

The Controversial Impact of Coronavirus Lockdown Measures in the Context of an Unequal Society – A Decolonial Theological Perspective

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Abstract

The socio-economic situation of Africa has been attacked by the coronavirus that has engulfed the planet faster than has any other deadly bacterium that has ever threatened the survival of the entire human race. The tsunami of the coronavirus has not only overtaken the life of many worldwide, but its consequences have also disrupted some transformational programmes. The pandemic arose while most African countries were at their peak of decolonising their education and information systems. The South African educational system, after having been affected by the #FeesMustFall campaign in 2015, is exerting an effort at the time to regain its previous momentum. Decolonisation, as part of its transformational trajectory, has had to face certain challenges arising from the arrival of the pandemic. Moreover, the moves that have been made to curb the challenge have had a huge impact on the decolonisation process that had started to reverse the colonialism of the past, with many African countries being reduced to mere shadows of themselves. Therefore, the intention, with the current research, is to unveil some of the obstacles that decoloniality has had to face as a result of the presence of the coronavirus, particularly within the South African context.

Keywords: Coronavirus, COVID-19, lockdown, inequality, Decolonial Theology

1. Introduction

The current author completely agrees with Alana Potter, who is quoted by Bega (2020:9) as saying: ‘Covid-19 has shone a light on this profound pre-existing inequality and provides clear clues as to how it is driven. The emergency measures are welcome, but they need to be better monitored and the government needs to account against them. Importantly, the emergency measures need to lead to sustainable, lasting solutions in housing and in basic services provisions’.

The present article, instead of negating or dismissing the positive role of the lockdown rules, is aimed at indicating how they have come to expose the inequalities prevalent in South Africa, as well as how they have impacted on the decolonising of the life of the marginalised in society. The approach taken is directed at uncovering whether the socio-economic conditions of most African people were taken account when the rules governing the lockdown conditions, imposed to halt the spread of the virus, were first devised. Accordingly, the article exposes whether the tools and rules employed to assist in curbing the pandemic have been universally and acceptably applied, and whether they cannot still do much to save and protect the majority of the people in the country, and on the African continent, from contracting the virus. Prof Themba Sono has correctly indicated that the measures taken against the spread of the coronavirus have served to delay, or to undermine, the impetus of the decolonisation movement. Such was articulated in his telephonic interview with Munghana Lonene, in the programme, *Africa wa vulavula*, broadcast on 8 April 2020 (SABC 2020a). The gist of the broadcast forms the basis of the current research, in which the author intends to unveil, among other matters, how the measures that are being implemented to curb the virus are also the means by which decolonisation projects can be disrupted. The news reports that are contained in newspapers, and that are broadcast on the radio and television, as well as via other media sources, have been used in the study, since the research has been undertaken during the time of quarantine, when the opportunities to visit libraries, as well as to employ other methods of research, have been very limited.

In defining the nature of the coronavirus, Araie (2020:12) has the following to say: ‘No event on earth could have sent about 16 000 airliners into storage, curtailed international global travel by 95%, forced 195 countries to seal their borders, cost the world a loss of over 2 trillion dollars leading to more than 50 million people being rendered jobless’. Such is the depth to which the

pandemic of Covid-19 has harmed and disrupted worldwide functioning. In overcoming the differences of race, religion, caste, colour, language, status, and wealth, among others, the virus has also managed to force all people to use a single universal language, namely one of 'survival'.

2. Short Background to the Emergence of the Coronavirus Pandemic

2.1. Definitions

Christensen and Senthilingam (2020) define coronaviruses as follows: 'Coronaviruses are a large group of viruses that are common among animals. In rare cases, they are what scientists call zoonotic, meaning they can be transmitted from animals to humans. According to Health24 (2020), the World Health Organization (WHO) describes the so-called 'virus' as 'a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. The name comes from the Latin word 'corona', which means 'crown' or 'halo', and refers to the shape of the virus particle when viewed under a microscope'.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2020) identifies the coronavirus as giving rise to the 'widespread chaotic fear and boundless death caused by an invisible enemy'. According to Dennis Chow (2020): 'Early research suggests that the virus closely resembles a known coronavirus harbored in horseshoe bats, according to Ian Jones, a professor of virology at the University of Reading in England'. Jones, as cited in Chow (2020), argues: 'What is not clear is the steps that moved the virus out of the bat, into some intermediate source or sources, and then finally into man'. Many different interpretations and variant conspiracy theories exist concerning the origin of the virus, which first led to the death of many in Wuhan, China.

According to Seroto (2018:1), decolonisation has become the norm in South Africa, with it being a radical attempt to reverse, change or undo what colonisation did, in the past, to knowledge systems, as well as to the colonised. Decoloniality, hence, is another way of rediscovering oneself from what was once lost due to colonisation, which dislocated both self and information by means of the enforcement of dehumanising colonial laws. Malema (as cited in Nare 2020:1 - 2) defines the phenomenon well in asserting that the school, which the party that he leads, namely the Economic Freedom Front (EFF), is currently building, has, as primary target, the teaching of a form of decolonised education that is directed at inculcating a sense of black pride in the student

body. The present author has realised that, if there were to be no colonisation, there would be no decolonisation either. However, because of what colonisation has done to the native inhabitants of Africa, it is crucial to reverse what the colonialists previously perpetrated, particularly through their colonialist education systems.

