



# **Cultural Communication Patterns and Alternatives Approaches to Fight COVID-19 in Cameroon**

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## INTRODUCTION

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Since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Cameroon on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020, 23 measures have been taken by the Cameroon Government which spoke through Prime Minister and Head of Government in a bid to contain the spread of this unwanted visitor or is it a permanent resident! Agreeably, the government's response strategy has been in line with the World Health Organization's (WHO) guidelines for its member states (WHO, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. The response strategy aims to interrupt transmission of the virus as well as effective management of confirmed cases. The most common preventive measures include: social distancing, suspension of mass gathering of more than 50 persons, frequent hand washing with soap, disinfecting surfaces with alcohol and sanitizers, self-isolation, quarantining of conformed cases and the obligatory putting on of a face mask in all public places. However, there have been some concerns relating to the effectiveness of this response strategy.

The number of confirmed cases has been on the rise since 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020 when Cameroon registered its first case. It has been observed that most of the problems associated with curbing person to person transmission have to do with behaviors, related issues, especially cultural stereotypes (WHO, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. The problem is that Cameroonians have cultural behaviors that may not be compatible with the current national response strategy. Consequently, the objective of this paper is to investigate and identify the gaps that exist between these control measures churned out by the government and the Cameroonian cultural environment; with the view to suggest alternatives to intercultural communication approaches, which can be encouraged to fight the spread of COVID-19.

The expected significance of this paper is that, should these suggested alternative approaches to intercultural communication strategies be effectively adopted in Cameroon's cultural milieu, there is bound to be a considerable reversal of behaviors, which influence trends that escalate the propagation of COVID-19 and other pandemics amongst communities in Cameroon vis-à-vis government's measures to curb pandemics such as COVID-19 and others. This significance is absolutely necessary to accommodate, because the length of stay of COVID-19 remains a puzzle. For instance, as Ewubare (2020)<sup>3</sup> opines, Chinese scientists have just said the novel coronavirus will likely not be eradicated but co-exists with humans for a long time. A group of Chinese viral and medical researchers reportedly made the disclosure in Beijing at a briefing. The scientists suggested that the epidemic is likely to become seasonal due to the so-called asymptomatic carriers.

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1 WHO 2020: A coordinated global research roadmap: 2019 Novel coronavirus

2 Tweet of the Minister of Public Health, April 19, 2020.

3 Kess Ewubare (2020) "Chinese Scientists say COVID-19 is likely to keep coming Back each Year" cited from: [https://www.legit.ng/1324961-chinese-scientists-covid-19-coming-year.html?utm\\_source=mail-fire&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=5](https://www.legit.ng/1324961-chinese-scientists-covid-19-coming-year.html?utm_source=mail-fire&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=5)

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## **THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Anthropology is one of the social science disciplines that studies man from a holistic perspective, with a particular focus on culture and human behavior (Cecile Helman, 2000)<sup>4</sup> The problems hindering effective containment of the pandemic are largely behavioral (Kelly and al., 2019)<sup>5</sup>. Human behavior which is central to effective interventions is influenced by several factors such as socio-cultural, economic and political within a specific local context (Lynteris et al., 2018)<sup>6</sup>. This underlines the importance of including an anthropological perspective in the national response strategy to tackle COVID-2019. Anthropological perspectives are critical in disease outbreak response (Inhorn and Brown, 1990)<sup>7</sup>, and their role has been highly appreciated in previous cases like Ebola<sup>8</sup> and Zika. During the Zika and Ebola outbreaks in some African countries, anthropologists conducted insightful analysis from where they provided in-depth information on several public health concerns including: negative public perceptions about the disease, social resistance to interventions, effective socio-cultural adaptive behaviors, insights about cultural beliefs, perceptions and practices related to the causes, prevention and management of the disease and factors influencing adherence to interventions aimed at eradicating the disease. These insights contributed in informing the design of culturally appropriate interventions (Stellmach et al., 2018)<sup>9</sup>. The case of the current COVID-19 pandemic will certainly not be an exception.

