**Kairotic Archiving of a Pandemic**

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**Abstract**

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic across the globe has transcended the realm of the medical to affect social, cultural, economic, political, and quotidian ways of living. Various members of society, including governments, medical experts, social commentators, academics and researchers, and ordinary people, continue to communicate their thoughts on the crisis. There is therefore a need for empirical work on the language and communicative aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The present volume responds to this need. By responding to a ‘kairotic’ moment in world affairs using data from Ghana and other parts of Africa, this collection redresses the absence of communicative perspectives on Covid discussions on Africa and the near absence of the Global South (especially Africa) in discussions on world events. The volume takes a discourse-cum-linguistic oriented view of crisis communication and sheds light on issues such as the use of metaphor, the role of social media in disseminating (dis)information, and the content, channels, and strategies of crisis communication employed by politicians, social commentators, digital citizens, and medical experts. It archives an aspect of Africa’s communicative response to a global crisis and makes an interdisciplinary contribution to the fields of rhetorical studies, linguistics, semiotics, media, and cultural studies.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, crisis communication, discourse analysis, global pandemic, intercultural communication, Ghana, African studies

When the Covid-19 pandemic started, all of us, the co-editors, were living and working in different parts of the world. Nancy and Edzordzi were graduate students at Michigan Technological University while Mark was a postdoctoral researcher at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Later, Nancy would return to Ghana and Mark would move to Bristol, UK. While Edzordzi remained in the US, he would move to a different state in the country. We point to these various movements because they provided us with the kind of epistemic advantage that allowed us to think about the pandemic cross-culturally as we compared notes about our experiences in multiple localities. We observed with keen interest how discourses about the virus were circulating and by who, which discursive formations were being created, and as Africans, how our continent was represented in the discourses we encountered. Because we are rhetoric and linguistic scholars, we noticed the near-absence of African communicative strategies for managing the pandemic in our home country Ghana and had animated conversations about what an interdisciplinary communicative analysis of Africa’s Covid-19 experience might contribute to the ongoing discourse on the subject matter. Africa is a large continent with 54 countries—with several languages, cultures, and histories—that is often spoken of in broad terms. We knew that there was a need to work on specific national responses if we are to gain a clearer and more complex insight into Africa’s Covid-19 experience. This collection responds to that need.

Thinking about the pandemic from an African perspective raised some very complex issues about what it means to theorize the pandemic from a postcolonial or Global Southern lens. First, despite Africa’s crucial role in global history, it is often erased or positioned at the margins of historical archives and scholarship from all disciplines. The fields of rhetoric, linguistics, and communication are no exception (see Asante, 2019; Asante and Hanchey, 2021; Makoni, Mufwene, and Vigouroux, 2022). Gewald (2007) has observed the lack of engagement with Africa’s experience of the Spanish Flu of 1918-20 in some recent literature despite the availability of some substantial archival material. But accessing African archives can present practical challenges, sometimes shaped by one's location in the world. To access African archives, one must often travel elsewhere, especially the West and because archiving is always political, they impact who and what is represented and ultimately, the knowledge we construct from them. Like elsewhere, the African experience of the pandemic was expansive and we noticed as interdisciplinary communication scholars that several pieces of data needed urgent archiving and analysis. These include speeches, music videos, lockdown photographs, poetry and other literary representations, social media memes, cinematic representations, journalistic reports, sartorial designs, medical posters, conspiracy rhetorics, and patient narratives among others. Given the precariousness of postcolonial archives, we feared that these crucial sources of African and global history might be lost somewhere in time. It is in this context that we came to conceptualize this work as an intellectual archive of some sort.

Second, there were specific aspects of the Covid-19 experience in African contexts that were not represented in mainstream conversations about the pandemic. For example, religion (in addition to politics and science) played a very pivotal role in Africa’s experience as compared to other places. This is especially significant because there are notable differences between African and Western conceptions of health and disease. African metaphysics highlights the symbiotic relationship between man, nature, and the spirit world (Omonzejele, 2008). Disease is not just what happens to the human body and psyche but it is an imbalance between man and his community, the divine and nature, which is why divination and sacrifices are crucial to African health protocol (Omonzejele, 2008). In Ghana, not only did the government organize a breakfast prayer meeting with Christian leaders (i.e., Archbishops, Bishops, Apostles, General Overseers, etc.), but also priests from the country’s many traditional religions performed sacrifices and libations to cleanse the land. By taking some religious measures while also emphasizing the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on Covid prevention and control, Ghana’s experience interrogates the sole emphasis on biomedical constructions of health even as it underscores the entanglement of the physical and spiritual in matters of health and wellbeing.

