

## COVID -19 AND HAND WASHING: THE IGBO CULTURE PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract**

*The novel corona virus (covid-19) is a pandemic which was first reported by the officials in Wuhan City, China, in December, 2019. Since the outbreak, the pandemic has torched and ravaged almost all the countries of the world, including those of the African Continent. Hand washing has remained prominent amongst all the safety measures recommended by the World Health Organization, and other health institutions, to prevent Covid-19 infection. This paper recalls therefore, that hand washing, which is being preached presently as a basic safety measure, in the wake of Covid 19 pandemic, has been there, as part of the Igbo and African Cultural values, unfortunately, people have neglected this cultural good practice and waited for World Health Organization, UNICEF and other government agencies, to remind them, before they put it into practice, even when it is for their personal safety and protection. This paper contends that if the hand washing and cleanliness culture of the Igbo is adequately propagated, it will go a long way in protecting the people from diseases and untimely death. This paper will benefit the general public, especially teachers and care givers, at this period of covid 19 pandemic and always. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) of Albert Bandura was adopted to ex- ray the culture of cleanliness and hand washing in Igbo culture, reasons for hand washing, the benefits and the state of hand washing in the present Igbo society. The paper exposed numerous benefits of hand washing and general cleanliness, which include,- prevention of diseases, Covid 19 inclusive, and recommends the revitalization of the Igbo culture of hand washing and cleanliness, in such a way that people will be sensitized to take initiative of doing the right thing at the right time, instead of waiting for the government or the World Health Organization to remind them to do the needful.*

**Keywords:** Hand washing, Cleanliness, Covid-19, Culture, Infectious diseases

### **Introduction:**

The story about Covid-19 pandemic came into lime light at the later part of the year 2019. Since the outbreak, the pandemic has touched almost all the countries of the world, killing hundreds of thousands of the people.

The pandemic has adversely affected every facets of livelihood, economically, socially, religious. As part of the measures to contend the outbreak, many countries introduced and enforced some laws, rules and regulation like restriction of movements, total or partial lockdown orders, social and physical distancing, prohibition of social and religious gatherings, closure of inter-state boundaries, flight restrictions amongst other measures, whose violators were either prosecuted or sanctioned.

The World Health Organization and other health scientists of different countries of the world have been on their feet in their efforts to produce drugs and or vaccines to treat or prevent the spread of the virus. In the interim, hand washing with soap for at least 20secs, the use of face mask, alcohol based sanitizer avoidance of hand shake or close contact, covering the mouth with one's elbow while coughing and reporting every symptoms like persistent dry cough, fever, dry and sore throat, diarrhea etc., to the designated control agencies are some measures recommended by the World Health Organization and countries agencies for infectious disease control, as further measures to prevent the spread.

As a result of the ravages, lost of lives and economic shot down already caused by this pandemic, the world health organization, international donor agencies, countries, corporate bodies, groups, organizations, individuals and philanthropists have been assisting some countries, states and individuals through donations and supplies of medical equipments, drugs, food and other palliatives on humanitarian bases, as well as to further strengthen the ties that existed between those countries or organizations.

As at the time of this research, no solution in terms of care or preventive vaccine have been discovered to tackle the covid 19 pandemic, rather the number of the positive cases continues to rise in all over the countries of the world.

### **The First Human Case of Covid-19**

The first human case of Covid 19, the disease caused by the novel corona virus causing Covid 19, subsequently named SARS-COV-2 was first reported by officials in Wuhan City, China in December, 2019. (<https://www.who.int/situation/reports.20/06/20>.)

## **COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa**

The confirmation of the spread of Covid-19 pandemic in Africa was on the 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2020. The first case was confirmed in Egypt while in Sub-Saharan Africa, the first case was confirmed in Nigeria. The imported cases that were identified were mostly arrivals from the United States of America and Europe, instead of China where the virus was first heard of. There is fear that Africa with its underdeveloped health care systems may be under reporting the actual cases and impact of covid-19 in that continent.

