

Covid-19 protocols damaging our culture, humanity and mental health

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It's common to evaluate the impact of covid-19 on politics and economics of a nation but rarely do we pause to reflect on the cultural repercussions. To wit, some politicians, like in Brazil, have come under immense pressure in regard to how well or badly they handled the pandemic. The world over, economies are still reeling under the damaging effects of the virus. But what about the culture of a people?

Anthropologically, Africans are famously contact people in contrast with north Europeans who are non-contact people. In terms of proxemics, or the way people occupy space, Africans huddle close to each other in public places like buses and cinema queues, bars, restaurants, etc. They leave little if any space in between them. This contrasts remarkably with northern Europeans who maintain a reasonable distance, of say a meter between themselves. It is said that ideally, a person should not smell the perfume of the next person. This is unimaginable for Africans.

Further, African culture highly values handshakes and bear hugs. Shaking hands is how we conclude deals, business or otherwise. It is also how we evaluate each other's intentions, overtly or subtly. For instance, a handshake can insinuate intimacy or signal emotional distance. The handshake or hug is also accompanied more often than not by eye contact. The latter is key in assessing friendship, threat or indifference. In other words, we communicate non-verbally. We use our bodies to bond with or flee from others. This aspect alone makes us extremely sociable, very much like our primate cousins.

The idea of family in Africa is not easy to delineate like in the Western world. Beyond the nuclear family is an entire network of cousins, half- relatives and even neighbors who all count as family. Our essence is intricately intertwined with the soul of the community. The drama of ubuntu or ubumuntu, our humanity is daily expressed through frequent visits to each other, attending social functions such as births, marriages and deaths. Coming from an oral culture, we prefer calling our friends rather than texting them. We want to hear their voice in order to feel them. This cultural trend endeared us to Michael Joseph, former chief executive of Safaricom, who remarked that the company was thriving thanks to the myriad calls we made, in lieu of texting.

Black Aesthetics, or most analyses of human beauty are centered on the face. Beauty is first and foremost imprinted on the human face. The symmetry of the face, eyes, the nose and the sensual mouth are the hallmark of exquisite beauty. We want to see the face and the expressions it makes. A smile makes us smile too, and this is very calming to our souls. Smile and the world will smile back at you, we are told. Sadly, now our faces are hidden behind masks.

Work is social in Africa. Research shows that the motivation to go to work is more social than financial. Surprisingly, Recognition, bonding and defending our values trump salary

considerations. Put simply, we need others in order for work to have a meaning. Working from home, in front of a small computer screen, is not even within the pale of the reason we work. This is simply not right. It's a stress trigger.

Traditionally, it's common for the couple to leave the house for work and then they congregate again at the end of the day. Kids also go to school. Now, the scenario where the entire family is holed up in the same home space can be a very pleasant opportunity but it can also disrupt your mental health. In effect, emotional bonding with your spouse is felicitous and it may even lead to Covid babies, but it can also be very stressful to be with your family all the time, as you slave through your grind.

Culture is nothing more than habits or behaviors that are repeated over time. These habits are recurrent because they are deemed as beneficial to the community. They express the values and beliefs of the commons. It follows, therefore, that, when these habits are curtailed or all together stopped, there is bound to be pressure or stress on the individuals. Such stress could lead to depression of the mind.

Covid-19 protocols, designed with the best of intentions, fly in the face of African culture. They hit at the very core of habits that we cherish from time immemorial. Our social relations are recalibrated to conform to international norms in order to save lives. This is as it should be but the cultural cost is colossal. Inadvertently, people visit their sick parents or siblings in hospital and they contract the virus. Similarly, people attend church functions or burials and they are hit by the virus. These could be conscious or unconscious habits that are informed by our culture. How do you abandon your child, mum or dad in a hospital in the name of isolation?

Social distancing might be natural to some cultures but not ours. We want to huddle together, even with strangers. We want to shake hands vigorously and pat each other on the back. We want to talk and talk a lot with each other as we admire each other's faces. But the face is covered three quarter way! The protocols prohibit all these fundamental habits that define our humanity. But they are there to save our humanity too.

The conflict, to call it as it should, between the protocols and African culture is inevitable. The resultant stress on our minds is unavoidable too. Sadly, there are no signs of the virus relenting, which means that the protocols might obtain for a long time to come. This calls for supportive mechanisms to help us cope with the stress. The government and civil society groups should begin rolling out programs to promote mental health for the citizenry. Mental health is about psychological and emotional well-being. We need to remain mentally healthy during this crippling pandemic even as we embark on economic recovery for our countries.