

Literature and the Battle against Covid-19 in Zimbabwe: A Study of Flight Mlambo's Digital Verse

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Abstract

This article evaluates the contribution of digital literature in the struggle against the novel coronavirus contagion, focusing on Flight Rufaro Mlambo's poetry of ChiNdeu and English expression. Since the outbreak of the disease in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, in November 2019, and its declaration as a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020, various efforts to combat the disease have been implemented at global, regional, national and institutional levels. Notable in this struggle has been the use of cyberspace to complement other non-digital fronts in fighting the seemingly elusive pathogen. Written texts, audio recordings, songs, drama and verse videos are among the multiple artistic forms posted online as anti-Covid-19 weaponry. Employing the "existence-as-war" theory, Mlambo's verse is evaluated against this context in which the efforts to suppress the virus are theoretically interpreted in real war terms. The war's antagonists pit governments and all local, regional and international partners on one hand and the virus, sceptics and denialists on the other. The article seeks to answer the following question: To what extent does Zimbabwe's anti-Covid-19 digital literature serve as effective weaponry against the stubbornly mutating lethal virus?

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel evalueer die bydrae van digitale literatuur in die stryd teen die nuwe aansteeklike siekte, die coronavirus, met die fokus op Flight Rufaro Mlambo se digkuns van ChiNdeu en Engelse uitdrukking. Sedert die siekte in November 2019 in die stad Wuhan in die Hubei-provinsie van China uitgebreek het, en die Wêreldgesondheidsorganisasie (WGO) dit op 11 Maart 2020 as 'n pandemie verklaar het, word verskeie pogings op globale, streeks-, nasionale en

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institusionele vlakke aangewend om die siekte hok te slaan. Die gebruik van die kuberruimte om ander, nie-digitale fronte aan te vul om hierdie skynbaar ontwykende patoog te beveg, is opvallend. Geskrewe tekste, oudio-opnames, liedjies, drama- en versvideo's is van die vele kunsvorme wat aanlyn geplaas word as wapens teen Covid-19. Die "bestaan-as-oorlog"-teorie word toegepas om Mlambo se poësie te evalueer aan die hand van hierdie konteks waarbinne die pogings om die virus te onderdruk, teoreties geïnterpreteer word in werklike oorlogsterme. Die oorlog se antagoniste durf regerings en alle plaaslike, streeks- en internasionale vennote aan die een kant aan, en die virus, skeptici en ontkenners aan die ander kant. Die artikel poog om die volgende vraag te beantwoord: In watter mate dien Zimbabwe se digitale literatuur teen Covid-19 as doeltreffende bewapening teen die dodelike virus wat onversetlik muteer?

Keywords: Covid-19; digital poetry; Zimbabwe; ChiNdau; coronavirus; pandemic; existence-as-war theory

Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus in China in late 2019 was succeeded by an accelerating global transmission of the virus, which saw the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring it a pandemic in March 2020. The virus, whose epidemiology was virtually unknown, caught all health systems unprepared. Even the comparatively sophisticated Western countries' health systems battled the virus with very little success. Thousands were infected while hundreds were dying on a daily basis globally. Regrettably, while these tragedies happen and governments impose a whole range of measures to reduce its transmission, many still resist such measures, arguing the violation of their constitutional rights. Among them are Covid-19 denialists and sceptics whose views and actions seem to aid the transmission of the virus. Cyberspace has emerged as one of the platforms to provide Covid-19 information to the public. While information about the virus is communicated in various forms, this article evaluates the recognition and effectiveness of digital literature in the global war against the coronavirus. Specific focus is placed on the young artist Flight Rufaro Mlambo's digital poetry, which can be found on major social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, ZBC News Online and WhatsApp. The following poems are analysed: "Coronavirus," "*Totizirawo kuri isusu adoko?*" ("Where Shall We Children Find Refuge?"), "*Coronavirus, iyo Covid-19 uh ... uhmm*" ("Coronavirus, That Covid-19 uh ... uhmm"), performed in her mother tongue ChiNdau, and "Come Great Deliverer Come." The article conceptualises all the global efforts to combat the virus as akin to real war situations and thus proposes the existence-as-war theory as its conceptual framework. The article argues that whereas digital art in its various forms is making a significant contribution in the anti-Covid-19 war, its effectiveness should be assessed against the success achieved so far and the proliferation of counter digital information that tends to promote denialism and scepticism.