Third, because of Africa’s relation with global coloniality, analysis of its pandemic experience raised some important issues of representational power and inequality. Africa became a spectacle. Western subjects like Melinda Gates felt pity for Africa as they projected that very soon people would be dying on the streets. As Gewald’s (2007) observations of earlier work suggest, such negative projections are hardly new and point to a pattern of representation that links Africa with disease, without critical engagement with data. None of the spectacular projections on Africa materialized, and we thought that examining discourse about the pandemic would highlight some of these problematic rhetorics and give voice to perspectives that would otherwise be missing from the voluminous literature on the pandemic. Because Africa was almost absent from the academic discussions circulating at the time, we decided to embark on this project to, hopefully, bring such perspectives to the discussion and help overcome what decolonial scholars have called “epistemicide” (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). It also became very clear that language was at the core of health inequality. That Covid-19 information was first represented in English meant that many, on the African continent and elsewhere, who did not read and speak English had unequal access to health information about the disease. Linked to this are the cultural assumptions underlying the Covid-19 lexicon such as social distancing, isolation, shelter-in-place, and drive-thru-testing that did not adequately align with the daily experiences of many people around the world. But there are also countless examples of linguistic agency in local contexts including, for example, translations of Covid-19 information and the lexical innovation of language users (see Edward et al., this volume; Kupolati, Adebileje & Adeleke, 2021).

This volume examines the communicative dimensions of the Coronavirus pandemic in Ghana. By ‘communicative dimension,’ we mean how communication affects bidirectional flows between senders and receivers through diverse impacts and feedback. The volume is framed by Blommaert’s (2020, p. 1) observation on the global effects of the Coronavirus: that is, “when things go global, they don’t stay the same things, they morph and acquire new features, dimensions, effects.” While the Covid-19 pandemic was a global phenomenon, it had different manifestations as local factors, including those related to cultures, histories, and infrastructure, complicated experiences in different contexts. This is also true for the communicative manifestations of the pandemic which continued to change in response to different pandemic exigencies. That said, there is the tendency to theorize the pandemic in a global manner without significant attention to how local contexts shape responses to the pandemic. Also, the knowledge produced and circulated about the pandemic has tended to privilege certain contexts over others, highlighting the ways in which the pandemic reinforces “epistemicide” (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Against this backdrop, the present volume examines the pandemic experience in a Global South context and, specifically, hopes to achieve the following objectives:

* To examine the communicative dimension of the Covid-19 pandemic through an interdisciplinary and transnational lens
* To illustrate how communication intersects with other (sociocultural) variables to shape discourses surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic
* To contribute to ongoing conversations on Covid-19 in ‘marginal’ contexts using Ghana specifically and Africa generally as a focus of analysis.

The various chapters of this book take a semiotically informed view of crisis communication and shed light on the discursive aspects of the COVID-19 crisis, including the use of metaphor, the role of social media for (dis)information, psychological remediation through religion, and the content, channels, and strategies of crisis communication employed by various sociopolitical actors. Particularly, the book examines how the semiosis-ideology interface reflects and shapes varied responses to, and perceptions of, the pandemic. By illustrating how communication intersects with other variables to shape discourses surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in ‘marginal’ contexts specifically, the volume contributes to the growing cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary work on COVID-19 related discourses. It also intervenes within the ongoing conversations on COVID-19 by emphasizing the need to move beyond generalizations at a global level to zoom in on experiences at particular local contexts where we can more directly observe how communicative events produce embodied reactions of the pandemic at various levels. Additionally, the volume contributes to debates on the historical and contemporary aspects of media and communication in Africa as well as to the ongoing (re)positioning of cultural and media studies outside the Anglo-American praxis.

