



The subjectivity of pestilence in view of the COVID-19



Review article



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Abstract

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 has occasioned disruptions to all people's diverse cultures across the world. Faced with one of the greatest challenges in decades, individuals, families, communities, corporate bodies and governments have been forced to react by adopting new and stringent measures, aimed at combating this highly communicable disease. Meetings such as funerals, weddings, classes, political gatherings, religious congregations, sporting events and all other events that require physical human contact, have either been indefinitely postponed or the number of people attending such functions as funerals reduced to a maximum of fifteen in Kenya. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines how responses to the global pestilences trigger disruptions to people's culture resulting in adoption of new sets of ways of life, that are a complete departure from the known conventional lifestyles. The adoption of digital technology has helped alleviate the harsh containment measures around the globe in partial discharge of essential public functions as opposed the otherwise effective physical meetings. The paper argues that the changes occasioned by the discovery of the COVID-19 may not be abandoned altogether even after its consequent containment.

Keywords: *COVID-19, digital platforms, disruption to culture, pestilence, social distancing*



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Public Interest Statement

The subjectivity in people's response to pandemics raises a host of constraints to societal life in totality. The pressure for survival triggers adoption of protective behavioral adjustment measures in an effort to combat the outbreak. Of particular interest to this study is the incorporation of technological innovative systems that have allowed global communities to cope with the tough measures instituted for feasible containment of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study, moreover, captures the behavioral adjustments that may remain as part of planetary lifestyles long after containment and resumption to normalcy occurs.

1.0 Introduction

The invention and growth of digital technology such as internet has helped entrench new customs and daily practices in the lives of people. Communication channels such as phone calls, emails, chat rooms (where a person types a message and posts it to be displayed on a window of several participants; a maximum of 256 in the case of WhatsApp group), text messaging (for two people), and social networking (for members of internet communities such as Facebook, Instagram, FaceTime, YouTube, LinkedIn and Twitter) have all opened new frontiers on how people interact by reducing physical human contact. The internet has also spurred innovations that has seen people work from home, seek medication online, hold virtual meetings, access platforms of e-learning, entertainment and worship, and many more. These practices have been consequential as people have been occasioned to bypass physical human contact in favour of technological applications (Frangoul). This has stretched the social fabrics and entrenched what can be regarded as social distancing.

The coronavirus pandemic has had many countries implement social distancing, on the advice of the World Health Organization (WHO), as a primary measure breaking the chain of person to person infection of COVID-19. In the context of COVID-19, social distancing is a requirement for people to remain out of congregate settings, avoid mass gatherings, and maintain a social distance (approximately 2 metres) from others when possible ("Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)"). As a consequence, people are encouraged to keep distance and limit face to face contact with others as a way of breaking the chain of infection. The social distancing has occasioned a cultural shift and a disruption of relational interaction in ways that people have incurred large and potentially lasting costs (Rasheed).

Social distancing has also placed people in dilemmas as they are forced to face tough decisions: whether to cancel meetings, celebrations, conferences, schools, close office(s), postpone or cancel vacations (Snowden). Made at either individual or corporate levels, Snowden contents, such decisions are both basic and complex — and yet can go a long way in achieving the desired goal of combating the threats posed by pestilences. Simply put, in the Kenyan context, people have to deal with whether to shake hands or otherwise, suspend visiting the sick in hospitals, and

how close one sits to someone — friend or stranger. People have had to contend with the reality of avoiding social gatherings (such as dinner parties, wedding ceremonies, family get-together meetings, and fundraisers), worship congregations, learning groups, funerals and many other cultural activities that require people coming together for their execution.

The subjectivity of people to pestilences (such as the global outbreak of COVID-19), shape politics in communities where the effect is felt, affect personal relationships, alter the work of artists and intellectuals, crush revolutions, and entrench racial and economic discriminations (Snowden 7). The residues of changes occasioned to cultural practices at the height of pandemics, linger in such communities and act as emergent customs that are constantly being created in society which in turn change the complexities of dominant culture as people know it (Gebre; Sureshrajana).

