

**A COMPARATIVE APPRAISAL OF THE UNDERSTANDINGS OF  
EPIDEMICS IN CAMUS' *THE PLAGUE* AND PANDEMICS IN AFRICAN  
TRADITIONAL EPISTEMOLOGIES (ATE)**

**Mark Omorovie Ikeke, PhD**

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy

Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Ikeke7@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14770.12482

**Abstract**

*Epidemic refers to a wide occurrence of an infectious disease in a community within a particular time; while a pandemic is a more extensive spread of an infectious disease on a worldwide scale. A person or society that believes that disease comes from God or an evil power is of the same position whether it is a pandemic or an epidemic. This study is concerned with how Africans have conceived and interpreted pandemics or epidemics. The thoughts of Albert Camus, a French-Algerian philosopher on an epidemic that he wrote about in his novel, *The Plague*; and the understanding of epidemics or pandemics in African traditional epistemologies will be interrogated. That it is traditional does not mean it is no longer held. Some persons' understandings are still influenced by traditional epistemologies. Camus through the views of Dr Rieux expresses non-belief in God, for if he were to exist, he would be the one who should take care of the sick during the epidemic. The human response to evil should be that of revolt in taking action to solve human suffering instead of waiting for God. There are various perceptions on epidemics or plagues in African epistemology. In some cultures, it is believed that God is good and anything evil or suffering such as sicknesses comes from evil spirits. In others, epidemics emanate from human sinfulness or punishment for human faults. Pandemics can happen to one as a result of one's destiny. The paper through analytic and hermeneutic methods finds that while the viewpoint of Camus is thoroughly atheistic and secular; that of African epistemologies are theistic. The paper concludes that whether theistic or atheistic, there is solid reason for human beings to rebel against pandemics and work hard to eliminate them.*

**Keywords:** African Traditional Epistemologists, Camus, Epidemic, Plague

**Introduction**

Human societies from ancient times have been troubled by epidemics, pandemics, plagues and other infectious diseases. Epidemics that have afflicted the world includes: the 3000 BCE prehistoric epidemic, 430 BCE plague of Athens, the 165-180 ACE Antonine plague, the 250 AD plague of

Cyprian, the 541-542 AD plague of Justinian, the Black Death of 1346-1353 AD, the 1545-1548 Cocoliztli epidemic, the 16<sup>th</sup> century American plagues, the 1665/1666 great plague of London, the Russian plague of 1770-1772, the great plague of Marseille of 1720-1723, the Philadelphia Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793, the American Polio epidemic of 1916, the Spanish Flu of 1918-1920, the Asian Flu of 1957-1958, 2014-2016 West African Ebola epidemic, and the Zika Virus epidemic. For pandemics they include, the 1889/1890 Flu pandemic, the Aids pandemic of 1981 till present day, H1N1 Swine Flu Pandemic of 2009-2010 (Jarus, 2020). Currently the entire world is experiencing the pandemic of Coronavirus. Pandemics/epidemics have had grave effects on society. Millions of people have lost their lives to epidemics and pandemics and these epidemics and pandemics have also brought about social chaos and problems. As at the time of writing the Coronavirus pandemic has caused Africa some loss of lives, a decline in African economies, and resulted in many other untold damages.

It is imperative to point out the delimitation of the paper. The concern of this paper will not be to examine the origin, causes, and consequences of epidemics/pandemics. This work will focus on making a comparative appraisal of the understanding of epidemics in Camus' thought and pandemics in African traditional epistemologies. It is focused on the traditional African understanding and not understandings or philosophies on pandemics in general. In respect of Camus, the focus will be with his understanding of epidemics as presented in his novel, *The Plague*. It is through critical analysis and hermeneutics that the work examines these twin issues. Through critical analysis the issues will be broken-open for deeper understanding. Hermeneutics will be used to interpret and bring out the meaning of epidemics and pandemics in Camus' *The Plague* and African traditional epistemologies respectively. In presenting the understanding of epidemics in Camus' *The Plague*, the attention will not be to narrate the entire story or examination of literary styles and other issues raised in the field of literature. The focus here will be how people in the novel perceived, understood and responded to the epidemic that happened in the novel. Regarding the understanding in African traditional epistemologies, though African cultures are not monolithic there is a general consensus and cosmic worldview of framework within which all African cultures view reality. For instance, though African cultures may have various names for God they all believe in the existence of a supreme being, the existence of a spirit world and have a cosmos that is created for welfare of human person. In this sense it is possible to speak of African traditional epistemologies or epistemology. There

