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The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Environmental Humanities Perspective



Sounding the Impact of COVID-19 on Environmental Health in Lagos, Nigeria

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by Deborah Temisan Lawal



Abstract

The study examines the use of music as a tool for chronicling the environmental effects of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigerian space, particularly, Lagos state. The study employs ethnographic research using interview methods and musical analysis of selected popular songs. Using purposive sampling technique, 10 people were contacted, 5 each from mega slums and urban areas. Backed by ecomusicological theory and the concept of musical environmentalism, this study examines how music offers a site of memory for COVID-19 and its consequences on environment health, how popular musicians advocate for the prevention of and rehabilitation from effects of COVID-19 in African urban cities like Lagos. It also investigates the perception of Lagos dwellers on the impact of COVID-19 on environmental health. From the interviews conducted and the analysis of popular songs by Cohbams Asuquo, Adewale Ayuba, and MK Arzikii, the article concludes that music has the potential to advocate for and sensitize on the effect of COVID-19 on environmental sustainability and transformation in African cities.

Keywords: COVID-19, ecomusicology, Lagos, popular music, environment



About the Author

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Sounding the Impact of COVID-19 on Environmental Health in Lagos, Nigeria

Deborah Temisan Lawal

The COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the world in such a way that every country felt its impact. In Nigeria, the pandemic resulted in fear as many Nigerians were worried about their survival and sustenance (Ekoh et al. 2021; Agbedo et al. 2017; Nwatu et al. 2021). As Nigeria struggled with issues of corruption, environmental degradation, and an epileptic healthcare system, people began to wonder how they were going to survive, especially since everything happened so fast and even the government was caught off guard (Tormusa and Idom 2016). Although COVID-19 was first detected in China in December 2019, Nigeria did not confirm its first case until February 27, 2020 (Dan-Nwafor et al. 2020; Li 2020). However, it was not until March 30, 2020, that a nationwide lockdown was imposed, starting with three states: Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja (Ibrahim et al. 2020).

Lagos city, which is the geographical focus of this study, is not just Nigeria's largest city, it is also a leading hub for big investors. The city has the capacity to generate huge turnovers every year due to the amount of human traffic that occupies its spaces. The lockdown in Lagos meant that people who had previously left their homes every day to earn a living were then required to stay indoors. The resultant effect is an involuntary overdependence on scarce resources such as water, clean air, sanitation facilities, vegetation, land space, and food. This overdependence contributed to an increase in environmental issues such as air pollution, water resource depletion, and solid waste issues, among others. As it is in African countries, Nigerians practice a culture of communal living. Communal living is a tradition in which extended families, neighbors, and friends live closely together, sharing resources, responsibilities, and providing support in decision-making and childcare. However, COVID-19 threatened to jettison the existing physical closeness and daily interactions with friends and neighbors. Therefore, the COVID-19 safety protocols were difficult to enforce, and many people did not take the health implications and risks of contracting the virus seriously. Insisting

that people adopt safety practices, such as regular hand washing and the use of face masks, required consistent repetition for greater compliance (Anyanwu et al. 2020). In this context, Nigerian popular music emerged to create awareness about COVID-19 and helped to narrate the environmental changes and lifestyle adjustments experienced by Lagos residents.

An effective way to foster social change is to use music as an educational tool. According to scholar Tal-Chen Rabinowitch (2020) music has been a companion throughout civilization, helping individuals to shape their behavior as social beings. Rabinowitch's description of how music is used to resolve conflict through collaboration and shared experiences accentuates the role of music as a site of memory for the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on environmental health. The musicians who have engaged in the issue of environmental health can be regarded as advocates for the prevention of and rehabilitation from effects of COVID-19. This view is supported by ethnomusicologist Christian Spencer-Espinosa (2022), a sociologist, who observed that the society dictates how music is composed or performed and how listeners interpret the music. In the case of Lagos, popular musicians used their platforms to advocate for sanitation and social distancing, as well as adherence to medical and environmental health instructions. These songs are aired on public and private media houses with millions of listeners tuning in. Arts and music scholar, Brynjulf Stige (2017) explained that some people are non-participatory listeners of music; nevertheless, they eventually progress to become eccentric participants. Thus, it can be argued that active listening increases the likelihood of individuals complying with public health awareness, as demonstrated by research conducted in Ghana (Thompson et al. 2021) and Quebec, Canada (Lemaire 2020). Also, people's perception can be influenced by continuous exposure to the music they listen to.

