

## COVID-19 and the fluidity of Group Identification: Perspectives from Religion and Philosophy

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to argue that COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the commonality of human experiences and the fluidity of group identities. This, therefore, warrants the need to rethink the underlying position of scholars in area studies, particularly in religion and cultural studies, who focus on how humans exclusively differ according to regions and cultures. To achieve its aim, this paper adopted qualitative method of study to analyse primary and secondary data using content analysis. It assessed the question of identity from specific religious, and broader philosophical perspectives. This study found that various bases for human identification and grouping faded in the face of COVID-19 as societies vigorously exchanged ideas and updates, on solutions to the problem. Based on this, this paper concludes that the commonality of human experiences in the face of global problems such as COVID-19 is an empirical pointer to the absurdity of rigid group identifications. The authors therefore recommend that scholars in area studies such as African studies, need to devote less attention to cultural and regional differences and points of unique identifications. It will prove more useful if they devote more attention to the imperative to collaborate with each other towards solving human problems.

**Key words:** COVID-19; fluidity; identity; religion; African studies

## Introduction

The question of group identities is a recurrent rallying point for discourses in religious, cultural and area studies. It is the ground for highlighting and emphasising human differences. It is at the core of the difficult philosophical question of one-and-many. It is also the foundational basis for various religious and cultural conflicts, and the seeming insolubility of many of them. All these are grounded in the fact that the world remains divided based on various forms of identification. Individuals and groups segregate themselves from others based on religious affiliation (Christians, Muslim, traditional religionists, Hinduists, and so on), or religious orientation (theists, atheists, secularists). Sometimes, the bases for religious differentiation also imply ethnic and nationalist differentiations. People also differentiate themselves from others simply because of political ideologies and affiliation.

In the process of holding onto these forms of identification and differentiation, people who deserve help are ignored. The faults of members of one's in-group are ignored or simply explained away resulting in larger, negative social consequences. The authors explore the idea that negative attitudes toward those considered as out-group, and the uncritical attitude toward those of in-group, are largely unreasonable. They are based on a faulty assumption that what people consider as their identity is rigid and fundamental. These assumptions are behind exaggerated and destructive critique of a political leader simply because of his political affiliation, the wanton waste of human lives and property through religious and ethnic violence, the lingering Israeli-Palestinian border conflicts, and so on.

Some scholars have highlighted some of the weaknesses in this predominant, rigid conception of human beings into groups (see Appiah 1992, 2018; Lefkowitz 1996; Bhatt 2015; Asiegbu & Ajah 2020;

Akah & Ajah 2020; Ajah & Akah 2022). Others have focused on sustaining such forms of human conceptualisation and differentiation, in the name of area studies (see Mbiti 1969; Platvoet & Rinsum 2003; Metz 2015; Chimakonam 2019). The engagements of the latter group are problematic, anti-development, largely against improved general human self-understanding, as well as against human collaboration. Several efforts have also been made to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on conceptions of some aspects of reality and religious beliefs (see Coppen 2020; Osteen and Campbell 2020; Lenox 2020; Worley 2021). However, there has not been obvious efforts to use the experiences of the pandemic to rethink ideas of social identifications. Although several authors have argued on how exaggerated focus on human identification is misdirected, particularly in relation to Africa, this study uses the situation of COVID-19 pandemic to draw a fresh attention to this misdirected stance and the projects it grounds. The authors imagine what would have happened if human societies did not collaborate to identify patterns of manifestation of the pandemic. They highlight how the pandemic has projected the fundamental fact of commonality of human groups, and sidelined all forms of emphasis on how humans differ.

To achieve its aim, the authors adopted qualitative method of study to analyse primary and secondary data using content analysis. The authors assessed the question of identity from specific religious, and broader philosophical perspectives. This contribution is divided into three sections after this Introduction, and before the Conclusion. The first section is a brief definition of the idea of identity and its resurgence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The second section highlights some of the weaknesses of excessive attachment to one's identity. In the third section, the authors paid close attention to evidence on how human cleavage to identities faded in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also raised some questions that emphasised the fluidity of identity.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century hype for identity**

