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RA Reviews Editorial Voice:

***Africa and the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Beyond Imposing Lockdowns and Unsettling Communities***

When the Coronavirus, popularly known as Covid-19, made headlines in China's Wuhan city about six months ago, many of us were unaware and unfazed about the headline news or what it entailed. Then we were told the virus was spreading, that we had to be careful. When it suddenly became a global pandemic, we had to quarantine. Communities in the US, Europe and in certain parts of Asia started showing signs of the virus strains. And by February 2020, countries on the African continent were told to brace for what was to come by adopting the necessary precautionary measures.

According to World Health Organization (WHO) records, Italy and Iran were the ones that were the hardest hit during the early part of 2020. Soon thereafter, other countries followed suit. By then, Africa was not yet affected; it was only when cases came to the fore in Algeria that Africa decided to go on the offensive. Being the first among the African states, Algeria signaled that the continent had to prepare itself by adopting the same measures of quarantine and social distancing that were adopted in Europe and Asia. Then, the WHO, led by Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, an Ethiopian microbiologist, updated the continent on Covid's reach and its upcoming unstoppable continental spread; and as a proactive measure, it requested countries to scale up their readiness by taking various precautionary methods.

Towards the end of February, less than half of the continent's countries were in a position to test for Covid-19. By March, just more than 10 African countries reported Covid-19's presence within their borders. Around this time, Africa had only recorded less than 700 cases compared to the overwhelming cases that occurred in European and Asian countries. On the African continent, the recordings indicated that the cases were increasing but at a slow pace. This was out of sync with some of the WHO experts' predictions that averred that the cases were rising thick and fast. Since Africa had (and still has) a shortage of medical supplies such as masks and an array of other products to combat this virus, countries such as China that experienced the pandemic first reached out to the continent to assist; it was, however, Cuba that sent health care workers that included doctors and nurses to lend a hand.

African countries gradually responded to the reported pandemic in three ways: Though Africa's number of cases has remained relatively low, some governments like Uganda lashed out at their population with stringent lockdowns measures based only on what "others are doing." There were no considerations of the poor, no coordination with civil society groups and certainly no consultation with opposition parties. The concern of these governments was exerting control and maintaining the political status quo.

Many African countries have meanwhile taken extra measures to consult with opposition groups, open up public deliberation and consider scientific input before introducing some level of lockdown. This was the case in Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Kenya, among others. While communities in many of these countries are hurting and suffering under restrictive measures,

governments are reticent in opening up because of their precarious status in a lockdown frenzy world.

Between the two polar responses lie countries with a *laissez-faire* approach, shaped by denial, ignorance or ineffectiveness. No clear restrictions among the public, and no system of directiveness to educate the citizens on the known facts of the virus. In the age of fake news, citizens of these countries revert to Facebook's rumors, apocalyptic religious leaders and healers. This is what one observes in Mauritania, Mali, Tanzania and other countries where people are left to fend for themselves.

Amidst these divergent African responses, the WHO continued to urge African countries to scale up their health care readiness, which in reality translated to acquiring more debt from global monetary funds or ceding more leveraging powers to the Chinese state's benevolence. The WHO and its administrators seem to overlook the realities on the African ground in the midst of these abnormal circumstances; it thus creates the atmosphere of an absurd dialogue. The WHO's prescriptions for Africans ignore their different responses and dire economic circumstances.

Many African governments have tried, through various strategies, to get out of the debt trap. As a consequence, they are unable to address significant areas such as education and health care sectors due to the lack of capital. In the case of Africa's Francophone countries, a sizable number of them are still tied to their age-old currency agreements with their former colonial power. A situation of colonialism that deprived these countries from raising capital investment funds or maintaining low interest rates in their banking system. Alongside this, many other progressive African countries that worked hard to be politically and economically independent of the plethora of global conglomerates have found themselves trapped after being forced to adopt the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programs in the 1980s. Fallouts from these programs brought along more hardships beyond financial relief. In both cases, countries, except a few, are forced to be financially dependent rather than being autonomous politically or financially. And now that these countries are facing Covid-19, the desire to be economically liberated has become a pipe dream.

Covid-19, which emerged during the despised neoliberal age, has obscured the plight of African countries. Instead of these countries advancing in pursuit of policy reforms, cross-border collaboration and integration as they have already expressed in their regional associations such as the East African Community (EAC), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), they now are closing borders under the new uncertainties of the global pandemic. One cannot ignore the fact that as this pandemic weakens African communities, it also empowers authoritarianism and dictatorship. Long standing dictators in many countries on the continent are using their responses to garnish their one-man show.