The fear stemming from the grim of the situation as painted in media from the affected countries, coupled with the spread of unverified information, rumours, and misinformation have set people in panic mode even as countries and global health organizations strive to look for ways of curbing what has been described as an invisible enemy. A global emergency to combat the spread of the pandemic has occasioned individuals, private organizations and corporate bodies to make unprecedented adjustments in their lives and this has affected people's financial stability, quality of life, and habits (Whittaker). The author further points out that the disruptions brought about by pandemics can be a part of people's ways of life as the changes continue to exist long after the diseases have been eliminated. Amid the global emergency to eliminate the threat posed by the COVID-19, various governments across the world have advanced drastic measures such as closure of borders, airports, hotels, social joints, and other businesses. Some have implemented lockdowns of major cities and others entire countries for several days. All these measures have disrupted people's practices and economies of the affected countries, resulting to mass job losses, restricted movement of people and an increased spectre of widespread hunger (Rasheed).

2.0 Problem Statement

The emergence and spread of the COVID-19 has occasioned a raft of measures to people's way of life in a bid to arrest the threat posed by the disease to humanity. The implementation of social distancing, quarantine, and isolation in the context of COVID-19 has had unprecedented disruptions to the lives of people around the world. Some of the measures undertaken by individuals, families, private organizations and corporate bodies, and the follow-up actions from the measures constitute the emergence of new customs to the people's dominant culture. Technology has replaced a great deal of physical interaction as people are increasingly reliant on it to be able to work from home, worship from home, access learning platforms, conduct meetings, get banking services, conduct cashless transactions, and consult medics, and many more changes. Some of these changes continue to linger even when the threat caused by pandemics is eliminated

(Whittaker). The changes continue to manifest themselves as emergent forms in the complexities of culture. This constitutes an unprecedented evolution of culture as it exemplifies the customs that continue to emerge in a culture in ways that deserve a scholarly attention. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the customs that emerge from the subjectivity of the pandemic, and how they are entrenched into people's lives in the literary perspective.

3.0 Methodology

This study examines the disruptions to people's lives, occasioned by the measures undertaken to combat the spread of COVID-19 and the use of technology as emergent forms that continue to emerge in the dominant culture. The study adopted a desktop literature review method which involved the review of studies related to the evolution of culture, occasioned by the emergence of infectious diseases and the use of technology in people's lives.

3.1 Sample Size and Sampling Process

Articles based on the account of personal and family experiences in the height of the Covid-19 to determine a sample that can provide viable data in relation to the subject of study. This process was implemented in threefold: identification and collection of relevant articles process, the filtration process to eliminate duplication of articles, and selection of the sample process.

3.1.1 Identification and collection process

This comprised the initial identification and collection of all articles published from January to April, 2020 based on the experiences of people, families, and organizations in the internet communities: Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. Through the Google-search-engine, as well as other digital media – Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp – the researcher conducted a search of relevant articles using key-terms such as the coronavirus pandemic, the global emergency response to COVID-19, quarantine, social distancing, virtual meetings, patriotism and heroism of people during disease outbreaks, among many others.

3.1.2 The filtration process

The titration process was conducted on the articles identified in order to eliminate the duplication of articles. It was also done so that the articles that do not fit the studying criteria can be expunged from those under consideration as sample of study. The study took the perspective of literature in English as emergent customs in relation to COVID-19 is a reflection of changes in society as we know it. This process helped the researcher to identify 359 articles relevant to this study and this constituted the total population for this study.

3.1.3 The Selection Process

After the filtration was done, the third step involved the selection of a sample for the analysis of the highlights of the emergent customs to the lives of people. The sample size was purposively drawn from a pool of 359 articles published from January to April 2020 by individuals, private organizations, and corporate bodies on the experiences of the changes made in the height of coronavirus outbreak. Purposive sampling was used as a method of sample selection because it is a technique that allows for a deliberate choice of a sample that can enable the researcher to answer a research question(s) (Tongco 147). In order to determine the number of articles to be studied, the study relied upon the criteria of selection advanced by Mugenda and Mugenda which provides that 10% or more of the target population studied is representative enough (33-36). Guided by this principle, the researcher selected 36 articles (which is equivalent to 10% of the total population or articles earmarked in this study) suitable for the analysis. The study relied upon the textual analysis as a technique for collection of data and their interpretation.