The Existence-as-War Theory

While this theory can be applied universally and historically, it is more relevant to the global challenges of the late twentieth century and especially the twenty-first century in which pandemics and the effects of climate change are more prevalent. Although the Covid-19 pandemic is not a “random accident or a scourge” but a pandemic occurrence that “has happened before, and it will happen again” (Giordano 2020, 3), its difference from previous ones is perhaps the fact that it is happening in the context of climate change. Research now demonstrates that there is a link between climate change and pandemics. Global warming destroys ecological systems, threatening pathogen hosts and causing their relocation and that of micro-organisms (El Hamichi et al. 2020). The onset of the twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented acceleration of complex changes in human and animal lives owing to both natural and artificial causes. Climate change effects, disease pandemics, (civil) wars, and fundamentalism, among others, have left individuals, families, nations and indeed the whole globe largely insecure. As a result, humanity is constantly on the fighting front, in a state of war against the effects of climatic phenomena and the spread of dangerous pathogens. In spite of significant strides in science and technology in the twenty-first century, humanity’s chances of being wiped from the face of the earth have perhaps never been more imminent. The climate change-pandemic/epidemic nexus will perhaps intensify more interest in the study of epidemics and pandemics. Contagions do not exist “in some separate medical paradigm” and should not be left solely to the inquiry of medical scientists, but “are integral to every aspect of life, death and society” (Phillips 2012, 9) and should therefore also be subjected to scrutiny from the perspective of the humanities. Contagions, as Covid-19 and other large-scale contagions have demonstrated, temper with society. They “accentuate many features and beliefs present in society, as well as [...] accelerate processes already underway therein” (Phillips 2012, 10), thus requiring a holistic interdisciplinary approach.

Regrettably, these existential wars have no predictable end. Who can guess when the wars against climate change and the coronavirus will end? Even scientists cannot. What they can do, however, is prescribe a string of measures to counteract the dangers of adverse weather phenomena. For the Covid-19 pandemic, they have prescribed sanitisation, social distancing, masking up, lockdowns and vaccination. Healthcare workers are advised to always wear personal protective equipment (PPEs) while at work. At the governmental level, lockdowns are being imposed to prevent human movement and gatherings, which increase human contact, a highly favourable condition for the crowd-loving virus. While these efforts are being implemented, recent scientific knowledge informs us that some of the effects of climate change are now irreversible. The high frequency of veld fires, storms and floods indicates runaway climate change, while disease epidemics similarly indicate human vulnerability to runaway lethal pathogens. Humanity is now in perpetual warfare with the vagaries of Mother Nature, some of which we know, thanks to scientific research, it has been complicit in causing. Normal wars are not fought forever, because at some point the feuding sides negotiate

for a ceasefire and eventually sign a truce to end the war. This is not the case with climate change and contagion wars, which so far have seen no ceasefires signed. In reality the wars have just begun, let alone being waged in disunity.

Real war devastates humanity in all spheres, leaving indelible psychological scars. Wars rob people of their freedoms and force them to join armies in defence of homelands or ideological persuasions. So have the war against the coronavirus and other wars fought against equally lethal contagions such as the Spanish flu (1918–1920), the cocoliztli epidemic in Mexico and Central America (1548–1548) and the ongoing battle against HIV/AIDS. In the past we have known wars in traditional terms as those involving armies and soldiers using assortments of weaponry and strategies in the hope to defeat the enemy. Despite others condemning the ruthlessness of war, wars still persist. We live in various contexts in which our distinct identities, interests, geographical, spiritual, political and other spaces and resources are constantly perceived to be threatened by other nations and institutions with different or hostile identities and interests. Although in theory humanity can live in sustainable perpetual peace, reality shows that this is not possible owing to the antagonistic differences in identity, interests and aspirations. Humanity is thus engulfed in the spirit of war even in the so-called peaceful times. The Roman military expert General Vegetius's statement, "If you want peace, prepare for war" (Gill 2019), succinctly summarises humanity's inextricable intertwinement with war.