Some democratically elected governments such as South Africa and Kenya are using military and police might to confine the poor who have been stigmatized as sources of risk. Other governments, as is the case in Senegal, are quietly taking advantage of the pandemic to suspend some democratic processes of governance. It is, however, a stage in 21st century history that is reminding us of a stage of pre-colonial history. African leaders are responding to the pandemic in a way that is similar to how our ancestors responded to colonialism: There were those who embraced it as an 'evolution' and went with it and there were those who attempted to cut themselves off through 'revolution.' There were also those like the Sheikh in Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, when his people came to ask what they ought to do about sending their children to the colonial schools, he melted down and said "I swear to you I have no such knowledge as that," then

“the men who were gathered there looked at one another in deep uncertainty and dismay. If the teacher did not know, then who would know?”

The faultline in all African responses today as well as yesterday is in the absence of unity. We are not sure that any pandemic policy proposal regarding Senegal, for instance, will be effective if the Gambia is not a part of it. Likewise, the mobility and interdependency between Ethiopia and Eritrea will forbid a successful Covid-19 response unless coordinated between the two polities. If any lesson is to be learned from the AIDS epidemic in SADC, it will be a need for policy integration among member countries.

If there is any wisdom to be learned from most recent human-made calamities it should be that in most cases they have not been resolved, but provincialized and Africanized. Anti-Semitism was a European creation and a German moral disease, but nowadays some African countries rank high in anti-Semitic attitudes. Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) became a global problem when it suddenly appeared among healthy people in the United States. But by the beginning of the new century, it became a mostly African and Southern African problem. Militant terrorism developed as a result of the fallout between warring parties in and about Afghanistan, but as its sponsors moved on to other new initiatives, militant Islamist groups have increasingly become an African-Sahel problem. It is no wonder that recent development in Guangzhou, China, singled out Africans, announcing “every black person needs to be quarantined” to quote an eye witness. A strategic concern for African governments should be to avert making Covid-19 another African problem.

For Africa to move forward, Africans must imagine the impossible that lies beyond the conventional political norm that has left us all in a precarious state. If the current global reality is not of our making, then we need to either live ours or imagine an alternative one. Only then, can one understand the wisdom of Paul Kagame’s declaration that “We must stop borrowing and start printing money for Africa’s development.” In qualifying this statement, Kagame explains that “the idea of going to another sovereign country to borrow paper (fiat money) instead of using our sovereign status to print money and manage this printed money to support our developmental projects and programs has become the normal and easy way for almost all African countries since attaining independence status.” Kagame is correct in theory as this is what the US is doing in public while many other ‘sovereign’ countries are doing it in secret. But in practice dis-membered African countries cannot print money for their people because in their current limited capacities they cannot provide goods, and that too means that they cannot prevent inflation and currency devaluation.

Since most African citizens survive on the informal market and are living outside the formal state, no effective government control can be imposed without their consent. The fact is that across the continent, communities have been challenged culturally and religiously; their societal character, on the one hand, has committed community members has been shaken and, on the other, their identity as religious communities has been dented. Never before have they or earlier communities encountered such audacious intrusions by the state, which visibly forced them to change their ways and habits almost overnight in order to keep at bay a debilitating disease.

To end on a good note; even though this incapacitating virus has forced this world to come to a proverbial standstill, it caused many creative individuals to produce artwork, compose poems, write newspaper columns, pen short stories and work on novellas. Of late, RAR’s subscribers have read translations of a poem on this pandemic in Arabic, Swahili, Wolof and Pulaar. One, therefore, expects other translations to appear too and together with this process one is bound to see creative writings in the next few months and years that capture the impact of Covid-19 on African lives; and RAR looks forward to having those works reviewed in one of its future issues. Needless to

say, translations in the work of arts are commendable, but not in government's responses to a global pandemic. As argued in this editorial, we hope to see no 'translation' in governmental responses to Covid-19, but a more deliberated and community-oriented approach to the pandemic.

In the Time of Pandemic

Catherine O'Meara, [March 16, 2020](#)

And the people stayed home.

And they read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still.

And they listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed.

And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

Arabic

قعد الناس في البيوت
فاستراحوا و انصتوا
درسوا محتوى الطروس
فاستقاموا و اقسطوا

ريضوا الجسم رفهوا
ابدعوا اجمل الفنون
علموا النفس ان تعي
كيف تحيا و ان تكون

بعضهم امعن النظر
بعضهم اصغى و اعتبر
اطلق الذهن سابرا
غور باق و ما اندثر
انست روحه الى

Swahili

Na watu walitulia majumbani
wakasoma vitabu na kutega masikio
Wakapumzika na kunyoosha viungo
Wakaunda sanaa na michezo kuicheza
Wakajifunza njia mbadala za utu wao
Wakatulia tuli.

Wakisikiliza kwa makini.
Wengine walitafakari
Wengine walisali
Wengine walicheza
Wengine walikutana na vivuli vyao.
Na watu wakaanza kuwa na mawazo tofauti.
Na watu wakaponya.