This study is backed by the theory of ecomusicology which seeks to interrogate the relationship between music, culture, and nature (Allen and Dawe 2015) and the concept of musical environmentalism. The theory allows for a multidimensional approach where music is a suitable tool for understanding the relationship between humanity, nature, and culture. Scholars like Turner and Freedman (2004) have stressed the need to incorporate the sound of nature into music and ensure that environmental topics are reflected in the lyrics. Similarly, scholars Aaron S. Allen and Jeff Todd Titon (2023) and Mark Pedelty et al. (2022) have described ecomusicology as a practical and pluralistic musical approach to criticizing issues pertaining to the environment. Musicology scholar, Olusegun Titus and Rachel Obonose Titus (2017), Aaron S. Allen (2012), and Peter Okoye et al. (2020) have applied ecomusicology theory to study the intersection between music lyrics, cultural depictions, and environmentalism. Their research has

brought to fore the positive and negative outcomes of the intercourse between humans and nature. As Titon wrote: “Sustainability is one of the main concerns of contemporary ecomusicologists; indeed, within environmental discourse sustainability is prominent. For that reason, ecomusicology holds promise for music and sustainability studies” (2013, 9). The ecomusicology discourse is therefore imperative as it confronts the reality of humanity’s existence, which encompasses interactions with the environment, as well as lifestyles and the existing soundscapes.

Growing up in Lagos city, I experienced the complexities of migration and urban life firsthand. I witnessed how environmental degradation gradually transformed many areas of the city into mega slums. This personal connection to Lagos, coupled with my research in ecomusicology and urban narratives, allows me to approach this study with both academic insight and personal understanding. The aim of this article is to show how music serves not only as a source of entertainment, but as an important tool for addressing the multiple challenges posed by environmental degradation and COVID-19 pandemic.

The article opens with an overview of the pandemic’s impacts on Lagos city and examines how popular music was used to raise awareness. It then justifies the use of ecomusicological theory to analyze the relationship between music and environmental sustainability. Following this, the article discusses selected popular songs by Nigerian artists, such as Cobhams Asuquo, Adewale Ayuba, and MK Arziki. Through interviews and song analysis, the article explores ways through which song lyrics combine with Lagos residents’ perceptions to respond to environmental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the article summarizes its key findings and discusses the potential for music to foster long-term environmental advocacy in Nigeria.

COVID-19 and Environmental Health in Lagos

Assessing attitudes and perceptions of environmental health in Lagos, environmental studies scholars Marja Järvelä and Eva-Marita Rinne-Koistinen (2005) argued that the definition of “purity and dirt” is based on cultural and social ascribed values. This stance is contrary to the safety protocols that the World Health Organization (WHO) has adopted in the fight against coronavirus. In mega slums such as Amukoko and Makoko, the concept of hygiene is interwoven with the cultural and social ascriptions and norms of the people. The size of the population in terms of physical spread necessitates the use of the word, *mega*. These areas are referred to as mega slums because of the scale and severity of their living conditions. Using the example of the shantytown, Amukoko, in Nigeria, Järvelä, and Rinne-Koistinen (2005) examine the definition of hygiene and sanitation. They show that cleanliness and dirt are categorized differently due to cultural

influences. The result is that waste is often dumped on the roadside, especially since Amukoko has no active waste management system.