## **COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria**

Like other affected countries of the world, Nigeria contacted the world-wide corona virus pandemic (Covid-19) which is caused by a severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-COV 2). The announcement of the first confirmed case was made on 27 February, 2020 when a positive test result was confirmed on an Italian Citizen in Lagos. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020 another positive case of Covid-19 was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, this time a citizen of Nigeria who had contact with the index case, the Italian. Starting from that point, corona virus has continued to spread in all the states in Nigeria, with a continued daily increase in numbers even as at the time of this report, ([cn.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/](https://cn.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/)).

## **Recommended Safety Measures Against COVID-19**

In their efforts to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Central for disease control of different countries recommended some safety measures which were enforced on the people, for their respiratory safety.

### **Some of those measures include:**

1. Regular hand washing with soap for at least 20 seconds, in a running water.
2. The use of alcohol based sanitizer.
3. Use of non-medical face masks covering for all persons in public places.
4. Practice of non-touch greetings, avoid handshake and hugs.
5. Maintain at least 2 meters (6 feet) physical distance between oneself and anyone who is sneezing or coughing.
6. Avoid crowded places such as open markets, crowded super-markets and pharmacies.

7. Adhere to other national and state directives on the issue at hand.  
(<https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng>faq>)

Hand washing has remained top on the list of the covid-19 precautionary measures hence the choice of this topic, in view of the writer's belief that hand washing if strictly observed, will go a long way in curtailing the spread of Covid-19. This is in line with the WHO advice to the public on Covid-19 based on scientific findings, as was last updated on 29 April, 2020, "...you can reduce your chance of being infected or spreading Covid-19 by taking some simple precautions – regularly and thoroughly clean your hands with an alcohol based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. Why? Washing your hands with soap and water or using alcohol based hand rub kills viruses that may be on your hands... (<https://www.who.int>diseases>advice.fa>)

### **The Concept of Hand Washing**

One of the easiest ways of keeping the children healthy in their places of birth, home, school, hospital and their place of development is hand washing with soap.

The presence of illness necessitates the quest for medication. Access to medical information is instrumental to people's change of certain behavior in order to prevent sickness. Hand washing judging from its benefits should be part of people's behavior and way of life that is to say, a daily routine task.

According to UNICEF, "every four childhood deaths – some 1.4 million under age five globally result from diarrhea and pneumonia". This is more than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis put together.

Sam Stevens, Opines, "...just hand washing with soap can reduce death rates from these diseases up to 65%; when people wash their hands in the appropriate manner and times, it can be more effective than medicine and vaccine".

In support of the above, Arjun Srinivasan of the United State Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says,

Anyone who is interested in the prevention of infections acquired in the hospital really needs to be passionate about hand hygiene...but for that to be truly possible, there should be proper information and awareness campaigns like "clean hands

count” save lives, clean your hands by the center for disease control and world health organization respectively.

Washing hands thoroughly last for about 20 seconds only, costs little or nothing yet it helps prevent dangerous disease and saves lives. It helps in preventing those antibiotics resistant bacteria from spreading as well as reduces infectious diseases like Covid-19 in the society. (<https://www.sandoz.com>stories>wash...>)

### **The Global Hand Washing Day**

The Global Hand Washing Partnership (GHP) is the organization that initiated the Global Hand washing Day in August, 2008, during the annual world water week in Stockholm, Sweden. This implies that the first global hand washing day, took place on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2008 the date slated by the United Nations General Assembly.

