

## Fears, Deaths, Mourning, and Burials in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

### Medos, mortes, luto e enterros em tempos de pandemia de COVID-19 na Nigéria

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**Resumo:** Os trabalhos existentes sobre mortes na Nigéria foram feitos sem muito foco crítico em como o público respondeu à política de emergência ou às intervenções do governo em tempos de pandemia. Fundamentalmente, esta é a lacuna que este trabalho de pesquisa se propõe a preencher. Este artigo enfoca os eventos de dor, luto e luto após mortes relacionadas à COVID-19. Assim, este artigo analisa mais as interseções entre a COVID-19 e o discurso da morte, expondo e interrogando as variâncias, ambiguidades, ambivalências, corolários e paradoxos em meio a conversas complicadas de saúde pública. A pesquisa empregou fontes primárias e secundárias. As fontes primárias incluem crenças africanas, relatos de jornais sobre pandemias passadas e atuais; e narrativas de rádio, televisão e mídias sociais. As fontes secundárias incluem revisões da literatura existente sobre mortes e pandemias. A análise histórica é essencialmente utilizada neste artigo. Este artigo identifica duas categorias de “cadáveres” criados durante esta pandemia de COVID-19. A primeira categoria são os «Cadáveres Pandémicos» (APO) e a segunda categoria é «Cadáveres Não Pandémicos» (nPDB). Vários concomitantes que carac-

terizam “cadáveres pandêmicos”, incluindo estigmatização, apatia, alterização, ambiguidades, genderização, demografia, politização, contestações e armamento são interrogados a partir de perspectivas sócio-históricas. Aumentar o estresse das famílias enlutadas são questões em torno de mortes, já que os enterros são adiados ou realizados dentro das restrições dos protocolos COVID-19 do Centro Nacional de Controle de Doenças (NCDC), muitas vezes com a presença de um número limitado de familiares do falecido. Assim, as dores e tristezas não são apenas sobre a perda dos entes queridos, mas a incapacidade de dar-lhes um enterro condizente, uma vez que os nigerianos adoram celebrar a liminaridade de seus entes queridos para a eternidade. Da mesma forma, o luto antecipatório tornou-se mais agregado e agravado no país no contexto da maneira de anunciar a morte de poucos políticos populares que morreram em decorrência da COVID-19. Fundamentalmente, esses ônus problemáticos, nuances e intrigas sobre mortes em tempos de pandemia de COVID-19 são historicizados. Este artigo conclui que as dores, o luto, a tristeza, a morte e o sepultamento são historicamente constituídos e configurados em relação às interações sociais, econômicas, políticas, culturais e ambientais.

**Palavras-chave:** África, Medo, Morte, Nigéria, COVID-19.

**Abstract:** Extant studies on deaths in Nigeria have been conducted without much critical focus on how the public responded to emergency politics or the government’s interventions during pandemics. Fundamentally, this is the gap this research aims to fill. This study focuses on pain events, grieves, and mourning following COVID-19-related deaths. Thus, this study analyzes the intersections between COVID-19 and death discourse by exposing and interrogating the variances, ambiguities, ambivalences, corollaries, and paradoxes amid convoluted public health conversations. This research employed both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include African beliefs, newspapers reports of past and current pandemics, and radio, television, and social media narratives. Secondary sources include reviews of existing literature on deaths and pandemics. Historical analysis is used in this study, identifying two categories of dead bodies created during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first category is Pandemic Dead Bodies (PDBs) and the second category is Non-Pandemic Dead Bodies (NPDBs). Many concomitants characterizing

Pandemic Dead Bodies including stigmatization, apathy, otherization, ambiguities, genderization, demographication, politicization, contestations, and weaponization are interrogated from socio-historical perspectives. Heightening the stress of grieving families are issues around deaths, as burials are postponed or held within the restrictions of National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) COVID-19 protocols, often with the presence of limited family members of the deceased. Thus, the pains and grieves are not just about the loss of loved ones, but the inability to give them a befitting burial, since Nigerians love to celebrate the liminality of their loved ones into eternity. Likewise, anticipatory grief became more accentuated and aggravated in Nigeria regarding the manner of announcing the demise of some popular politicians who died of COVID-19. Fundamentally, these problematic encumbrances, nuances, and intrigues concerning deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic are historicized. This study concludes that pains, grief, sorrow, death, and burial are historically constituted and configured regarding social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental interactions.