Several factors make this volume distinct. First, while communication has been an important dimension of the pandemic, not much work exists on this aspect of the pandemic from an African perspective. There is no chapter on Africa in Musolff, Breeze, Kondo and Vilar-Lluch’s (2022) work *Pandemic and Crisis Discourse: Communicating COVID-19 and Public Health Strategy*. There is one chapter, on South Africa, in Price and Harbisher’s (2021) *Power, Media and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Framing Public Discourse*. Pollock and Vakoch’s (2021) *COVID-19 in International Media: Global Pandemic Perspectives* contains a couple of chapters on African contexts. Mpofu’s (2021) *Digital Humour in the Covid-19: Pandemic Perspectives from the Global South* also contains chapters on a number of African contexts but with an emphasis on a specific subject—digital humour. While Heath, Darkwah, Beoku-Betts, and Purkayastha’s (2022) *Global Feminist Autoethnographies During COVID-19: Displacements and Disruptions* contains several chapters on Africa, it focuses solely on the autoethnography of academic experiences. Available book-length collections on African experiences with the pandemic focus on socio-economic analysis, literary representations, or education (e.g., Kinyanjui & Toure, 2020; Boswell, 2020; du Toit, 2021; Namatende-Sakwa, Lewinger and Langsford, 2023). Apart from centering on an African context, the current volume engages with a range of subjects, including politics, humour, religion, linguistic diversity, media representations, precarity, digital communication, and higher education. Hence, it does not only highlight the pandemic’s multifaceted dimension, but also extends research on the crisis beyond medicine, economy, and politics – perspectives that seem to have significantly shaped the global conversation on the subject. Most importantly, the book highlights communication as integral to every aspect of the pandemic. Another significant feature of the present volume is its interdisciplinary and transnational approach. The volume engages with the communicative aspect of the pandemic from an interdisciplinary perspective, with chapters using theories from rhetoric, linguistics, semiotics, cultural analysis, and philosophy among others. “Semiotic” here emphasizes multimodal sensibilities including visual, tactile, and auditory significations. The pandemic has highlighted the fact that issues of health and medicine are complex and require exploration from multiple angles if they are to be understood comprehensively.

A cursory glance at the volume’s title seemingly suggests a national emphasis; however, the collection is framed with a transnational lens, a perspective that aligns with the global manifestation of the pandemic. Thus, while the experience of the Coronavirus pandemic in the specific context of Ghana is discussed, the link between the Ghanaian experience and experiences elsewhere—for example, those in other parts of Africa and the African diaspora— is also considered. While the Coronavirus pandemic is global, the situatedness of the current volume and the range of issues examined demonstrate the need to pay attention to specific contexts, including those in Africa where experiences with the pandemic have challenged dominant narratives. For example, while Africa was initially projected as a possible epicenter for the pandemic (Nyenswaah, 2020), Africa would record some of the lowest numbers throughout the crisis. Additionally, though there were calls for global solidarity in the fight against the pandemic, discourses around Africa especially highlighted the colonial and racial ideologies that continue to shape the management of global health crises. We argue that insights on the public discourses on the pandemic from an underexplored context hold several theoretical, methodological, and cross-cultural implications and highlight the precariousness of global Black subjectivity during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Firstly, such research extends the scope of crisis communication research and builds on the existing literature, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this field of critical inquiry. While Africa shares some experiences of the pandemic with the rest of the world, there are several linguistic, economic, political, and sociological factors that make its experiences rather unique. Our emphasis, therefore, highlights the ways in which these realities complicate the communicative dimensions of the pandemic. The recognition of such complexities in the analysis will enable the identification of diverging and converging points in the glocal pandemic experience. The alternative perspectives proffered in this collection demonstrate how crisis communication may be conditioned by specific spatiotemporal and sociocultural contexts, and this will subsequently lead to a more holistic understanding of the field. Secondly, studies on the communicative aspects of the pandemic that are situated in an African context can provide a basis for comparative studies that move beyond simplistic explanations of the links between Global Southern and Northern experiences. As Chan and Lee (2017) note, such studies are needed to delimit the generality and specificity of media and communication theories as well as advance comparative media and communication research. Thirdly, research that engages with work that transcends traditional European and North-American contexts underscores the importance of epistemic pluralism. This is even more significant considering that Africa, as a space, has experienced several epidemics/pandemics in recent history (e.g., Malaria, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Cholera, Typhoid), and has been said to have overturned normative discourses on pandemic preparedness during the Covid crisis. Fourthly, as indicated earlier, African contexts are also shaped by other knowledge systems that are sometimes in tension with the global narrative on the pandemic.

