



Contemporary Issues in African Trade and Trade Finance

CIAT

Volume 6 • Number 1
December 2020

Africa after COVID-19:
Community, Spirituality
and the Face of Hope

COVID-19
SPECIAL
ISSUE

INSIDE

–
Emmanuel Akyeampong
Africa after COVID-19:
Community, Spirituality,
and the Face of Hope
–

ISSN 2409-3688

Africa after COVID-19: Community, Spirituality and the Face of Hope



Emmanuel K. Akyeampong

Ellen Gurney Professor of History and of African and African American Studies, and Oppenheimer Faculty Director, Harvard University Center for African Studies

Across the world, COVID-19 has laid bare the social and economic disparities both between countries and within countries. African nations took steps to secure personal protective equipment for healthcare workers, test kits and ventilators, but were outbid by wealthier regions and countries. And in those wealthier, developed countries, like the US, COVID-19 disproportionately impacted minority groups – African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans – in larger, crowded urban areas. In the early months of the pandemic, deaths among African Americans and Hispanic Americans in cities like New York and Chicago far outnumbered their representation in those cities' populations. In early April, it was reported that while African Americans represented 32% of the population of Louisiana, they

accounted for 70% of COVID-19 deaths at that time.¹

Weak health infrastructure compelled many African nations to close their borders and airports pre-emptively to avert the possible entry of visitors with coronavirus. According to a World Health Organization (WHO) survey from April in Africa, the 41 countries that responded had only 2,000 ventilators between them, with Somalia having none, the Central African Republic three, South Sudan four, Liberia five and Nigeria fewer than 100.² In the same month, a BBC News story noted how Nigeria's early victims of coronavirus included the country's political elite, prompting gibes about how everybody must now, with borders closed and the option of 'medical tourism' removed, utilise the country's rundown hospitals.³

Under-resourced African nations like Tanzania that sought refuge

1. Lois Parshley, "The Deadly Mix of COVID-19, Air Pollution, and Inequality, Explained" Vox, April 11, 2020. See also, Isaac Chotiner, "How Racism is Shaping the Coronavirus Pandemic" The New Yorker, May 7, 2020.

2. Max Bearak and Danielle Paquette, "Africa's most vulnerable countries have few ventilators – or none at all" The Washington Post, April 18, 2020.

3. "Coronavirus: Why some Nigerians are gloating about COVID-19" BBC News, April 22, 2020 (bbc.com).

in spirituality, dismissing social distancing and face masks, soon realised – like in the US – that it was unwise to fly in the face of science.⁴ Few African governments have the capacity to arrange the massive fiscal stimulus measures and financial bail-outs that advanced, industrialised countries have announced.

A virus that has led governments to mandate isolation, quarantine and social distancing has deepened individuals' appreciation for warm and nourishing social relations that many have previously taken for granted. Even in the more individualistic societies in the global north, where more focus is given to the 'nuclear family', families yearned to celebrate birthdays with grandparents and other, more distant, relations. When authorities began to permit gatherings of small social groups, people embraced the respite that even such modest get-togethers, of perhaps just 10 people, could offer from social isolation.

Thus far, Africa has borne relatively well the burden of COVID-19. The more dire predictions of international health experts are yet to manifest, though the continent cannot let down its guard. Some have pointed to how previous pandemics, such as HIV-Aids and Ebola, and the health protocols put in place in response have helped African policymakers and communities deal with coronavirus.

A key asset Africa has is the strength of its community networks and the continuing relevance of the extended family.

A key asset Africa has is the strength of its community networks and the continuing relevance of the extended family. This is a factor in African resilience that must be engaged explicitly as a coping mechanism. The importance of religion is another.

In the late 1960s, research claims about both set in motion debates that have persisted into the present. The WHO's International Pilot Study of Schizophrenia from 1968 covered nine countries, with Nigeria being the only African nation involved. For a disease then seen as progressively degenerative, early findings suggested more positive outcomes in developing countries like Nigeria, pointing to the possible contributory factors of family and community. Several subsequent studies have tested and revised these findings. Kinship in Africa, as a therapy-management group, has long been a research staple in medical anthropology.

In 1969, the Anglican priest and theologian John Mbiti published his landmark book, *African Religions and Philosophy*. He described Africans as

4. Basillioh Mutahi, "Tanzania President John Magufuli: The Man who declared victory over Coronavirus" BBC News, November 2, 2020 (bbc.com).

As in previous viral epidemics, the strong norms around funeral and burial practices in Africa pose challenges during COVID-19.