**Keywords:** Africa, Fear, Death, Nigeria, COVID-19.

## INTRODUCTION

Professor Joanna Bourke, in her book (Joanna BOURKE, 2005) states that “historians love to talk about rationale responses and are less comfortable with irrationality,” perhaps this accounted for the reluctance of historians to focus on the history of pains, grief, and apathy since these are subjective experiences. Clearly, historians of Nigeria have specially neglected critical considerations of the effects of pandemics or epidemics upon the mood of the nation and its peoples, especially as these effects relate to death and burial. However, stories of several epidemics and pandemics suffered by Nigerians were essentially stories of fear, grief, sufferings, deaths, and burials.

This paper briefly discusses the fears exhibited as parts of responses to previous epidemics/pandemics in Nigeria. Subsequently, this paper focuses on pain events, fears, grieves, and mourning following COVID-19-related

deaths. Thus, this study analyzes intersections between COVID-19 and death discourse by exposing and interrogating the variances, ambiguities, ambivalences, corollaries, and paradoxes amid convoluted public health conversations. The research employed both primary and secondary sources. Sources include African beliefs, newspaper reports of past and current pandemics, and radio, television, and social media narratives. Secondary sources include reviews of existing literature on deaths and pandemics.

### THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN AFRICA

For the people of Nigeria, domiciled in oral traditions are the beliefs and culture of the people on death, the dead, and related matters such as burials, funerals, memorialization, etc. (Omosade AWOLALU; Adelumo DOPAMU, 2005). Death is dreaded. It is considered a transitional bridge towards becoming an ancestor after death (AWOLALU; DOPAMU, 2005). This is usually accomplished by several traditional and religious rites, as most Nigerian tribes believe that every person who dies must be given a befitting funeral depending on the deceased's religion and socio-economic status. This "befitting burial" is designed to mourn and celebrate the life of the deceased (Roland ROBERTSON, 1969). Funeral ceremonies often occur during the weekends, usually Fridays in recent times. Colourful 'aso-ebi'<sup>1</sup> are usually sewed and wore to celebrate the dead (Tade OLUDAYO, 2020). Musicians with expertise in different genres of songs are employed to provide entertainment and merriment. Different delicacies of food are prepared to entertain mourners and sympathizers. This practice is common among the Yoruba tribe of Southwestern Nigeria.

In traditional Nigerian religions, burial occurs in the deceased's ancestral land (Omosade AWOLALU; Adelumo DOPAMU, 2005; Margereth DREWAL, 1992; Bolaji IDOWU, 1967), although, it is difficult to generalize the ideals of burial rites based on traditional religion because Nigeria has over 350 ethnic groups. Notably, regarding burial beliefs/practices, modes, and use of permanent and temporal memorialization, Trans-Atlantic

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<sup>1</sup> A common dress code sew with local fabrics called 'ankara' is a common thing organize by the family of the deceased

and Trans-Saharan borrowings occurred in burial practices of Pre-colonial Nigerian societies. For Christians, Biblical injunctions are followed. Priests conduct the funeral ceremony, starting with wake keeping and the burial. Following Islamic law (*shariah*), the dead body is buried within 24 to 48 hours (Daniel SMITH, 2004). Significantly, issues of death and burial were and still are important in Nigerian communities.