4.0 Results and findings

Social distancing in public space has been emphasized as a primary measure of breaking the chain of the spread of the coronavirus. This has prompted many people to avoid public spaces and stay in their homes because of the need to reduce physical contact with many people as the coronavirus has been classified as a highly contagious. Many people are now spending more time with their families as many employers have allowed their employees to use technology in order to be able to work from home. The stay home order has no doubt interrupted the normalcy of things and this has occasioned closure of many businesses, open-air markets, schools, churches, mosques, and people in supermarkets restricted. People have adjusted in unprecedented ways as the pandemic has occasioned changes to society. These changes form a part of the findings of this study.

4.1 The pandemic has brought out the heroic side of people

The COVID-19 pandemic has helped highlight the heroics of a few people such as political and business leaders, health workers, teachers, journalists and many more across the world. From the first time the virus was brought to light, medics and scientists the world over, classified it as a novel pathogen that causes an acute respiratory ailment in human beings. As essentials — the testing kits, ventilators, and all sorts of personal protective equipment — grew acutely in shortage supply across the world, (@JackMa) has demonstrated his caring gesture by dispatching a series of donations of the essential items to several countries across the world. The figure 1 below for example, shows a tweet published by (@JackMa) on April 21, 2020 revealing his commitment to continue helping the world in the fight against the virus. The tweet like many of others received a

lot of support in terms of likes, re-tweets and glorious comments. Several media outlets termed Jack Ma, the unlikely hero in the fight against the spread of coronavirus.



Figure 1: Image of a [tweet](#) published by Jack Ma on his Twitter handle on April 21, 2020

Another heroic gesture that captured the attention of several people around the world was a selfless act done by Don Giuseppe Berardelli, a 72-year old Italian catholic priest who gave up his ventilator so that a younger patient to use it (@Johnthemadmonk). His gesture ended his own life, but saved a number of people in the hospital he was admitted in.



Figure 2: A [tweet](#) capturing the heroic gesture by a priest in Italy, published by John Stone on Twitter on May 12, 2020

The heroics displayed by people in saving or providing solutions to the challenges that people face and the subsequent public support of such actions, becomes an influence in shaping the character of those that look up to the said heroes (Snowden 58-82). During the pandemics such as the coronavirus, those who have gone out of their way to provide leadership and practical solutions against the scourge are hailed by the society. Accordingly, Kenyans have borrowed a leaf from the United Kingdom and other countries by making a stop every Wednesday at noon, to clap or honk their car horns as a way of appreciating the dedication of the healthcare workers in the fight against Covid-19. The people that participate in this action are encouraged to take short videos or pictures and share them with accompanying message of encouragement through the #SAA6 so that the healthcare workers can access them. This sort of encouragement has a positive influence on the work done by the medics for the sick.

The outbreak of coronavirus and the reaction of families, countries and corporate organizations to fighting the threat posed by it, and the eventual emergence of heroes and heroines, shape the debates around people's culture, and influence the history and literature of people. This has seen many artists creating content that is aimed at creating awareness through songs, poetry, and many more literary texts. According to Snowden, pandemics of the magnitude of the coronavirus inspire innovation, catalyze the change of culture, and influence the creation of literature as people are revolutionized to respond to the existential threat posed by that kind of the medical emergency (168-232). A good example is explicitly captured by Manzoni's novel, *The Betrothed*, which brings out the heroics of the archbishop of Milan, cardinal Borromeo, who went into the pest houses and was willing to lay down his life to look after the poorest and most unwell people in his flock.

4.2 The pandemic has changed needs of people, private and corporate organizations

People's travel plans, ways of their thinking, and/or the image they project to the public have all been revolutionized. Being an existential threat to humanity, the responses to the COVID-19 has resulted in job losses, and people feel isolated and wondering: what will happen next? The lives of people have been disrupted, as they no longer congregate in bars or parks, dining out, or going into office to work. The implementation of social distancing has reduced mass gatherings and crushed planned events such as sporting activities, entertainment meetings, celebrations, and confined many people in their homes (Rasheed). Those who occasionally go out are required to get back to their homes before 7pm every day due to the curfew that has been imposed by the Kenyan government. This has exposed some sense of fragility and vulnerability that people's wellbeing is depended on others. This, according to Kruglanski, has prompted people to be more group-centric as they yearn for unity and cohesion. The results of this study show that people's attachment to their families has been strengthened, and the appreciation of one's loved ones has been boosted during the pandemic. People have a greater sociability, and yet others yearn for

warmth and succor, in the realization that we need each other as we cannot possibly hack the danger posed by the pandemic alone.