In this section, the authors briefly indicate their conception of the term identity and its use in this contribution. They also

highlight evidence of relatively surprising resurgence of identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global society. The use of the term identity here is as (i) self-conception of an individual or a group, and/or (ii) self-awareness and -representation of an individual or a group. Either way, the authors conceptualise identity here particularly from the perspective of group/social identity. Hence, they define it as the self-conception, self-awareness, and (preferred) self-presentation of a group and its members. This way of defining identity is related to the views of Seul (1999:554) that "identity... is, the more or less 'enduring aspects' of a person's or group's self-definition." This definition, however, is different from the views of authors who argue for authentic, as if immutable, identity of groups such as Africans (Wiredu 1984; Mudimbe 1988; Bodunrin 1991; Platvoet & Rinsum 2003; Metz 2015). Seul (1999:556) explained that social identities are given meaning by the need to satisfy psychological stability. They are also constructed when individuals that make up the group "generate collective purposes and goals, the achievement of which is important to the maintenance of group identity and to the group's survival."

Based on this baseline conceptualisation, the authors agree with Appiah (2018) that there are five predominant modes of social identification. The first is social identity based on creed or belief. This includes identification based on religious affiliation (Christian or Muslim, and so on), or orientation towards religion (theist, atheist, secularist). The former part of this first classification implies several sub-classifications such that, among Muslims, there are Shi'ites, non-denominational Muslims, Sunnis. And, among Christians, there are Pentecostals, Catholics, and so on. The second mode of identification is based on colour, or what is dangerously termed race. The third is identification based on country or recognised state. The fourth is culture, which includes human groupings based on ethnicity, or ideas of nation as different from state. The fifth, according to Appiah, is identification based on class. This includes such differentiations as economic class, social class, political class, the free and the *osu*-caste, and one may even add, religious class (the ordained or the clergy; the not-ordained or the lay).

In the opening lines of this section, the authors hinted that one may consider the resurgence of identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as relatively surprising. Their position is because we are in a century of increased human knowledge and interaction – thanks to globalisation and massive advancements in ICT. One would have been rationally justified to expect that mutual knowledge of the existence of several others and their minor points of difference would enhance humanity’s understanding that they are fundamentally more common than they are different. Or, that their points of differentiation are accidental, rather than fundamental. That calculation has proven to be unappealing to most. Instead, what has predominated is that the mutual encounter of groups has increased fears about domination and intimidation by others. In fact, Huntington’s (1996) prediction during the eve-years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to have completely taken the day. For this reason, rather than the first calculation having its way, identity continues to be hyped in a century of massive knowledge and mutual encounter (see Akah & Ajah 2020). First, the authors recall the global shock by the events of 11 September 2001 attack on the U.S. That the attack was carried out in 2001, in the views of this study, was a notice to the world that the master-minders of the attacker were out to emphasise their religious identity. And, ever since then, similar attacks of various scales continue to be carried out in various parts of the world for related reasons of emphasising religious identity (for instance in the U.S., France, Nigeria and Lake Chad Region, Central African Republic, India, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan), or nationalist/racial preferences (for instance in Sudan, the U.S., Nigeria, South Africa). The continuous loss of lives along Israeli-Palestinian border is anchored on both forms of identity.

What remains worrisome is that humans are in a century in which there are loads of scientific evidence to the fact that the points of differences are not worth resulting in the large scale of violence and loss of lives. Yet, the problem is complicated by the fact that the lines of identity differentiation are being

hyped rather than fading. A set of important questions worth posing repeatedly is this: Are our lines of differentiation so rigid and fundamental that we should lose lives, and developmental gains at the rate we do? Are our differentiations not more fluid than rigid? It is defensible to think there are a lot of reasons to argue sustainably that group identity and lines of differentiation have several weak points that should make us pay less attention to them.

### **Weak points of excessive attachment to identity**

In this section, the authors engage some ideas highlighted by Akah and Ajah (2020). First, let us explore the basic submissions of these authors, and then attempt an expansion of their arguments.

According to these authors, an underlying assumption by most claims to identity is that identities unite disinterestedly. This means that in its various manifestations, identity as a philosophical concept and mental stance, appeals to the fundamental human propensity to belong in a special way, with specific persons. A follow-up feature of this propensity is that for each group they form, humans demand to be respected. A failure to be recognised by non-members of each group is faced, first, with an insistence on recognition, and maybe later, various forms of violence, and possibly destruction. The authors posed a question which they didn’t quite answer directly. They asked: “But, are the destructions and violence worth the demand and the identity?” (Akah & Ajah 2020: 135). Although this is an important question, this study will not be able to explore its answers here considering that the focus here is less on the connection between identity and violence.

