification of those affected by the Covid-19 for proper isolation.
- A suitable and standard isolation centers should be built and maintained to accommodate enough patients.
- Other preventive measures like hand washing and wearing of face mask should be strictly adhered to by adherents of Igbo culture as ways of compensating non compliance to physical/social distancing to avoid contacting the virus.
- Proper education and awareness on the Covid-19 preventive measures should be extended to the rural communities.
- Isolation method which has been in existence as a traditional way of separating person/persons with infectious diseases from the general public, should be given a face-lift with modern infrastructure, equipments and manpower, for proper functioning, in such a way that patients will recover quickly and join their kits and kin.

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