are several cultural understandings but overall they share in many commonalities.

### **Terminologies**

The concepts grounding this work that requires explication are epidemics, pandemics, and African traditional epistemologies. The magnitude and scale of occurrence differentiates an epidemic from a pandemic. "An epidemic is an occurrence of disease that is temporarily of high prevalence and that is confined to one region or one part of the world, such as a single country," while

"A pandemic can be defined as an outbreak of infectious disease that occurs over a wide geographical area and that is of high prevalence, generally affecting a significant proportion of the world's population, usually over the course of several months" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

African traditional epistemologies refer to traditional epistemologies from continental Africa and also African derived epistemologies in the Diaspora grounded in the African traditional worldviews. K. C. Anyanwu writes that African epistemology refers to conceptualizations, apprehensions, and interpretations of reality by Africans in the light of their cultural experience (Udefi, 2014). The term traditional is used here in the sense of indigenous or endogenous, coming from Africa. Traditional does not mean it is stagnant, ancient and irrelevant or obsolete. Traditional implies the worldview that preceded the advent of colonizing forces in the continent. Though pre-colonial, this worldview survived colonialism and permeates African culture even in contemporary times. This worldview is still the way that many Africans look at reality and happenings in the world. It is important to understand the meaning of epistemology. The word, "epistemology" comes from two Greek terms, *episteme* (knowledge) and *logos* (study, discourse, theory). Epistemology is a philosophical discipline that systematically studies the origin, nature, scope, sources, definitions, structures and theories of knowledge, the question of truth, etc (Ezeani, 2009, p. 1; Kehinde, 2012). Epistemology is concerned with the question of the certainty of knowledge-What can we know? How can we know? Are we sure of what we know? (Kehinde, 2012). When knowledge is spoken of it means knowledge about all of reality or whatever human beings claim to perceive or know. It is inclusive of knowledge in the sciences, social sciences and humanities. African traditional epistemologies refer to African ways of knowing, interpretation of reality and understanding of the world. African epistemologies can be gathered from African proverbs, myths, folktales, arts and aesthetics, etc.

### **The Concept of Epidemics in Camus's *The Plague***

Albert Camus was an Algerian-French philosopher who lived from 1913 to 1960. He was born into a poor family and grew-up in a poor environment. He studied philosophy at the University of Algiers. He was equally a journalist, novelist and essayist. In 1957, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is an existentialist though he refused that title. He is termed an existentialist because the theme of existentialism runs through his works. For him, life is meaningless and absurd (Camus, 1955). Yet, in the meaninglessness of life, human beings have to courageously confront and commit to the fact of their existence. The absurdity of life makes Camus to deny the existence of a good and all-powerful God. He was thoroughly concerned about the human condition as he gave attention to the Algerian political problems, condemned communist tyranny in his 1951 book, *The Rebel*; and critiqued fascism (Mautner, 2000). Among the works for which he is notable are: *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *Caligula*, *The Plague*, *The Rebel*, and *The First Man* (posthumously gathered) and published in 1942, 1942, 1944, 1947, 1951, and 1994 respectively. He founded and edited an underground paper called, *Combat*. He was active in the French Resistance in Paris. He was a friend of the French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre though he latter broke away from him for his endorsement of communism. He spent the 1950s actively in theatre activities. He died in an automobile accident.