روح إلف به السمر
هاجرا بادي النظر
فانجلي الشؤم و الكدر

بان عنا الجهلاء
ليس فينا اغبياء
ليس في الكون معتد
و الذي قلبه هواء
يا لسعدي و فرحتي
دب في العالم الشفاء

ثم أبنا بدمعنا
نبيكي من ضممه الرفات
و ارتجعنا نفوسنا
بعد ان هزها الشتات
و ابتعثنا الرجا الذي
عد قبلا من الموات
غن يا خل غننا
خل ما أجمل الحياة

Translated by Dr. Abdellateef Said.
International University of Africa, Khartoum.

Wolof Wéral

Nit ña faf jekki lëlu ca séeni kër
Faf di jàng i tééré, teg ca-y déglu
Faf di noppalu ak a tàggat séen yaram
Faf di sos ay xeeti fànn, boole ca-m po
Ñu doxe fa faf jàng xeeti nekkim yu yees
Teg ca faf ñépp taxaw, seetlu

Teg ca ñu tàmbali di gën a déglu ci-g teewlu
Ñenn ña dëkke xalaat
Ñeneen ña wëy di julli
Ñenn ña ca pecc ma
Ñeneen ña faf safoonte ak séen takkandeer
Nit ña jekki tàmbali di xalaate ak anam wu
bees Teg ca ñu faf di wér

Teg ca suuf sa tamit tàmbali di wér
Ci wuute-g nit ña fa daan dund
Dundinu ñàkk-xam gu àndoon ak musiba
Suuf sa tàmbali di wér
Ci wuute-g nit ñu réer ña amulwoon
yërmaande

Na, bila ya uwepo wa watu walioishi katika
Njia zenye ujinga, hatari, kutojali na kukosa
mioyo

Dunia ikaanza kuponya.
Na baada ya hatari kupita, na watu kuungana
pamoja tena,

Walihuzunika kwa yote waliyopoteza, na
kuchagua mapya,

Na kuziota taswira mpya,
Na kuunda njia mpya za kuishi na kuiponya
dunia, kabisa
Kama wao walivyoponyeka.

Imetafsiriwa kwa Kiswahili na Ida
Hadjivayanis

Translated by Dr. Ida Hadjivayanis, School of
Oriental and African Studies, London.

Pulaar

Yimbe njoodii galleeji mabbe

Be njaṅgi defte

Be kedii

Be pooftii

Be coftini balli mabbe

Be mbaḍi ñeeñal, be piji

Be ekkii ngonka kesa

Be ndartii be kedii ko moy'yi

Bee heen ina miiṅtoo, bee heen ina ñaagoo

bee heen ina kawra e beeli mabbe

Yimbe puḍḍii waylude miiṅooji mabbe

Yimbe celli

De yimbe famḍube kakillaaji

heewbe bone balwube deedi njahi

Leydi ne fuḍḍii sellude

De bone oo iwi

Haa yimbe kawriti

Be cunii maaybe mabbe

Be mbayli jaḍbal

**Te ba musiba ma jàlle
Ba nit ña manatee gise ak a dajaloo
Ñoom ñépp a jooy séeni way-dem ya**

**Ca ginnaaw ba ñu faf amal tànnéef yu yees
Teg ca ñuy gént a fent mébèt yu yees
Nit ña mujj sos xeeti dundin yu yees
Faf sax mujj fajal suuf sa jàngoroom ba mu
ni peleg
Na ñu wérewoon ca séen bopp ñoom**

**Be puɗɗii miijaade ebbooje kese
Be tafi ngonka kesa
Be cafri leydi haa ndi selli
Hono be cellirnoo kam en e koye mabbe**

Translated by Dr. Sadibou Sow, an independent scholar.

*Translated by Mor Gueye, University of Illinois at Urbana-champaign.

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Review Team

Editor-In-Chief & Associate Editors:

- Muhammed Haron, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Botswana/University of Stellenbosch (haronm@mopipi.ub.bw).(Editor-In-Chief);
- Wendy Wilson-Fall, Associate Professor and Chair, Africana Studies Program Oeschle Center for International Education, Lafayette College (wilsonfw@lafayette.edu);
- Hassan Juma Ndzovu, PhD. Senior Lecturer of Religious Studies, Department of Religious Studies, Moi University, Kenya (hassan.ndzovu@gmail.com);
- Yunus Dumbe, PhD. Religious Studies Department, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Accra, Ghana, (ydumbe@gmail.com);
- Badr Abdelfattah Badr, PhD. Assistant Professor of Curriculum & Instruction, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt (badr_alkafy@edu.asu.edu.eg);
- Bamba Drame, Dar El Hadith El Hassaniyya Institute, Rabat, Morocco, (ndrame.online@gmail.com);
- Mbaye Lo, Associate Professor of the Practice, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies & International Comparative Studies, Duke University; (mbayelo@duke.edu).

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