4.3 Good values in people’s lives have been strengthened

As the coronavirus keeps on spreading to the Kenyan communities, and into villages, people have prioritized the communal values of cooperation, consideration and caring for each other as they try to keep the virus at bay. In the time of crises all over the world, the people that extend a helping hand to those who need it are celebrated, and those who sacrifice self-interests for the common good and exhibit empathy for humanity are glorified. Figure 1 for instance shows the support offered by Jack Ma and how his help was praised by many people all over the world. Patriotism and the sense of nationalism have been elevated during the virus outbreak as messages from leaders, artists, medics, and members of the general public are clothed with national sentiments. The figure 3 below for instance shows images by two leading dailies in Kenya that advance national sentiments and patriotism. With the identical headlines, “We stand with Kenya”, messages in the two leading Kenyan dailies, published on April 9, 2020, are accompanied by the colours of Kenya’s national flag. They seek to rally the people to adhere to the guidelines issued by the ministry of health in the fight against the spread of coronavirus. The stories in both dailies, though separately written, acknowledge culture as a vital component in the lives of the people, but encourage people to embrace unprecedented change in life for the common good.



Figure 3: Images that advance patriotism and national sentiments by two leading dailies in Kenya: *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation*

Incidents of patriotism have also come to light from different countries in the world, and feelings of optimism that their country handles the crisis better than others. In Italy for example, people took to their balconies across the country to sing patriotic songs and songs of encouragement to boost their morale and motivate the healthcare workers during the lockdown even as the statistics showed grim realities in the country (Kearney). "People of my hometown Siena sing a popular song from their houses along an empty street to warm their hearts during the Italian COVID-19 lockdown", Valemercurii, a resident of Siena in Italy said in a tweet published on March 13, 2020. Kearney notes that the Italian people joined hands to sing the "Canto della Verbena" — a popular patriotic song in Italy, something that elevates the feeling of patriotism in a people during the lockdown.

The results also show that the usual fascination with fame and riches is diminished; it takes a back seat as admiration for simple acts of kindness takes centre-stage. The people that extend their kindness to others are appreciated more. The pandemics according to Kruglanski, alters who we are by affecting several and critical facets of our psyche. Scholars such as Whittaker and Snowden note that any positive changes occasioned by epidemics are embraced by societies. The disruptions however that cause closed-mindedness, as crises brings out the best in people but also the worst in some. It is also worth noting that pandemics such as the current outbreak occasion the expansion of innovation in a number of faculties such as language. Words such as COVID-19, social distancing, isolation, quarantine and novel coronavirus in respect to the current global pandemic are some of the words that have been added to the vocabularies of a people in society.

4.4 Technology has been more entrenched into the lives of people during the pandemic

The progress of the digital technology has perhaps never been as consequential to humanity as it has been during the coronavirus pandemic amid the widespread social distancing measures which have resulted in lockdowns and restricted movement of people in several countries in the world. Without technology then the absolute sense of isolation would suffice in the present circumstances. Many people are now confined in their homes for long hours and most families and homes have been strengthened with quality reforms of interpersonal relationships among members because of COVID-19. Virtual gatherings through technology have replaced physical contact meetings. People are increasingly using the internet to be able to work from home and to socialize (Lawson); activities that require congregations of people such as weddings, religious services, education classes, and many more are ongoing with the help of the internet. With the learning instructions closed as a precautionary social distancing measure, players in the education sector have embraced digital technology as an innovative mode of learning (virtual learning). The findings of this study indicate that learners have embraced digital platforms such as the WhatsApp group chat-rooms (for 56 participants) and emails to access learning. Those with elaborate

infrastructure have embraced video conferencing apps such as Zoom, Google classroom and Skype to have a one on one interaction between learners and their tutors. Other platforms adopted for learning include radio lessons on KBC and television channels such as EDU TV and KBC Channel One.