In his novel, *The Plague* (*La Peste* in French), there is a presentation of an epidemic and how human beings are to respond to it. The aim here is not to narrate the entire story scene by scene. The paper will highlight and portray the characters and present the understanding of epidemic in the novel. The novel presents varied and different understandings, attitudes and responses to the epidemic. The novel describes how an epidemic happened in the French Algerian town of Oran in the 1940s. It is believed that it is the plague that occurred in Oran in 1849 that killed many persons that is captured in this novel though Camus situates it in the 1940s. Before Camus published his novel many other plagues had occurred in Oran. It is important to note how the plague comes about. It has a natural origin and explanation to it.

There are many characters in this novel such as the major characters of Dr Bernard Rieux, Jean Tarrou, Raymond Rambert, Joseph Grand, Cottard, Father Pane Loius, and minor characters such as the Narrator, the Prefect, Dr Castel, M Othon, Philippe Othon, Mme Rieux, Dr Richard, M Michel, Raoul, Gonzales, the Asthma Patient, Loius, and Garcia. Each of these characters responds to the plague in different ways.

The novel presents a medical doctor, Dr Rieux who works extremely hard at the time of an epidemic to treat the sick people. He is the first major character

in the story and turns out to be the narrator at the end of the novel. He never introduces himself in the beginning saying that it is for neutrality and to allow the characters speak and act for themselves. He gives his time and full commitment to treating the sick people during the epidemic. To the question of whether he believes in God, Dr Rieux' position is that if God exists he should have prevented the epidemic and even have treated the sick persons. It will not be his duty to do that for a good and loving God. Dr Rieux opines, "I shall refuse until I die to love this creation in which children are tortured" (Camus, 1961, p. 240). It is better not to look to the sky to this God who is sitting in silence in the midst of human plagues, epidemics, and suffering.

God does not exist, for Dr Rieux and so it is the duty of human beings to care for the sick and confront human problems. Human beings should not be fatalistic and sit down looking at human problems of pandemics, injustice, hardships, oppression, pain, etc. There is no room for passivity. Human beings must confront and deal with their problems. The human duty is to revolt against problems, "revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life" (Camus, 1995). Combating epidemics and the social problems of meaninglessness requires: "Moral integrity and an ideal of human solidarity" (Mautner, 2000, p. 85). For Camus, "even the most hopeless circumstances" should be resisted (Appiah & Gates, 1996, p. 113). He treats the first victim of the epidemic. He sees the epidemic not as divine or from God for a so-called loving and powerful God who allows innocent children and humanity to suffer when he can do something but keeps silent does not exist. The narrator says of Dr Rieux:

...that if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort; no, not even Paneloux, who believed that he believed in such a God. And this was proved by the fact that no one ever threw himself on Providence completely. Anyhow, in this respect Rieux believed himself to be on the right road, in fighting against creation as he found it. (Camus, 1948, p. 62)

Though he encourages and warns the authorities of the town to take action, at first they seem not to understand the seriousness of the situation. He courageously and doggedly works long hours to confront the epidemic by treating people. For him, it is his duty as a doctor to stop human suffering and pain though death stares everyone in the face. He bravely fights on without giving up the struggle against the plague. For Dr Rieux, life is absurd and meaningless though despair and suicide are not options. Human beings are to continuously revolt against the absurdities and nihilism of life.

Another character in the story is the Jesuit priest, Fr Paneloux. Unlike Dr Rieux he is a strong believer in God. He strongly emphasizes the doctrines of the Christian faith and condemns the immorality among the people of Oran. His reaction to the epidemic is that it is God-sent to those who have failed to repent and amend their ways. During the week of prayer organized in the city of Oran he states categorically, "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it" (Camus, 1948, p. 46). He argued further in his sermon at the cathedral, "The first time this scourge appears in history, it was wielded to strike down the enemies of God. Pharaoh set himself up against the divine will, and the plague beat him to his knees. Thus from the dawn of recorded history the scourge of God has humbled the proud of heart and laid low those who hardened themselves against Him. Ponder this well, my friends, and fall on your knees" (Camus, 1948, p. 46).