Similarly, in the Makoko slums, good hygiene can be likened to when a person defecates in a nylon and drops it into the flowing river or the use of pit latrines that are emptied into the lagoon (Oyinloye et al. 2017). Since social infrastructure like clean water supply and water closet toilets are almost non-existent in this area, the people are left to make do with what is available. Due to lack of adequate living spaces, many houses are built in close clusters, allowing neighbors to see into one another's houses. Moreover, the high cost of accommodation in Lagos city has forced many to squat with friends or engage in communal living arrangements. It has become common to find large families sharing a single room or up to five families sharing one toilet and bathroom. This creates an artificial scarcity of clean air as well as increasing waste generation within a given enclosure. Lagos state has a Directorate of Environmental Health Services whose duties include the monitoring of all activities pertaining to environmental health, conducting periodic training for staff, attending to citizen complaints on environmental issues, and creating and regulating policies that are environment friendly (Lagos State Primary Health Care Board 2022). While this agency works assiduously to improve the environmental health conditions in Lagos city, it is ultimately the responsibility of the residents to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of their surroundings. The sanitation law mandates monthly clean-ups in residential buildings and weekly cleanups in commercial buildings. However, as noted by Islamic studies scholar Musthapa Adebayo Bello (2022), Lagosians do not fully comply with this regulation.

There are several perceptions to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the environment in Lagos city. Some reports state that there was a decrease in the rate of air pollution precipitated by a reduction in vehicular movement and industrial activities (Abdulkarim et al. 2021; Fuwape et al. 2021), others state that there was a disruption of water supply leading to poor hygienic practices ("Water Crisis" 2020). However, as there are positive outcomes to the lockdown, there are also negative impacts. For instance, Lagos experienced an accumulation of domestic waste as waste collection and disposal services only worked sparsely during the lockdown (Obioma et al. 2020). In some cases, garbage trucks could not enter certain parts of the city to collect waste due to lack of motorable access roads, forcing people to resort to burning waste by the roadside or in their backyards, which lead to increased air pollution and emission of toxic substances.

Popular Music as Advocate for Environmental Health

Reviewing the pandemic lockdown timeline, it is obvious that there is enhanced interaction and engagement with music. In a survey of over 5000 people selected from

three continents, Lauren Fink et al. (2021) were able to deduce that listening to music can be used as a coping strategy during the COVID-19 lockdown. When they asked respondents if their engagement with music was effective in maintaining a stable socio-emotional state, over half responded in the affirmative. In research conducted in Spain by scholars Alberto Cabedo-Mas, Christina Arriaga-Sanz, and Lidon Moliner-Miravet (2021), 1868 people were questioned. When asked about their involvement in music related activities before and during the pandemic, a majority of the respondents said that they spent more time listening to music and getting involved in music related activities during the lockdown. Only 3.7% were reported to have reduced the extent to which they listened to music. Findings from the research also suggested that music helped to cushion the effect of boredom caused by being indoors for too long. Arts and music scholars Trisanasari Fraser, Alexander Hew Dale Crooke, and Jane W. Davidson (2021) argued that the pandemic is responsible for an increase in social bond and solidarity. It was an opportunity for many to explore and discover that they enjoy music from other parts of the world.

Beyond the individual search for music to cushion boredom or bridge the gap caused by social distancing, individuals sought music that could serve as a source of information about the pandemic. It was reported by psychologist Naomi Ziv and computer scientist Revital Hollander-Shabtai (2022) that in Israel, musical clips called “Coronal Clips” were created specifically to ease the anxiety and tension created by varying restrictions that were in place. In response to this, many were able to navigate the period with ease. Musicians who have gained popularity are able to leverage their influence to connect with their listeners. It is this connectivity that big institutions take advantage of in engaging the services of celebrity pop musicians to serve as their ambassadors (Breves et al. 2019). Riding on the same level of connectivity, popular musicians as well as popular music become viable instruments of engagement in the issue of environmental health proliferated by COVID-19. As a vehicle for advancing desired change in a society (Gibbs and Eggermann 2021) and an essential phenomenon in the study of space, place, and scape (Titus 2023; Edwards 2015; Allen 2011; Rehding 2011), music is taking a central position in interdisciplinary research, especially in ecomusicology studies.