#### FEAR OF PAST EPIDEMICS/PANDEMICS: *TRYPANOSOMIASIS* AND INFLUENZA IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

Describing the fear of the sleeping sickness (*trypanosomiasis*) epidemic that gripped Abeokuta, a city in Southwestern Nigeria in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Iwe Irohin* (*Iwe Irohin* literally means newspaper), the first indigenous newspaper in Nigeria referred to the disease as dreadful. (*Iwe Irohin*: Abeokuta, 1867). According to the same newspaper, “all known victims of the disease died, even within a short period of infection”. Citing 1922 *The African Messenger*, another indigenous newspaper, Jimoh Mufutau Oluwasegun (2017) questioned how the fear of the 1918/19 Influenza was expressed in Lagos. For example, a spraying gang employed for the colony abandoned their job because most of them contracted the disease and fled in order to not be sent to quarantine or a disease hospital. This became markedly manifested in a maxim among the people: *Owo re, ikure, oyinbo pe e ko wa gba (that is, if you answered the call of the colonizers to help fight the disease due to monetary gains, you are doing so at your own peril)*. Oluwasegun (2017) states that the 1918 influenza unleashed an unprecedented panic that affected the entire community during the outbreak, causing disastrous effects, such as the fear of being sent to an infectious disease hospital and being isolated from their family prompted individuals to conceal from their relatives that they were victims of the influenza. Panic over the 1918 Influenza forced Lagosians to discretely escape to the hinterland, thus spreading the disease (Jimoh Mufutau OLUWASEGUN, 2017). A major source of panic among the people was the newly introduced house-to-house visits. Residents of Lagos, the economic capital of Nigeria, reacted against the government’s intervention because they believed it would undermine their privacy (Jimoh Mufutau OLUWASE-

GUN, 2017). This culminated into massive social and economic dislocation as the people began to leave Lagos, whereas those who could not leave concealed their sickness. It is important to note that the social stigma and fear of losing their property made people hide information about the influenza. It was believed that people sent to the ‘disease asylum’ would not come back and have their property appropriated by the government.

Without mincing words, the aforementioned encumbrances that characterized public responses to past epidemics/pandemics are variants of what occurs in the current COVID-19 pandemic. They will be discussed below.

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA: FEAR, APATHY, INDIFFERENCE, AND CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE

Nigeria’s COVID-19 index case occurred on February 27, 2020. The World Health Organization (WHO) categorized Nigeria as one of the high-risk African countries regarding the spread of COVID-19 since Nigeria is among the most vulnerable African nations due to their weak state of health-care infrastructure and bureaucracy (Olivier MARBOT 2020). The case fatality rate from COVID-19 in Nigeria has been described as the highest in West Africa (Rasheed SOBOWALE, 2020). Most of the fatalities were recorded among persons with underlying health conditions (Nigerian Center for Disease Control 2020), predominantly chronic/non-communicable diseases that constitute a public health burden in Nigeria and Africa (Emmanuel OK-PETU et al., 2018). Consequently, the NCDC activated a multi-sectorial National Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to oversee the national response to COVID-19. Subsequently, the Presidential Task Force (PTF) for coronavirus control was inaugurated on March 9, 2020. The PTF declared that travelers from some COVID-19-high-risk countries had been restricted from entering Nigeria. Nevertheless, the onset of COVID-19 triggered waves of panic across Nigeria.

Nigerians experienced the synchronization and globalization of the effects of pandemics. Pervasive are the temporalities, timelessness, timeliness, contourness, externalities, tentativeness, plausibility, and inventiveness encumbered in this pandemic. Nigeria currently becomes vulnerable to many

losses, notably, loss of income (nations, organizations, individuals, etc.), loss of social/physical connections, and loss of freedom to move across the country. Within the contexts of African culture, particularly in terms of caregiving to sick family members, it became a grieving moment when relatives of COVID-19 victims could not care for their loved ones in order to maintain public health protocol.