He teaches the God of the Holy Bible who offers comfort to those in pain. He joins in fighting the plague as a volunteer. When an innocent child dies of the plague he sees this as rationally indefensible but he claims it is a test of faith. He himself eventually falls ill and maybe because of the shaking of his faith he does not call the doctor and he dies. Dr Rieux records his death as "doubtful case" as the symptoms are not those of the victims of the epidemics.

A word need to be said about the other characters. Tarrou, a non-believer in God is caught-up in Oran where he had arrived before the plague. He suggests the idea and teams up with others to fight the epidemic as it is a duty for everyone. He struggles with commitment to fight the epidemic but eventually dies. Rambert who has left his girlfriend in Paris visits as a journalist to examine the circumstances of life of the Arab section of the town. The epidemic meets him in the city and he made various attempts to be smuggled out of the city but all the attempts failed. He eventually accepts his fate and joins in combating the epidemic as he feels everyone should be obligated to fight the epidemic for the common good of all. One other personality in the novel is the city clerk, a neighbour to Cottard and he is the one who calls Dr Rieux when Cottard attempted suicide. He joins in confronting the epidemic as he documents the numbers of death. He also becomes ill of the epidemic but recovered. Cottard is presented in the novel as somebody who is enclosed on himself even though he will later try to make friends during the epidemic. He takes advantage of the plague in selling banned items like liquor and cigarettes. He becomes mentally imbalanced as the epidemic declines and because of his disturbances is taken in by the police.

The narrator presents himself as a witness to the events in the story and a chronicler of the events. There is the Prefect of the city who fails to see the enormity of the epidemic at first but later on tightens regulations and closes the town to control the plague. Dr Castel, a friend of Dr Rieux sees the disease as a bubonic plague and develops a serum to cure the epidemic. Like Dr Rieux he is dogged and courageous. M Othon, the magistrate in Oran catches the plague and dies. He also loses his child to the plague. His time of isolation with his child makes him more compassionate. Dr Rieux's mother, Mme Rieux who lives with the doctor while the doctor's wife is in a sanatorium calmly reflects over life, feeling no fear in the midst of the epidemic. Dr Richard is the chairman of the Medical Association in Oran who responds reluctantly to the epidemic calling it a "special type of fever." In the novel, the concierge of the building in which Dr Rieux lives becomes the first victim of the epidemic. Raoul, Gonzales, Loius and Garcia and Marcel are engaged in various ways in the attempt to smuggle Rambert out of the city. The Asthma Patient who is often visited by Dr Rieux plays the role of a commentator on the happenings in the town.

Towards the ending of the story, Dr Rieux's wife dies. Rambert is reunited with his wife. Grand begins working on his novel. The town's gates will be opened as the epidemic ends. Dr Rieux the narrator states at the end, "to simply say we learn in the midst of plagues; there are more things to admire in men than despise." Despite the various attitudes and responses to the plague, there is the predominant portrayal that the author Camus through the character of Dr Rieux and those who join him to fight the plague intends to present how a plague should be understood. The plague is not God-sent as God does not exist. If he does exist it is unimaginable that such a loving and powerful God will be silent in the midst of human sufferings and pandemics. It will be his duty to stop the plague and all human sufferings. Life is absurd and meaningless. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, another novel by Camus, human suffering and pain through pandemics and other diseases make no sense.

### **The Understanding of Pandemics in African Traditional Epistemologies**

It is difficult to understand, African traditional epistemologies on pandemics without grasping what the African worldview is all about. The word, "worldview" is used here to refer to a people's unified explanations of events and realities in the world. Africans believe in the existence of a Supreme Being called by different names in different African cultures. It is generally believed that this Supreme Being created the universe or cosmos. It is also understood that he placed human beings at the center of the cosmos and created reality

