

Ethical inversions due to COVID-19: Pandemic and local ironies in managing responsibilities

2020-05-25 07:00:55

By

On Friday March 21st 2020, the Fula men, who live in the town of Gabu, in the northeast of Guinea-Bissau, did not meet to pray in their mosques. The containment measures adopted by the whole country to face the COVID-19 emergency introduced a curfew from 11 am, prohibiting people from gathering. The police have guaranteed the respect of these rules in cities but in the *tabankas*, the villages in the Region of Gabu, it has not been so.

Saico Embalo, the central *régulo* of the area, held his Friday speech at 8 pm on Syntchan Occo Radio, raising the awareness of the Fula people about the imminent emergency, and inviting them to behave according to the government rules. At the end of his speech Saico spoke to the disobedient in Pulaar, the Fula language, saying “*ful?e ko rim?e de,*” which can be translated to “the Fulas are honest.” By using the word “*rim?e,*” plural of *dimo*, he also referred to responsibility and freedom as a blood link to genealogy, to ethics, and to good behaviour among the Fula.

The task of Fula *régulos* is historically linked to the organization of Fula society in terms of justice, agriculture, and more broadly of any social questions of the population, and is taken into great consideration among its members. In the history of the country, the *régulos* have faced various conflict situations, mediating firstly with the Portuguese colonists and then with the single-party government of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), incorporating contradictory colonial and socialist logics.

There is an ordinary ethics, as Michael Lambek has defined it, to which human beings cannot help submitting. In a silent pact, which puts relationships into the foreground, humans are “everywhere cognitively and emotionally predisposed to a moral sensitivity,” to quote Signe Howell. Referring to this quality, Jarrett Zigon has spoken of embodied moral dispositions as a non-reflexive layout of our social everyday life. Although these statements tell us little about the content of the various locally constructed moral sensibilities, they help shift the question of such sensibilities from the what to the how. Such embodied morals can be

interrupted by “ethical moments,” or critical situations in which the right thing to do is not recognised or questioned. In these moments, in which the conscious awareness of ethical dilemmas and moral questioning arise, the debate around ethics becomes explicit.

The rapid diffusion of the new coronavirus from its epicenter, Wuhan, in January and the declaration of a pandemic by the WHO, on March 11th 2020, has made the world situation critical. The protection of the value of life has become a global problem, and local responses have differed according to the severity of the health situation in different areas, as well as the different structural conditions necessary to contain the diffusion. Everywhere, however, the mechanisms of the virus action have set off reflection on people’s behaviour, responsibility and on damage minimization both in economic terms and in terms of people’s health. The ethical discourse has become explicit and shared.

In Italy, after the March 9th lockdown, the call to responsibility spread rapidly online with the viral message #iorestoacasa, proposed by mass and social media, through politicians, athletes and figures in show business. The deprivation of personal freedom has been turned into a personal choice, with a growing emphasis on its ethical dimension. Whoever did not subscribe to this idea would be considered irresponsible. The fear of the infection had acquired primacy over human relationships, thereby turning social isolation into a moral obligation. On the other hand, the pandemic has reawakened new practices of solidarity and has given new life to rituals of giving, in particular to the weakest in society, through anonymous offers of food and hospitality. Moreover, the willingness to renounce a part of individual freedom cannot be seen only as a passive acceptance of the rules of a state of exception – it is also based on the cooperative nature that characterizes Western moral sensitivity.

If the speeches and the practices of risk-containment have been focused on the protection of life, seen as a primary, indisputable, universal good, disparities in culture, class, and age have emerged as particular demographics that the virus has targeted. In Italy, the majority of victims are old people, who are more vulnerable and are destined to die alone without a funeral. Statistically, the youngest seem to be spared even though they embody the difficulties of living with the quarantine on their skin. In order to prevent the diffusion of the virus, the adults are called to their responsibility by being asked to not go to work or be productive, which is the opposite of what is usually asked of them. This apparent inversion resides on solid continuities, such as the consideration of altruism as moral value.

Régulo Embalo’s irony elicits this process of questioning ordinary ethics. Referring to the disobedient, he has pointed out that “the Fulas are

honest,” free and responsible, meaning that they should not go against the government rules. At the same time, it insinuated that the right thing to do at the moment is the opposite of what is usually considered ethical by the believers: breaking the common moral and religious rules. In both the Italian and Guinean cases, the ethical message appears contradictory in different ways, proposing the reversal of ordinary moral rules amid this extraordinary moment. In both cases, the reversal of moral rules has been promoted by the authorities and epitomized by people via a top-down process, but the *Régulo*'s explicit use of irony has widened the margins for negotiation from below.

Irony is a highly relational mechanism that requires inference and exempts the speaker from liability of expressing a clear view when this proves to be difficult or contradictory. Irony is the process of encountering and accepting ambiguity. The density of Saico's irony hides an extreme consideration of his interlocutors' 'honesty,' which is regarded as biologically determined. At the same time, his leadership depends on the ability to induce them to a reasonable dialogue with the historically and culturally connoted rules of the State. Looking through the Fula of Gabu, cultural relativism, usually linked to space-time coordinates, has ironically and tragically collapsed in the uncertainty of the here and now.

This essay, more anecdotal than scientific, suggests how anthropology, put in check by immobility and by the strength of contingency, has the opportunity to rethink ethical categories by studying local ethical dimensions in-depth where they are made explicit. Further, irony as an ethnographic research tool deserves to be taken seriously.

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AMA citation

. Ethical inversions due to COVID-19: Pandemic and local ironies in managing responsibilities. *Somatosphere*. . Available at: . Accessed May 25, 2020.

APA citation

. (). *Ethical inversions due to COVID-19: Pandemic and local ironies in managing responsibilities*. Retrieved May 25, 2020, from Somatosphere Web site:

Chicago citation

. . Ethical inversions due to COVID-19: Pandemic and local ironies in managing responsibilities. *Somatosphere*. (accessed May 25, 2020).

Harvard citation

, *Ethical inversions due to COVID-19: Pandemic and local ironies in managing responsibilities*, *Somatosphere*. Retrieved May 25, 2020, from <>

MLA citation

. "Ethical inversions due to COVID-19: Pandemic and local ironies in managing responsibilities." . *Somatosphere*. Accessed 25 May. 2020.<>