The authors shall, however, explore what they meant by the expression that there are weak points of excessive cleavage to identity and nationalism. They identified five of such weak points: (i) identity is more fluid than it is fixed; (ii) identities over-lap; (iii) the narratives that ground some identities are

lies, or just myths; (iv) identities can be mere tools in the hands of selfish others, and (v) humans can reconstruct.

Regarding the first weak-point, Akah and Ajah explained that unlike what is predominantly assumed about group identities, they are fluid, and neither fixed nor immutable. This means, in the words of Sapolsky (2019), that group identity and identification is continuously random, like the toss of a coin. Or, in the views of Lowery (2023), that as long as social contexts and memories change, so do identities and conceptions of us change. Akah and Ajah projected the idea that group identification is nothing other than stories we were told and that we tell ourselves (see also Kaplan 2003; Bhatt 2015). On the second weak point, the authors explained that the various identities that exist do over-lap from time to time. The primary assumption for this position, according to them, is that “[N]o human being has a single identity. Rather, every human being has several/ multiple identities” (Akah & Ajah 2020:135). This position is related to that of Sapolsky (2019:45) that humans have “multiple over-lapping in-groups”, or another fact that “a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind” (James 1950:294).

On the third weak point, Akah and Ajah expanded an idea they hinted on in the first weak point, namely, that many times what we call our identities are mere stories or narratives we were told or that we tell ourselves, about ourselves. However, in their explanation of the third weak point, they held that many times, the narratives that give meaning to what we cling to as our identities are either lies or just myths. They summed their critique of narratives as lies by posing two striking questions, namely, “If a story that grounds a particular identity is an outright lie, or just a myth, is the cause to defend that identity worth pursuing? Is one justified to be violent to others because of a lie or a myth, even if he/she does not know yet that the story is a lie or a myth?” The fourth weak point, according to Akah and Ajah (2020), is that identities can be mere tools in the hands of selfish others. According to them, this implies that

most times, calls for identities are made by political elites, for their selfish interests. This view is related to those of Eide (1997) and Rosenthal (2008) on the engagements of political elites as entrepreneurs of violence.

The fifth weak point, according to Akah and Ajah (2020), is that humans can reconstruct themselves. This is because they are creative. The result is that they creatively reconstruct their perceptions of and approach to themselves and reality in general. This capacity to reconstruct, according to the authors, implies that granted that humans have an underlying propensity to differentiate themselves into groups, they can as well suspend and provide justifications for not exhibiting this propensity. A striking example to back-up this aspect of their submission is the 2019 Jena Declaration in which several German scientists publicly declared that “there is no biological basis for races, and there has never been one. The concept of race is the result of racism, not its prerequisite” (see Cavanagh 2019). That such a declaration came from Germany of all countries, in the views of Akah and Ajah, is a further boost to their view that our perceptions about our identity and that of others, is always open to reconstruction. Now, let us expand on some of the arguments expressed by these authors, particularly as some of them manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic. To do that, this study first presents how the pandemic projected human solidarity in moments of shared concerns.

### **COVID-19, shared struggle to live, and the fluidity of identity**

Whitehead (2020) reported the views of Sandy Mather who admitted that although the experiences surrounding COVID-19 can be defined as amounting to “a terrible time”, yet, one of its exciting features is that it “has brought the international intensive care community together” (Whitehead 2020: Web). For instance, Mather explained that during the outbreak, professionals across the globe who use intensive care unit (ICU) shared their experiences to improve their efforts in treating the virus. The result is that lessons were passed on

quickly, from one country to the other – from those who had earlier experiences in combating the pandemic, to those whose experiences were still comparatively lower. Whitehead (2020: Web) summed that despite the many unclear and unpredictable twists regarding how the virus was manifesting, one thing that was clear, however, was that the mortality of patients in ICUs around the world fell by one third between March and the end of May 2020, from 60 per cent to 42 per cent. In her view, the decline in fatality rates of COVID-19 cases in ICUs “could be a result of ‘the rapid learning’” that took “place on a global scale due to the prompt publication of clinical reports early in the pandemic” (Whitehead 2020: Web).

