

Igbo Culture and Corona Virus Pandemic Social Distancing Order of Nigerian Government on a Collision Course: Reflections on Law as Culture

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Abstract

Recently, the corona virus pandemic is devastating the world. At the time of this writing, more than a million people have been infected and more than one hundred thousand have died. In Nigeria, the corona virus pandemic has resulted in the Federal Government giving out orders on social distancing, stay at home and stoppage of all forms of social visits, social gathering such as wedding and burial ceremonies. This new way of living came in contrast with Igbo people's (South East Nigeria) culture and made it very difficult for them to comply with the directives.

This paper examined the collision between the Igbo culture and the new approved ways of living due to corona virus which I termed the corona virus culture especially as it relates to the social distancing directive. The paper elucidated the different aspects of social distancing such as keeping two metres between two individuals, stay at home order and stoppage of social activities including closure of markets and how these directives are in sharp opposite of Igbo people's culture. It was indicated that Igbo people are not complying with the Federal Government Directive which means that these efforts of the Federal Government are not effective. The implication is that if the corona virus comes to the area, it may be very difficult to contain.

The paper concludes that government measures to curb corona virus pandemic in Igbo land is not effective due to the fact that the new way of living as a result of corona virus stand in contrast to Igbo culture. It was recommended that Igbo people should be sensitized before giving such directive in the future.

Key Words: Corona virus, pandemic, social distancing, culture, collision and law

Introduction

The recent Corona-virus pandemic is giving governments and peoples around the world great concerns. Corona-virus in historical perspective was first described in the 1931 with the first

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corona virus (HCoV-229E) isolated from humans in 1965 (Korseman 2012). In the United States of America, Corona virus were first recognized in turkeys in 1951 and were associated with various disease syndromes. The disease is now everywhere in the world especially where turkeys are raised (Fenners 2017).

However, this recent one becomes highly topical and problematic due to its global character as a result of modern globalization which has made it possible for people to be in Britain in the morning and in the evening of the same day, they are in the United States of America. This has been made possible by modern technology in communication and transportation.

It has devastated the world including very advanced countries who are versed in modern science and medical technology. For instance, America, China, Britain and many other countries have recorded many deaths within a short time. As at today (14th April, 2020), China had more than seven thousand (7000) confirmed cases with more than three thousand (3000) deaths while United State of America is having four hundred thousand (400,000) cases with twenty thousand (20,000) deaths. In the same vein, Italy, Britain and Spain are having their own share of the infections and deaths. Also, Africa has recorded sizeable number of infections and deaths due to the virus. Globally, the total number of infections stand at one million, nine hundred and fifteen thousand, one hundred and forty-eight (1, 915, 148) confirmed cases and have recorded one hundred and eighteen thousand, six hundred and eighty-four (118,684) deaths (Worldometer, 13th April, 2020). Indeed, one can comfortably say that the world and its leaders are frightened to the marrow. This is especially so for us in Africa with very fragile healthcare systems and economies.

In Nigeria, three hundred and twenty-three (323) cases have been confirmed, out of which ten (10) deaths have been recorded (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), 13th April, 2020). These figures came from sixteen out of the thirty-six states of the Federation. Importantly, the nature of the infection in Nigeria somehow defies the democratic nature of the disease in the sense that elsewhere, the virus infects the rich and the poor alike but in Nigeria, most of the infected people, especially initial infections are the political leaders, the rich and elites who had history of returning from abroad. I said defies above with every sense of seriousness because, in Nigeria, the political class does not suffer diseases like the rest of the citizens. In fact, diseases here are mainly for the poor. As such, the nature of corona virus infection in the country came as a surprise to many Nigerians and federal government is at her wits end. Now, the virus has entered the general population through these people.

As precautionary measures, the Federal Government of Nigeria has ordered or given a directive that people should begin to distance themselves from one another for at least two metres between two persons (NCDC, 2020). The government also directed all markets should be closed (except those selling food stuff, drugs and other essentials), that people should stay at home and should stop all social visits and social greetings such as hugging, kissing and standing very close to each other. The people are told to greet one another with their elbows and feet instead. This is where this new corona virus culture comes in head on collision with Igbo culture and indeed it is a running battle.

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The Igbo people – a cultural group that live in the east of the Niger, South East, Nigeria are a very vibrant people who are always on the move. The new Corona-virus culture of social distancing has come as a contravention of the Igbo culture and the state governments are finding it difficult to explain and control people's behaviour in this regard. The Igbo people are known for their close-knit relationships in an extended family organization in which everyone is one another's keeper.

As a cultural group, the Igbo were and are still republicans who were governed by elders in stateless societies without any form of central government structure. This communal orientation continues even after colonialism instituted central form of governance in the area.