2.2. Symptoms of the Coronavirus

Some common signs of the presence of the coronavirus in an individual include: respiratory symptoms; a fever and cough; shortness of breath; and breathing difficulties. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), kidney failure and, even, death. No cure is yet available for the virus.

A key point, in discussions of 2020 events, is bound, in future, to be the wave of coronavirus that has staggered the entire world during the current time period. Most African people based in South Africa had not yet realised how serious the issue was until the State President announced the country's shutdown, on 16 March 2020. During the second week of lockdown, over 1660 cases of coronavirus infection were already confirmed, placing South Africa as the leading African country in terms of the physical impact of the pandemic, with 11 fatalities having already occurred within the national boundaries.

Although the national lockdown announced by the President on 16 March 2020 was assumed to be the appropriate measure for coping with the crisis, much evidence shows that many, both in the urban and rural areas, were impervious to the call for them to remain at home. In some townships, including Alexandria, north of Johannesburg, people were forced to abide by the mandated restriction of movement, while those who lived in the more rural areas, like Malamulele township in the Limpopo Province, carried on life as normal. A Gaza Party local politician, Emmanuel Mtileni, observed the movement of people between the two Shoprite shops in Malamulele, witnessing 'vanhu va xewetana no qhavulana hambi ku ri ku khohlola va ri ekusuhi na le kusuhi'. Mtileni recorded seeing people greeting one another and shaking each other's hands, as well as coughing into one another's faces with impunity (SABC 2020b). Multiple arguments were advanced as to why people did not wish to curtail their daily activities, some of which will be discussed later on in the present article. Minister Beki Cele repeatedly announced that no one would be allowed to purchase alcohol or to walk his/her dog during the shutdown.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC's) news reporter, Hasina Gori (2020), indicates that some resisted the President's call to lockdown the nation as a whole, citing an example of Alexander township, where life was continuing as 'normal as usual' after lockdown. In addition, another news reporter on radio indicated that the townships Malamulele and Elim in Limpopo were overcrowded with people trying to access their social grants, while ignoring the social distancing regulations, and refusing to wear the obligatory facial masks. Concern was also expressed by the Premier of Limpopo, Stanley Mathabatha, that non-compliance with the lockdown rules was widespread (Makungo 2020). At such a time of national disaster, the need for decolonising the South African curriculum has been at its highest level, following on the 2015 #FeesMustFall campaign, which saw the statues of arch-colonialists, like Cecil John Rhodes, being removed from public exhibition.

3. Lockdown Exposure of the Long-Standing Inequalities Prevalent Throughout South Africa

A core task of decolonisation lies in assisting those who lost their dignity and respect, due to colonial pressures, to regain what they once possessed. Such upliftment of the downtrodden requires radically reversing the remaining inequalities, by means of ensuring that the majority of the previously disadvantaged communities are able to regain their worth in the current situation. Indisputably, South Africa is among those countries that are distinguished by the inequalities that were originally orchestrated by racism and apartheid. Even if the still-prevailing inequalities have tended to be overlooked by many, the arrival of the coronavirus, which forced the country into lockdown, for which it was ill-prepared, served to expose the existing inequalities. According to News24 (2020), President Ramaphosa went on record in the following way:

The lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus has 'revealed a very sad fault line in our society' – inequality – President Cyril Ramaphosa said in his weekly newsletter, in which he also criticised the hoarding and selling of food parcels as 'disgusting'. 'But our lockdown has revealed a very sad fault line in our society that reveals how grinding poverty, inequality and unemployment is tearing the fabric of our communities apart', he said. Over the past three weeks, we have been confronted with distressing images of desperate people

clamouring for food parcels at distribution centres and of community protests against food shortages.

According to the television programme, Morning Live broadcasted on 6 April 2020, many South Africans were not cooperating with the lockdown injunctions, as could clearly be seen in the shots taken of those cooking and selling food on the street in the townships. The inequalities present in the situation were apparent, in that those who could afford to remain indoors, did so, whereas those who were living a precarious hand-to-mouth existence had to venture out to earn some sort of income, merely to be able to survive on a daily basis. Curbing the pandemic in South Africa, hence, demanded that even the poorest of the people be taken into consideration. For instance, there are some who are, at the best of times, only able to eke out a living on the streets from vending their goods. If such vendors were to be confined to their homes for 21 days without the possibility of selling their wares, the likelihood was that they would barely be able to survive until the lockdown was over. Secondly, the Minister of Transport, Mr Fikile Mbalula, in response to the onset of the pandemic changed the rules of the public transport system in South Africa, showing that most South Africans depend on public transport for being able to satisfy their daily needs. Such reliance is yet another clear indicator of the levels of inequality currently existing in the country.

The visit of the Saturday Star reporter, Sheree Bega, to the Letlhabile area, just outside Brits in the North West province, indicated the devastating situation regarding the lack of water in the area, which was sufficient to jeopardise the imposition of any lockdown regulations in the area. A basic and cheap way of fighting the pandemic is to keep washing one's hands with just soap and water. The presidential message in this regard was, at the time of the current research, repeatedly being broadcasted throughout the day. However, regularly washing one's hands requires a continuous supply of running water (Bega 2020:9). Those who were without such a supply, and who had to fetch their water from some distant source, were unlikely to be able to remain at home continuously for a period of 21 days. The Limpopo Provincial Government has also used the argument of lack of running water to justify their reluctance to reopen their schools, with the province concerned having high levels of water challenges compared to other provinces that have a more ready supply of the natural resource. According to Mgidi (2020:4), Manthati Makoshane challenged the authorities in saying the following: 'How can they tell us about social distancing when they know very well that there are more

than five people in one mkhukhu? I need water and I need to go to the toilet’. Such realities confronted people even before the start of the pandemic, and with its onset, the situation has become even more problematic.