A striking point in reports like the one by Whitehead (2020) is that there was no reference to religious dispositions of the scientists, or their nationalist ideologies. There was also no reference to whether national/ethnic sovereignty and self-reliance was at stake. During those moments of extreme crisis and fears of death, all the lines of division faded. Elsanousi, Visotzky, and Roberts (2020) noted in catchy terms that in the experience of COVID-19 pandemic, Islam, Judaism and Christianity came together to obey government instructions and guides on how to stay healthy. But what could not fade was that we are all humans, and that whatever worked in saving a life in one location would also – not probably, but certainly – save lives in other locations.

In related terms, the World Health Organization (WHO 2020) submitted with regard to collaborations since the COVID-19 pandemic, that “[T]he unprecedented investments and global collaboration in research and development may result in a vaccine being available in the medium term” (WHO 2020:3). And this was the case. In what she described as “global allocation framework for fair and equitable access to COVID-19 health products”, WHO’s official statements did not focus on racial distribution of humans around colour and religion. They were simply about humans in various parts of the globe. This focus informed what came to be termed COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility, and the Access to

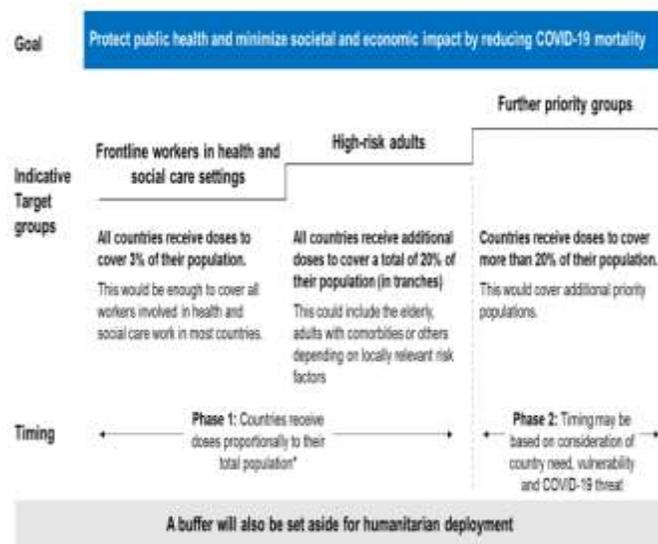
COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-Accelerator). In both platforms, global partners, countries, and groups were pooling resources together in preparation for how best a successful vaccine was to be distributed in fairness, and with earliest attention to locations in greatest need at the time. WHO explained that the COVAX Facility was meant to bring all participating countries together, regardless of their income level, for the procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. The underlying idea that grounded COVAX Facility is the establishment of a global access mechanism that links individuals and groups in various areas of research, development, and manufacture of vaccines. Based on this framework, WHO explained that the COVAX Facility has four specific goals. These were to:

- a. develop a large and diverse actively-managed portfolio of COVID-19 vaccine candidates to maximise the probability of success of several candidates, so that the best vaccines are ultimately made available and the supply will be sufficient for highest-priority populations globally for all self-financing participants and COVAX AMC Eligible Economies,
- b. deliver at least two billion doses of approved vaccines by the end of 2021,
- c. guarantee access to approved vaccines for every participating economy, and
- d. end the acute phase of the pandemic by the end of 2021 (WHO 2020:4).

Figure 1 represents WHO’s proposed plan to allocate successful COVID-19 vaccine, according to phases, and with priority on specific groups based on needs. As the figure shows, in the classification of who receives the vaccine first, considerations were not given based on which group is loved by God the most, which nation or ethnic group are God’s most beloved (for instance, Israel’s stories as the beloved of ‘God’), and which group is in possession of the last revealed truth (for instance, the story that Muslims are in possession of the final

truth). The distribution of vaccines was not based on who obeys which revealed truth, who is a sinner or an infidel, or who is white or black. The basis for the decision was just on the fact of reducing deaths. Hence, WHO wrote about what she termed ‘a reasonable scenario’ that was to define which group gets the vaccine first. A defining component of this ‘reasonable scenario’ was a focus on reducing mortality and protecting the global health system.