The law as culture in this paper is in the sense that Igbo people's culture represents law to the people which they adhered strictly to and demonstrate in their lived experiences of daily lives. This cultural orientation also represents law in that anybody who fails to conform is punished with ostracism, stigma or banishment depending on the seriousness of the cultural violation.

The importance of the paper lies in the fact that highlighting the problems associated with a cultural group adhering to directives even as it is to save their lives will go a long way in creating knowledge on the people's reactions to such issues and would help to create effective intervention programs in the future. This paper will therefore contribute to knowledge on the role of culture in prevention of infectious diseases in Igbo land and Nigeria. This contribution is significant in the sense that not much research has been done on culture and adherence to new rules as regards infectious diseases in the study area.

This paper is premised on the Igbo philosophy and world view and how these made it difficult for the people to begin to live a different kind of life due to Corona-virus. In this paper therefore, I argue that the difficulty in the Igbo people taking on the new corona virus culture stems from the Igbo world view which has been so embedded in everyday life of the people from time immemorial and which is very difficult to change overnight even in the face of a deadly virus.

In this paper, an attempt is made to examine the reaction of the Igbo people to the social distancing order of the federal government of Nigeria, the stay at home order and the new form of greeting one another. The paper will flesh out in the following order: first, the context will be discussed which will be followed by the government directives and next one will be the collision of the two cultures which will be followed by conclusion.

The Context

The context of this paper is the Igbo of South east Nigeria. The South East geopolitical zone is made up of five states which are Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia and Ebonyi. The Igbo people speak the Igbo language and they are traditionally traders, farmers, fishermen and currently, many of them are artisans, bankers, doctors and professionals.

A vibrant group who are so versatile with very high business acumen and who are also great travelers making it difficult to go to any part of the world without seeing an Igbo person there. Indeed, Asikaogu (2019) described the Igbo people (natively called NDI IGBO) as the third largest and the most dispersed ethnic group in Nigeria.

In spite of this dynamic nature of the Igbo, they still hold their cultural heritage close to their hearts, part of which is the practice of extended family and brotherhood in very heavy and unusual bonding. The Igbo upholds the principle of brotherhood as noted by Asikaogu (2019) that Nyerere in his Ujamaa declaration described African socialism as attitude of the mind where everybody cares for one another. Asikaogu (2019) maintained that this principle manifests in strong sense of community, sense of good relation, sense of sacredness of life, sense of respect for elders and authority. Indeed, Davidson (1974) summed the Igbo sense of the community thus: an Igbo proverb says “go the way people go, if you go alone, you will have reason to lament”. This shows how important the community is to the Igbo and this explains why there is association of Igbo people in every country you travel to globally and I call them, the ethnic villagers in urban areas. In these faraway lands, the Igbo people still celebrate new yam festivals and other cultural days. In these associations away from home, the people continue to practice their culture and to continue to teach their children and this is how this cultural heritage is transferred from one generation to another irrespective of where the children are growing up.

Politically, the Igbo people are organized along patriarchal lines in which the eldest man in the family is the head of the family and community leadership is in the hands of the elders. The Igbo society is built along the principle of egalitarianism in which everybody is equal. This is why it is said that the Igbo taught the world the republican form of governance. As such, they lived in stateless communities and communal life is a daily routine and experience even after colonialism has instituted central governance system in the area. They are always in close proximity to one another and this is where the culture clashes with the new culture brought about by corona virus. This is because in the Igbo world view/philosophy/cosmology, the human being is not an individual. A human being is an entity who is connected to other human beings, the dead, children yet unborn and the universe and all of them form one body and a person cannot live normal life without these others.

The Igbo Culture as it Relates to Social Distancing

I deem it necessary to discuss the meaning of culture before delving into the Igbo culture as it relates to the social distancing order of the federal republic of Nigeria as a result of Covid-19 pandemic. This will give the reader a background information about the Igbo culture. Culture has several definitions and many scholars find it difficult to have a unified definition. Tylor (1871) defined 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. In the same way, Keesing (1981) defined culture as systems of shared ideas, systems of

concepts and rules and meanings that underlie and are expressed in the ways that humans live. These definitions indicate that culture emanates from the reality of human living together in particular environments. This prompted Helman (1992) to posit that culture is a set of guidelines which individuals inherit as members of a particular society and which tells them how to view the world, how to experience it emotionally and how to behave in it in relation to other people, to the supernatural forces and to the environment. To me, culture represents ways through which members of a society adapt to and survive in their environment. As such, over the years, the Igbo people have developed and evolved a cultural orientation and these norms and values have been handed down from generation to generation. The Igbo culture stems from the Igbo philosophy and cosmology; the entire Igbo worldview. This was indicated by Asikaogu (2019) that culture characterize a particular group of people and their very ways of life which differentiates them from other people.