Hightening the stress of grieving families are issues around death. Funerals and burials are postponed or held within the restrictions of National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) COVID-19 protocols, often with the presence of limited members of the family of the deceased. Thus, the pain and grief experienced are not only about the loss of the loved ones, but also the inability to give them a befitting burial. However, Nigerians love to celebrate the liminality of their loved ones into eternity. Radio and television shows that allowed calls from listeners and/or viewers witnessed how the masses lamented about the burden placed on them by the lockdowns and inability of the governments to provide palliatives. The people are feeling uncomfortable about the new normal (wearing facemasks, social distancing, no hand shaking, no hugging, etc.). Although the lockdown was critical for disease containment, it undermines the economic and social foundations for survival and the resilience structures of Nigeria's most vulnerable population (UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM, 2020). The projection is that millions more Nigerians will be pushed into poverty and temporary and permanent unemployment, which will further expose them to the "hunger virus." Lockdown-induced poverty and unemployment might trigger an increase in other social problems, including general insecurity, kidnapping, and gender-based violence. Likewise, the people lamented about restrictions on inter-state movement, etc.

Remarkably, one of the hallmarks of the crises that characterized this period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is the convoluted myths on COVID-19. People argue that the disease does not exist, usually pointing to the ambivalence or indifference inherent in the behavior of the ruling elite. Even for scientists and public health experts, it became a Herculean task to convince the public not to follow the political elite in their indifference, inactions, delayed actions, and non-adherence to public health protocols. Significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic is helping to expose governments' ambiva-

lence and lack of empathy for the socio-economic realities of the masses. Like how some members of the public believed that the smallpox of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was contracted by those who had vexed the gods, some Nigerians consider it a disease of the rich, international travelers, Westerners, and even the Chinese. Labeling and profiling others with having or spreading COVID-19 virus became the order of the day. Another myth regards the areas of several conspiracy theories proposed due to the fifth Generation (5G) of internet connectivity. The fifth generation of mobile network is a new global wireless standard (after 1G, 2G, 3G, and 4G networks) and enables a new kind of network designed to virtually connect everyone and everything, including machines, objects, and devices. Issues around 5G became complicated in Nigeria as some religious leaders claimed that the 5G internet protocol is responsible for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. What also accentuated this assertion was the attempt by the Nigerian government to install 5G internet protocols in Nigeria in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### HIERARCHING GRIEF AND DEATHS

The discussion on the concomitants characterizing this era presents ambiguities, segmentation, genderization, demographication, politicization, and weaponization of COVID-19 and its effects. The poorest of the poor in Nigeria were named the vulnerable as the pandemic exposes daily the wide gap of inequalities while showing the looping of societal vulnerabilities despite many and contested hierarchies of sufferings and privileges in the nation's politics or governance. Demographication, as used here, connotes demographic analysis or representation of COVID-19 victims and those exposed directly or indirectly to the effects of the pandemic. Demographication occurs regarding the age bracket of those who are more vulnerable and those who are dying more from the disease. People with the highest risk are those with underlying health conditions. People over the age of 50 are also considered to have a high risk. According to the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), three of every five Nigerians who die from COVID-19 are over 50 years of age. One of 10 people over 50 years who contracts the coronavirus will die from it. Also



notable is the genderization that manifested about the victims of this pandemic. NCDC affirms that men are more likely to contract the disease and/or die.

Notably, two categories of dead bodies emerged during this pandemic. The first category is the Pandemic Dead Bodies (PDBs) and the second category is Non-Pandemic Dead Bodies (NPDBs). NPDBs are the dead bodies of those who died due to other causal factors, whereas the PDBs are the dead bodies of those who died due to COVID-19. What about the ambiguities, ambivalence, stigma, and contestation associated with PDBs by the State and people? The masses and the Presidency contested against the burial of some PDBs (Abba Kyari, the Chief of Staff to the president of Nigeria and Abiola Ajimobi, a former governor of Oyo State and Deputy National Chairman of Nigeria's ruling political party). When they were eventually buried, several back-and-forth arguments followed. The Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Aso Rock<sup>2</sup>, and family members of the deceased were accused of ambivalence towards the COVID-19 protocol amid the COVID-19 phobia pervading the nation. Apart from some popular deceased persons such as Kyari, Ajimobi, PDBs remain nameless.