As most of the unemployed cannot afford to buy hand sanitisers and facial masks, the courts may be compelled to force the government to provide such sanitisers to its citizenry (Morning Live, 7 April 2020). In another incident, Premier Stanley Mathabatha of Limpopo, on 6 April 2020, received 32 radio phones donated by the company Altron Nexus to the Covid-19 disaster team (Tshungu 2020). The fact that many other donors have, since then felt duty-bound to supply some of the necessary equipment for fighting the coronavirus is a clear sign that there is a need for such assistance, particularly in the light of the prevailing inequalities. The article ‘Big relief for squatters’, which focuses on the water tankers supplying the informal settlements around the Vaal area, indicates how the government has been compelled by the coronavirus no longer just to speak about the need to service its people, but also to act swiftly on their behalf (Jimta 2020:4). Although the pandemic is frightening in the implications that it has for all South Africans, it has helped some informal settlements in the country access the resources that they had, previously, been unable to secure for themselves.

Whether keeping a family of eight confined to a one-roomed shack for 21 days can be seen as a viable proposition is highly debatable. Mgidi (2020:4) exposes how some of the rules that are used to govern the more affluent areas cannot be imposed on those living in overcrowded squatter camps, where millions of African South Africans live. In the above-mentioned report, the residents of Makause were indicated as retaliating to the imposition of the lockdown restrictions on them by asserting that the lockdown was for the middle and upper classes, whereas they had to share mobile toilets and streets with only a single water tap. A female resident, Thabisa Majeke, on being interviewed about the effects of the coronavirus on the local community, stated: ‘No one has visited us since the lockdown started to check if [we] were even following the rules. We are suffering and no one cares’. Another example of the inequalities present in the current pandemic-afflicted nation can be seen in the mass removals of people from their informal settlements, because of the virus. Madisa (2020:2) reports on the mass relocations that have taken place, are which are likely to see the government building many temporary houses in future, so as to enable the poor to escape having to live in congested shantytowns. At the time of the current study, six informal settlements around Atteridgeville, Mamelodi, Alexandra and Diepsloot were set to benefit from

the presence of the virus in their midst by way of their planned removal over the following few weeks. Most of the marginalised were, undoubtedly, going to have their needs attended to for the first time since they voted for the implementation of a democratic system of governance in 1994, due to the presence of the coronavirus. Thembi Nkadimeng, the president of the SA Local Government Association and the Mayor of Polokwane, argues:

Who wants to be called a homeless child on African soil? It is only now that, as municipalities, we have facilities to deal with [the] homeless. Why have [i.e. has] this not been happening before? The coronavirus disaster has given us this silver lining, so we now say that, as municipalities, it is best for us to care for such people. We are now placing them temporarily in halls (Stone 2020:4).

Restricting taxi operations in South Africa, in which country most commuters do not own a vehicle, was a short-sighted decision that did not consider those who were in the process of decolonisation. For instance, Khayelitsha residents were shown as being cramped into a very small space that prevented compliance with the distancing laws, with them toyi-toyiing for the right to occupy a piece of land on which the government was prepared to allow only 49 families to erect their makeshift homes (Morning Live, 1 May 2020). In the same area, emergency medical service (EMS) workers were reported as striking, in response to their lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), impeding health service delivery in the area (SABC News, 3 May 2020). The above-mentioned actions demonstrate how the measures that were put in place to counteract the spread of the coronavirus infection have encountered multiple inequality-related challenges, with most of the poor and displaced having felt justified in resisting any attempt to enforce the lockdown rules on them. Naki (2020:3) enunciates the possibility of corruption, rather than hunger and the spread of the coronavirus, as being likely to rouse civil unrest among the masses in South Africa. Such a response to elected governance has resulted from the perception that some political leaders are benefiting themselves and their own families at the expense of the poor, even at such a time of national crisis.

With the pandemic only starting to show its full implications on the international front, Professors Jean-Paul Mira and Camille Locht appeared on French television, suggesting that trial vaccines should be tested on those based in Africa (Moyo 2020). Dr Mira was quoted as saying: ‘If I can be provocative, shouldn’t we be doing this study in Africa, where there are no masks, no

treatments, no resuscitation? A bit like as it is done elsewhere for some studies on Aids. In prostitutes, we try things because we know that they are highly exposed, and that they do not protect themselves'. Egregiously enough, Loch agreed with Mira's proposition.

Allegiance to those on the African continent is shown in the response of the former Chelsea soccer star, Didier Drogba, to the above-mentioned opinions, with him tweeting: 'It is inconceivable that we continue to accept this. Africa is not a laboratory'. Drogba's view should be seen against the background, and within the context of, France being a former coloniser of many African countries (SL International 2020). According to Moyo (2020), Drogba's sentiments were supported by other African footballers, including Samuel Eto (Cameroon) and Demba Ba, who went on to argue: 'Welcome to the west, where white people believe themselves to be so superior that racism and debility become commonplace. Time to rise'. Such inequality between Africa and the West is what decolonialists aim to overcome in their decolonisation efforts. The current author wishes to urge that the doctors based on the African continent should seek to counter the effects of the coronavirus on their own, rather than waiting for French intervention. Reuters (2020) has, since the broadcasting of Dr Mira's views on the use of African nations for medical trials, apologised for his remarks, in response to the resultant outcry, as well as to threats of litigation against him. Even post Mira's apology, the issue of Africa being a clinical testing ground remains a contentious issue, especially in the light of the statistics showing that more deaths related to the coronavirus have taken place in Europe and in the United States of America (USA) than in Africa. The medical trials should, more logically, have been first implemented where the coronavirus infection rate was highest. Why Africa should have been considered suitable as the first testing site, when the continent's death rates from the coronavirus have tended to be far lower than elsewhere, especially in some European countries and the USA, is a highly debatable matter.