As mentioned earlier, the Igbo people live communal lives with chains of connections. In this area, a family is the closest knit for every human being and the family here means father, mother, children, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins, grandparents, great grandparents, the dead and children yet unborn. Asikaogu (2019) noted that Igbo as a nation hold the family and its name, sacredness of life, chastity, respect for elders and parents, marriage, honesty and hospitality as very important. These values are inscribed in the spirit of the people and in their history (2019). This goes to show that the family is cherished and held in high esteem by the Igbo. Importantly, several families form a community which represents a group of people who are related to a great extent by blood and marriage in a very complex whole with chains of relationships. Also worthy of note is that the Igbo community is made up of so many people at different realms of existence in terms of the living, the dead and posterity. In-fact, Abraham (1992) (quoted in Agulanna (2011) captured this when he said that in western culture, the community is conceived as a mere circular institution while in Africa, a community is conceived as having sacral unity which comprises its living members, its dead (those who live at less substantial form) and its unborn children. This is an indication that the community means so much to the Igbo. Indeed, Agulanna (2011) posited that the Africans see community as supreme over the individual. This is not different from the Igbo concept of the community, no wonder this value system stood the test of time despite onslaughts from formal education, westernization and globalization.

As such, one person is related to so many people and must try as much as possible to maintain the relationships. As noted by Agulanna (2011), for the African, no one can live successfully outside the human community. For the Igbo, from the time a person is born to the time he/she dies, the person is made aware of the value or importance of the communal group, or her/his dependence on the kin group (2011). As such, the community is the base of the life of the Igbo and Agulanna further affirms that a person is adjudged either as good or bad depending on the approval or disapproval of the community (2011). This fosters close knit relationships among the Igbo and this could explain why the Igbo cling tenaciously to this age old tradition.

This close-knit relationship shows in greetings among the Igbo. When an Igbo person encounters another, they usually stand in close proximity to one another (about a foot or two

depending on their relationship) and say to each other, *ututu oma* (good morning) or *ehihe oma* (good afternoon) or *ugbede oma* (good evening). If the person is a titled man or woman, he/she will be greeted by calling her/him the *ozo* title name. As they say this, they tend to stand for a long time asking about the welfare of each other and all the people in their families and friends.

Apart from this exchange, most Igbo people hug one another when they encounter each other. In my particular culture which is Idemmili in Anambra State, we hug each other whenever we encounter one another especially if we are friends, relatives, husband's relatives, wives' relatives and acquaintance. It is important to point out here that the people a person regards as related to are many because in this culture, a friend of my blood relative is also my friend and the circle goes on almost to infinity. This is because everything is communally owned including friendship and even shame. If any family member is involved in a shameful act, the shame is corporate in nature in the sense that every member of the clan will share in the shame. With this chain of relationships, one person in this culture ends up hugging so many people in one day. It is also important to note that this way of living has been embedded in each person from childhood to adulthood which makes it very difficult to change.

Moreover, this bonding does not stop there. Every morning, neighbours visit each other especially if ones neighbor is an elderly person. The younger one will visit to enquire how the neighbor slept last night. Sometimes, many people may be in one person's house and in the process, they will break kola nuts and use it to pray for everybody. In the study area, the kola nut is a prayer symbol with which to commune with the ancestors. After this, they will eat the kola nuts and now disperse to their various homes to face the day's activities and in the evening, they repeat the same ritual.

The people are also usually involved in festivals, rituals, naming ceremonies, weddings, burials and all these bring the people together on a daily basis. This is why ostracism is one of the biggest and most effective tools of social control in the area.

Another important issue is that the Igbo people are very dynamic and always on the move. This is why they are great travelers and can go to any part of the world. Indeed, Macebuh (2002) observed that the Igbo are noted for their enterprise, their creativity and for their intellect. They are notorious for their refusal to admit the constraint of geography and boundaries of language and religion.

Directive of the Federal Government of Nigeria as Regard the Corona Virus Pandemic

As measures to combat the corona virus infection, the Federal Government of Nigeria has directed that every citizen should distance himself/herself from others, that one must keep at least six feet or two metres distance from another person. This does not end there, the government also directed that people should not hug or shake hands, that instead people should be greeting by knocking their elbows or touching one another with their feet. Moreover, the government also directed many states to lockdown and told people to stay in their houses and

to cut off going to crowded spaces including markets, offices and to stop all social events such as burials, weddings and to stop all social visits. To show their seriousness, government of Lagos state recently sentenced a popular actress and her husband to three months of community service and one hundred thousand Naira (100,000) each for holding a party in their house to mark the husband's birthday. All these put together represents the new corona virus culture which I earlier referred to.