exists for the good and welfare of human beings. The African universe is anthropocentric. The universe is made-up of multitudes of beings and spirits. These spirits and beings in the universe are inter-related, interlinked, and inter-penetrate one another. So what affects one can affect the other as the universe shares in organismic harmonious unity. Understand that: "In the African category or hierarchy of beings - Supreme Being, spirits, human beings, animals, objects-one mode of existence presupposes all the others, and a balance has to be maintained to avoid a drift from one mode to another. There is peace and harmony in the community when the balance is maintained...." (Agbakwuo, 2013, p. 23). The African universe is theistic. In this universe, there is cosmic order, harmony, unity, and inter-dependence. Expressed in another way, "African view of reality emphasizes the structural kinship between man and nature, man and man, and man and the spirit world. To Africans the whole multiplicities of things which comprise the universe are mystically one and therefore constitute only one thing, one reality...." (Dime, 1995, p. 28). This does not imply that Africans don't distinguish or differentiate between things. There are distinctions but there is organic unity. Human beings are not the Supreme Being or ancestors but share in the life of the spirit world.

It is important to also have an African understanding of health, healing and disease. Among the Urhobo people of Nigeria like most other African peoples a person's health is composed of amicable synergy between the person's physical body, spiritual elements and psychosocial realities and the person living in harmony with the universe; if not sickness and diseases will occur. For indigenous Africans such as the Igbo people, "healing entails the harnessing and controlling of pervasive powers in the universe to remedy sickness and misfortune" (Igboamalu, 2016, 184). F Mwaura states that among Africans health is not just a biological matter but includes mental, physical, social, spiritual and environmental wellbeing; and illness implies a disruption in the above (1994).

Three types of diseases and their causes can be indentified among the Urhobo people-natural or non-supernatural diseases, social or preternatural, and supernatural diseases. Natural diseases such as headache, catarrh, ringworms, etc are caused by bodily chemical disequilibrium and are cured through herbal therapy; social diseases emanate from attack from witches, sorcerers, and evil persons and are often remedied through cultic sacrifices and other rituals; supernatural diseases result from breakdown of relationship between humans and the ancestors and can be remedied through cultic practices (Ubrurhe, 2001, pp.40-42). Complex or extraordinary diseases are attributed to



supernatural causation of spirits or supernatural agents (Ubrurhe,2001, p. 43). A pandemic such as Coronavirus will be traced to the supernatural as it is a complex disease defying all attempts to cure it. Pandemics do not happen by chance but are a result of external forces and are a manifestation of physical or spiritual discord in the universe (Dime, 1995). It is generally understood in Africa that: "...good health and wealth are an index of a harmonious relationship between the individual and his ancestors, etc, the balance of the whole self and one's environment. It is therefore considered futile to treat a patient with herbs without first appeasing the divinities, spirits, or ancestors" (Dime, 1995, p. 30-31). As Dime notes even when a sickness or disease such as malaria is natural arising from mosquito bite the question a traditional African will ask is; why me? The spiritual angle to diseases is often taken into perspective. All forms of suffering such as sickness, epidemics, natural disasters are attributed to the influence of the supernatural powers (good or evil spirits) showing anger at human wrongdoings (Ezeanya, 1994, p. 19; Gbenda, 1997, p. 105; Mbiti, 1967, p. 171).

In trying to decipher the African traditional epistemological understanding of pandemics, it is also important to keep in view the African notion of destiny. Destiny (*fiyebobra*) refer to the "pre-natal chosen life courses or choices" made before you were conceived (Dime, 1995, p. 31). Whatever is happening in your life is your destiny. If you are struck by a pandemic it is a result of what has been predestined. Among the Yoruba, "...the end for which a person is made is inextricably bound up with his destiny. They believe that man's doing on earth have been predestined by Olodumare" (Idowu, 196, p.: 173). The belief in destiny runs through most African cultures (Dime, 1995).