Though it is not the intention of the current study to discuss the political details surrounding the behaviour of Minister Stella Ndaweni-Abrahams, which was reported on in the news for some time, it is important to indicate how South Africans are still affected by, and what they are still feeling about, the differences that are so clearly made manifest in the everyday lifestyle of parliamentarians and ordinary citizens. The President's reaction to the Minister's lunching with a friend in Fourways, north of Johannesburg, in clear defiance of his lockdown rules, has become a much-disputed issue (Mtshali 2020a:1). The cry 'Give Stella her marching orders!', which was vociferously

voiced by some opposition political parties, as well as by some members of the public, showed exactly how people felt about her two months' suspension from office, which occurred at a time when other citizens of the country were being arrested and charged with similar offences (Molobi 2020:1). Mtshali (2020a:1) also, ironically, argued that the Minister was part of President Ramaphosa's Covid-19 response team in the Cabinet, meaning that (at least some of) those in power did not see her as blameworthy.

The call for leadership by example, in terms of following the rules that leaders themselves make, still clearly remains to be heard in certain quarters. For the author, it is a question of inequality if those who are in a position of leadership, and who, indeed, make the rules governing a society are found to act in contravention of such rules; instead, those acting in such a way deserve to be more harshly sentenced than are the ordinary citizens when perpetrating such deeds. The above reminds the current author of George Orwell's allegorical novella entitled *Animal Farm*, in which the pigs, who have assumed rule over the ill-ruled Manor Farm, on finding themselves having broken their own rules, change their founding rule, 'All animals are equal', to 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others[own italics]'. The very same pigs alter another of their rules, 'No animal shall sleep in bed', by adding 'with sheets', thus justifying their penchant for luxurious living in the farmhouse, while all the other animals are relegated to the farmyard (Orwell 1945). In contrast to Minister Ndaweni-Abrahams' actions, Ngubane (2020:10) explains the humiliation experienced by a KwaZulu-Natal couple on their wedding day for daring to contravene the very same rules, while the aforesaid Minister received only slight chastisement for not abiding by the officially declared mandate. It should be noted, however, that a court case has since been opened against her by the EFF for her breaching of national lockdown regulations (Mtshali 2020b:2).

Another point of controversy has to do with the self-employed, like traders. The U-turn that the government felt obliged to take to authorise their selling their wares openly in the street during the lockdown has raised many concerns. According to Mbolekwa (2020), on 6 April 2020 alone 766 traders in Johannesburg received permits to vend their goods in public, meaning that those concerned could immediately return to the streets and continue to sell their products, despite the lockdown. In addition, on television, on the same day, scores of people could be seen standing in queues to obtain their permits while ignoring the need to leave the mandated one-meter space between them. In short, they were seen touching, rubbing against and pushing each other, as

if no social distancing rule had been issued. In reality, however, being allowed to operate from 08h00 to 17h00 daily helped the vendors relatively little, as their trade depended on the public, who were in lockdown at the time, to purchase their wares. Secondly, by enforcing the need for street vendors to obtain permits, and, hence, to become subject to unprecedented control, the way has been opened up for curtailing their freedom in future. Joffe's (2020:12) illustrated report, showing men crowding around a bakkie, desperate for work, is a true reflection of what was being experienced, as part of the daily routine, in the vicinity of big shops, malls and warehouses at the time. Such individuals have to survive on what they are hired to do on a daily basis, meaning that one day spent without being assigned a paid piece job to do implies that they, and their families, have no food for the rest of the day. The plight of people like this during a 21-day lockdown is inconceivable for many.

4. Decolonising Controversies around the Lockdown, and Securing a Way of Reducing the Spread of the Coronavirus

For a developing country like South Africa, a shutdown or lockdown has, inevitably, meant that an extensive amount of damage has been done to the nation's economy. However, since lives had to be saved, imposing a lockdown was the only choice for the decision-makers to take, despite the economy suffering as a result. The coming into force of the lockdown has meant that migrant workers could not traverse the provinces so as to be with their families during the crisis, which has had serious implications for many an African marriage, which tends to survive on the basis of having the chief male figure working at some distance from his own home. The meaning of the restriction of movement was very clear, in that few marriages would be likely to survive the extramarital relationships entered into during the lockdown, when the strict travel bans were lifted and the migrant workers could resume visiting their families in their ancestral provinces. To ensure that long-term relationships were treated with all due seriousness even during the lockdown, the SABCNEWS (03 May 2020) indicated that the first aircraft to Brazil would be used to repatriate the South African citizens who were stranded in that country. Ironically, the above situation meant that South Africa's citizens who were abroad at the time of the lockdown were treated with greater consideration than were those who lived locally, who were unable to travel interprovincially to be with their families who lived at a distance from their workplace. The stress of

being away from one's family for a long period was already fuelled by the uncertainty regarding whether having a low-paying job would be sufficient after the lockdown, when the bills (such as those for rent) incurred during the lockdown would become payable once more. To endure such a life is extremely difficult for a black migrant worker at the best of times, but it is so much worse under the present conditions.

