

## From 'Koro' to GSM 'Killer Calls' Scare in Nigeria: A Psychological View

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I received a text message from a friend on 18 July 2004 informing me of the demise of her mother-in-law. Shocked and worried, I decided to call from a public phone booth since my mobile phone was low on credit. The call went through but unfortunately, all I got was silence from the other end. I tried again the next day, this time from my mobile phone and pleasantly got a prompt reply. After the usual condolence and words of encouragement, I complained about the unanswered call the previous day. I was jolted off my track with the following reply 'Sorry about that, I'm just being careful. I no longer attend to unidentified calls because I don't want to die a mysterious death'. Obviously, my friend was disturbed by the panic, fear and anxiety recently in the air over alleged 'killer' GSM phone calls reported in many parts of Nigeria. As the claim goes, receiving a call from some killer numbers result in the receiver going into spasm and vomiting blood to death. Across the city of Lagos were claims of many who had fallen victim, but no one has been able to say exactly where it happened or specifically identify any victim. It all remains a mystery. The police and also one of the GSM network operators, V.Mobile, which has been hard hit by the rumours, have tried to dismiss the rumour, for want of evidence. But the rumour still persists causing so much anxiety among GSM mobile phone subscribers. The situation is not being helped by some churches in Lagos, who warned their followers on the consequences of answering calls of the purported 'satanic' numbers. In Enugu, the eastern part of Nigeria, subscribers now fret over which calls to take and which to ignore, for safety, while many rushed to hospitals to confirm the state of their health, after the news of the killer GSM numbers and deaths. Members of the public are still debating on whether or not it is true, some say it is real, others insist it is a hoax while a good number believe that it is the invasion of the living by the dead and probably a sign of the 'end times'.

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The mystery surrounding the recent GSM scare could somehow be likened to that of the outbreak of 'vanishing' genitalia reported in Nigeria in the 1990s. Accusation of penis theft and disappearance was supposedly triggered off after an unsuspected or unwelcome touch from a stranger. This article therefore aims at revisiting the missing genital saga of the 1990s, which could probably aid in understanding the current GSM scare in Nigeria. Of utmost importance is the psychological view of the phenomenon with the goal of ultimately drawing lessons from past experiences, in order to be able to understand the present anxiety.

### 'Koro': The era of missing genitalia

Nigeria reported an episode of 'vanishing' genitalia in the 1990s, with most reports of attacks involving male victims. A typical scene on the streets of Lagos was aptly described below:

Men could be seen in the streets of Lagos holding on to their genitalia either openly or discreetly with their hands in their pockets. Women were also seen holding on to their breast directly or discreetly, by crossing the hands across the chest. It was thought that inattention would facilitate the 'taking' of the penis or the breast. Vigilance and anticipatory aggression was thought to be good prophylaxis (Ilechukwu 1992).

Accusations were reported to be triggered by incidental body contact with a stranger in a public place after which the victims would feel strange scrotum sensation and grab their genitalia to confirm whether they were still there. A woman in Lagos, for example was reported to have narrowly

escaped being lynched by an enraged crowd after a market trader claimed she had stolen his penis. The accused would usually be confronted, and accused of being a genital thief. The accuser would then strip naked to convince bystanders that the penis or breast was really missing. Many victims claimed that the genital was returned once the alarm had been raised, or that though returned, it had shrunk and so was probably a wrong one. The accused was often threatened, or in some cases, beaten to death by a mob.

This is a typical example of 'koro', in psychological parlance, a belief that the genitalia had been stolen, or that they had fatally shrunk into the body. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV 1994) reported that 'koro' is a culture-bound syndrome, characterized by an episode of sudden and intense anxiety that the penis (or in females, the vulva and nipples) will recede into the body and possibly cause death.

The word 'koro' is of uncertain origin but is thought to derive from the Malaysian word for tortoise, (sometimes locally used as a slang term for the penis), perhaps with a nod to the tortoise's ability to retract its head into its body. 'Koro' has a long and distinguished history. It was first mentioned in China (known there as suo-yang, shuk-yang and shook-yang or rok-jos in Thailand). Minor 'koro' episodes have seized parts of Asia at various times, including a well-documented 1967 outbreak in Singapore. Vanghan (2002) reported that many resorted to pegs, clamps and even a constant firm grip from concerned family members to prevent the member from vanishing entirely. The panic stemmed from the rumours that pork, poisoned from a swine fever inoculation, was causing genital shrinkage while another source attributed the phenomenon to the sighting of the beautiful Hu li Jung, a genital thieving fox spirit traditionally thought to wander the countryside in search of male victims.