Research Approach: Interview Methodology and Musical Context

This research was conducted via semi-structured interviews in English, Yoruba, or Pidgin English, depending on the language the respondent was comfortable with. Invitation to participate in the study was posted in WhatsApp groups. This medium was adopted because, during the research period, social distancing policies were still in effect and physical interactions had not yet returned to normal. Requirements for participation

include residing in Lagos city or slum before and during the pandemic. First, 10 people who responded and gave consent were selected. Interviews were conducted over the phone. All interviews were audio-recorded and focused on the experiences and perceptions of 10 respondents regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their immediate environment. The study also includes a textual and sonic analysis of three popular Nigerian songs: “We go win (Corona)” by Cohbams Asuquo, “Bye-Bye Corona” by Adewale Ayuba, and “Cuta Corona” by MK Arzikii. These songs were purposefully selected for their relevance to health, COVID-19, and the environment. Specifically, the study examines sound through aspects such as instrumentation, melody, rhythm, and code switching.

Nigerian Musical and Lyrical Responses to COVID-19

“Bye-Bye Corona” (2020)¹

The song, “Bye-Bye Corona” by Dr. Adewale Ayuba emphasizes the requirements by the Lagos state government to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Corona virus mawole mi o	COVID-19, don't come into my house
Imototo bori corona virus	Because I have sanitizers in my house
Mo'n fowo mi dada	Cleanliness will overcome coronavirus
Tori moni sanitizer to po ni le	And I don't entertain visitors
Mi o de tu je keni body wa kimi	I wash my hands very well
Enikeni to ba ti gboro yio moribo	Whoever listens will overcome

The lyrics of this song not only emphasize the need for safe practices during COVID-19, but the song also stresses an important aspect of the African culture, which is obedience to constituted authorities. The environmental health of a place depends largely on the collective effort of those living and interacting with the environment. Compliance can be achieved through obedience and mutual respect. This submission is buttressed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020) who posited that the policies which the government put in place will act as a safe guide for responding to and recovering from pandemic situations. If the right policies are in place, then the onus lies on the citizens to comply with the rules. A part of the song refers to disobedience: “Awa o kin se omo alayi gboran,” meaning we are not children of disobedience. In some markets

visited by Bassey Udo et al. (2020), shop owners were said to resist the lockdown for fear of loss of livelihood until they were threatened by law enforcement agents. When asked about the impact of Ayuba's song, a respondent replied excitedly: "I love Wasiu's songs. When I heard the song, my mind was calm. I know that if I follow what Baba (Ayuba) said, I'll be alright." The song text encourages people to obey rules so as to stay safe, reduce the spread of COVID-19, and cooperate for a healthy Lagos city.

Significantly, the use of Yoruba language resonates with the respondents as most of them dialogue in this language on a daily basis. The vibrant rhythm reflects the culture and connects with listeners while the use of indigenous percussion instruments like the talking drums, xylophones, and shekere adds a boisterous feel to the song and this can be interpreted to convey resilience and a call to action so that everyone is conscious and careful during the pandemic.

"Cutar Corona" (2020) by MK Arzikii

Cutar corona ai gaskiya ce	Corona disease is true
Cutar nan da ka ji	the disease you hear about
Mai shaken nufashi	the one that hinders you from
Mu kare kan mu	breathing
Harma da rai iyalenu mu	let us take care of ourselves
Mu fada ma yan' uwa	and our love ones
Wadan da ba su sani ba	let's tell the people
	that don't know about it
Mu wanke hanuwan mu	let's wash our hands with soap or
Da sabulu ko da omo	Omo
Mu kauracewa taro	avoid crowded gatherings
Taron da yana da cunkusu	large gatherings
Har mu saba hama	let's stop anything
Hanya ce da za ta yadu	that can cause the spread
Mu taimake junan mu	let's help ourselves
Mu taimake Al umma	and the government