The international year of sanitation was also marked in 2008, and the bodies and Agencies that funded the project included, FH1360 (a United State based nonprofit oriented human development organization) United States Centers for Disease Control/Prevention, Procter & Gamble, United Nations International Children Education Fund (UNICEF), Unilever, World Bank water and sanitation programme and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Activities during the global hand washing day celebration among other things include messages concerning hand washing, like talk shops, posters and other street programmes or road walks in order to engage public in promoting hand washing, by reinforcing the messages. (<https://en.m.wikipedia.prg>wiki>glob...>)

### **Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)**

The above theory discusses the influence of individual experiences, what others do and environmental situation on the health behavior of a person. The Social cognitive theory (SCT) started as Social Learning Theory, (SLT), and was propounded by Albert Bandura in 1960s. The theory metamorphosend into SCT in 1986 and states that learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment and behavior.

The special characteristics of the social cognitive theory are its emphasis on social influence, external and internal social reinforcement. Social cognitive theory recognizes the special way in which persons acquire and maintain behavior. It takes into cognizance, an individual's past experience which determines the occurrence of the behavioral action.

The past experiences influence reinforcements, expectations and expectancies, all of which determine whether a person will engage in a specific behavior and the reasons why the person engages in that behavior.

Wayne, (2019) observed that many theories of behavior used in health promotion do not consider maintenance of behavior but rather focus on initiating behavior. This motion is wrong because in public health, maintenance of behavior is a more important goal than initiation of a behavior.

The goal of social cognitive theory therefore is to explain how people regulate their behavior through control and reinforcement to achieve goal-directed behavior that can be sustained overtime.

Social cognitive theory has been widely employed in health promotion with emphasis on the individual and the environment, the latter of which has become a major point of focus in the health promotional activities in recent times. (Wayne, W. L. 2019).

Hand washing as a behavior conforms with the ideals of social cognitive theory because of its relevance to health as well as being a cognitive and emotional behavior, which is prompted by some environmental factors.

According to behavioral theories, hand cleansing patterns are most likely to be established in the first 10 years of life. This established behavior subsequently influences the attitude to hand cleaning throughout life, with the practice of inherent hand hygiene, which reflects the instinctive need to remove dirt from the skin.

Worthy of consideration in this paper is the remarkable impact made by some cultural habits in relation to some health habits especially hand washing.

## **The Igbo Culture of Cleanliness and Hand Washing.**

### **a. Cleanliness of the surroundings.**

The Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria are well known for the cleanliness of their environment, hence the institution of the norm of road cleaning as their way of life. In the words of Osuji, (2009:149),

“Traditionally, road clearing is of general community concern... villagers organize themselves for weekly or monthly clean up of village and market squares. During this period, adjoining roads and pathways which run into and through the market square are regularly cleared so as not to allow the areas to be overtaken by bushes and shrubs”.

In Igbo society family members as a matter of routine morning chores, engage in the sweeping of the rooms, the fire place (kitchen) and the entire compound before engaging in any other activities or stepping out of the compound. Personal hygiene, like washing the face and mouth in the morning, bathing, washing clothes, plates and cooking utensils are acquired by the children through informal education.

These as a matter of fact have been in practice over the years as well as become some of those cherished norms and values of the Igbo society, which go a long way in protecting the people from predisposing themselves to infectious and diseases, especially in the era of covid-19 pandemic.

Personal hygiene according to (WHO 2009) is a key component of human well-being regardless of religious, culture or place of origin. Human health related behavior however results from the influence of multiple factors affected by the environment, education and culture.

### **Hand Washing:**

Hand washing/cleaning as a way of preventing the spread of diseases is clearly in harmony with the fundamental Igbo norm of *ikwọ* aka (hand washing). In Igbo traditional society, hands are rubbed with ash, rubbed vigorously and then washed and rinsed with water. In the absence of water, other substances like sand are used to rub the hands.

In most West African Countries, ancient traditions are applied in the practice of hand hygiene. Before anything passes through the lips, hands must be washed. Customarily, a bowl of water with special leaves is placed outside to enable the visitors wash their hands and faces before entering the house. (Health safety .jigsy.com. retrieved 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2020).