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## **PERCEIVED CULTURAL BEHAVIORS OF RESISTANCE TO GOVERNMENT REQUIREMENTS**

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In Cameroon it is not a common practice nor is it a cultural stereotype for people to wear and carry on face masks, except by certain strata of Muslim religious leaders, who wear the turban. This partly explains why some people have not been able to use the mask or some people wear the mask and cover only their chins, while the original objective for putting on a mask is to cover the nose and mouth. It goes the same with the frequent washing of hands with soap or disinfecting the hands using sanitizers. Similarly, people are not used

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4 Cecil Helman, *Culture, Health and Illness*, Edition 4, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000.

5 Ann H Kelly, Federick Keck and Christos Lynteris: *The anthropology of epidemics: Routledge studies in Health and Medical Anthropology*. Routledge, 2019.

6 Christos Lynteris & Branwyn Poleykett (2018) *The Anthropology of Epidemic Control: Technologies and Materialities*, *Medical Anthropology*, 37:6, 433-441.

7 Marcia C Inhorn and Peter J Brown: *The anthropology of infectious diseases Annual Review Anthropology*. 1990. 19:89- 117

8 Emilie Venables and Umberto Pellicchia: *Engaging Anthropology an Ebola Outbreak, Case Studies West Africa*.

9 Darryl Stellmach, Isabel Beshar, Juliet Bedford, Philipp du Cros, Beverley Stringer: *Anthropology In Public Health emergencies: what is anthropology good for?* *BMJ Global Health*: 2018.

to long periods of self-isolation or be confined through quarantine. All these partly explain why people runaway when they are asked to be confined, or reject results when they are tested positive. All these barriers related to COVID-19 response strategy suggest that, there is disconnectedness between the prescribed preventive measures and the way community members respond to these measures. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that COVID-19 is a new disease and not much is known about it especially from an anthropological perspective. Hence the evidence based is still very weak in Cameroon and this knowledge gap is even a global problem partly hindering efforts to contain its spread.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL COMMUNICATION APPROACHES

The design of interventions aimed at curbing transmission, effective prevention, and management of confirmed cases requires inputs from different national cultures (Wilkinson and al., 2017)<sup>10</sup>. The first problem encountered from the point of view of intercultural communication is that the Cameroonian government is adopting a single strategy for the whole country. The only local mark observed is the translation of messages into the different local languages, which is insufficient. Beyond this codic approach (language), we must introduce the anthropological approach (cultural behavior). A message receiver is not a tabula rasa: it already has information kept in memory in such a way that when a message is communicated to it, its degree of adhesion corresponds to the degree of adaptability of the new input with the knowledge already recorded in memory. If the new message is out of phase with the knowledge already stored, then the individual will oppose the messages disseminated (Kakdeu, 2012)<sup>11</sup>. In the context of community communication, the ideal is therefore to align messages with community knowledge in terms of beliefs, behaviors, attitudes and practices.

The second problem observed since the launch of the campaign against COVID-19

<sup>10</sup> Wilkinson A, Parker M, Martineau F, Leach M. 2017 Engaging communities': anthropological insights from the West African Ebola epidemic. *Phil.Trans. R. Soc. B* 372: 20160305. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2016.0305>

<sup>11</sup> Louis-Marie Kakdeu, 2012. *Pragmatique, société, changement : Les méfaits des conflits discursifs dans la communication sociale au Cameroun*. Sarrebruck : Editions Universitaires Européennes.

is that innovations are introduced without explanations or instructions on how to use them. It is as if people were given good treatments /therapies without sufficient instructions or dosages. For example, we have already recorded many cases of wrong use of masks, gloves, sanitizers, water points, etc. For example, we see some masks with a hole in front of the mouth for people to be able to continue drinking beer in bars. Others who wear gloves continue to put their fingers into their mouth or rub their nose or eyes. Some people drink water from water points intended for washing of hands or they use sanitizers to wash their faces or brush their teeth. Amazingly, some even open the water containers and wash their hands inside, thereby soiling the entire water reserve. Indeed, these are new behaviors and tools introduced without explanation and without transition in the communities. Hence, there is need to investigate the feasibility, appropriateness and meaningfulness of official policy prescriptions. This will enable policy-makers to determine if they fit in the local Cameroonian contexts.