Perhaps because pestilences have affected society at the individual, familial or epidemic levels, battles against them have not caused much trepidation, fear and pessimism. The reality that some contagions such as Covid-19 can affect hundreds of millions, invade nations, kill millions and threaten to wipe out communities, implies that such a contagion is an "enemy" to human life and its interests. As Giordano (2020, 7–8) confirms, "the virus doesn't care about us, our age, gender, nationality, [and] personal preferences," but classifies us "into one of the three categories: the Susceptible, those it can still infect; the Infected, those it already has; the Recovered, those it can no longer infect." While of course this is not a physical but a biological enemy logged and multiplying exponentially and aggressively in the human body, the fight against it requires human, financial and spiritual resources and "weaponry" just like in a typical war. Like armament industries, pharmaceutical industries are some of the biggest industries, and they manufacture drugs, the weaponry needed to wage anti-pathogenic wars. Naturally, health workers are the soldiers in this war who come face to face with pathogens, sometimes contracting diseases and dying. As of May 2021, the WHO "estimates that at least 115 000 health and care workers have paid the ultimate price in the service of others" (Euronews 2021). It is for this reason that doctors in some countries such as Kenya, Colombia, France, the Philippines and Zimbabwe embarked on strikes calling for adequate and suitable PPEs.

The continued spread of the virus has resulted in a critical a shortage of healthcare staff, a condition that led to governments deploying soldiers to assist health workers with

treatment and vaccination work as well as the enforcement of lockdowns and curfews. For that reason, in his song “Covid-19” the philosopher-cum-satirist and Zimbabwean popular singer, Hosiach Chipanga (2020), observes this unprecedented reality in which a disease has to be fought through the deployment of the security forces. He attacks Covid-19 as a *gandanga* (terrorist) par excellence because it requires the deployment of the army and police when other diseases can be addressed by medical doctors, traditional and faith healers alone. The same applies with the battles against the effects of climate change. Armies are deployed to help with rescue efforts among people affected by floods and veld fires. Perhaps the most unprecedented aspect of wars against the effects of climate change and indeed the coronavirus pandemic is the fact that health workers and disaster management professionals alone cannot constitute armies strong enough to fight their enemies (disease, fire and floods)—they require assistance from not only the army but the entire population. Even children are not left out. Mlambo’s activism follows in the footsteps of the Swedish teenage girl Greta Thunberg who held the world spellbound by her anti-climate change message. World leaders, particularly of superpowers, need to be on the same page in addressing global challenges.

The Arts and Contagions in Africa

In P’Bitek’s (1986, 39) view, “art is the most direct vehicle; a special language spoken by the clan called artists” to shape the consciousness of their community. In African artistic traditions, the artist is expected to help address community challenges. Achebe (1998, 45) sees the essential role of literature in society as that of “education” from which “the writer cannot expect to be excused.” The writer has “to help us get on our feet again” (45). The African artist is seen as an advisor, philosopher, educator, seer and sage by their community. As Mlambo’s verse illustrates, this function of literature is still expected in the digital age. African artists are thus perpetuating the traditional role of literature and other arts through exploiting digital technology for communication purposes. Short films, stories, verse and drama videos now feature on both social and mainstream media, communicating what their producers consider appropriate and effective information to help fight the pandemic. In a typical war situation antagonists employ (counter-)propagandist strategies in their attempt to gain support and win the war. The arts are quite instrumental in this endeavour. The beauty and seductiveness of art are marshalled to lure people to rally for a common cause. As P’Bitek (1986, 39) observes, artists entice their audience to the values of society “by the sweetness of [their] song, and the beauty of [their] works.”

The use of art in combating diseases is not new in Zimbabwe or indeed globally. In the clan praises of the Rozvi people (a sub-group of the Shona people identified by their totem of *Moyo* [the Heart]) it is said *VaRozvi vakapera nhenda muDzimbahwe* (The Rozvi people [were] decimated by diseases in Dzimbahwe) (Hodza and Fortune 1979, 224, 227). Shona totems and totemic praises date back to the mythical *Guruuswa* period, the ancient times of Shona history. Disease epidemics obviously affected them to the point of nearly wiping out the entire community because the tragedy was immortalised