In the traditional African worldview pandemics are essentially from the supernatural. Though perceived to be essentially supernatural, pandemics are to be eliminated. Human beings are not to accept their pandemic situation as it is or give up in their treatments. In the African worldview all things, plants, animals, objects carry vital force or power. Trees, plants, animals all carry spiritual powers in them. Through incantations and prayers, the spiritual powers in nature can be invoked to make herbs and medicine more potent. Human beings are to seek cure to pandemics/epidemics while invoking the power of the Supreme Being. Even when a sickness or disease is as a result of one's destiny, the person is not to fatalistically accept it and do nothing. "...the African diviner cum medicine-man can both diagnose it with his highly dramatic and magical revocatory rituals accompanied by the power of the words (incantations)... even though the future is already shaped, Africans believe it is pliable" (Dime, 1995, p. 37). To put an end to

pandemics/epidemics, appropriate purification rites and cleansing rituals, sacrifices of propitiation and reconciliation are carried out in order to remove the guilt or other causative agents, to clear the way for a brighter future” (Gbenda, 105).

To be kept also in mind is what Dime calls *Uvi-aye-abiyen* (curses you incurred from a previous life) (1995). Most African cultures believe in reincarnation. Whatever wrongs you commit in this life will be repaired in the next life on earth. Some sicknesses and diseases are reparation for the wrongs of the previous life. To be struck by a pandemic in this life may be reparation that the person is making to remedy his/her previous wrongs. There is also the belief that somebody can suffer from a pandemic disease as a result of the sins or evils committed by his/her forefathers or foremothers. According to C. C. A. Mbaegbu, evil and human suffering can also be as a result of moral evils committed by human beings (this is the cosmological optimistic perspective that sees God as good), or as a result of a person’s destiny, or arise from both a person’s destiny, some spirits or human action (the eclectic position) (Kanu, 2015). Kanu sees these positions as inadequate and proposes that suffering is part of the mystery of the universe created by a mysterious God and through suffering people can come to a deeper comprehension of the mystery (2015).

### **A Comparative Appraisal**

While there are various individual viewpoints and responses to the epidemic in *The Plague*, the predominant viewpoint towards which the novel tilts, is that of existential atheistic humanism. Through the main character of Dr Rieux the view is affirmed that God does not exist. If he does exist, he will be the one caring for the victims of the plague. Because he is loving and all powerful he should even prevent plague and suffering to his creatures. But because he does not exist, it is the responsibility of human beings to care for the victims of the plague. On the other hand, the African traditional epistemological viewpoint is that of theistic humanism. It affirms the existence of God. For various reasons as outlined above plagues and pandemics do exist in the world created by him. There is a divergence on the origin of pandemics/epidemics in the novel and African traditional epistemologies. While in the novel they are naturally occurring, in Africa there is the strong belief that they emerge from the supernatural realm. This paper agrees with the position that avers that pandemics/epidemics are naturally occurring and are driven by globalization factors such as rapid mass migration and expanding populations, urbanization, climate change, deforestations, changing patterns of interactions between human beings, animals and nature,

etc that foster the coming into being of microbes from animals and forest to humans (Gostin, 2018).

It is important to relate that the understanding of epidemics affects the response of people to it. If people believe that pandemics/epidemics have a divine origin they are likely not going to adhere to medical rules and laws as they tend to trust in prayers and divine intervention.

The current Ebola outbreak in West Africa clearly demonstrates that scientifically proven methods of combating the transmission of infectious diseases, if not culturally and religiously acceptable to a community, are likely to be resisted and rendered less effective. There is, thus, a need to investigate and align preventative measures with cultural norms and values of affected communities. Where there are incompatibilities between religious and cultural practices and prescribed scientific preventive measures, there is a need to widely consult and collaborate with traditional and religious leaders. We propose that, for effectiveness of community-based preventive programs, traditional leaders should be engaged and assigned important roles in monitoring and implementation of preventive measures against the spread of Ebola. (Manguvo & Matuvadze, 2015, p. 5)