## **SOME SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS: THE USE OF CULTURAL PROVERBS**

In several Cameroonian cultural settings, proverbs are the fastest socio-cultural purveyors of transmitting knowledge in the community. In this direction, this paper will adopt some general proverbs shared in many communities as case studies, since it is difficult to focus on each of the several cultures in Cameroon (more than 250 cultures in the country). Expectedly, the government has the means for applying most of what we will recommend here. One of such means available to Government is the medium of traditional rulers, who are auxiliaries of the Government in Cameroon (Ngankeu 2006). Below are some suggests on how we can formulate the five main messages on COVID-19 in a local cultural area:

- To actively involve local population in educative seminars for curbing COVID-19, they should be told that the organizer is their traditional ruler.
- To explain to the people the merits of the preventive measures, they should be told that it is raining and that it is necessary to take shelter while the tornado passes.
- To explain to people that it is necessary to go out while being protected, that is to say by wearing a mask, it would be necessary to tell them that a peasant does not go to the farm without a machete or a hoe. Or that a traditional ruler does not go out in public without wearing his attributes.
- To explain to the people that it is necessary to wash their hands regularly with soap, just remind them that it is not normal to stay near water and to eat with hands which have been used in touching many things and greeting many people around.
- To explain to the people that it is necessary to be conscientious with their lives, because such lives are too precious to the government, they should be reminded that one does not hunt the panther when one has only one arrow to his bow. Therefore, it is inappropriate to want to be the hero in front of COVID-19.
- To explain to the people that, they have to respect the safety distance of one meter, just ask them to avoid crowds and to withdraw if people get a little too close to them. The fly is said to have survived avoiding the sweep.

In fact, the use of proverbs in socio-cultural milieu has served as very effective instrument in cultural communication in most African landscapes (Achebe, 1996). Consequently, we recommend that traditional rulers use proverbs and other social beliefs to cause change of behavioral pattern that is, to alter peoples' behaviors while dealing with one another in their communities, especially in respect to curbing COVID-19 and other disease control measures. Still at the inter- and intra-cultural levels, it is interesting to use channels of transmission of messages known by local populations, such as Town-Criers. For example:

- The traditional channel for seniors: Seniors are still very resistant to what is exogenous and very attentive to everything that respects the pre-established social order. Thus, it is necessary to use the traditional chieftdom and its networks of associations to reach out to the citizens. Leaders of association and notabilities can act as relays. The local language should be the recommended cod of communication within cultural communities and peoples.
- The network of social and cultural activities for young people under 35: Young people are influenced by "hot spots". Messages must be made available at these places. The jargon is the recommended language.

In the Cameroonian mentality nowadays, it is difficult to succeed in a communication

action without “means of accompaniment”: People ask you what you have brought or if you came empty handed. It is therefore advisable to mobilize resources to be able to offer the following items:

- Soap: it remains the best way to dissolve the membrane of the virus and limit its spread. By asking people to always wash their hands with soap, they should be encouraged by giving them the first piece. Soap is better than hydro-alcoholic solution since it is already in the habits of our populations.
- Masks: This is the best way to prevent the spread of particles in the air. By asking people to go out protected, it is advisable to offer them this protective tool in order to encourage them adopt the practice.

Some of these actions are already done by the government and people of good will. It should be continued.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, in reflecting on the place of socio-cultural beliefs and practices in changing the behavior pattern of populations, we have realized that government’s communication strategy lacks the promptness to attach itself to cultural alternatives capable of enabling populations to accept all innovative tools and techniques. One shortcoming in understanding this character of Governmental attitude is that, traditional rulers in Cameroon are auxiliaries of the administration, who are even on the payroll of the Government. It is expected that, the optimal utilization of these leaders of thought in cultural milieu could directly and indirectly serve the state governing apparatuses in the furtherance of good governance. It is on this understanding that, this paper anchors its theoretical and empirical underpinning for the curbing of COVID-19 and related pandemics in Cameroon.