Noma Bolani (2020) discusses how the German people living in South Africa were repatriated at the start of the lockdown. However, even if it means death for those concerned, the culture of connecting with one's home during difficult times is a truly African phenomenon. Most African people wish to be repatriated and buried in their own home villages and towns. When Saddam Hussein was about to be executed, he returned to his home town, Tikrit. The same was done by the slain Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, who returned home prior to his own execution. Restricting mobility under the pretext of fighting the pandemic, according to Boaventura, should not jeopardise the basic human rights that are enshrined in the institutions of democratic governance. In the programme *Africa wa vulavula* (meaning 'Africa speaks'), Professor Themba Sono argues that African people do not tend to act for themselves, although they might have the resources to do so, because they often depend on the West to act on their behalf. Such was the response that was publicly voiced to the question regarding the French doctors who indicated that they wanted to test their trial medication for coronavirus on those living in Africa (SABC 2020). The eNCA reported that President Ramaphosa declared the Ranch Hotel outside Polokwane in Limpopo a green zone for quarantined South African citizens who were repatriated from China when the lockdown first started (eNCA 2020b). The declaration was made despite the recent remarks of a television presenter that Limpopo was 'higher grade' in witchcraft than were the other provinces. According to Sinhle Mavuso (2020), the rules, as stated by the President, were the following:

The categories of people who will be exempted from this lockdown are the following: health workers in the public and private sectors, emergency personnel, those in security services – such as the police, traffic officers, military medical personnel, soldiers – and other persons necessary for our response to the pandemic

The above-mentioned rules were set for all South Africans, regardless of their background or educational standard. The President is clearly using them not to

punish the citizens of the country, but to curb the spread of the coronavirus as soon as possible. Every citizen, therefore, has been tasked with the responsibility of abiding by, and supporting, the overall national vision that is aimed at securing the safety of all living in the country. In addition, the President's speech, delivered on the eve of Good Friday, indicated that South Africa will not be the same again after the coronavirus disaster is over. The specific changes and differences involved were not mentioned, but the behaviour of all South Africans towards one another is likely to have changed for good (eNCA, 9 April 2020).

Dis-Chem, one of the biggest pharmaceutical retailers in South Africa, which vowed to assist with obtaining hand sanitisers, gloves and other PPE was, at the time of the current report, failing to pay its rent in malls and other buildings (Wilson 2020:11). With the lockdown affecting such a large pharmacy chain to the extent that its chief executives, Ivan Saltzman and Estienne De Klerk, being compelled to negotiate for lower rentals for the duration of the lockdown, the challenge is clearly daunting. Besides the above, there is much speculation that many jobs might be lost after the lockdown.

Just as most countries in the world have begun to enjoy and feel some kind of freedom from colonialism and other kinds of inequality, it looks as though the implications of the coronavirus might be used to revive the worst of their past. At such a critical time, black African people living in Guangzhou in China were found to be subject to racial discrimination (Morning Live, SABC 2, 15 April 2020). This an instance of which was a note posted in a local McDonalds outlet, stating: 'From now onwards, we have been informed that blacks are not allowed to enter the restaurant'. According to Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (Cheng *et al.* 2022), 'Guangzhou had confirmed 114 imported coronavirus cases as of Thursday, 16 of which were Africans. This has led to Africans becoming targets of racism in China. Several Africans also claimed that they have been forcibly evicted from their homes and turned away by hotels'.

Such discrimination was found to occur at a time when China was openly accusing the USA of racism (Hindu Janajagruti Samiti 2020). Although Monyae (2020) had received a video clip from one of his closest friends in China, asking that South Africa and the rest of Africa should publicly comment on the alleged racism taking place in Guangzhou, the journalist played down the issue by providing several reasons for the established relationship between China and South Africa being devoid of discrimination. If the racism that appears to have been present in the above-mentioned situation is true, however, it is a matter of concern that, instead of the nations involved uniting against the

global pandemic, there seem to be those who are continuing to embrace the egregiously evil practice of racism. If African people wish to silence their compatriots in China, the matter is serious enough to raise considerable debate.

Just as the lockdown has been aimed at helping people, it has also become an opportunity for the perpetration of theft. Lourie (2020:1), among many others, reports on the theft of food parcels, donated by willing helpers, being stolen even by government officials. Officials and politicians have been accused of using the lockdown as an opportunity for stealing food parcels, with some being said to be using food to campaign for their own political parties. True African hospitality militates against trying to gain something in return for what is meant to be freely given. In addition, Moagi (2020:40) indicates that the residents of Booyens' informal settlements clashed with the police while they were protesting the lack of delivery of promised food parcels.

When Freedom Day occurred in the middle of the lockdown, some officials, who were supposed to be celebrating the day in isolation, were, instead, being summoned to their local magistrates' court for breaking the same rules of lockdown that they were supposed to be embracing and protecting as leaders of the nation, thus indicating their failure to lead by example. Two reports evidencing such misbehaviour on the part of government officials were printed in *The Citizen* on 28 April 2020, under the headings 'Mayor in party probe' and 'ANC Limpopo officials ignore lockdown' (Matlala 2020:7). The actions identified have helped to undermine the spirit of solidarity and ubuntu that should be especially visible during trying times.

