“ABSURDITY” OF ALBERT CAMUS’ THE PLAGUE IN POLITICS OF PUBLIC HEALTH IN NIGERIA: DOUBTFUL TRUTHS AND TRUTHFUL LIES ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

*Humanity has been hit in recent times, by unusual mortality provoked by the emergence of COVID-19. A report of 21 March 2020 by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) confirmed 22 cases of the dreaded virus in the country. Desperate times they say require desperate measures. Facing the pandemic, the leadership of Nigeria has been more political than practical. Citizens resort to divers’ self-medication thus: Bathing with well-boiled Dogo Yaro leaves (Neem leaves); excessive consumption of bitter kola (Garcinia kola) or ginger (Zingiber) and the excessive consumption of alcohol. This study seeks to assess the level of preparedness by the Nigeria National Health System to combat the further spread of COVID-19 as apparently predicted in 1947 by Albert Camus in his work, *The Plague*. Our work further seeks to ascertain to what extent these self-aids have proven to be the effective panacea. It employs the conspiracy theory to argue that Nigerian leaders give priority to wealth accumulation over public health.*

Keywords: COVID-19, Absurdity, Politics, Albert Camus, Public health.

INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to peruse a literary or philosophical work of the 20th Century without discovering the concepts of revolt, atheism, or absurdity. (Agwu 2018, p. 392). These concepts are the basis of writings by philosophers and even playwrights like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and many others. The French writer, Albert Camus, drew from his extensive study of the history of plagues in the world (the Black Death of the 14th Century; the Italian Plague of 1630; the London Great Plague of 1665; the East China Plague of the 18th and 19th Centuries) to write a book “*La Peste*” (translated as “*The Plague*” in English) in 1947 (Fendt 2020). In *The Plague*, Camus depicts a scenario of “absurdity” that resulted from the advent of bubonic plague that probably emanated from rats to affect humans in the Algerian Coastal town, Oran (Thoyakkat 2009). From Camus’s account in the novel, the virus spread with such ferocious speed that it destroyed several lives and forced the world to shut down, especially because of uncertainties and even failure in decision - making by bureaucrats (Abram 1973). Quarantine, contagious atmosphere, high rates of mortality, exhaustive medical doctors, saturated hospitals, religious debates, and interpretations are among the few facts that characterized *The Plague*.

Camus’ project predates the appearance of a dreaded epidemic and somewhat sinisterly recalls our present-day Coronavirus pandemic. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-related Coronavirus-2 that causes the diseases called COVID-19 invaded the Chinese province of Hubei and Wuhan unannounced in December 2019. The Chinese authorities saw the need to officially notify the world that the virus was spreading to their communities. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “an infected

person with the virus spread it to an average of 2.6 people and after 10 generations of transmission, with each taking 5 or 6 days, that one case is spawned 3'500 in a matter of days" (Specht 2020). In another study, Umukoro *et al.*, (2020), see the fear of the pandemic as a pull factor away from international tourism. This according to the authors has drastically affected tourism in developed countries. Similarly, Zou Yue, an anchorman in CGTN adds "Covid-19 respects no cultural values, no political system, no social bounds, and no national borders" (Travkina & Sacco 2020). Drawing from Zou's point, it's obvious that COVID-19 has not only taken down the famous but also the obscure, the vile, and the virtuous inclusive. As Andrew Sullivan (2020) put it:

Like wars, plague can make us see clearly where we are, shake us into a new understanding of the universe, and reshape our priorities. Plague living lays bare whom to trust and whom not to trust and most importantly, it reveals what matters most.

Extrapolating from Sullivan's opinion, Nigerians are faced with the bitter truth that their leaders are more interested in wealth accumulation than the public health of their citizens. No matter the apposition employed to buttress how disoriented the virus has caused Nigeria, facing the pandemic is not really what matters but rather how the government responds to the situation.

There is no gainsaying that the political class sees the pandemic as yet another means to siphon public funds while citizens are left in ignorance, fear, and subjected to the use of local traditional remedies (Umukoro *et al.*, 2020). They are made to resort to diverse self-medication to keep the virus at bay among which are:

1. Bathing with well-boiled Azadirachta Indica Neem leaves commonly referred to as *Dogo Yaro* in Nigeria,
2. Excessive consumption of bitter cola or ginger as preventive measures.
3. Immoderate intake of alcohol.