Cases of 'koro' were also reported in America, Europe and Middle East while in Africa, it was reported in Benin, Ghana and Nigeria. Vaughan (2002) also reported that sufferers tend to show a couple of marked differences. While American, European and Middle Eastern persons believe that genital retraction tends to present more commonly in the context of mental illness, to African and Asian sufferers 'koro' is commonly related to the work of black magic and involves alleged penis theft rather than retraction. A medical case study reported in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, captured an incidence of koro resulting from a complication of depression, psychotic symptoms and heightened anxiety. The gentleman concerned was treated with mood stabilizing and anti-psychotic medication after which his penis-related concern abated. Researchers also suggest that 'koro' could be brought about by a combination of pre-existing worries over penis shape, anxiety and probably, a bad reaction to situational Cannabis use. 'Koro' was also reported after depression following stroke, in relation to phobia for AIDS, and after a brain tumour. In some cases, the individuals had heard about 'koro' before suffering it themselves, a belief perhaps triggered by the latter's unfortunate event.

The above argument portrays the universality of the 'koro' syndrome which manifests as a problem of a lone individual (from complications of depression, anxiety or drug use), or that of a fast spreading social belief that causes panic and momentary madness.

Good old Sigmund Freud theorized that the better part of a man's psychological makeup was predicated by a secret primal fear of having his genitals removed (Tull 1996). Freud's psychoanalytic theory posits that the phallic stage, about age three, is when children focus their attention on their genitals while the differences between male and female anatomy become more salient. During this stage, the primitive sexual urge of the boys becomes directed towards their mothers as part of their fantasies. The child develops castration anxiety when he senses that his father would be angry if he knows of his desires while the girls develop penis envy when they discover that their 'penis' (clitoris) is inferior to the ones possessed by the males (Freud 1940/69). Though this is not a popular view among

psychologists today, it is however not difficult to see how 'koro' beliefs may relate to many sexual anxieties and body dissatisfaction. While there is no evidence that 'koro' may be directly related to these disorders, it is easy to see how body concerns and anxieties could be incorporated in fuelling unlikely beliefs.

### Back to GSM 'Killer' call scare in Nigeria

The Global System of Mobile (GSM) Communication came to Nigeria three years ago, bringing with it so much convenience and prospects to the country. However, it appears that the joy is gradually turning into fear, panic and anxiety as many subscribers now view the possession of one as a burden of some sorts. This is due to the current belief that people are dropping dead after receiving calls from certain mysterious numbers. A supposed victim, who spoke to *The Guardian* on anonymity, claimed that the call that almost led to her death flashed the name of a close relation without numbers. She lamented:

On the first day the phone rang, I picked it and shouted 'hello! hello!' but did not get any reply. I was hearing strange noises at the background. The call came again at the weekend, when I picked it, I lost control completely. I don't know who is behind this and I don't want any problem. (*The Guardian*, July 21, 2004:13).

In a similar incident allegedly occurred in Maza-Maza area of Lagos on Sunday 18 July 2004. A young man in his mid-30s was said to have received a call from a number 017202127. Suddenly, he shouted, 'Blood of Jesus! Blood of Jesus!' before he collapsed. Sympathizers later revived him. *The Guardian*, (July 21, 2004), also reported the case of a company in Maza-Maza, Lagos with the following notice posted on its notice board to alert employees on the 'killer' numbers:

Please beware of these strange GSM numbers: 0801113999, 08033123-999, 08032111999 and 08025111999. In short, any number that ends with 333, 666, 999. They are killing! This is nothing but reality, you are warned!

The scare is currently generating a lot of controversy, with the less-impressionable minds asking the following questions: Which networks are these numbers pass-

ing through? While some wondered that, if there are many of these killer numbers around, many would have died or bound to die. Daramola, a telecommunications engineer noted that makers of Samsung, Nokia, Thuraya and others would have issued a red alert on this problem, if it were true. He thinks that the story is probably the handwork of some fraudulent people, and also wondered what is so special about Nigerian mobile phone users that faceless enemies would want to kill so many people. In a similar letter to *The Guardian*, (July 30, 2004), one Mr. Taiwo argued that it is possible for someone who had been ill to expend his last burst of energy talking on the phone. The fact that he or she dropped dead is not enough to say that the 'phone call' killed him. He therefore warned that people should learn to seek empirical proofs before rushing to a conclusion. On further lamentation, he observed that the 'killer GSM number' rumour has shown the depth (or the lack of it) of our understanding of technology and likewise observed that the numbers thrown about were not the same, while most simply don't exist. Some contain twelve digits instead of the eleven digits of normal GSM lines while others do not belong to any Nigerian Operators' network.

