The Covid-19 Effect in Cameroon: Between the Deconstruction of Social Relations and the Emergence of New Relational Habits

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ABSTRACT

Considered the third world war, the Covid-19 pandemic affects all regions and cities of the world, sowing terror and desolation in its path. The objective of this article is to analyze the impacts of this pandemic on social relations in Cameroon. Socio-historical approaches have been used to understand this phenomenon. Based on in-depth field surveys, this study shows that the methods used to raise public awareness of the harmful effects of this pandemic, in particular through communication (in the streets, in schools, at university, on the market, on television, etc.), the uproar around Covid-19 in Cameroon has not only raised awareness among the population; it also traumatized them, thus creating panic, shame, fear, all crowned with a deconstruction of the relationships between each other. Doomed to failure, the response against the “indisputable destroyer” has social consequences, among which figure prominently: stigmatization, abstention from screening tests for some, refusal to seek treatment for others, and the different representations of Covid-19 and also of people carrying the virus.

Keywords: Construction, Covid-19, Deconstruction, Fight, Social Psychosis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 is perceived today as a Third World War. It sows terror and fear as it passes. This is a considerable demographic catastrophe, comparable to or even greater than the demographic effects of the worst epidemics (plagues in the 14th century, tuberculosis in the 19th century, influenza or Spanish flu in the 20th century, HIV/AIDS in the 21st century). This pandemic, whose impact is considerable, even measurable, on social relations, thus degenerating a societal deconstruction, is the subject of this analysis. Such deconstruction is due to the new provisions of the way of acting, doing, and feeling taken by the government in order to “block the road to the coronavirus”. However, this system seems to create within society a new type of interaction, that is to say, relations which tend to take place according to the age group, each one flourishes more with his or her age ego. This article is the place of the evaluation of the impacts of the different representations given to Covid-19 by Cameroonians on the social level.

To be more precise, the field of knowledge specific to this article can be delimited by situating it at the crossroads of two major concerns. The first concerns the past/present relationships that govern the current world shaped by the coronavirus effect. The second concerns the relationships between individuals, focusing particularly on actions, behaviors, habits, etc.

II. HISTORY OF COVID-19 IN CAMEROON

Submit At the dawn of the year 2020, the coronavirus surprised the world (Nagel, 2020) and dragged the whole earth into a terrible situation (Adhikari et al., 2020). With the epicenter of the city of Wuhan in China (Chapman & Miller, 2020), the coronavirus quickly spread across the world, affecting the most remote places on the planet (Harapan et al., 2020). Even the Amazon rainforest and some African villages have not been spared (Sohel et al., 2021). Until now, the Coronavirus pandemic is still lingering, bringing terror...
and destruction to daily life all over the world. It has had an adverse effect on human health and an increase in morbidity and mortality all over the world, especially in less developed countries where access to medical facilities and medicines is insufficient. Meanwhile, several countries have adopted strong health policies and mobilized their resources to deal with the reality of this global health crisis based on their past experiences. Without proper treatment and vaccines, most governments have imposed lockdowns (staying at home) to prevent the spread of the virus. Lockdown is considered an effective measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus around the world (Barkur et al., 2020). Many countries have adopted some degree of containment to avoid the potential transmission of the virus. Hence, along with the health issues, it has led to a crisis of major demands including food, goods, and services such as job loss, economic and monetary loss, food insecurity, starvation, social conflict, and death. This image is especially even more deadly in developing countries like Cameroon, where economic recovery will be gradual.

The first case of coronavirus was confirmed in Cameroon on March 6, 2020, and it quickly spread throughout the country. At that time, the government of Cameroon declared lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 17 (Services du Premier Ministre, 2020), and spread over a few months in different time slots. After which the limited movement of individuals was allowed. Yaoundé, Douala, and neighboring towns recorded the highest number of coronavirus cases and this continued to grow during the first week of July, for this reason, localized closures were reinstated in most infected areas. As a result, this pandemic has caused untold deprivation to Cameroonian citizens. Most low- and middle-income households faced massive complications due to loss of life, job, and income (Ndour, 2020).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted among 652 people in two major cities in Cameroon (Ngaoundéré & Yaoundé). Thus, to achieve this, a socio-historical approach was adopted. The purpose of this approach is to highlight and support the fact that this reflection is situated between sociology and history. Indeed, from this methodology emerges a form of interdisciplinarity associating sociology and history. It is for this reason that this socio-historical study is based on a combination of the fundamental principles of the two disciplines. It takes up the historian's approach, based on an in-depth analysis of the archives, on a comprehensive approach emphasizing the importance of context in understanding the past. Added to this approach is that of the sociologist who attaches an interest to the study of social ties and his concern for the construction of the object of research at odds with common sense.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Social Representation of the Coronavirus in Cameroon

The fight against the most famous and devastating pandemic of the century in the whole world does not concern only one social stratum but society as a whole. Covid-19 is and remains a social fact but also and above all a "total social fact" although being a public health problem, its difficult but also almost impossible extermination for the moment modifies more or less the values of human societies, and plunges them back into cultural imitation.