Lagos is one of the states in Nigeria with the most severe cases of internal migration (Guyer 2011). People from different African communities can be found in Lagos. The song by Mubarak Nuhu aka MK Arzikii, speaks to the Hausa community in Lagos city. A good number of them have had to migrate voluntarily and involuntarily (due to the security crisis in the Northern part of Nigeria). The lyrics of the song "Cutar Corona" acts as a form of sensitization for how to relate with each other during the lockdown. The concept

of being your brother's keeper is portrayed in his song. He admonished people to take time to explain to their friends and neighbors the implication of the COVID-19. Hand washing with soap and practicing social distancing are the core messages in his song. Reports from the ("Water" n.d.) showed that only 30 percent of Nigeria's population has access to clean water. It is important to note that a significant part of Lagos's mega slums, which are home to a large concentration of immigrants, face challenges such as inadequate access to clean and reliable water supply, as well as insufficient social, medical, and housing infrastructure. This poses a limitation, making it difficult to wash hands regularly and thoroughly as stipulated by the WHO. In addition, family houses are built in clusters in a large compound, making social distancing nearly impossible. Having migrated from the Northern states into Lagos, the Hausa community have brought their architecture along (Makanju and Uriri 2018). According to architectural design scholar Faisal Koko Auwalu (2019), a description of the housing structure typical to those in Northern Nigeria is a large compound built with mud bricks, grasses, or timber, having small sized windows, and containing, among others, housing facilities such as "sleeping quarters for family members and visitors, children play area, kitchens, storage, granaries, chicken coops, bath rooms and toilets, and a number of other functional spaces" (Auwalu 2019, 5). In this case, culture and the absence of basic infrastructure become a major limitation in the fight against COVID-19 and for environmental sustainability. The one-minute song made use of only one musical instrument, the piano. It portrays a solemn effect, placing more emphasis on the message than the musical accompaniment. Arzikiii deliberately punctuates the song with harmony to emphasize the key message. For instance, the song is a solo rendition, but there is a harmonic portion where he sings: "Mu fada ma yan' uwa, Wadan da ba su sani ba/let's tell the people that don't know about it." The use of harmony to capture the attention of listeners contributes to the impact of sonic elements on environmental health.

"We Go Win (Corona)" (2020)

My brother, my sister, papa, mama and pikin
 Corona no big pass us, we go fight am we go win
 As long as we remember to always do the right thing
 Wash your hands, love each other, we go win o
 Corona na the virus wey dey worry human being
 E no get leg o but e dey waka from pesin to pesin
 But we fit beat am, we fit stop am
 If we maintain good hygiene
 And practice social distancing
 We go win o

No shaking hands with your neighbor
 Blow them a kiss from afar
 Use soap and water to wage war
 Let's show this thing who we are
 We are special, we're courageous
 We are awesome human beings
 We dey super, we get power
 We can conquer anything
 If we hear word and obey laws
 And exercise discipline
 Wash your hands love each other
 We go win o

In this song by Cohbams Asuquo, the lyrics state that “e no get leg o but e dey waka from person to person,” which means that while the coronavirus does not have legs, it can still spread from person to person in the same way that humans move from one place to another. The imposed lockdown, which restricted human mobility, is expected to also limit the spread of the virus. Furthermore, he sang that: “as long as we remember to always do the right thing.” In the case of the pandemic, the right thing is to observe COVID-19 safety protocols and encourage environmental health. However, people were in doubt of the existence of the coronavirus, as it was in many other countries, leading to protests against the government’s containment measures. A respondent said he watched as protesters stomped the ground (displacing the soil), littered the streets with sticks, nylons, paper, and other wastes, with some even defecating by the roadside. Reports stated that a set of protesters cooked in the middle of the road (Okolie-Osemene 2021; Arin et al. 2022; Ezeibe et al. 2020; Oginni et al. 2020). “We go win (Corona)” is a song that redirects minds to a better way of fighting the virus. Cohbams advised in his song that we “wage war” by washing our hands with soap and water. The musician also referred to the issue of good hygiene as a way to beat/stop the spread of the virus by saying: “We fit beat am, we fit stop am, if we maintain good hygiene,” meaning we can beat it (COVID-19), we can stop it (COVID-19), if we maintain good hygiene.