**Figure 1: Graphic representation of WHO’s plan for COVID-19 vaccine allocation in phases**



(Source: WHO 2020:8)

According to this ‘reasonable scenario’, the first-Tier group (Tier 1) that were to receive the vaccine, included: (i) frontline workers in health and social care settings, (ii) people over the age of 65 years, and (iii) people under the age of 65 years who have underlying conditions that put them at a higher risk of death. Explanations for this classification based on need and reason are that:

Frontline workers in health and social care settings could be prioritized as they are essential to treat and protect the population and come in close contact with infected individuals and provide care for high-mortality risk groups. Initial epidemiological data has shown that adults over 65 years of age and those

with certain co-morbidities are at the highest risk of dying from COVID-19. However, this evidence may evolve as more data from different contexts is gathered and assessed (WHO 2020:7).

The last sentence in the quotation still lays emphasis on reason, need, and epistemological humility (see Akah & Ajah 2019), not on group identification and absolute truths about who deserves to live and who they should not be yoked together (2 Cor. 6:14).

As a follow-up to the above, the central issues at stake in discussions about COVID-19 vaccine production and allocation were not on differences in identities, but on more fundamental issues about fairness and equity. Again, this is evident in the views of the WHO (2020:7) that “[T]he fair allocation of vaccines will combine the principle of fairness to meet the basic needs of all countries at the same time in the initial stages (that is, based on proportional allocation), as well as the principle of equity to account for differences in risk profiles across countries.” These principles informed a further emphasis that the supply of vaccines should also prioritise the need of those trapped in humanitarian situations, deployments, and other emergency related situations. What should be reserved for people in such conditions were described as components of “humanitarian buffer” (WHO 2020:8). They were made available to partners involved in implementing humanitarian aid as well as other relevant organisations working in such contexts. Specifically, the vaccines that made up the buffer were made to “serve vulnerable populations, for example refugees and asylum seekers, and those dedicated to relieving their suffering” (WHO 2020:8). Again, on the basis of rational considerations, rather than group identification, WHO added that:

The prioritization and quantification of products for each allocation round should be based on a risk assessment through the evaluation of: threat – the potential impact of COVID-19 on a country, assessed using epidemiological data - and

vulnerability – the vulnerability of a country based on health systems and population factors (WHO 2020:10)

In a voice speaking on behalf of a common human family, WHO (2020:9) clarified that “[G]iven the ubiquitous nature of COVID-19, all countries should receive, in Phase 1, an initial allocation of vaccines based on a proportional allocation scheme.” Again, one sees in this voice a focus on humanity, and an obvious redundancy of group differentiations along identity lines. This shows that in the face of real human needs, these identities become obviously irrelevant. This means, in the views this study, that they were never necessary in the first place.

There will be obvious rejoinders to the positions and interpretations of the issues of COVID-19 vaccine up to this point. One quick response could be that the above positions are merely official positions as this study ‘rightly’ qualified them. A respondent may go ahead to remind the authors that even among the ‘so-called’ world uniting agencies and institutions, there are efforts to benefit one group to the detriment of others. A critic may add that in the end, it is the poor countries that will still be short-changed and left behind. They may refer to the concept of ‘vaccine nationalism’ which followed the release of COVID-19 vaccines in 2020. The brief response of the authors of this paper is that the observations by their hypothetical critic do not weaken their position. They rather justify the problem that warranted the question of identity and nationalism highlighted in this contribution. That groups short-change others is only a fact of international politics. And, by the way, that is why it is called ‘politics.’ That same fact confirms the urgency of the position of this paper rather than weaken its central argument that the lines of identification and differentiation among humans are not as fundamental as majority of humans tend to take them, and therefore, they are also not necessary.