In both the novel and African traditional epistemologies, human beings are not to remain docile and silent in the midst of human pain and suffering. In the novel the plague is tackled and confronted. In the novel, even the priest who perceives plagues as coming from God or permitted by him because of the failure of people to repent; joins the volunteer team in working to ameliorate suffering. In Africa when a pandemic strikes people do not accept their fate like that. Even when it is believed that the pandemic is sent by God or some spirits or reparation for a previous wrongdoing in a previous life or as a curse; people seek out the medicineman/woman or the traditional healer; consults with the priests/priestess and offer sacrifices or perform other rituals to avert the pandemic. The two worldviews are in conflicts with one another as to the source of the pandemics and plagues. Scientifically, a pandemic like Covid-19 and all other pandemics are caused by a virus. Scientific interventions and disruption in some aspects of nature may have led to it. The crucial point to be taken from the responses in both the novel and Africa is that pandemics are threats to human wellbeing, society and the cosmic order. Pandemics or plagues are to be confronted, fought, and eradicated. Pandemics are not to be tolerated.

You equally find the themes of solidarity, commitment and community in both the novel and ATE. In the novel, even those who initially were interested only in their private affairs, felt unconcerned by the plague, wanted to escape or remain aloof; eventually re-orientate their mindsets and come to join in fighting the plague. They move from the zone of their private interests to that of the public good. From individualism they move to that of radical community awareness. They make sacrifices of their time, talents, and resources to help the people of Oran recover from the plague. You can find these themes of solidarity and community also in the traditional African understanding of response to pandemics/epidemics. Traditional African epistemologies prioritised the community efforts and support. There was the philosophy and spirit of communalism. Whatever happens to one happens to one. When afflictions strike you see people coming to the help of one another.

In the novel in terms of seeking out a cure to the plague, the doctor through whom Camus presents his viewpoint of atheism sees the solution not in prayer to God, or gods or divinities but in medical science. The colleague of Dr Rieux creates a serum to cure victims of the plague though the serum proves ineffective in most cases. They put their hope and trust in medicine not in offering religious sacrifices and performing rituals. In African traditional culture they seek solution to pandemics by offering sacrifices and performing rituals. Though in many cases they do consult traditional doctors and healers and accept herbal treatments in combating pandemics. In both the novel and African traditional culture there are doctors who could be relied upon for a cure. In that of the novel they produce serum and rely on medical expertise to cure the plague. In African traditional culture, traditional doctors, medicinemen/women/healers do create mixtures from herbs to help those afflicted. Even when people offer sacrifices and perform rituals, they don't discountenance herbalism in African traditional practice. But it should be noted here that traditional forms of health and healing systems should be thoroughly probed and critically integrated into modern scientific medicine to ensure that things are properly done. Modern scientific medicine should also take into consideration the positive dimensions of African traditional medicine. If this is not done the danger always remains that some persons who are afflicted during epidemics consult some traditional healers who lack a full understanding of the etiology of illness and diseases and this have made some traditional healers to claim unfounded cures and put people lives at risk (Manguvo & Matuvadze, 2015 ).

The prevailing attitude that runs through the novel is that of nihilism and absurdism. Life is meaningless. Pain and suffering are part of it and all make

life meaningless. Death cannot be overcome. In African traditional epistemology, though there is pain and suffering, epidemics and pandemics, and death is inevitable; yet life is not seen as meaningless.

### **Conclusion**

The paper examined the two different understandings of epidemics/pandemics as presented in Camus' novel *The Plague* and in traditional African epistemologies. The paper noted that an epidemic is the occurrence of an infectious disease among a local population in an area, community or country. While on the other hand, a pandemic is an epidemic that has spread from a locality to many regions or areas in the world. A number of epidemics or pandemics from ancient times were mentioned. In relation to the perception of epidemics in the novel, it was indicated that through the major character Dr Rieux, Camus presented the understanding that epidemics are not from God or supernatural. He affirmed that God does not exist. The plague or epidemic has a natural explanation as it came from dead rats that were gathered together and this became a catalyst to spread a plague. Though human life is meaningless and life is an absurdity, men and women must struggle and fight pandemics, plagues and epidemics. Perhaps, it can be deduced from Camus that the meaning is in the revolt. The paper revealed from African traditional epistemologies that pandemics and epidemics even when they have a natural explanation were mainly seen as supernatural. They were either coming from God as punishment, reparation for a previous life, or arising from a curse, etc. Life still has purpose and meaning despite pandemics and plagues.