The volume is divided into three different yet overlapping thematic areas and illustrates the complexity of the conversation around Covid-19, including the links between global and local materialities and interstitial discursivity. The chapters in the first section of the collection —Religion and Phenomenology—are interrelated and align with our overarching goal of illustrating the intersectionality, transnationality, and centralization of ‘marginal’ discourses of the pandemic. As the first segment demonstrates, Covid-19 is more than a scientific problem. The pandemic also highlights aspects of faith and culture in African societies as they are connected to moments of crisis and illness. The chapters in this section advance our understanding of the semiomaterialities of Covid-19 and related material infrastructure (such as the mask and dressing) (cf. Coker); and spirituality (such as libation and cleansing rituals, temples and churches, pastors, and priests, incantations and prayers) (cf. Prempeh, Baa-Ofori &Duncan) which are all aspects of holistic medical and healing processes. The spiritual processes and products of psychological stability are, for instance, not sanctioned by the World Health Organization as part of pandemic health protocols. These chapters show, however, that African public health semiomaterialities transcend the WHO-sanctioned protocols. These chapters are not only explicit critiques of how African (and other non-Western) health epistemologies have been sidelined in the global pandemic management methods but they also show how WHO protocols are substantially recontextualized in the Global South. They also require us to reflect more critically on the connections between religion and science (cf. Prempeh, Baa-Ofori &Duncan, Boafo): these two powerful institutions can sometimes align, misalign or form complex relationalities between these two extreme positions. But questions of religion (and science) are always connected to the coloniality of power and this is especially evident in the Ghanaian government’s marginalization of indigenous Ghanaian religious traditions (cf. Boafo) in their pandemic policy. Boafo’s work on “embodied rituals” and their “collective care” ethos suggests that African communicative practices not only challenge normative Western understandings of disease but also they can help us envision alternative concepts of care.

The chapters in this section clearly demonstrate also that Global Southern perspectives are worthy of theorizing and theoretical categorization. These chapters deploy visual theory, phenomenology (especially the perspectives of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger), and African epistemologies to propose a Global Southern Crisis Standpoint that critiques a West-centric worldview of disease and the mask and how African conceptions can help us understand these. Coker argues, for instance, in theorizing his Taxonomy of the Face Masking Culture that Ghanaian performances of politeness also shape how Africans wear the face mask. The face mask culture, therefore, transcends the binaries of disease prevention (if one wears it) and disease infection (if one does not wear it). Removing the face mask when talking to an elder is a sign of politeness (in spite of the health risks), and, thus, the performance of cultural competence also shaped the phenomenology of the African face mask culture.

The chapters in the second segment of the collection—Discourse of Local and Transnational Institutions and Publics—explore the relations between continental African experiences and their transnational connections. Most of the chapters signal the co-construction of people, institutions, and races in ways that redeploy old stereotypical discursive and rhetorical moves, suggesting how moments of crisis are moments of precarity. Nancy Henaku, for instance, uses a materialist rhetorical critique to highlight the global problem of race which has been heightened by the pandemic. Examining the material and rhetorical enactments of Black precarity in the United States, China, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria among others, she argues that Black people all over the world are radically subjective to colonial matrices of power, and these varied forms of subjectivity make them live unliveable lives. Thus, the pandemic is a double jeopardy for Black lives—disrupted by the pandemic and disrupted by coloniality. Mark Nartey demonstrates that these disruptions are taken up as arsenals for political benefits by oppositional politicians in Ghana such as John Mahama. Consequently, Covid-19 prevention becomes a platform for electioneering campaigns as we have seen in other jurisdictions such as the United States, Malawi, Egypt, South Korea, Slovenia, Portugal, Palau, and Bolivia. These connections are important for understanding the global nature of Covid-19 as political capital. Nii Kotei Nikoi presents an autoethnography of his experience as a “transmigrant”—a Ghanaian who lives and works in the United States. Nikoi’s work provides one example of the liminal lives of migrants during the pandemic for not only did he have to care for himself, but he also had to worry about his family in his home country. This piece highlights how media became crucial for not only coping with the pandemic away from home but also engaging in civic action during the pandemic. Through media consumption and production (in the form of podcasting), Nikoi reflects on and critiques the dominant narratives of powerful agents and institutions. Nikoi’s is an example of how scholar-citizen agency even in moments of crisis can help imagine alternative worlds.