Sonically, the piano’s timbre and dynamics are calm and warm, evoking feelings of hope and sobriety that exemplify the feelings expressed by two respondents who were impacted by the pandemic. The piano chords are a mixture of major and minor notes which gives a feeling of undulation, confusion, uncertainty, and anticipation; from the moment the virus was officially diagnosed in Nigeria, some respondents revealed that they went through several emotions crises until life began to return to normalcy. Aside

from the lyrics, Cobham's vocal performance conveys the mood of the moment, which is vulnerable, yet soothing.

From the interviews conducted, respondents gave graphic details of their lived experiences during the pandemic. A resident from Gbagada area of Lagos state lamented how littered her environment was during the lockdown. The respondent stated that the makeshift drums used for waste disposal were filled to capacity and overflowing with residential waste. Concerns were also expressed about face masks, cookie wrappers, and other single use items being blown by the wind from a neighboring compound. When asked about the waste management company, the interviewee replied that they did not have the manpower to cater for the amount of waste generated daily. Following that, the interviewee reported that the community decided to burn the waste. However, this temporary solution can lead to severe consequences such as the release of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere ("Environmental" n.d.), respiratory illness (Irianti and Prasetyoputra 2018), and contamination of water sources (Padmavathy and Anbarashan 2022). Moreover, waste such as diapers, sanitary pads, and metals, are left to litter the streets because they do not burn to ashes.

As a result of living in unsanitary conditions, some respondents say they became ill but refused to go to the hospital for fear of being admitted into isolation centers. Some respondents said they had to resort to using local herbs to treat themselves instead of going to the medical center and being wrongly diagnosed with COVID-19. Living in crowded spaces also contributed to the increase in respiratory infections. One father of two reported that he survived the mental effect of being indoors by listening to music on his favorite radio station. The respondent said his daily routine was to pray each day with the family, turn on the radio, and go out to clean his immediate environment before going back in for breakfast. The interviews with respondents revealed that even after the lockdown was lifted, each time they listen to music, such as the ones used in this study, it invokes feelings of nostalgia that continues to serve as a reminder of what had happened in the past and how to manage it.

Conclusion

The study of the COVID-19 pandemic and music is intrinsically ecomusicological because it is the study of music, in this case, popular music, culture (within Lagos mega city and slums), and nature, in this case, socio-environmental conditions and the corona virus. Secondly, ecomusicology has the potential to explain how and encourage the creation of more music that is specifically working towards environmental justice and sustainability. Fundamentally, on the concept of environmental health and COVID-19, music does much more; it informs. Although it has been reported that music helped to

reduce the rate of depression and anxiety during the coronavirus pandemic (Cabedo-Mas et al. 2021; Ziv and Hollander-Shabtai 2022), this study demonstrates the role of music in chronicling the lived experiences of people in Lagos mega city and slums as well as advocating for public awareness in issues of environmental sustainability. This study has established the potential that music has to offer as a site of memory for COVID-19 and its consequences on environment health. With continuous listening to these songs, people were convinced to believe in the existence of the virus and adhere to safety precautions.

Furthermore, this study has shown how popular musicians use their lyrics and influential platforms to advocate for the prevention of and rehabilitation from effects of COVID-19. They have advised that the fight against the virus is not in the street protest and agitations but in good hygiene and social distancing. Managing COVID-19 means considering what others are going through and showing empathy, while ensuring that one does not become a conduit for infection. Popular singer, MK Arzikii, admonished in his song that we be our “brother’s keeper” by spreading positivity and authentic information about the virus.

Given the pivotal role that music has played in shaping the perception of Lagos city dwellers on the impact of COVID-19 on environment health, there is a need to prioritize and integrate music as a functional tool to advocate for and sensitize people in case of similar pandemic situations. The implication is that the effect of a global pandemic on mental health, communal life, social interaction, and environment health will be minimal. Since ecomusicology encompasses the study of music, culture, and nature, this study concludes that music has the potential to act as an element of intervention, which is needed, to seek solutions to the issue of environmental justice and sustainability through sound, language, and visuals.

Note

¹ All song lyrics included in this article were translated by the author.

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