The paper showed that in both the novel and in African traditional epistemologies, plagues, epidemics, and pandemics are not to be accepted and lived with but they are to be fought and combated. There is pain and suffering in the world. This pain and suffering can come in the form of epidemics and pandemics. There will always be different understanding of pain and suffering in the world dependent on people's cultures, religious philosophies, cosmic worldviews, and even backgrounds. No matter people's understanding of pandemics/epidemics the fact remains that scientifically and from existential pragmatic paradigm, pandemics/epidemics exist in this world. They do have natural explanations even if some persons look beyond the natural. Pandemics and plagues are to be combated and fought with all that is available to the human persons through the wisdom of genuine orthodox medicine and also traditional medicine. The paper concludes that it behoves human beings with all their ingenuities to combat pandemics/epidemics. Nothing should be left unturned in the human quest

to conquer pandemics and make this world a more harmonious place for human beings to live.

## References

- Appiah, K. A., & Gates, H.L. (1996). *The dictionary of global culture*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Agbakwuo, J. O. (2013). *The African: His religion and cosmology*. Umuahia: Lumen Press.
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (2020). What's the difference between an epidemic and a pandemic.  
<https://www.britannica.com/video/215272/Top-questions-answers-epidemic-versus-pandemica>
- Camus, A. (1948). *The Plague*, trans from the French by Stuart Gilbert. Online
- Camus, A. (1955). *The myth of Sisyphus*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Camus, A. (1961). *The Plague*, Middlesex: Penguin Modern Classics.
- Dime, C.A. (1995). *African traditional medicine*. Ekpoma: Edo State University Publishing House.
- Ezeani, O. E. (2009). *Epistemology: An Introduction*. Abakaliki: WilyRose & Appleseed Publishing.
- Gbenda, J. S. (2006). *African Religion and Christianity in a changing world: A comparative approach*. Nsukka: Chuka Educational Publishers.
- Gostin, L. O., & Cathoir, K. E. (2018). Lurching from complacency to panic in the fight against dangerous microbes: A Blueprint for a common secure future. *Emory Law Review*, 67: 337-396.
- Jarus, O. (2020). *20 of the worst epidemics and pandemics in history*.  
<https://www.livescience.com/worst-epidemics-and-pandemics-in-history.html>
- Idowu, B. E. (1962). *Oludumare: God in Yoruba belief*. London: Longman.
- Igboamalu, P.T. (2016). *Okike: Intercultural review of religion, society and traditional values*. Enugu: Timex.

- Kanu, I.A. (2015). *African Philosophy: An ontological-existential hermeneutic approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Jos: Augustinian Publications.
- Kehinde, O. (2012). Epistemology as a branch of Philosophy. In F.M. Ndubuisi (Ed.), *Philosophy, Logic and Philosophy of Science* (pp. 43-53). Lagos: University of Lagos Press.
- Manguvo, A., & Mafuvadze, B. (2015). The impact of traditional and religious practices on the spread of Ebola in West Africa: time for a strategic shift. *Pan African Medical Journal*, 22(Supp 1) (9)
- Mautner, T. (Ed.). *The Penguin dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Penguin Books.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1967). *African Religions and Philosophies*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Mwaura, P. (1994). Healing as a pastoral concern. In *Pastoral Care in African Christianity: Challenging essays in Pastoral Theology*. Nairobi.
- Ubrurhe, J, O. (2001). *Urhobo traditional medicine*. Ibadan; Spectrum Books.
- Udefi, A. (2014). The Rationale for an African Epistemology: A critical examination of the Igbo Views on knowledge, belief, and justification. *Canadian Social Science*, 10 (3): 108-117. DOI: 10.3968/4445