Figure 4: A screenshot of a videoconference for English form 4 – Revision 2019
(Sourced from www.mombasayetu.com)

Figure 4 (above) shows a screenshot of a video of an English lesson that was posted on the Mombasa's elimu hub for the learners' access. The video is pre-recorded so there is no direct interaction of the tutor with her students. These modes of learning have undoubtedly improved access to education in Kenya (Ang'ondi 228), and it's my view that it will continue to be more integrated in learning as people break away from the conservative modes of access to education. The clergy from various denominations such as Catholics, SDAs, PAGs, and others have also embraced the use of digital platforms ranging from Facebook Live, WhatsApp groups, television to radio in reaching their faithfuls both in the dissemination of their spiritual messages and in the collection of Tithes and Offerings through cashless money transfers. This has marked a complete departure from the usual conventional religious practices the congregations are accustomed to. Employers have also allowed some of their employees to work from home as a way of adopting social distancing as a protective behavior against the pandemic. As a result, the performance of various businesses has been affected, leading to mass job losses as documented by the Kenya's Ministry of Labour.

The changes that accrue from pandemics such as the COVID-19 can revolutionize various industries, occasioning tailor their products and services towards betterment of people's health-

care (Snowden 208). The new way of working may see many companies enhance their digital infrastructure as they seek to reduce the number of employees in offices. The standard chartered for instance has just announced the closure of several branches in Nairobi as they struggle to adjust to the new normal of doing things. Many people can now access health care services as they can consult doctors using applications such as tele-health provided by the digital technology. People are encouraged through text messaging, e-mails, television ads, newspaper communication and many more ways, to avoid visiting hospitals if they can make a call to a doctor or health officer for medical advisory. Several people have revealed positive experiences in their access of medical help by dialing publicly unveiled numbers such as 1528, 719 or *719#. These changes may prove enduring to people's way of doing things.

Results also indicate that events that require physical congregations such as weddings, funerals, live entertainments and other business and government meetings have resorted to virtual gatherings using platforms such as Facebook Live, Google Hangouts, Zoom video conferencing, Skype, Google Duo, and many others to enhance close socialization. Movements of people in public gatherings such as markets, supermarkets, and restaurants however, have been restricted to one metre apart. This has disrupted intimate meetings of people such as dating individuals, and close friends in the public space. Digital creations such as MPESA, Pesalink (for interbank money transfer), Vooma, and bank to mobile money transfers have allowed people to conduct cashless transactions unlike the past practices in which a lot of goods and services would dominantly be acquired through cash transactions. This is likely to be continued even after the elimination of the threat posed by the Covid-19, as it may prove to be a good disruption.

4.5 Emergence of racial undertones in the response against pandemics

When pandemics such as infectious diseases are brought to light, society's harmonious coexistence is tested as natives blame, discriminate and accuse immigrants for the pandemics' start and spread to their neighborhoods (Stann-Missouri). Liu notes that governments across the world and the US leadership in particular, have found it fashionable to lay the blame on China for what those governments believe is the country's lack of responsibility in combating the spread of the coronavirus. Several images and videos that show the extent of the racial discrimination against Africans in China during the coronavirus outbreak have been documented and widely circulated online. Figure 5 below for example shows rows of Africans sleeping on the streets in China, with their luggage next to them, having been evicted from their residences by natives. Africans at that time were blamed for the second wave of coronavirus infections.



Figure 5: Africans evicted out of hotels and residences in china after rumours circulated on the Chinese social media that a second wave of Covid-19 infections had originated from the African race.

(Source: France24 TV.)

Other incidents are captured in a number of videos in which restaurants, shops, and public facilities across major cities in China like Guangzhou bar people of African descent from entering or accessing them. In the same videos, whites are allowed to access services whether their statuses are known or not. In this video which was filmed in the McDonald's for example, there was a display of a sign indicating that black people were not allowed to enter the restaurant. In another video, workers at a shopping complex are seen blocking a woman of the African descent from entering but allow the white woman next to her to enter. The advanced digital technology in the modern era has only helped to document and expose such atrocities against humanity at the height of pestilences like the COVID-19.

5.0 Conclusion

Changes like greater workplace flexibility toward remote work, ICT integration to access education, cashless transactions, improved accessibility of tele-health services, and a shift in how people communicate, socialize and are entertained may prove enduring even after the elimination of coronavirus from the Kenyan communities. Whether or not people revert back to their old normal of doing things, it's clear that the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has pushed humanity to change, abandon some of the practices and things they are accustomed to, and made them to embrace the use of technology in innovative new ways. The changes may persist as the use of technology has made the otherwise severe social distancing measures more bearable during COVID-19.

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