The Nigerian Police was also reported to have alerted members of the public over tactics adopted by some faceless and fraudulent persons who send threat messages through GSM calls to defraud the unsuspecting victims. They also observed that the syndicate uses a GSM telephone number 08011123999 to call unsuspecting persons threatening that they will surely die after receiving calls from the number. The Police assumed that the fraudulent people are traceable and that they would work out modalities through the Intelligence Unit to fish them out. Aaron Rezay, in another letter to *The Guardian* (August 2, 2004), noted that smart Nigerians, with their foreign collaborators may be experimenting on some techniques to beat the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) at their own game, by trying to access the various available networks through an unauthorized frequency. In so doing, there would be a violent audio reaction, which is caused by radioactive or hyperactive (abnormally active) sound. This in turn could cause a brainstorm (violent mental disturbance), which eventually may result in brain haemorrhage and profuse bleeding.

Mr. Awoyinfa, in an emotion-laden article insisted that the calls are real and are being made: 'He noted that the possibilities of science are endless, even made longer through fetish and occultic routes. Ignorance, he lamented, should not be an excuse, Nigeria is a country where anything can happen and usually does.' *The Guardian*, August 4, 2004.

So, what are we supposed to believe? Will it be tempting to assert that the GSM 'killer call' scare is a make-belief, exaggerated by bouts of mass hysteria and collective delusion. Could the development be explained scientifically or is their more to it? Perhaps, a psychological view to the phenomenon could aid in our understanding of this mystery and the awe surrounding it.

### Understanding the GSM 'Killer calls' scare in Nigeria

This recent phenomenon in Nigeria brings to mind the words of George Mackey; in *The Madness of the Crowd and Extraordinary Popular Delusions*, he notes:

We find that when communities suddenly fix their mind upon one subject and go mad in pursuit, then millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by new fallow more captivating than the first.

It seems that after the fever over contaminated Indomie Noodles experienced earlier in 2004 in the country, which resulted in cartons of the product being destroyed, Nigerians are now bedevilled with a more mysterious and bigger scare – the GSM 'killer calls' scare. A story of such magnitude, of course, requires at least, the following ingredients to thrive: unhappy and vulnerable people, enthusiasts and most importantly a supportive cultural environment. Nigeria seems to be in possession of the aforementioned ingredients. Inflation, uncertainty, poverty and unemployment are eating deep into the social fabric. People saddled with these avoidable difficulties are always on edge and could easily fall prey to hyper-arousal and catastrophising of simple everyday difficulties. While fear, anxiety and worry are normal human reactions to perceived threats, stressful environment predisposes a more distorted perception of threat.

Cognitive theorists for example, assert that anxious people tend to have distorted perceptions of the world around them. Cognitive model posits that the problem with anxious people is that they tend to misperceive or misinterpret internal and external stimuli and decodes what is not really threatening as the opposite. Similarly, in such individuals, manifestations of anxiety usually involve fear: (panic), body sensation (dizziness, fainting spell, increased heartbeat) and catastrophe (heart attack, insanity, death) (Beck 1988). Thus, the likelihood of such people manifesting physical and mental symptoms without an organic cause is quite high. This probably has a lot to contribute to the anxiety and claims of death surrounding the GSM scare. Hartfield (2000) rightly observed that people are most vulnerable to hysterical contagion when they are under stress and need a way out. Mass hysteria, he perceived as a causative factor in magnifying and sustaining a mysterious event.

It is also important to note that for a rumour to thrive, the facts must be shrouded in some sort of mystery and ambiguity. Rumours are capable of triggering hysterical feelings because they are hard for people to deny or refute, while the carrier tries to impress on the listeners by distorting the story or by implying that they have knowledge that the audience does not. Its most interesting feature is that it is usually anonymous in nature, leads to nowhere in particular and disappears when no longer topical. So, with the anonymity, mystery and ambiguity surrounding the GSM scare, it is not surprising the rumour is thriving well.

One way in which rumours and gossips sip out of a group to a larger audience is through the mass media – TV, radio, films, newspapers, magazines and more recently, mobile phone text messages. Worthy of note is the fact that such agents of communication may make the rumour more contagious by altering it in such a way that extraneous details are dropped and others exaggerated so that the message becomes clouded in mystery. This could be observed in the various artistic ways the GSM scare was reported in the national dailies - 'satanic calls', 'killer calls', 'doomsday calls' etc. Of course, the longer the 'epidemic' continues, the greater the audience needs to believe it is genuine and the harder the media tries to sustain the interest of the audience. This

suggests that the mass media may precipitate the spread of not just information and entertainment, but of emotions as well (Dewey & John Ries 2000).