All over the world, linguistic injustice is a problem. Many linguistic communities are sidelined because their languages are not dominant and under Covid, the neglect of various speech communities in national health communication plans was too glaring. Mary Edward, Marco S. Narko, and Esther Akrasi-Sarpong examine this problem in their chapter focusing on the Deaf community in Ghana. Already, this community’s linguistic needs are always on the periphery (as they are global) but the authors demonstrate that even Covid-19 prevention messages and presidential addresses on Covid-19 in Ghana have not been interpreted in sign languages. Deaf lives have become, always have been, precarious lives in their own homelands. Nancy Achiaa Frimpong further indicates that Ghanaian languages were minimally used in these official public health campaigns and presidential addresses. Both Edward and Frimpong articulate evidence-based recommendations that can bridge this communicative gap. The chapter by Emmanuel Essel, Eliza Govender, and Sarah Gibson presents us with an example local agency by a community radio in Ghana. Their chapter points to how alternative platforms that use participatory approaches make Covid-related information accessible to those who would otherwise be marginalized by official rhetoric.

The last section of the collection — Digital Technology, Humor, and Multimodality — takes up the crucial role of digital technologies in public health, emergency digital literacy, social media humor as a coping mechanism, and the vicissitudes of digital technology within moments of crisis. Using the concept of rhetorical situation, Novieto, Yegblemenawo, and Yegblemenawo’s analysis highlights possible challenges in the communication around Covid-19 in a range of texts and how some of these texts resulted in reactions from the public that are likely to derail efforts to curtail the spread of the disease. This chapter is in conversation with many others in the collection. For example, read together with Rockson and Ofori et al., this chapter suggests that humor, for example, may not always have positive impacts as it could also be a means for the circulation of misinformation. Victoria Ofori et al. examine how Ghanaians used humorous discourse to cope with and comment on aspects of the pandemic experience in Ghana. By using data from variety of sources—that is, jocular conversations on radio, social media discourse, and interviews in a Ghanaian community—their analysis not only points to the linguistic creativity that the producers exhibited but also provides important insight into how these rhetorical moves were received by consumers. Utilizing a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) framework, Kweku Rockson examined the discursive complexity of Covid-19 as expressed by cartoon creators in a national newspaper. Rockson’s analysis provides insights into how the pandemic amplified otherwise underlying political tensions within Ghana. Ultimately, Rockson and Ofori et al.’s paper foreground the triple functions of humor as a coping strategy, a tool for political critique, and public health education (on Covid). Diana Sebbie, Jade Ampomah Baah, and Daniel Ampofo Adjei examine the crisis communication of three government agencies noting the consistency in messaging within and between the various agencies. The design choices of some printed messages, however, make some of the messaging inaccessible for persons living with a disability.

In terms of context, it was crucial to include Andrews Nartey’s submission, which, unlike the others, was not an academic paper but an opinion piece with a general audience in mind. Because Covid-19 impacted all lives, the inclusion of this piece was in recognition of the importance of other voices, besides those of communication scholars and students. The submission is an example of many everyday writings that Ghanaians of all walks of life were producing during the pandemic. Because Nartey writes as a health professional and as a citizen, he provides an expansive perspective that highlights the interlocking factors that complicated Ghana’s experience with the pandemic. The emphasis on self-discipline as a key strategy for curtailing the pandemic point to extant morality narratives that often do not adequately account for the conditions of some of the most vulnerable in society (Boateng, Kusi, and Ametepey, 2021). The reference to discipline needs to be understood as an example of the construction of ideal citizen-subjects in Ghana’s postcolonial nation-building project. However, as research from other contexts has shown, these narratives of morality are not unique to Ghana but manifested globally at the height of the pandemic (see Kim and Chung, 2021; Ekberg, Ekberg Weinglass and Danby, 2021; Ji, 2020) so that mask-wearing, for example, became a sign of morality transnationally. Nartey’s piece thus provides important information for understanding the postcolonial and transnational contexts and issues that defined and necessitated this project.

Together, the chapters in this collection achieve three significant goals. Firstly, they offer substantial accounts of the African and Black diasporic experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic—experiences that have not received significant scholarly attention, except for negative global media portrayals. Secondly, they signal theoretical and methodological diversity and complexity to discursive and rhetorical problems. Such interdisciplinary approaches are needed more than ever at this time when we are at the height of ‘messy’ communicative strategies and infrastructure. Thirdly, they demonstrate that African and Black diasporic experiences are also global experiences and are equally valid in the efforts to understand the nature of, effects of, and solutions to the Covid-19 pandemic in particular and to disease, illness, healing, science and crisis communication, political rhetoric, and linguistic imperialism in general. This volume, thus, helps to address “epistemicide” (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020) by calling attention to not only Ghanaian experiences and knowledge about Covid-19, but also how these experiences are examples of and connected to continental and global communicative epistemologies about Covid-19.

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