

## COVID and the Lagosian

by Chinyere Evelyn Uku

It must have been about midday on January 5th when the radio announcement was made - virus detected in Wuhan, Eastern China, population roughly 11 million. Not much else was known at the time other than the virus having possibly emerged from a seafood marketplace and it setting off a number of pneumonia cases in the surrounding areas. Soon enough, the TV comes on - breaking news, headline stares back with reporter giving details of the situation, the words in bold, beneath other less interesting news highlights. What should have been a really good start to the decade with the ball drop in Times Square, news of my brother taking major steps to open up a restaurant in Virginia, my mother making arrangements to move to New York to fawn over her then two week old nephew, several celebratory emojis sent over my sister's job promotion, had already been marred by some unpleasant news in the family so none of us were quite ready for what this news would bring. I was already slightly on edge when I said to my mum, "Don't worry, it'll go away, SARS eventually did." But I didn't understand anything, no one did, and till date we all still struggle to do so. I didn't know what it was or how it might affect us, why it was puzzling to these reporters who just stared back at us blankly, its origin still in question as it was reported that there may have been instances of the virus well before the seafood market. Flash forward a couple of weeks later and we're really cooking. The Chinese healthcare system is inundated, Hubei, the province encompassing Wuhan, is quarantined, masked people amble about streets, businesses shut down rapidly - what the hell is happening, I thought. Tens to the hundreds to the thousands became infected, images of countless beds made up for the unrelenting numbers marched across the screen. Ventilators show up, health care workers got infected, this thing was showing no sign of slowing down even as non-citizens started fleeing from the situation, escaping the country.

Of course, in a very different country, there were no shortages of memes, wisecracks and jabs - absolutely nothing is sacred among Nigerians. The internet video of a village girl being abandoned by pastors and subsequently the entire village for having had intercourse with a Chinese man circulated rapidly. Caricatures, jokes and the like continuously oozed from social media platforms until it started to become even more evident that things were truly escalating world over.

The US confirmed its first death from the coronavirus - a case in Seattle, Washington where patient apparently had returned from a trip to Wuhan to visit family when he started showing symptoms. Travel restrictions had been called for by the CDC when President Trump chose to delay move to slow down travel for a month within which time close to 14,000 travelers departed Wuhan for the United States.

And then of course, Italy, Spain, Iran, and soon after, the UK, were reporting cases in the thousands. Numbers kept rising, confusion did the same - a single day had a mouth large enough to claim close to a thousand with not even the finest operatic renditions from balcony edges able to stem the spread of the virus.

As death toll figures rose, another cartoon emerged of Europeans running to Africans for succor, and then the inevitable happened, our first index case landed in Lagos and something close to a panic attack met me at my door. Suddenly, places like the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) come to light, the Ministry of Health stepped in, NCDC shot out daily health and safety warnings, public service announcement could not emphasize further the importance of washing hands thoroughly. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water, use hand sanitizer. Sanitize all surfaces. Is that it? It was like I could see the entire human population, all races, all peoples clasp hands together to wash in unison in one petrified sink. There had to be more to it than that. Suddenly I had spare sanitizers to go around, even considered bathing in the stuff, but I didn't realize sanitizers would be the least of our problems.

They of course started to become a rarity. In an instant the stuff could hardly be found. Stop by anywhere to buy and they'd run out. Not only that, with the fear of the virus at our necks, anti-malaria drugs were also becoming a rarity. Suddenly the ongoing Lassa fever was brushed aside as cases started to crop up in various states. All flummoxed faces, including Governor Cuomo's seemed to have no idea about a vaccine - when we might get one, if ever. Panic buying had begun. I went in a store once and in my face mask I touched the produce as if touching boiling water, looking like I was getting ready to perform surgery on cabbage. By this time street kids had already caught on, the viral craze in their songs. Danfos were shuddering not from their interaction with bad roads but from the slightest cough or gesture that might signal the presence of plague. At the entrance to churches, shops and other such establishments would stand a guy in uniform with two or three pumps into ready hands until numbers started rising and a lockdown was issued and suddenly ambling street kids and all and sundry took to their heels to shelter in place. Of course as sheltering in place is the luxury of the rich, less fortunate, which let's face it are the vast majority of the country, began to cry out. Why are they using Oyibo people methods to tackle this problem in Nigeria, some have been cited as saying? Why do we always look to Oyibo man to solve problems? And now more than ever the problems of always running to Oyibo were being sharply revealed within our piteous healthcare system. With the lockdown it became impossible for anyone to flee for any reason and with fear also came stigmatization further increasing the difficulty in detecting anyone with the virus and curbing its spread. A lockdown would only mean an increase in cases and growing difficulty with contact tracing. There were already cases of people going to hospitals with the virus and infecting healthcare workers leading to 17 hospitals in Lagos state being shut down. It would of course be a nightmare if the disease were to spread in large numbers with testing kits and ventilators in short if not next to supply. Food drives were happening, a local news channel carried the look in a man's face as he grasped a plate of rice, his entire body rattling with hunger. Sadly, disparities became evident with the trepidation surrounding this virus - hunger due to impoverishment, job losses, domestic violence cases went up in certain areas, and many others issues that made it seem as though we were truly going back in time, possibly back to the Dark Ages. I washed the dishes for what felt like the thousandth time - over and over again, woke at the same hour, paced the compound, ate, watched the news, again and again until I'd started to wonder what the new normal would turn out to be, shaking hands and hugging neighbours now a luxury. While people were breaking curfew and looting, pastors were capitalizing, sending out false information, fake remedies were on the rise. A celebrity was detained for hosting a party of about 2,000 at her home while one 'Man of God' gathered the same number at a venue claiming that those infected with the coronavirus were not of God.

Cases were indeed rising world over but it did not deter Nigerians from being solutions- oriented. With the demise of Lagos state's chief of staff, Abba Kyari, and various other high-ranking officials, came a number of innovative moves to tackle the ongoing problem. Fashion houses swung into action, producing face masks en masses. Households started sewing together little Ankara print masks which started to take off as a veritable side hustle, a gesture showing solidarity in the midst of fear. Agribusiness or raw food retailing flourishes and does pretty well as there's never a dull moment for a bag of rice here no matter the circumstances. Mobile app developers are making waves, remote learning platforms and education delivery is clearly the future. IT security consultancy is booming, mental health experts have their hands full, unfortunately. The demand for online conferencing apps is unmistakable as it's not hard to spot an elderly woman under a tree somewhere shouting Amen into her phone joined by a group of virtual prayer warriors.

We continued to watch the unfolding of this disease and didn't think things could get any worse until COVID-19 took a back step to the killing of an unarmed black man in Minneapolis. George Floyd's death stunned us as greatly as it did the rest of the world - the I Can't Breathe signs were out again, racial tension high, the coronavirus still busying itself with new infections. Currently the number of cases in Nigeria have reached over 13,000 and no one is sure of anything still - a vaccine, a cure, a way to curb its spread, but some of us will just continue to sit at home staring at our screens, rotating the same meals, pacing our compounds, hoping for the best.