There is certainly no doubt that the emotions generated by the recent GSM scare tended to be that of awe and excitement. Collective emotional outburst tends to bring drama and excitement into an otherwise monotonous life. This may provide a cultural 'time out', when people take a vacation from ordinary life. It may therefore, be tempting to wonder if this is what the current phenomenon has encouraged; a 'time out' from the stress and anxiety that Nigerians grapple with everyday to keep body and soul together.

When official explanation to a phenomenon is either insufficient or unavailable, people are likely to improvise their own, attempting through conversations to place an unusual event in its proper context. This tends to serve as a fertile breeding ground for what Bartholomew (2000), referred to as collective delusion. This could be described as characterized by spontaneous rapid spread of exaggerated beliefs within a population, temporarily affecting a particular region, culture or country. One is tempted to conclude that this is true of the present phenomenon in Nigeria.

If you are pondering over what I am pondering, it appears that Nigerians are gradually being coaxed into becoming 'Numerophobic' - fear of numbers. With the mass media, religious leaders, friends and significant others encouraging all that care to listen to steer clear of any number that ends with 333, 666 and 999, what more could the audience do but adhere. The claim is that they are demonic or killer numbers. Suffice to note that phobia, viewed as persistent and irrational narrowly defined fears are associated with a specific object or situation. Fear is not considered phobic unless persons avoid contact with the source of the anxiety (Oltman and Emery 1994). It is then obvious that a good number of Nigerians seem to be preoccupied with this 'fear' situation, with useful time and energy spent manoeuvring a way out of the situation. The side effect could result in social, economic, interpersonal and emotional difficulties. People are obviously making less calls, a lot of energy is spent brooding over which call to pick and which to ignore. Overall, the impact of this on socio-economic and political life

of Nigerians could be said to be quite significant, and totally unwelcome.

### Similarity in psychological reactions

A similarity could be drawn from the reactions generated during the era of the missing genitalia in Nigeria in the 1990s and the recent GSM scare. Both are clouded in mystery, while the excitement generated sprung up hysterical epidemics and collective delusion. Both events also shared similarities in their interpretations. A similar reaction ascribed to Mr. Adisa in his programme 'Labe Orun' on Murhi International Television (MITV) goes thus:

Those who do not believe the existence of the killer numbers run the risk of dying soon. Nigerians should beware of such numbers, but if you must receive all calls, you have to allow the caller to speak first before replying. Once this is done, you are free from the trap. But if you first say hello, you are gone for it (*ThisDay*, July 23, 2004).

Studies also indicate that 'Koro' (retracting genital) tend to present in the context of mental illness and use of psychoactive substances, and that, as opposed to African and Asian sufferers who believe that 'Koro' phenomenon had something to do with black magic. It is quite possible that the understanding of what is indeed happening with the 'GSM scare' in Nigeria, will have a more scientific explanation from a western point of view. An interesting letter credited to Mr. Taiwo written to *The Guardian* (July 30, 2004), asserts that:

for those who still prefer to be misled, a few lines of technical analysis may put their mind at rest. The telephone is a tele-communication equipment, with coded information being its strength. If this was not so, it would have been possible to perceive the odour from the mouth of the fellow at the other end of the line! To be able to use the phone as a vehicle for

distributing disease-causing agents would have required coding the complete DNA mapping of the agent, send the code down the phone line and decode and rebuild the agent at the receiving end. No telephone has been built yet with such a clearly futuristic capability, and none may ever be built that way because there is clearly no need for such an appliance.

What more can we say?

### Conclusion

The turn of the past and present millennium seem to have brought about in Western as well as in the Developing world, an outpouring of concern over unfamiliar events, all in a bid to maintain order and accord scientific explanations to such events. A major part of this concern, seems to have a hysterical flavour, specifically in imagining an-end-of-the-world scenario. As a way of placing the recent GSM scare into its proper context, experts observed that, it is impossible for anyone to die after calling or receiving calls from the said 'killer numbers', adding that it may probably be a de-marketing campaign of competitors. However, quite a good number of Nigerians believe that there are limitations to science and that the phenomenon is probably a sign of 'end times'.

Bizarre as the recent GSM scare in Nigeria may seem, it would be mistaken, to simply dismiss the phone scare as typical of a 'primitive and superstitious people.' Robert Bartholomew, the sociologist, also observed that industrialized societies have a much more complicated history of similarly unusual scare (Bartholomew 2001). For example, the hysteria triggered by the belief that Warminster was being over-flown nightly by Alien Space Ships in 1965, turned many into sky watchers, with many misinterpreting car head-lights travelling on local hills as UFOs (Tull 1996). It is then obvious that the excitement and awe surrounding a 'mysterious' event is very contagious and people are much more

likely to believe what their neighbours believe, than they would like to admit.

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