In Cape Town, the arrival of Cuban doctors to help with fighting the pandemic was faced with mixed feelings from the trade unions in the Cape, which alleged that the government was betraying its own unemployed doctors by employing outsiders who would charge even more for their services than the locals would have done (Naki 2020:4). The South African Medical Association was found to take an extremely critical stance in defence of the local unemployed fraternity of medical practitioners (Hoeane 2020:12). The South African government would have avoided such a public outcry if they had, first, consulted with the relevant stakeholders about the situation, alerting them to the importation of Cuban doctors into the country. The citizens of South Africa should accept their responsibility to protect their democracy and freedom of opinion in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. In light of the claim that out-of-work South African doctors were not employed to handle the coronavirus pandemic, the government needed to justify its stance in the above regard, seeing that the African leadership was expected to consult with the people to

reach agreement on how to handle the so-called ‘disaster’. Such a *modus operandi* explains why, in the case of South Africa’s traditional councils, meetings tend to last for a long time, because a suggestion cannot be accepted as fitting for implementation until a consensus is reached on the issue at hand.

Few people would like to hold the position held by the ministers of education, in particular not that of the Minister of Basic Education, especially after Minister Angie Motshekga started a campaign to reopen primary schools. Her announcement of 1 June as being the first day for schools to reopen was not only received with mixed feelings by the parents and school governing bodies (SGBs) concerned, but it also served to split the opinion of parents and trade unions. The remaining inequalities that still exist between the former Model C, or well-to-do schools and the very poor schools that cannot afford to have even running water are the source of much conflict and debate. In relation to such dissension, Sobuwa (2020:7), supported by Masweneng (2020:7), contends: ‘Meanwhile the Congress of South Africa Students (COSAS) is calling on parliament and provincial legislature members to open the same time as schools, saying that if it is safe for pupils to return to schools it should also be safe for lawmakers to go back to work’. The unions have started to threaten to take Minister Angie Motshekga to court if the matter is not resolved before opening day. Such are the issues with which the average citizen is concerned, rather than with contending against the root causes of colonisation and racism.

The issue of the reopening of the schools is also a serious point of contestation, due to the inequalities with which the situation is riddled. Besides the fact that most South African schools are overcrowded and have very limited facilities, to make the matter worse, several schools, of which many are in the poor black areas, have been burned down during the lockdown. The above means, inevitably, that the pre-existing overcrowding will be exacerbated when the lockdown ends, at the very time when the government wants the schools to reopen. Strong signs indicate that the unions and the government might come to loggerheads over the situation, since questions relating to the regulating of lockdown conditions require answering before the reopening of the schools takes place. The Minister of Higher Education in South Africa, Minister Blade Nzimande, wants educational institutions to reopen as a way of salvaging what remains of the 2020 academic year, while the trade unions, parents and SGBs are demanding to know that the safety of their children and teachers will be safeguarded. Whether the schools will, indeed, reopen on 1 June, as has been announced by the Minister, may be contested at court by the

trade unions and by some parent-teacher representatives. The reality is that, in terms of public health requirements, some schools might be able to afford to reopen, whereas others, in the poor communities, might not. For instance, some schools are able to afford to have a continuous supply of running water, along with having sufficient financial capital to make hand sanitiser available for all the educators and learners, while some schools are unable to have any additional outlay to that which they had prior to the onset of the coronavirus crisis.

As much as the lockdown has exposed the inequalities that are so rampant in South Africa, the government, which has been forced to supply food to the locked-down poor, has seen some of its officers being accused as thieves who have stolen from the poor. The proverbial saying, ‘One man’s death is another man’s survival’, has resonance in the current situation, in terms of the fact that the banks have been awarded a R200 billion guarantee by the government to help small businesses that have collapsed as a result of the depredations caused by COVID-19 (Ciaran 2022:1). The result is that the banks stand to benefit from the situation, while small business will have to rely on both short- and long-term loans for their survival.

Recently, the President and a governmental minister, Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, made contradictory statements that added much confusion to the situation regarding the banning of tobacco. Just two days after the President declared the lifting of the ban on tobacco, Minister Dlamini-Zuma broadcast, on exactly the same television channel, the message that the ban on tobacco was to continue (Stone 2020:1–2). The resultant battle, which was of both an economic and a political nature, has affected those whose compliance with the regulations could be compromised thereby. The country’s largest cigarette manufacturer (British American Tobacco) vowed to open a court case against Minister Dlamini-Zuma if she did not reverse her decision before 4 May 2020. Besides the Minister’s reversal of the President’s statement raising issues with her own supporters, she was noted to be speaking on behalf of the same government that was headed by the President concerned (Mthomboti 2020:17).

The ensuing arguments politicised the issue still further, since the African National Congress Women’s League (ANCWL) had already indicated their readiness to support Minister Dlamini-Zuma, with the spokeswoman of the League accusing those whom she said were insulting the Minister of being racists and of being misogynistic (Khambule & Medupe 2020:2). The obvious dilemma has raised doubts as to whether the Minister and the President consulted with each other before presenting their message to the public via the

mass media. Whether such a situation manifested political jockeying for power, or the intentional undermining of the President, can be seen in the actual effect that the contradictory statements have had on the functioning of the nation as a whole. Matlala (2020:2) reveals how white-owned companies in South Africa have benefited from the presence of the coronavirus in the country. The South African United Business Confederation has already met with National Treasury Director-General Dondo Mogajane over their sharp criticism of the decisions made regarding the selection of PPE, which have seemed to be biased and to have excluded black business in the awarding of the relevant contracts.