It is against this backdrop that this study set out to assess the level of preparedness by the Nigeria National Health System to combat the further spread of COVID-19 and analyzes how the health system is handled with a bizarre level of incompetence and deceit. The work further seeks to ascertain the extent to which these self-aids have proven to be effective remedies against this virus. Through a conspiracy theory, this study maintains that what matters most to Nigeria's leaders in the politics of wealth accumulation to the detriment of the public health of their citizens. A logical conclusion will be drawn as an affirmation to the radical uncertainty of life as stated by Albert Camus in "*The plague*" (1947, 1967) as so witnessed in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study anchor on the conspiracy theory put forward by Stephan Lewandosky and John Cook. They maintain that real conspiracy exists in companies and governments as revealed to them through internal industry documents, government investigations, or whistleblowers. They went further to argue that conspiracy theories tend to go on resolutely even when evidence speaks otherwise of them. In their bid to differentiate between actual conspiracy and imagined conspiracy, these theorists came up with two patterns of thinking known as conventional and conspiratorial thinking. While conventional thinking is responsive to evidence, is coherent and based on healthy skepticism, conspiratorial thinking is based on overriding suspicion, over-interpreting evidence and it is usually contradictory. Little attention is given to conventional thinking, as they went on to provide details on conspiratorial thinking thereby giving rise to the question if the actual conspiracy is responsive to evidence, can it be said to have truth-

value? Hinging on the characteristics of conspiratorial thinking as observed by Lewandosky and Cook (2020), the ideology of the leadership of Nigeria in the fight against COVID-19 is laid bare as being contradictory.

Contradictory in the sense that the claims of the government, in her purported purposeful fight against the virus as propagated on paper and social media, are disproportionate to the reality on ground. This is a far cry from pragmatic action which Nigerians are expecting to see and feel. (Lewandosky and Cook 2020) explain that conspiracy theories can be intentionally constructed or amplified for strategic and political reasons as was recorded by Albert Camus in *The Plague*. This underlines the thinking pattern of the leadership style of Nigeria, where leaders are just committed to making paper policies that do not translate into reality (Anweting & Ogar 2018; Egbeji 2019). Wealth accumulation through fraudulent means in itself is an act of constructed conspiracy. Moreover, this study employs the analytical approach in the appropriation of collected data to foster a better understanding and make revelations concerning the doubtful truths and truthful lies concerning the government's preparedness in the fight against COVID-19.

Basic efforts by Nigeria Government to combat COVID-19

According to (Farooq Kperogi 2020):

In most parts of the world, it feels like the world has come to, or is coming to an end. Routines have been displaced. Familiar reality has been ruptured. Even habitual perceptions of the world around us are being disrupted. And people are gripped by immobilizing panic and anxiety”

He stressed that in an uncertain moment like this, people look up to their national leaders for assurance, for psychological comfort, for emotional stability, for guidance, for good cheer. Most world leaders have lived up to this expectation. They have addressed their compatriots in national broadcasts and become consolers-in-chief in words and action.

Unfortunately, Nigerians are still in search of social solidarity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic judging by the daily increase in the number of new cases in the country, as there has been a lukewarm response from their leadership. Government officials in Camus' *The Plague* put up a similar attitude. When questioned about their lukewarm attitude, the officials rather advised the people to be wary of hastiness in taking decisions. One may ask about the role of the Senate. Based on antecedents, they have been nicknamed “*Rubber-Stamp*” Senate, which takes pride in being at the beck and call of the executive. The Senate has called on Buhari to rise to the occasion and prioritize the nation's health care system to contend with the menace posed by the Coronavirus. However, one of Buhari's media aides said such calls from the senate amounted to “populism and cheap politics”. Former Vice President of Nigeria and the PDP Presidential Candidate in the just concluded general elections, Atiku Abubakar advised the presidency to take drastic precautionary measures by stopping flights coming from Coronavirus-affected countries. The government initially ignored this warning. Then effected on March 18, 2020, four days after the Chief-of-Staff to the president, Abba Kyari returned from his Germany trip. More so, the Special Adviser to the President on Media and Publicity, Mr. Femi Adesina, defended the decision of the President, Maj.Gen Muhammadu Buhari (retd.), not to address Nigerians daily amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic. Adesina said on Channels Television's ‘Politics Today’ programme on Thursday 26 March 2020 that it was not Buhari's “style” to brief Nigerians. He further maintained that the Minister for

Health and the Minister of State for Health were already briefing Nigerians daily and when the President gives a job to someone to do, “he leaves them to do it”.

Nevertheless, in the bid to combat the spread of Coronavirus, the government of Nigeria, like the government in Camus’ *The Plague* has implemented the lockdown strategy as regards all schools, churches, football teams, air travels, and waterways. The public is consequently encouraged to embrace self-isolation and advised to adhere to some guidelines during this period. We shall display some of these guidelines provided by the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control and analyse how feasible they are against the backdrop of current realities in Nigeria. They are:

1.1

Persuading Nigerians to voluntarily stay at home and isolate themselves without clear guidelines from the government is not easy. So business owners who fend from their daily hustle are left with no choice but take their steps. Staying at home to them is not an option.

1.2

Though this looks right given the nature of the virus, it is practically impossible Nigerians who live in congested houses. report of the United Nations (UN) in that Nigeria’s housing shortage climbed out of every three Nigerians live in a settlement with no better infrastructure.

1.3

How do one work from home given the inconsistent power supply? It’s like

sending a child to school without books. The child will never be comfortable in school. Bureaucracy has marred all agitations from the populace to make the power supply relatively constant in Nigeria.