The views expressed here are related to that of Bollyky and Bown (2020). They had worried at the time, that the earliest

available COVID-19 vaccines will result in a tension. On the one hand, they admitted that there will be an obvious problem of each country trying to provide COVID-19 vaccines for her country before she can release quantities for countries who will not be able to provide initial quantities for their citizens. On the other hand, they argued that the only way to avert the dangerous consequences of vaccine nationalism is if global institutions provide the necessary lead for collaboration, and if political leaders keep to their commitments to global frameworks for initial distribution of earliest quantities of available vaccines according to needs and vulnerability of nations. The striking similarity between the views of Bollyky and Bown, and the views expressed here is that the focus is on human cooperation, rather than group identification. And, whereas this study focuses on identity generally, Bollyky and Bown addressed the issues with particular focus on state-nationalism.

The views of the authors of this paper are also related to those of Okonjo-Iweala (2020) and Hillman (2020). Okonjo-Iweala’s submission was based on a deeply entrenched assumption that the world is made of one human family. She held that the ultimate goal of the race for COVID-19 vaccine was “not only to produce a safe and effective inoculation but to bring the pandemic to an end” (2020: Web). One way to make this possible was to ensure that once such a safe vaccine was available, it should be made affordable particularly to low-income countries. Okonjo-Iweala emphasised low-income countries. This study assumes that this emphasis was in respect to ‘affordability’ rather than ‘who gets the vaccine first’. With regard to affordability, her emphasis is understandable because if the experience about HIV/AIDS drugs repeats itself - whereby the price of anti-retroviral drugs was not affordable by individuals in low-income countries who needed them the most - then COVID-19-related death toll in such countries would have been terrible. If on the other hand, her emphasis on low-income countries is in terms of who gets first, then, this study assumes that her position is either

entirely wrong, or simply based on the paucity of data on COVID-19 spread at the time she wrote, that is, April 2020. For the sake of the latter, the authors excuse her.

Notwithstanding this clarification, Okonjo-Iweala was still right in her later view that making COVID-19 vaccine affordable and available, was a huge enterprise. According to her, to succeed with this enterprise, there is a need for a new perspective to understanding vaccines. This perspective is that vaccines should be seen not as the property of the scientists and pharmaceutical companies that produced them, or the countries that funded them. They rather “must be recognized as global public goods” (Okonjo-Iweala 2020: Web). She explained that:

Neither domestic agendas nor profit can be allowed to drive the effort for the largest vaccine deployment in history. Governments, pharmaceutical companies, and multilateral organizations must work together to develop, produce, and deliver the vaccine. Producing and distributing billions of doses of a new vaccine would be challenging at the best of times. Doing so during a pandemic will require an unprecedented global effort (Okonjo-Iweala 2020: Web).

Again, one finds in those lines, obvious sidelining of demands for nationalist, professional, ethnic, religious, and racial identifications. There are only appeals to fundamental points of human unity and possibilities for collaboration. These also indicate that all the bases for differentiation are not fundamental enough to surface during such critical decisions. And, since they are not fundamental, humans can learn to keep them aside and focus on the things that matter, namely, the fact that they are humans; the fact that our sustenance and ability to surmount our common problems are anchored on our collaboration. Okonjo-Iweala (2020: Web) agreed that “[I]t is the duty of every government to put its citizens first, but during a pandemic this duty also requires thinking and acting globally.” Yet, she didn’t think this weakened her argument for a new perspective as the world prepared for COVID-19

vaccine. She rather argued that the problem at hand at the time was enough to justify the removal of identity barriers “created by intellectual property and technology transfer laws and to encourage manufacturers and research groups to work together toward a common goal” (Okonjo-Iweala 2020: Web).

Okonjo-Iweala’s submissions also contain further evidence in support of the core arguments in this contribution. She recorded that the Serum Institute of India had announced that it would not retain the intellectual property on its COVID-19 vaccine candidate. This is in addition to what she termed “an unprecedented partnership” by companies such as GSK and Sanofi, to pool their resources towards timely production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccine. Apart from pooling resources, Okonjo-Iweala added that several manufacturers “agreed to not profit from COVID-19 vaccines” (2020: Web). These, in the views of this contribution, are further evidence that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, human points of differentiation and identification faded in the battle of humans to live. Hence, Okonjo-Iweala emphasised that the pandemic was an opportunity to mobilise humans and contributors in the race towards development of COVID-19 vaccine around a common goal. This goal is that we are in one world, and that we all need to be protected “[B]ecause no one will be safe until everyone is safe” (2020: Web).