5. The Impact of the Lockdon on African Decolonisation

Poloko Tau (2020:9) indicates how the presence of the coronavirus has helped some drug addicts, through the opening of a rehabilitation centre in Mahikeng. An addict was quoted as saying: ‘We were very bad when we walked in here [a] few weeks ago – dirty and probably smelling from that [i.e. the drugs] – but look at us now. We are not only doing well in terms of shedding the habit and addiction, but we feel like better people already, and [we] can’t wait to go out there and [to] be purposeful and strive to make it in life’. The opportunity to enter a rehabilitation centre, into which they were forced, due to the lockdown, not only saved them from the virus, but also from their drug addiction as well. How many support the sentiment expressed by Vicky Abraham (2020:4) when saying that Covid-19 had strengthened her faith is debatable. Although Pastor and Honourable Minister Meshoe supported such a conclusion, the same cannot be said for all those whose jobs have been impacted on by the virus (Tau 2020). An intense faith would be required to make a similar assertion with sincerity, while many believers have been very unsure about what the future holds for them after the lockdown has ended. Relatively few car accidents have been reported during the lockdown, because motorists have not generally been on the roads, meaning that many a life has, hypothetically speaking, been saved from a car accident. According to the research statistics mentioned by Shaun Smillie (2020:5), the rate of violent crime has decreased, with some having attributed such a decrease to the lockdown, though some have argued for the ban on alcohol as having been the cause. By May 2019, 1500 murderers had already been forcibly detained by the police, while in 2020 only 432 murders have been recorded over the same time period.

An extremely painful funeral situation that occurred in a rural village outside Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape was broadcast on the SABC 2

Morning Live programme on 4 April 2020. The funeral was shown to be poorly attended, which was a serious concern for the family and relatives concerned. The interviewee, being the undertaker concerned, indicated that a problem that they faced was securing only 50 attendees, which was the prescribed limit under lockdown rules. Some of those who had wished to attend the ceremony had requested that the funeral parlour write letters to the authorities asking them for permission to attend the event and to bury their loved one. One female relative, who was excluded from attending the event due to the restriction on numbers, mourned the fact that the person to be buried was her aunt, for whom she was not allowed to be present at her final send-off. Short video clips of the funeral showed the poor attendance allowed, and how hurt the family members were because of some relatives having had to be refused permission to attend the funeral. Prior to the lockdown, the suspension of all other events at the time of a family funeral, as mentioned by Baloyi (2014:2), used to ensure that everyone who wanted to could attend the funeral at hand. The number of people attending a funeral or celebration then went uncounted. Therefore, the need to count the number of funeral attendees, which has come about with the lockdown restrictions, directly conflicts with the standard African tradition. Msomi (2008:219) calls such a reversal of traditional African communalism a form of 'rugged individualism' that is foreign to African people.

The African kind of funeral has been compromised by the demands made on African people by the measures imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Moagi (2020:1) argues that, during the coronavirus-caused lockdown, funeral costs have been cut, since the number of attendees per funerals has been reduced to 50 or less. Although the author argues that families no longer incur debt when burying their relatives, the issue of the African spirit of ubuntu has clearly come under attack. The way in which the deceased have been buried during the pandemic has violated the norm of true African funerals, as is shown by Baloyi (2014), who clearly indicates how Africans tend to use the funerals of their loved ones as a point of reunion and coming together, regardless of the cost and length of the journeys that are required to be undertaken by the attendees concerned. A death and funeral, in the African context, are a community affair. The late African writer, John Mbiti (1991:120), was quoted as saying: 'The corpse is kept frozen in the hospital or mortuary for several days, while funeral preparations are being made and relatives living far away are awaited'. In every decision-making venture, African people tend to assert their belief in consulting each other, until there is consensus in a particular case. The decisions made regarding the dates and rites

of funerals are no exception to the above, with the presence of every family member being awaited at the funeral site, no matter how far they have to come to attend the ceremony. Some, indeed, believe that they will be haunted by the spirits of their loved ones if they fail to attend their funeral (Ledubuko 2020:6). Regarding the issue of relationships and hospitality, the Munghana Lonene presenter, Maningi wa Ntamu, indicated that a man arrested for driving on the N1 highway between Johannesburg and Pretoria during lockdown indicated that he had felt compelled to visit his girlfriend after nine days of not seeing her. Another man was arrested on the N4 between Pretoria and Mpumalanga, while attempting to smuggle his girlfriend in his car boot (Head 2020).

African hospitality has been deeply affected by the depredations caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The inability to convey at least four people in a car, under lockdown restrictions, has meant that many relatives have been left stranded when an individual has been forced to drive their car in the same direction as others were hoping to go without taking them along too. Gradually, the practice of African hospitality has been whittled away from African people, leaving them without an identity. If other countries, like Germany, have been able to repatriate their citizens from South Africa, but African people have remained silent regarding the repatriation of their citizens who have been under alleged racial attack in China, the proof of negative self-thinking can be seen to demand much attention from those imbued with the spirit of deconstructivism. The current author strongly agrees with Julius Mutugi Gathogo (2006) on the importance of inculcating an ethos of African hospitality, according to which, for instance, the children belonging to the local community form a vital aspect of life in Africa in general. Opoku (2009:8), similarly, argues that, when a thorn penetrates the toe, the whole body bends down to the toe to pull the thorn out. The arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa has led to the imposition of lockdown measures, including the distancing of people from one another, which has clearly affected the kind of African hospitality that most African people would have liked to see being strengthened during the call made for decolonisation.

