

## Social Distancing in the New Normal: Its Implication for Community Well-Being in Ikwerre Society of Rivers State, Nigeria.

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### Abstract

This paper examines social distancing in the new normal and its implication for community well-being in Ikwerre society. Among the numerous diseases mankind have had to deal with over years such as: SARS, HIV/AIDS, Lassa fever, Ebola, Corona Virus Disease is the most recent. So far, there is no known cure for the virus although vaccines to help curtail its extreme effects have been rolled out. There are other non-pharmaceutical measures of prevention of the virus which includes: the social distancing, use of hand sanitizer, frequent washing of hands and wearing of face masks. Using the qualitative analysis of research method and the descriptive approach the paper x-rays the implication of social distancing for community well-being. Findings are that although social distancing in the face of COVID-19 is adopted as a measure to save and preserve life, there are merits and demerits and one has far more reaching effects than the other. The practice may lead to eroding the communal life of Africans, Ikwerre society inclusive are known for and are used to if prolonged. Pre-existing socio-cultural activities in Ikwerre society impede the capacity for the people to totally observe social distancing. The paper recommends among others, that wisdom is required in keeping to the compliance with prescribed precautionary measures of social distancing in order not to lose the very core values, socio-cultural lifestyle and customs of the Ikwerre people to the pandemic. As well as noting that, it is only a communally stable society that is capable of breeding a developed nation.

**Keywords:** Social, distancing, New-normal, well-being

## INTRODUCTION

As the pandemic (COVID-19) ravage the earth, unusual ways of living has become the new normal. So far, there is no known cure for the virus. The only thing that comes close to a respite is the vaccines that have been rolled out to contain it. But the introduction of the vaccines has got its attendant problems as there have been various conspiracy theories and propaganda against the vaccines. Some have linked it to chips to be implanted in people's bodies, others claim that it is the implantation of the G5generationmobile network in people's bodies; which will enable faster network connection of everyone and everything, while there is a school of thought who believe that getting vaccinated definitely means accepting the biblical mark of the beast as recorded in the Judeo-Christian Bible in Revelations 13:16-17. The truth or falsity of each of this claim is not our interest in this paper. The paper is rather concerned with the fact that COVID-19 has

compelled the human race to devise new ways of doing things in order to continue existing. As a result of this, the World Health Organization (WHO) has mapped out certain precautionary measures to curtail the excessive spread of the virus. They include the use of alcohol-based sanitizer, frequent washing of hands, the use of face shield and nose masks, social distancing, social etiquette when sneezing or coughing, and border closure (which was adopted at the inception of the pandemic, though have been relaxed by some countries including Nigeria). Presently, in Ikwerre society, social distancing has minimized social gathering which is one of the extant COVID-19 protocols leading to a breakdown of social cohesion that Ikwerre people enjoy. This paper therefore discusses the ways in which social distancing as a result of COVID-19 may lead to eroding communal lifestyle of the Ikwerre people of Rivers State.

## Theoretical Framework

This discourse is akin to the symbolic interactionist theory by George Herbert Mead and Max Weber. Symbolic interactionist theory posits that human beings react to situations concerning their surroundings based on individual understanding of those situations. Symbolic interactionism is a hypothetical structure in sociology that showcases how societies are shaped and sustained through recurring events. (Carter and Fuller, 2015). In plain language, people in society appreciate their communal worlds through interaction and convey meanings through verbal communication and symbols. Worthy of note here is the fact that the basic arrangement of a society is less significant in the symbolic interactionist view compared to how skewed, frequent, and significant connections between persons build humanity. Thus, society is considered to be communally built via human interpretation. Social interaction is better understood when considered from Blumer's (1986) point of view. Blumer explains it in four main principles as thus:

1. Human beings respond to the personal connotations things have for them. For example, persons that view the "object" of family as being insignificant will make decisions that showcases the unimportant role of family in their lives;
2. Interactions occur in a communal and cultural background where objects, people, and circumstances must be distinct and characterized based on individuals' personal meanings;
3. For some persons, meanings comes from communications with other persons and with society;
4. These meanings that a person has are shaped and reshaped through interpretation that occurs whenever that person interacts with other people.

