



COVID-19 Lockdown, Border Quarantine and Traditional Burial Rites in Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria

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The novel coronavirus also known as COVID-19 has presented the global community with unique challenges, and scientists are yet to develop a vaccine for the treatment of the disease. Consequently, political leaders in different parts of the world have resorted to untested theories, including the lockdown policy just to curb rapid transmission of the virus. As part of its traditional duty, the media have constantly connected the general public with the global threat of the deadly virus, and daily reports of the fatalities have become a predominant feature of the pandemic communications. Within the last week of April 2020, the media reported cases of ‘mysterious’ deaths in Kano, the commercial centre of Northern Nigeria. Over 640 people reportedly died within a week, and this provoked a panic in Kano and neighbouring states as people speculated that the deaths might be connected with the coronavirus.¹ The fear stemmed largely from the fact that there has been an exponential increase in confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Nigeria, and the national government has been battling with the challenge of ramping up testing to determine the rate and pattern of the transmission. Unfortunately, there was no functional testing facility in Kano to determine whether or

¹ Chi Chi Izundu, ‘What is Behind Nigeria’s Unexplained Deaths in Kano?’ *BBC*, April 28, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52454259>.

not the novel coronavirus had any role in the 'mysterious' deaths. Initially, the Kano State government attributed the deaths to ailments ranging from malaria, meningitis, hypertension and diabetes, but members of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 blamed the deaths on COVID-19. According to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control's report of May 13, 2020, Kano had recorded a total of 707 confirmed cases of coronavirus, making it rank as a state with the second highest number of cases. The industrial and densely populated city is unarguably the epicentre of the virus in Northern Nigeria, and this has compelled President Muhammadu Buhari to impose a lockdown on Kano.

While the government of Kano has been battling to unravel the causes of the mass deaths, individuals have been mourning their dead. Members of the Igbo ethnic group in Kano appeared to be psychologically worse off in the 'mysterious' death experience. It is not about the number of fatalities but the burial rites that must be performed by members of the deceased family. Culturally, Igbos usually take their dead relatives back to their ancestral home for burial rites, especially if the deceased is an elderly person. The cultural practices of some ethnic groups may seem appealing, but upholding such in an emergency situation certainly poses a challenge. Some Igbo families in Kano that lost their relatives since the outbreak of the pandemic were confronted with the challenge of taking their dead relatives to their ancestral home. Regrettably, the federal government had banned interstate travels as part of the effort to control the spread of the deadly contagion. To circumvent the lockdown rule, some members of the Igbo

ethnic group in Kano resorted to smuggling the remains of their relatives into South-Eastern Nigeria in body bags.

The haulage of corpses in body bags was arranged in such a way that it would be difficult for an outsider to find out. The bagged corpses were usually conveyed in long vehicles after treating them with chemicals that prevented decomposition and stink. In order to beat the police at checkpoints, the smugglers ensured that they carried about two corpses along with many other items. The drivers presented perfectly sealed body bags to the police as contraband and had to give bribes for speedy passage of such 'contraband.'² The smugglers charged as much as ₦100, 000 (\$30) per corpse and such negotiations were done without the knowledge of passengers who had legitimate goods. At some point, movement across River Niger Bridge and other borders became more difficult. State governments closed their borders to non-essential travels, and people were screened at different borders for symptoms of COVID-19. The corpse smugglers then started using tippers that carry sand and stone to convey corpses from Northern Nigeria. It is possible the smugglers might have also ferried bagged corpses across River Niger without the knowledge of security agents. Part of the reason for the smuggling of corpses into Igboland was to avoid the social stigmatisation associated with deaths arising from COVID-19. 'Body bagging' also enabled people to avert harsh punishment by governments. A number of times, the syndicate involved in the corpse smuggling have been caught and quarantined for fourteen days at border towns. Some

² 'Danger in the East: Igbo corpses are Smuggled in Body Bags with Coronavirus Spreading Speedily.' *The Nigerian Voice*, 7 May, 2020.

<https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/287755/danger-in-the-east-igbo-corpses-are-smuggled-in-body-bags-w.html>

corpse smugglers, who succeeded in bringing the corpse into Igboland have also been arrested by local vigilante groups or members of the COVID-19 task force mounted at various state and community borders to monitor interstate movements. Being caught and quarantined at the border in this kind of situation puts members of the deceased family in a more serious trauma. The suffering and penalty for violating government lockdown rules sometimes trivialise the very essence of taking risks to bring home dead relatives for traditional burial rites.

Whatever may be the justification, smuggling dead bodies during a period of global health crisis without considering the potential risks can be dangerous. In the first place, the haulage and secret burial of dead bodies associated with COVID-19 contravenes the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control's recommended protocols for handling dead bodies.³ The handlers of the bodies were not trained in infection prevention and control and did not wear personal protective equipment. The implication is that people who died of coronavirus and were smuggled back to their ancestral home might have ended up infecting other people. Again, Igbos have always had an alternative way of dealing with an uncommon situation of this nature. People who died in mysterious circumstances outside their ancestral home are usually given symbolic burials without bringing their corpses home. For instance, people who died either in a plane crash or in the high sea are accorded symbolic burials. In that circumstance, people do not need to see the remains of the deceased. The ongoing pandemic should have equally called for symbolic burial rites so as to reduce the potential risk of spreading the virus. In order

³https://www.ncdc.gov.ng/themes/common/docs/protocols/189_1586635002.pdf

to control cross-border infection risks, states and local governments should ensure that movements across state borders are strictly restricted to essential goods and services as directed by the federal government. And there should also be more enlightenment campaigns on the potential risks associated with handling COVID-19 deaths.