For the purpose of the current study, the present researcher selected a few African, particularly Xitsonga, idioms or sayings that have been contradicted by the actions performed and the measures taken to fight the coronavirus pandemic. The conclusions drawn are not intended to defy or undermine the measures concerned, but to indicate how rediscovering and redefining the nature of South Africans has been affected by them.

Regarding the traditional expression, *Rintiho rin'we ari nusi hove*

(literally meaning ‘a single finger cannot pick up a single mealie grain’), demanding work cannot be achieved by only one individual working alone. According to the spirit of ubuntu, African people tend to share all their activities with others, ranging from working to eating together (Junod 1990:212). Another idiom supporting the same notion goes: ‘Rintiho rin’we ari dlayi nhwala’, meaning that a single finger does not kill a louse (Junod 1990:94). For instance, digging a grave for the deceased requires the cooperation of all the men in the village concerned. The saying clearly shows how African people need one another on a daily basis. Being open and responsive to one another’s needs means that African people can uplift each other mentally, spiritually, psychologically and emotionally, as well as in sundry other ways. Nowadays, even the elderly, who used to be able to depend on their grandchildren, as well as on their neighbours, for assistance, are often neglected in their old age. The empowering African custom of working and consulting together before any activity can take place has been badly impacted on by the coronavirus pandemic, while attention has been diverted to the issue of the ban on tobacco, as debated between the President and the minister concerned. The form of isolation that the lockdown has imposed on African people will not yield the desired goal of decolonising the African mind from the ethos of Western individualism.

The meaning of the expression *vana va munhu va tsemelana nhloko ya njiya* is that the children of one man can split the head of a locust between themselves (Junod 1990:91). The idea of street children was not conceived of in the original African outlook on life, because, in Africa, it has long been accepted that it takes a village to raise a child. The lockdown regulations have destroyed the spirit of sharing, in terms of which a family would have been sustained by the neighbourhood. Instead, those without food now have to wait for handouts from donors, who often forget them and who tend to give only to their relatives and political allies. The source of donations is questionable when one’s own neighbours are forbidden to offer one the simplest meal. Stealing from the poor also does not indicate the presence of the African spirit of sharing.

A key African characteristic involves sharing the joys and sorrows of life with one’s fellow beings, which is an element that is truly embedded in the spirit of ubuntu. The well-known idiom that has been popularised by popular African writers like John Mbiti and Desmond Tutu states: ‘I am because we are’. The saying is applicable to the majority, if not to all, of the African tribes, who have had such an identity eroded away through colonisation and other

Western-sourced inequalities. Conceptualising the spirit of caring for one another during times when people are barred from approaching each other is difficult for most African people, let alone for those who were employed in Gauteng province at the start of the lockdown, and who have been barred from travelling cross-country to their ancestral homes, where the other members of their family are based. To the current author, the coronavirus pandemic has started exactly where colonisation has left off, in helping to ensure that African people lose their sense of belonging to one another.

The concept of unnumbered crowds attending a funeral ceremony is biblical, as can be seen in the example of the funeral of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus. According to the Bible in John 11:19: ‘... many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother’. The presence of multiple people at the funeral is also confirmed by the mentioning of ‘people’ (which is translated as ‘crowds’ in some versions of the Gospels) in John 11:42.

Geoff Hughes (2020:12), rather than just equating the present earthly challenge with the end of times, as some apocalyptic preachers are currently doing, argues that, despite the course of biblical history having been beset by many different massacres, genocides, wars and other calamities, people have still survived. Such a theological standpoint has been found to be relevant and contextual to the contemporary world and its realities. Likewise, a father of black theology, James Cone (1975) asserts, in accordance with the Bible, that God is always on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Thus, it follows that, if the coronavirus is the oppressor, then God is on the side of the oppressed. The oppressiveness of the virus has been evidenced by the fact that it has managed to force South Africans to celebrate Freedom Day behind closed doors. Too much fear has already been instilled in the people since the lockdown, which calls for the application of a form of liberation theology that should assist in healing the nation as a whole. Even after the lockdown has ended, there will still be those who are too afraid to return to their own churches to worship.

3. Conclusion

As much as it is a commendable reality that the lockdown has played an important role in slowing down the spread of the coronavirus in South Africa, it is equally true that the very same measures have brought about extensive controversy. The expectations that have come with the measures imposed have

exposed the existing inequalities that have been voiced by many for over a quarter of a century, since the start of the period of democratic governance. Some provinces, like Limpopo, have struggled even to obtain a regular supply of drinking water, with the injunction to wash one's hands regularly sounding an ironical note. Such inequalities are the very issues that those bent on decolonialism have been trying to address in attempting to assist the most marginalised of people. However wise distancing, as a preventative measure, has been, serving, as it has, as a sound defence against the spread of the coronavirus, the African poor, with their own spirit of ubuntu, which has inspired them to assist, and to share in the joys and sorrows of life with, one another, particularly in the funeral context, have been left stranded. The intention to be one another's keeper, and to show hospitality towards each other, has been compromised. Instead of communal life, the spirit of individualism, which has already destroyed the identity of some African people, has been allowed to run rampant over the spirit of the downtrodden and the oppressed.

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