From the foregoing, Blumer lays emphasis on how personality can materialize from the interactive process of fusion (Denzin, 2008; Carter and Fuller, 2015). People always take on "conscious action" that create and confer the meaning of situations. This is suggestive of the fact that research of individual behavior should begin by investigating how individuals relate and interrelate with each other in the society, rather than regarding the person and society as entirely separate entities. The social order itself is not a formation, but a continuum of interpretation and reinventing the connotation of events. An action may have a particular connotation in one circumstance, or in the interface between two persons, but will have a totally diverse connotation between other individuals in another context. Meaning is constructed through interactions between individuals based on individual understanding of the concept, as meaning cannot be preset, as well as, differ for the same person.

In essence, Symbolic Interactionist theory opines that people respond to things in a manner that indicates the meanings they have individually given to that thing. This means that individual

responses connotes from the social interactions that person have with others, and meanings are altered in the course of incessant interpretation processes that the person uses whenever they deal with things that they come across.

## WHO ARE THE IKWERRE?

The Ikwerre society with over 1,390, 895 persons from the 2006 census (NPC, 2008), is one of the major tribes in Rivers State who proudly address themselves with the coinage as *Iwhuruonha*, meaning proper native, to differentiate themselves from overwhelming strangers leaving in their society. The Ikwerre society spreads across four (4) Local Government Areas of Rivers State, namely the Port Harcourt, the Ikwerre, the Obio Akpor, and the Emouha Local Government Areas. It is quite unfortunate that the Ikwerre people are hardly known outside Rivers State as a result of lack of written literature about the people's way of life apart from a few excerpts here and there (Wotogbe-Weneka 2020). The Ikwerre society is bounded in the north by Imo State, north-east by the Etche, Eleme, and Tai, in the north-west by the Ogba, Egbema, Ekpeye, and Abua and in the south by the Kalabari or Ijaw (Tasie 2008). The Ikwerre society is made up of 29 clans.

Furthermore, the Ikwerre people are generally well-informed, good-looking, strong, intelligent, and clean (Tasie 2008). They are religious people as there are practicing Christians, Muslims, and Traditionalist, all paying their allegiance to God Almighty, in the manner specified by the teachings and contents of their respective faiths. Deductively, the upland and urban nature of Ikwerre land accounts for the Ikwerre society area playing substantial role in contributing to the economic, educational, and social potentials and viability of Rivers State to justify Rivers' state acronym as "The Treasure Base of the Nation".

## Implication of Social Distancing on the Community Well-Being of Ikwerre Society, Rivers State.

In public health, social distancing is one of the non-pharmaceutical procedures adopted by the WHO to prevent the wild and wide increase of communicable diseases by maintaining bodily space among two people. This according to the Center for Disease Control CDC, (2020) include the evasion of assembling together in huge crowd. This method was adopted in order to reduce the possible exposure of an uninfected person to the infected person. In order to achieve this when the pandemic was at its peak, there was the closure of schools, marketplaces, workplaces, churches, mosques, cancellation of all occasions/events of physical large gathering of persons such as weddings, burials, naming ceremonies all around the globe Ikwerre society inclusive. Crossman (2019) views social distance as a means of communal severance between two groups, caused by seeming or factual difference between groups of persons. Social distancing by implication means a situation where people cannot have any form of social interaction whatsoever. But this is not the case in our present reality as it is evident in this technological age where the internet is available. People may be physically distant but still maintain social contact via Youtube, Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram, and all other social

media apparatus made accessible. The ground for social distancing is to avoid the multiplicity of the virus. The symptoms that qualify a person to be labeled as having the virus are those of fever, cold (catarrh and cough) plus headaches which are very similar to the usual malaria that is common to Africans. These symptoms to the typical Ikwerre person are not enough to isolate a person how much more social distancing from the individual. There is a popular opinion among Africans that it is in the community of other humans beings that the life of the individual can have meaning or significance. This stance relates to George Herbert Mead's concept of the symbolic interactionist theory which argues that people's selves are communal products, but that these selves are also purposive and imaginative. Because of the communal way of life of the Ikwerre people, it is challenging for them to totally observe social distancing. The Ikwerre people who are naturally known for their hospitality will rather show empathy to an infected person by lavishing love and care to the individual instead of social distancing themselves from such a person. Close family members will even interact with the corpse of the person should the person fail to recover and dies. And so, the perception of the average Ikwerre is such that Covid-19 is not enough reason for them to boycott the communal lifestyle which has united them over the years as most of the precautionary measures run contrary to the established way of life they are accustomed to in the following areas.