Arguably, due to the huge publicity usually given to the death of a politician from COVID-19, the masses tend to believe more that the COVID-19 pandemic is becoming a benign engine for eradicating corrupt politicians in Nigeria. However, this goes against scientific and medical conclusions as the disease does not discriminate or segregate. This apathy to the death of politicians was also being expressed when they were announced as COVID-19 patients. This apathy by the public became more accentuated and aggravated on social media, with some people even pre-announcing the death of such politicians. Likewise, this triggered a case of anticipatory grief in the country within the context of discussing death during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as when the deaths of Abaa Kyari and Abiola Ajimobi were announced before they eventually died. However, insinuations say that the government purposefully postponed the announcement of their deaths. Evidently, these encumbrances, nuances, and intrigues concerning deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic still need more attention from social scientists.

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<sup>2</sup> Aso Rock typically represents the seat of power of the Nigerian government. Generally, it stands for the Presidency. That is, the Office of the President of Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

Issues regarding epidemics and pandemics do not just only involve physiological or biological processes. They occur alongside social, cultural, and political spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many traditional ways in which Nigerians mourn their grief and bury their loved ones. The traditional burial rites that may need direct contact with dead bodies are now being abandoned. The many laws enacted and implemented throughout Nigeria have prevented mass gatherings for mourning, praying for the dead bodies, and celebration of the deceased by feasting. Policy makers and health care providers are essential, as members of the burial teams usually want to meet with the families before the burial of PDBs. This meeting served as a means to address many concerns by the relatives on how and why PDBs are handled according to protocol. This will also help the families agree with the burial team and policy makers on the proper way to dispose such bodies according to protocol. However, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, dead bodies of people suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 should be respectfully buried according to the deceased's families, ensuring that the deceased culture, belief system, and religion are observed and the bodies are properly handled in a dignifying manner before the burial. It is advocated that adhering to standard precautions, including the use of appropriate PPEs and hand hygiene before and after the burial procedure should be properly offered to all in the funeral.

Notably, pain, grief, sorrow, death, and burial are historically constituted and configured regarding social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental interactions. They do not only involve physiological or biological processes since the processes that created them are negotiated with social, religious, cultural, and political conditions.

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By trade **Sesan Johnson** is an analyst of public policies and politics (institutions of governance, budgetary, and political economy) particularly in the areas of infrastructural violence against citizens, WASH Protocols, global health modellings & politics, public health priorities & policies and international health developments. He currently utilizes interdisciplinary approaches

in researching pandemics/epidemics amid various political and socio-cultural entanglements in Nigeria, West Africa & African Diaspora. He's an award winning researcher. In March 2018 he received Brian Bertotti Awards from Virginia University of Tech, USA in recognition for innovation in historical scholarship. He was one of the finalists of 2019 McCarthy Award for History of Medicine Research by Royal College of Physicians, University of Edinburgh. In 2021 he won research funding as research member of History of Health & Social Justice Research Group, University of Saskatchewan, Canada. He is a research fellow of IFRA & member Lagos Studies Association (LSA). He's published in journals & newspapers. In April 2022 he presented a paper (Deaths, Mourning and Burials in Times of COVID-19 in Nigeria) to American Graduate School, Paris, France. In March 2022 he presented to HIST 884 Graduates Seminar (Dept of History, University of Saskatchewan, Canada) the theme "Mechanics in Historical Writing". In June 2020 he presented 'Griefs, Pains and Apathy in Times of Epidemics/Pandemics in Africa' to University of Ibadan - History PG webinar on Africa and Pandemics. On October 17, 2019 he spoke to the Royal College of Physicians of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. On June 28, 2019 he presented a paper to the "Shaped by the Sea: Histories of Ocean, Science, Medicine and Technology" at University of Manchester, UK.

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