1.4

With a dwindling national salary scale implementation of the minimum wage, good number of Nigerians cannot afford supplies at home. A large population of meet even their day-to-day needs on a let alone having adequate supplies that needs for a given period in quarantine.

among the majority of In light of this, the 2019 to bbc.com has it to 22 million as two poor informal

and non- this is unrealistic, as a to have adequate Nigerians is yet to normal hustling period, will service their basic

1.5

Taking an oath of office is considered a ceremony in Nigeria. The contacts provided will neither respond to distress calls nor return any. It's either the line is switched off or the lines keep ringing without response. These numbers provided are just for mere formality

SELF-REMEDIES FOR COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

commonly known as Nigeria. Before now, been regarded in the medicinal plant with malarial pathogens and cardiovascular effects.

This is Azadirachta Indica, Neem Tree, *Dogo Yaro* in *Dogo Yaro* has country as a highly the ability to treat strong

It is currently being preventive measure

used as either a against COVID-19 or to cure an infected person. Method of use includes: Boiling *Dogo Yaro* leaves until 100°C (when one can visibly see its boiling bubbles). According to a local herbs seller” *Don’t wait for anything to cool down after you’ve taken it off the heat source... Pour the water into a bucket and sit at the front of it while it’s still steaming... Cover yourself with the bucket and a thick blanket for 15 minutes! That’s about 80°C of hot steam which is sufficient enough to terminate the virus”*

Ginger is a flowering plant that originated from China. It belongs to the Zingiberaceae family. It Contains Gingerol, a Substance with powerful medicinal properties closely related to turmeric, cardamom, and galangal. The rhizome (underground part of the stem) is the part commonly used as a spice that produces a unique fragrance. It is often called ginger root, or simply ginger. Ginger has a very long history

of use in various forms of traditional/alternative medicine. It has been used to help digestion, reduce nausea and help fight the flu and common cold, to name a few. Ginger can be used fresh, dried, powdered, or as an oil or juice, and is sometimes added to processed foods and cosmetics. It is a very common ingredient in recipes. It has been included in the list of traditional alternative solutions to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. It is mixed with pure honey in hot water and taken thrice a day to keep the virus at bay.

Bitter Kola is a plant from Africa. It has a lot of health benefits. Almost all the parts of this plant can be used for health purposes. Among them are: treatment of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), Anti-Malaria, Anti-poison, immune system booster, and so on. Nigerians have turned to it again as a preventive measure against COVID-19. It is highly consumed by many at the moment in the country. As the price control system is weak in the country, bitter kola is now more expensive than it has always been.

production of *Ogogoro*. It is a West African alcoholic spirit, usually distilled from fermented raffia palm tree juice most popular in Nigeria, where it is as the country's homebrew. The spirit is consumed not only throughout Nigeria across the entire West and Central African region. Before colonial times, wine tappers' have continued to refine techniques converting the fermented wine into its more potent form, known 'ogogoro', 'kaikai', etc. Its consumption has increased as people local bars where it is sold, violating the lockdown and social distancing from government, to drink to stupor. They believe bus that *ogogoro* contains a more effective component that can prevent them from contracting the COVID-19.

The self-remedies adopted by Nigerians to fight the Coronavirus are attributable to their state of despair and loss of hope in a government that seems unable to fight COVID-19 with integrity as recommended by Camus in the words of his narrator, Dr. Rieux who said "integrity is doing my job" (Duckworth 2009, p. 22).

CONCLUSION

Drawing parallels from Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), this study has addressed the Nigerian governments' malfeasance to her impoverished citizenry in the face of a dreaded COVID-19 pandemic. The study shows how the new coronavirus is threatening people and upending their ways of life with little effort that amounts no nothing from their leaders. COVID-19 has put to test the resilience of Nigeria's government and its ill-equipped health system". Conclusions are also drawn from the fact Nigerians are resorting to self-medication against the virus by consuming excessive alcohol, bitter kola, ginger, and *Dogo Yaro* juice and having a bath with the same juice. These non-scientifically proven self-made solutions give users some high level of confidence as regards their immune system and miraculously or fortunately, none of these known persons has tested

This picture shows the

locally and is known

but

'palm their palm as

trip to

positive for the new coronavirus. Most importantly, the study has validated Sullivan's assertion that:

"Like wars, plague can make us see clearly where we are, shake us into a new understanding of the universe, and reshape our priorities. Plague living lays bare whom to trust and whom not to trust and most importantly, it reveals what matters most".

What *The Plague* reveals according to Camus is the absurdity of human life and not an alleged lack of pity from the leadership. Agwu (2018, p. 400) noted that "What played out at the city of Oran in *The Plague* is what humanity faces on daily basis. This is the mirror of our absurd human condition". Whether Nigeria survives this mystery that has defiled science and has brought the world to its knees or get consumed by it, the generation of Covid-19 which should be simplified as "Generation C" in Nigeria will have a better understanding of the world to reshape their priorities and decide on whom to trust with their lives.

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