‘incurably religious’, an assertion that has sparked debates ever since.⁵ In an era in which science has been elevated, people were not sure what to do with this description. At the same time, we admire how Japan has developed materially and technologically without shedding its culture and spirituality.

An important historical truth today is that Africa has become the continent with the largest population of Christians and Muslims. Africans will determine the face and the future of these two world religions. And it is incontestable that spirituality is part of Africa’s DNA. Long before Mbiti, the statesman and philosopher, Léopold Senghor, pointed to this reality in his theory ‘Négritude’, hinting at an intuitive African way of knowing that did not necessarily privilege the abstraction that Western logic celebrates.

But the social strengths that kinship, community and spirituality bring are not without complications. As in previous viral epidemics, the strong norms around funeral and burial practices in Africa pose challenges during COVID-19. Funerals in Africa

have two key functions: to transform the deceased into an ancestor, which the proper conduct of funeral and burial rites ensures; and to dramatise the deceased’s social standing and networks among the living. The first brings close relatives into physical contact with the deceased, and the second accounts for the more public face of funerals. Both are opportunities for contagion.

Across Africa one can witness elements of change, especially in urban environments, in the proliferation of private funeral homes and funeral insurance. The necessity for families to physically prepare their dead for burial is lessening in certain areas due to the presence of funeral homes, and the availability of funeral insurance could minimise the heavy debts families incur for funerals. COVID-19 may, in the short term, buttress the trend towards using funeral homes and discourage the large funeral gatherings. And if this engenders a ‘new normal’, the continent may see some long-term changes in the conduct of burials and funerals.

In Africa, the notion of the extended family has survived the test of individualism and global onslaught of free market ideology. More importantly, even in poor families it has preserved some dignity through communal welfare.

Kinship and community are two important pillars of Africa’s informal

5. See, for examples, Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum, “Is Africa Incurably Religious?”, *Exchange*, 32: 2 (2003), 123-153; and Frans Wijzen, “Are Africans Incurably Religious: Discursive Analysis of a Debate, Direction of a Discipline” *Exchange*, 46: 4 (2017), 370-397.

economy. COVID-19 poses an existential threat on a continent where a significant proportion of economic activity resides in the informal sector. The significance of this sector for Africa is undisputed, accounting in some countries for as much as 70% of economic activity. Just as COVID-19 has reconfigured the nature of formal work – deepening the digital economy, facilitating workplace meetings through virtual platforms, and affirming the ability to work from home – the pandemic may also prompt a reconfiguring of work in the informal sector, though the outlines of what this would look like are yet to be discerned. Its transformative potential cannot be understated, however, because of the informal economy’s commitment to family, kinship and community. In this, it has the capacity to touch more lives.

The fragility of our species in a time of heightened uncertainty triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the sense of community and kinship worldwide. Spirituality, family, the extended family – these qualities have sustained Africa and Africans for generations. Africans should be more deliberate in how they leverage these in their development visions for the rest of the century. The Muslim community of the faithful (the ummah) and the Christian Church (the assembly or ekklesia, to use the Greek term) are both communities of hope. With its demographic growth, where by 2050 one in every four individuals on Earth will hail from the continent, Africa is the face of hope in the world.



African Export-Import Bank Banque Africaine d'Import-Export

Headquarters – Cairo

72B El-Maahad El-Eshteraky Street
Roxy, Heliopolis, Cairo 11341, Egypt

info@afreximbank.com
T+(202) 2456 4100/1/2/3/4

Abuja Branch

No. 2 Gnassingbe Eyadema Street
Off Yakubu Gowon Crescent
Asokoro, Abuja, Nigeria

PMB 601 Garki, Abuja, Nigeria

abuja@afreximbank.com
T+(234) 9 460 3160

Abidjan Branch

3ème Etage, Immeuble CRRAE-UMOA,
Angle Boulevard Botreau Roussel –
Rue Privée CRRAE-UMOA
Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

abidjan@afreximbank.com
T+(225) 2030 7300

Harare Branch

Eastgate Building, 3rd Floor
(North Wing), Sam Nujoma Street
Harare, Zimbabwe

P.O. Box CY 1600
Causeway, Harare, Zimbabwe

harare@afreximbank.com
T+(263) 24 2 700 904/941

Kampala Branch

Rwenzori Towers,
3rd Floor Wing A
Plot 6 Nakasero

Postal Address: P.O. Box 28412
Kampala, Uganda

kampala@afreximbank.com
T+(256) 417 892 700
+(256) 312 423 700

Transforming Africa's Trade
afreximbank.com

ISSN 2409-3688