**a) Hospitality**

Hospitality is the friendly generous reception of guests. Ikwerre society is unarguably one of the most hospitable communities in Nigeria (Tasie, 2008) this is true considering that it has and still plays host to so many ethnic communities who are resident in the land. In the same vein, the typical Ikwerre indigene will help and accommodate his brother in times of need. Social distancing contravenes this beautiful culture of the Ikwerre people, today, people are advised to sit at home and avoid visiting anybody or entertain guests in their homes in order not spread the virus in case they are carriers themselves or contact it from others. A lot of people are adhering to this government order because they do not want to be perceived as lawbreakers. But in all honesty, this does not portray the Ikwerre people for who they truly are.

**b) Social Gatherings**

Ikwerre people just like any other ethnic group in Nigeria are known for their unique culture and traditions. These cultures and traditions of the Ikwerre people make them distinct from all other existing tribes and they sum up as their social life. Social gatherings of Ikwerre people are usually a period of homecoming. It is a time when people meet with their kinsmen who they probably have not seen in a long time. For those in the villages, it is a period when people come out in their numbers and cherish the bond they share which can only best be expressed in such gatherings. It is a time of wining and dining and relishing local foods and drinks as well as catching up with folktales and gossips of recent

happenings around the towns and villages. It is also a time when some township men find beautiful home-groomed brides to marry. Some of the cultural activities of Ikwerre social gatherings are *Eregbu*(Cultural Dance), *Ite/Egelege*(Wrestling Festival) *Eri Obor*(Cultural Dance and Music), *Eri-Omu-Ada*(Cultural Dance of First Daughters), *Eri-Omu-Agbobia* and *Eri-Elewere-Nzi*(Cultural Dances of the Womenfolk). In these gatherings, the Ikwerre people especially the women dress in gorgeous cultural attires to grace the occasion. At the end of each of these events, the people gather either in their homes or outside in their *Obiri* (Village or compound square) to entertain their guest and for relaxation.

In all honesty, social distancing is crippling this all-important aspect of the lifestyle and culture of the Ikwerre people. The ban by the federal and state governments on all forms of gathering has adversely affected this aspect of the people's culture. Brothers and kinsmen have been separated as everyone is now a possible suspect/carrier of the virus. The traditional rulers in Ikwerre society as a matter of urgency should have a relook at the spate of deterrent of social cohesion in the society as a result of social distancing brought about by COVID-9 and take urgent steps to salvage whatever that is left of the social life of the people of Ikwerre society.

**c) Greetings**

Greeting is an integral part of Ikwerre people's culture. It is an exchange of pleasantries. It is an expression of respect, regard, goodwill, and wishes. Greeting among the Ikwerre people may involve handshake, a touch, an embrace, a hug, or a pat on the back (between an elder and a younger person). All these methods of greetings are applicable based on the type of relationship that exists between the fellows. When Ikwerre people gather, greeting is chanted in the following manner "Ikwerre *Anu Meka o! Oha Anumeka o!* (Ikwerre people I greet you all) And the response is *Diali* (bonafide person). Another type of greeting in Ikwerre is *Nda* (How are you?) and the response is *Oburuoma* (all is well). However, in this time of COVID-19 and with social distancing being adhered to, this very significant culture of the Ikwerre people has been seriously affected. People no longer shake hands, hug, embrace or even touch each other in excitement while greeting. This has greatly affected the social life of the Ikwerre people. Everyone is being careful not to contact the virus and as such suspects the other person to be a carrier of the virus. Social distancing does not appeal to Ikwerre culture at all. In fact, it is a typical westernized culture, a culture where every man minds his own business and does not interfere with another person's business. The Ikwerre society just like all other African societies is known and appreciated for their communalism. A typical Ikwerre

society is such that people live in houses without fences. They wake up in the morning and visit each other's houses just to say *Anu Bola?* (Good morning). They shake hands, embrace hug themselves, sit together, and drink the early morning palm wine in peace and harmony. Regrettably, social distancing brought about by COVID-19 is promoting individualism among the Ikwerre people and its excesses should be curtailed.