On the other hand, Hillman’s (2020) particular focus was on the possibilities of individual identity constituting a cog in the wheel of fast and timely distribution of vaccines. Specifically, she worried about whether patents, as manifestations of rights and identity of individuals and groups who may produce COVID-19 vaccines, would, in her words “stand in the way of global health” (2020: Web. See also Lester and Mercurio 2020). Before Hillman addressed her major concerns, she observed the impacts of global cooperation in the race for COVID-19 vaccine. A remarkable result of such cooperation was that vaccines and new medicines which usually took at least a decade to develop and test, were already showing

possibilities of being within reach in 18 months. This was possible because of “intensive global research efforts” and collaborations. These collaborations and results were possible because in the face of what Hillman rightly described as “a once-in-a-lifetime crisis”, points of differentiation either faded and/or were demanded to fade. To stress her point and offer a solution, Hillman (2020) thought that the best way to ensure that vaccines and treatments were provided to all who needed them was for countries to work cooperatively. This involves, among other things, ensuring that trade protections and intellectual property rights were not emphasised over and above the need to reduce the avoidable death of humans, that is, to safeguard public health. Recalling human experiences of public health challenges during the hay-days of HIV/AIDS, Hillman noted that despite years of pain and conflict on how best to distribute anti-retroviral drugs to reduce the cost of lives in Africa, the efforts to combat HIV/AIDS laid important groundwork. One obvious result of that groundwork is that it “brought international organizations, governments, private companies, research institutions, and nongovernmental organizations into cooperative relationships” (Hillman 2020: Web).

Based on their assessment and analyses up to this point, the authors think that despite the lingering discrimination against groups and identities, the situation that shocked the world in COVID-19 pandemic revealed that what most humans emphasise are not as fundamental as they tend to accept and hold them. The fact that they were not projected in honest, public discussions on how to save humanity from life-threatening conditions such as COVID-19 pandemic draws attention to the other fact that they are not as important as we project them. The fact that we keep quiet about them when we are eager to get each other’s assistance and collaboration, also means that they are not fundamental. They are not rigid. They are fluid. Their fluidity should make us give them less attention.

These last points are important in particular context of scholarship in what is generically termed African studies, and area studies in general. In the case of the former, it is defensible to hold that many scholars involved in that subfield have focused too much on how humans differ rather than how they are united. This is particularly manifest in religious and cultural studies in Africa, including the subfield of African philosophy (see Wiredu 1984; Mudimbe 1988; Platvoet & Rinsum 2003; Metz 2015; Chimakonam 2019). In these fields and subfields, there has been an emphasis on how Africans are more caring than the rest of the world. The comparison, however, is usually done in relation to so-called Western societies (see Metz 2015, for instance). Having assessed the efforts towards saving human lives from COVID-19 pandemic, the authors now pose the following rhetoric and reflexive questions: If Africans care about life and also extend helping hands in the context of communitarianism more than humans in the global West, why did they not emphasise their blackness and uniqueness during the search for COVID-19 vaccine? Why was it the WHO, not the AU, that planned how to allocate prospective COVID-19 vaccines? Since the most successful vaccine candidates originated from partnerships in the West and East, what if they insisted on their racial difference from Africa as a deciding principle for allocating COVID-19 vaccines? The answers to these questions are not straight forward, nor obvious. Whatever their answers, they will all point to the fact that once again the commonality of humanity and human experiences manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic. And, as humans struggled to live, they abandoned their locus of identification because in the struggle to survive, only the fundamental things remained, namely, that whatever we hold onto as our points of differentiation are not rigid. They are not important. At most, they are just there because humans created them. However, the authors argue that humans should learn to treat them for what they are: fluid stories we created which do not truly count for our survival.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article is to argue that COVID-19 highlighted the commonality of human experiences and the fluidity of group identifications. The authors' analyses of primary and secondary data revealed that various bases for human identification and grouping faded in the face of COVID-19 as societies, international organisations and associations vigorously exchanged ideas and updates, on solutions to the problem. The authors conclude that the commonality of human experiences in the face of global problems such as COVID-19 is an empirical pointer to the absurdity of rigid self- and group-identifications. They think that scholars in area studies such as African studies, should devote less attention on unique identifications; but more attention on the imperative to collaborate with each other towards solving human problems.

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