The Collision of Two Cultures

The two cultures in this collision course are the Igbo and the corona virus cultures. In terms of greetings, the Igbo people hug and shake one another but the corona virus culture in Nigeria stipulates that people should not hug and should not shake hands, instead they should greet each other with legs or elbows. To the Igbo people, this is absurd and people are resisting it. My personal observation shows that the Igbo people continued to hug one another and shake hands despite the fact that it has become risky to do so. Infact, many of them do it unconsciously. Many Igbo people will finish hugging and shaking hands before they remember that they are told not to do so. Their reaction generally is that they will begin to laugh heartily and tell one another – that you have forgotten that they told us not to hug again as, if the government is joking.

When I ponder over these things, it is not easy to entangle why a people will be adamant in the face of a threat to their own lives. However, on a critical look at the issue, one notes that the Igbo child has been socialized to imbibe these values. As noted by Uchenna (1965) in Asikaogu (2019), community spirit is very strong among the Igbo almost from the first day, the individual is aware of his/her dependence and he also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to a group to which he/she owes so much. He seldom, if ever, becomes really detached from the group wherever he/she may live. This close knit relationship is part of the reason for the difficulty encountered by Igbo in obeying this new order. Sometimes I wonder if it will ever be possible for the Igbo people to change and imbibe this new way even if it means temporally. The major problem here is that as observed by Asikaogu (2019), this way of living (in this case greeting) has been inscribed in the Igbo person from childhood. This reminds me of an Igbo adage which says that ‘ an individual cannot learn to use left hand in old age’. This means that it is not easy to change an adult to stop what he/she has been doing from childhood.

On the issue of greeting and standing /staying for a long time while greeting, the Igbo people still stay for long time while they ask each other about their loved ones. The people still even go further to discuss issues and recent events in the society including the corona virus. As such nothing has changed in the way the Igbo greet one another and how long they stay during greeting. This also goes for the visiting of neighbours. The people still visit their neighbours as usual in-spite of the government directive. The government is somehow incapacitated to enforce the order because most Igbo people live in rural areas where government patrols and police may not get to.

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Also, the two meter social distancing as directed by government sounds absurd to the people and they find it difficult to come to terms with such directive. They usually ask themselves ‘how can one distance himself from ones brother. Therefore, they still stand or sit in very close proximity to one another. This particular directive is the most difficult because in Igbo culture, the individual’s personal space/distance from another person is usually short and this is still the practice and the people do not want to know whether there is corona virus or not.

Furthermore, the people have been directed not to be in a gathering where there are more than thirty people. What the Igbo people is doing is that some of them suspended the burial ceremonies in their families while some others went ahead to conduct the burial ceremonies despite all warnings. In-fact, in one particular community, the governor of the State had to send soldiers and police men to go there and stop an ongoing burial ceremony and use force to disperse the crowd. Many of the people involved in that burial ceremony were grumbling, that the governor does not have any right to stop the burial of their brother.

This same resistance goes for the stay at home order by the government. The Igbo people hardly stay at home all by themselves. Therefore, this order did not go down well with many of them especially in the rural areas. They still go to their farms, markets and churches as if nothing is happening.

All these have exposed the resilience of culture in the life of a people. I wish to note that the Igbo people find it difficult to adapt to the new way of living occasioned by the corona virus pandemic because all the directives of the federal government are opposite of the Igbo people’s ways of life. This means that the people will have to change completely and quickly to a life style that the people regard as abominable. This adaptation is particularly difficult due to the fact that it is to be done instantly and the people found this very strange. It is true that culture is dynamic but the dynamic nature of culture is such that the change is very gradual and happens over time and in such a way that it is not noticeable.

The implication of all these is that the preventive measures put in place by government is not effective in Igbo land. What this portend is that if corona virus enters such a place, it will be very catastrophic and this goes for other infectious diseases. As such, this behaviour/cultural trait may need to be critically examined to find the way forward. It is also a lesson to government that they should not stay in Abuja to dish out orders, rather they should be sensitive to the people culture and endeavour to design intervention programmes that would enable their policies to be effective. This is why the government should not keep quiet because the lives of many are at stake.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that the government measures to curb corona virus pandemic in Igbo land is not effective due to the fact that the new way of living as a result of corona virus stand in contrast to Igbo culture. The people therefore are not able to adapt to this new way of living

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despite the fact that it is for their own good. The paper therefore recommends that before such orders are given in Igbo land, the people should be sensitized to inform them about the problem and the consequences. They should also be told that it is not to abolish their culture but to safeguard their lives and that they will go back to their normal lives after the crisis. The collision of two cultures was therefore an attempt to bring out to the fore the problem encountered by the Igbo people in adapting to the new way of living due to corona virus.

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