The above scenario also applies to Igbo Culture, in relation to hand washing, where hands must always be washed before putting anything to the mouth, hence the proverb. There is an Igbo proverb that says, “nwata kwọchaa aka,ya esoro ọgaranya rie nri” (When a child washes his hand well, he or she dines with the wealthy). The real interpretation of this proverb is that a man’s or woman’s good conduct avails him or her, certain good privileges and positions in the society. Though *ikwọ* aka (hand washing) here is metaphorical and has a denotative meaning outside the literary meaning of hand washing, but for it to be used as a symbolic action in Igbo proverbs shows its recognition in Igbo life. Also, the act of providing water for visitors to wash their hands first, before further interaction, has been customary and remained in practice since the time of the Igbo forebears.

The Igbo ancestors recognized the hands as the most utilized parts of human body, which man uses to function in the environment. Hands are used to lift objects, touch animals as well as used for certain social interactions, like, shaking, hugging and patting. Unconsciousness, one can touch and contact other harmful materials.

To buttress the fact that hand washing has been part of the Igbo norms, especially when receiving a visitor, (Nzeako, (1965) reveals, “Ezeonyekachi summoned Ugonna and told her to get a calabash bowl and bring them some water for the hand-washing before they chewed kola. Ugonna brought them water and they washed their hands”. ([www.columbia.edu>itcigbo.nzeako](http://www.columbia.edu>itcigbo.nzeako)).

The above excerpt from “Chi ewere ehihie jie (Night Has Fallen in the Afternoon), exposes the fact that hand washing has been in practice in Igbo culture from the time of their ancestors.

Kolanut hospitality in Igbo culture promotes hand washing. This is so because, observing regular prayer with Kola-nut, especially as visitors come, is a surest way of regular hand washing.

Hand washing can be practiced for the purpose of personal hygiene, ritual purpose, during ceremonies, and symbolic reasons in every life situations.

In Igbo Culture, the elders pour libations after washing their hands. They pour some wine or liquid on the floor, as well as drop some quantity of food in a designated place, for the spirit and the forebears.

Hand washing as necessitated by dirty or contaminated hands. In most cultures, the concept of dirt is not only visual, but relates to a broad meaning which points to both interior and exterior purity.

In Igbo Culture, the norm of washing hands (as soon as one wakes up in the morning, points to the fact that during the night, when one is assumed to be between the land of the living and the dead, hands may have contacted some impurities, (spirits). The implication is that dirt can be invisible. Therefore, the concept of dirt does not refer only to situations where it is visible. (<http://www.adherents.com> / Religious accessed 26 /08/2020).

Another occasion where *ikwọ* aka (hand washing) in Igbo culture, is during the traditional marriage ceremony. A personal communication account reveals that in some part of Igbo community during traditional marriage, before an in-law's (the bride's family) could eat any food in their in-law's (the groom's family) place; they must put some cowry shells or coins, in a basin containing the water which is prepared for the in-law's to wash their hands. After hand washing, the parents of the bride will collect the money, and the water will be thrown away (Ezeji, 2020).

A philosophical saying in Igbo Language, "*Ikwọ* aka *tiere okuko* *akị* (washing hands to crack palm Kernel for the chicken), is an age long saying that is used to explain wasted efforts, yet it also exposes the place of hand washing as a reoccurring activity in Igbo culture.

Several moments in the traditional Igbo life are characterized by hand washing. Those moments include, during the early morning prayer, before libation, Kolanut presentation, before eating, receiving a visitor, when one returns from one's daily business, and other moments.

Some hand washing in Igbo culture are for ritual purposes, hence the Igbo have both physical hand washing and spiritual hand washing, all geared towards achieving both physical and spiritual cleanliness and purity.