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of physical, moral, social and psychological well-being, not simply the absence of disease or infirmity”. This definition has the merit of presenting health as being important. It is generally, according to popular and ethnological considerations, pathologies caused by an evil act of the wicked with the aim of harming him. Along the same lines, Marc Augé observes that:

It is the paradox of illness that it is both the most individual and the most social of things, each of us experiences it in our body and sometimes dies from it; to feel it within him threatening and growing an individual can feel cut off from all the others, from all that made up his social life; at the same time, everything about it is social, not only because a certain number of institutions take charge of it at the different phases of its evolution, but because the thought patterns that allow it to be recognized, identified and to treat are eminently social: to think of one's illness is already to refer to others (Augé & Herzlich, 1984, p.36).

Although Africans, in general, have their representation of different diseases, the hype around Covid-19 has never ceased to create fear, fear, and disappointment. The diagram below represents the percentage of people vulnerable to the disease during field surveys.
It appears from this diagram that more than 60% of Cameroonians during this study are haunted by the fear of being affected by this virus everywhere in the world. One of the interviewees even confessed during the interviews in Yaoundé (the political capital of Cameroon) that “fear is what allows us to defend ourselves (…) it forces us to overcome our weakness and our fragility”. That being said, evil hurts, it scares us, we don't want to know that we are sick, and we don't want others to know that we are carrying the virus. This justifies at the very least the strong abstention from the screening test in this city, people go to the hospital in small numbers, and the very people who are declared carriers of the virus are not followed due to shame and fear of illness, hence the exponential growth in high rates of people troubled by fear.

B. The Social Consequences of the Coronavirus in Cameroon

In post and peri-Covid-19 society, Cameroonians experience the effects of the pandemic very early on, both in terms of the “structured structure” (society values) and on many “structuring structures” elements (functioning of the society). We understand why the UNDP in its recent statement on the health situation says “covid-19 is much more than a health crisis. By putting pressure on each of the countries it affects, the pandemic has the potential to create devastating social, economic, and political crises that will leave deep scars. To be more precise, the results of the total or partial transformation of post and peri-pandemic society clearly reveal considerable upheavals in the behavior of individuals. This challenges us to consider the imitativeness of Cameroonians in the response against the “undeniable devastating”. It has been observed on the ground that Cameroonians, like most Africans, have Westerners as their ideal model in the management of the pandemic, which is why immediately after the entry into the confinement of certain States of Western Europe, the State of Cameroon also declared containment, the same scenario during deconfinement; yet the socio-anthropological realities of these two entities are almost contradictory. Cameroon has its ethnomethods such as the consultation of traditional healers where we receive the barks and coctions that must be taken into account to fight effectively against this pandemic of the century. But those who govern act all the same under the impulse of a world that “imposes its presence with its urgencies, its things to do or to say, its things made to be said, which directly command gestures or words without ever unfolding like a show” (Bourdieu, 1992).
Indeed, the quantitative change observed in our current societies is accompanied by a qualitative change in terms of the reduction in the size of the social circle. At least that is what one of the respondents from Ngaoundéré, in the Adamaoua region of Cameroon recounted. According to him:

In Cameroon in particular, our culture is more one of proximity. It is important to greet by shaking hands except for an elder; in fact, the impossibility of performing this gesture leaves us speechless (...) and gives rise to a form of aggressiveness. If we don't touch you, we implicitly say “I'm dangerous” or “I'm afraid of you” (Interview with a resident of Ngaounderé, October 2020).

This testimony shows the impacts of Covid-19 on social relations in this part of the country. According to the present study, 81.89% find themselves in a situation of cultural deviance; Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 illustrate this fact.

Professor Vincent Yzerbyt declares “the human being is intrinsically social”. This says that the handshake anchored in our daily lives is not doomed to disappear from our societies. He concludes in these terms “we need others, to be in contact with them. On a virtual level, at a distance on the one hand. This is why after the deconfinement and therefore in a few months, there is no doubt that we will find habits that are more traditional and punctuate the life of Man. This analysis seems to us to be better while taking into account our daily experience because it is almost or even impossible to reproduce Western society in Africa and in Cameroon in particular.

V. CONCLUSION

If it is true that the coronavirus is the most widespread pandemic of our time in the world, it is also true that, like a war, its ravages are of importance whose magnitude is not measurable. Like all regions and cities of the world, Cameroon is experiencing the ravages of Covid-19, this, in a particular way. This article has reported on the fight against this pandemic which has more or less upset the social order through the elements of the response to the fight against the coronavirus. Thus, it appears that the way in which the response elements were made goes against human cultures more or less. Subjected to a sociologized reality, we realize that the uproar around Covid-19 has not only made the population aware but also, and above all, has traumatized it. Done in a spectacular way (in the street, in schools, at university, in newspapers, on television, in the market, on the radio, etc.) through communication, awareness has created a social psychosis. Panic, shame, and fear set in. The coronavirus is perceived as the indisputable massive destroyer. The social consequences of this pandemic are only temporary. Among these figures prominently the relaxation of solidarity and the acceleration in the pursuit of individual ends, the distrust of each other for fear of being the next victim of the virus. So, the observation is made today on the pandemic. While it...
meant death yesterday, Covid-19 is life today, it no longer kills. How to understand such a paradox? Is the current vision and conception of this disease able to reverse the trend of social practice in Cameroon? Reflecting on this question will be of great interest to us.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES


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