**d) Death and Burial**

Death is an inevitable end that awaits every living being. The traditional Ikwerre society celebrates the death of anyone who dies at full old age, but the death of a young person is frowned at. The burial of an old man in Ikwerre society is usually accompanied with a lot of activities. Such as expensive funeral rites, death notices in national and local newspapers, radio, television, dances, assorted foods and drinks, invitation cards are printed and the deceased photograph embossed on T-shirts. Different groups put on their different shades of uniforms and assorted kinds of souvenirs shared to guests by family and close friends at the funeral. Of course, there is usually a mammoth crowd expected at such burials. Need I say that it is another avenue for the social gathering of kinsmen from far and near in commensuration with the bereaved family? But due to social distancing characterized by COVID-19, large gathering of people at burials have been prohibited by the government. Ikwerre people are no longer allowed to give their dead the befitting burial they deserve, irrespective of the roles and positions they occupied in the society before their untimely demise. For people with exalted positions such as chief or Royal Highnesses, one would expect nothing short of a royalty kind of farewell in burying such an individual. The roles that people have are attached to their positions in society, and they can be indicators of their potential manners even in death.

Symbolic interactionism buttresses the fact that the social interaction between individual's socialization is a way in which individuals learn what it entails for them to function in accordance with the roles that they have taken on. Individuals identify themselves by the roles they take in social structure and the beliefs and opinions that others' identify them with become internalized (Casino and Thien, 2009). Burials of infected persons are now done in a hurry and at cemetery grounds against the Ikwerre culture that advocates for the burial of their loved ones in the deceased compound. In fact in traditional Ikwerre society, this is an abominable act and it is believed that the spirit of the dead will not find eternal rest and may not be granted access into the world of the ancestors until the body of the deceased has been brought home. This corresponds to the view of John .S. Mbiti (1969) when he asserts that "that in some societies, family spirits are to be moved ceremoniously when the villagers move from one place to another. This ensures that the family spirit and especially the living dead move with members of their human relatives and are not forsaken where there is nobody to remember them in their 'personal' immortality". Worst of it is that nowadays, the burials

are done unannounced and in a hurry, making some family members of the deceased unaware that their loved one has been buried. This is absolutely unacceptable to Ikwerre people and serious caution has to be taken by the government and present-day Ikwerre society in the manner burials are been conducted in land today. There is a possible danger looming in the future for the living in Ikwerre society if the living dead are not accorded proper burial rites that is befitting to them.

**Conclusion**

Social distancing brought about by the COVID-19 Pandemic has made severe changes in the communal lifestyle of Ikwerre people in the new normal. Socio-cultural activities have almost come to a halt in strict compliance to the prescribed precautionary safety measures of the pandemic. The warm reception accorded to guests in Ikwerre homes is gradually phasing out as people are not allowed to visit one another. People are now apprehensive and overtly skeptical in expressing themselves while exchanging pleasantries. Social gatherings have minimized or are gradually vanishing into thin air as it has almost become a forbidden thing for people to gather together for any event whatsoever in the new normal. All of these are further dividing us and making social cohesion for community well-being an almost impossible task among the Ikwerre people. In a time when the world is becoming a global village, anything that fosters division should be curtailed or better still jettisoned if the aim of unifying the continent must be achieved.

**Recommendations**

The traditional rulers in Ikwerre society needs to acquire wisdom in keeping to the compliance with prescribed precautionary measures of social distancing in order not to lose the very core values, socio-cultural lifestyle, and customs of the Ikwerre people to the pandemic. The people of Ikwerre society should embrace the idea of accepting to be vaccinated so that social activities that promote cohesion for community well-being will commence in its entirety.

The people in Ikwerre society ought to form a formidable bond among them such that no matter what circumstance that they face, their unity will remain undeterred noting that, it is only a communally stable society that is capable of breeding a developed nation.

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