Most interestingly, the Igbo method of greeting, by joining their hand fan and walking stick three times, as an alternative to handshake, should be regarded as a precautionary measure put in place by the Igbo ancestors in order to avert the spread of diseases. The same also applies to the Igbo type of greeting where a

woman genuflects before a man and the man in return pats her on the back with his hand fan, as an alternative to hugging or other closer contact.

### **Importance of Hand-Washing in Igbo Culture**

The importance of hand washing in relation to public health and infectious diseases control cannot be overemphasized. Aigbiremolen, Abejeyali Ike, Momoh, lawal-luka, and Abah, (2017), assert.

Hand washing with soap and water is one of the most effective measures against infectious diseases. The practice is safe, cheap and not time consuming. Hand washing could be effectively adopted by any socio-economic class and by any community. The practice of hand washing is also culture sensitive and is generally acceptable across many population groups.

Over the years, hand washing has saved the traditional Igbo the problem of contacting diseases and defilement. From day break when an Igbo wake up from sleep, to evening when they go to sleep, they always engage in hand washing as they engage in different activities, using the hands at different times. Hand washing builds a sense of cleanliness, parity and undefilement in an average Igbo.

### **The Place of Hand Washing in the Present Day Igbo Cultural Life**

Hand washing in Igbo life is a norm that is acquired and transferred from generation to generation through informal education. It is an experience that can be acquired from the immediate family, from the extended family, from kinship relations, as well as in social gatherings and interactions.

In the present Igbo cultural life, people still practice hand washing, at various occasions where they are needed. A question could arise from the above statement, as to why people will contact infectious diseases when they practice hand washing.

In the writer's opinion a greater number of people who practice hand washing in our local communities do it for either formality or for ritual sake, and as such the needed attention is not given to hand washing as a way of actually washing off dirt from the hands, with the aid of soap and sponge, where necessary.

A personal communication account exposes some slight differences between the usual Igbo form of hand washing, and that of the present day Covid19 prevention era of hand washing.

In the cultural setting, water is served in a bowl or calabash, and people wash their hands inside it. They may use soap or ash. More than one person may use a bowl of water to wash their hands before the water will be disposed. In the present day era of Covid19 pandemic, the hand washing technique recommended for all, is summarized thus “regular hand washing with soap, for at least 20 Secs in running water (Chukwu, 2020 P.C). This system of hand washing makes little or no difference from the way hands are washed in Igbo culture. What matters is that the consciousness for hand washing has been raised in the minds of the people, right from birth, and not just at the wake of Covid19 pandemic.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Covid19 is a pandemic that has claimed so many lives in all parts of the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) the centre for diseases control of various countries and other humanitarian agencies across the globe have made efforts, and are still making efforts, at the time of this work, to proffer solution to this problem.

One of the key recommendations given by health experts, as a means of preventing the contraction and spread of the virus is hand washing. Before the time of this work, World Health Organization, UNICEF and other Agencies have been sensitizing the world about the importance of hand washing, in the prevention of diseases, hence they set aside the 15<sup>th</sup> day of October, every year, as the Global Hand-washing Day.

Igbo culture, the culture of the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria, already have the norm of hand washing which they practice on several occasion in their daily activities.

This paper therefore is of the contention that the traditional Igbo society stands a better chance of survival and protection against Covid19, since they already practice the act of hand washing, which is one of the outstanding preventive measures against contacting the virus.

### **Recommendations**

1. People of other cultures of the world should imbibe the Igbo cultural practice of hand washing, as a way of preventing the spread of Covid19, and other infectious diseases.
2. Hand washing should be practiced purposefully in line with the guidelines provided by the relevant authorities, and no longer as a formality.

3. Parents and Care-givers should as a matter of urgent importance, teach their children and wards the habit of regular hand washing, as a way of helping them to acquire and embrace the behavior right from childhood.
4. Hand washing should be seen as a personal thing and as such, people should not wait for the government or health officers to remind them of it, before they do the needful.
5. Water supply should top the list of government programmers and project, to enable the people access water for the regular hand washing.

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