in their clan praises. In post-colonial Zimbabwe, artists have contributed significantly to the anti-contagions wars, particularly against HIV/AIDS, which was first diagnosed in the country in 1986. Commissioned by the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or working on their own volition, individual and group artists produced literature and music depicting the spread and destructive impact of the disease and later how the disease should be managed to enable positive living and also combat stigma. In music, Kenneth Chigodora's song "*Shuramatongo*" ("Pandemic") (1993) and Thomas Mapfumo's "*Mukondombera*" ("Pandemic") (1991) are cases in point. In the coronavirus context, we see popular musicians taking the lead again. Zimbabwean artists and media professionals collaborated under the banner "Artists: This is Corona" and produced an informative video on the dangers of the virus called "Artists vs Corona: We Will Beat This" (2020). In March 2020 the Zimbabwean dancehall artist Ras Caleb also released a musical video, "*Zviratidzo zvenguva*" ("Signs of End Times") (2020), for the same purpose. African students at Liaocheng University in China produced a music video called "War against Covid-19," which had, at the time of the writing of this article, over 67 000 views on YouTube. The title of their song conceptualises efforts to suppress the disease as war. In literature, texts that include Goerge Mujajati's plays *Yorire ngoma* (1997) and *Zinyekenyeke* (1997) and Virginia Phiri's *Highway Queen* (2010) assisted in disseminating information and education about the dangers of HIV/AIDS. Modern artists are therefore perpetuating an age-old artistic tradition by which art is not merely for entertainment but for weaponisation to combat tragedies befalling humanity.

Digital Literature and the War against Covid-19 in Zimbabwe

One unique feature of artists is their ability to adapt to technological and other changes in society to ensure the continuation of their work. When the first Covid-19 case was announced in Zimbabwe on 20 March 2020, the government went on to introduce a three-week lockdown beginning the 30th of the same month. Citizens were supposed to adhere to the WHO prescribed Covid-19 protocols and guidelines. However, the novel coronavirus disease was received with the same attitudes and sentiments as HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s in Zimbabwe that included denialism, scepticism, misinformation and disinformation. As in typical warfare, a refusal to acknowledge the existence of the war and evidence of enemy infiltration is quite dangerous. It gives the enemy time to gain a military foothold while his opponent dilly-dallies in disunity and ignorance. It is, inter alia, this disinformation and misinformation that digital literature intends to tackle.

Although most Covid-19 literary texts being written await publication, some artists have taken advantage of online publishing because it is a much quicker platform to disseminate ideas. Armed with smartphones, artists such as Mlambo can produce their creative work and disseminate it with little difficulty. Poetry is so far the most prolific literary genre being deployed digitally in the battle against Covid-19 in Zimbabwe. This is because the genre is easy to compose and always short enough to be quickly

memorised and performed for online posting. Besides, the solo performance the poet conducts perfectly adheres to protocols of social distancing. The issues raised in the poems demonstrate that Mlambo is an activist artist in the war against this elusive virus. She expresses the nature of the virus and people's mood in the context of the new normal—confusion, vulnerability, frantic efforts to combat the disease, illness, death, the global nature of the contagion and disruption of human life.

The Effectiveness of the Poet's "Military" Tactics

To assess the effectiveness of Mlambo's poetry, we need to interpret how she understands her enemy and identify the kind of (literary) ammunition she deploys against her targets. In the poem "Coronavirus" (2020b) she describes the impact of the disease, including disruption of learning at schools, colleges and universities. She proceeds to attack her target, the coronavirus, through exposing, deriding and demonising it. The poem ends on an optimistic note: "*Hino tinoambuka iwewe uripo ukhauye!*" (We will overcome right in your presence and humble you!). The poet instils hope and confidence in the people in their current efforts to combat the disease. In real warfare it amounts to literature and performance that motivates soldiers to fight on. The title of the poem identifies the enemy from the outset; it is not any other virus but the coronavirus. The disease it causes is rightly identified as Covid-19. She personifies the virus, equating it to a human being; "*Iwe Covid-19 ... !*" (You Covid-19 ... !). She implies that like a human the virus has a conscience. To her, Covid-19 chooses the negative side of conscience. In spite of their logical justification, sometimes wars are evil. Personification further helps to explain the fact that the virus has real human collaborators fighting on its side, sceptics and denialists. These are its front runners of disinformation and misinformation and spreaders too. They also exploit digital technology in the same way the poet does. This makes the poem a *bembera* (oblique criticism) in that while the artist attacks the virus, she also indirectly attacks those who deny its existence and those against protocols and guidelines to combat it. However, from the "existence-as-war" theory perspective, this is a *nduri yehondo* (war poem).

The seven-year-old artist proceeds to distinguish herself from her enemy. Her first name, "Flight," suggests the army rank of flight-lieutenant, which perfectly suits her role as a commissioned officer in the air force division. Her second name, Rufaro, which translates to "Happiness," can be taken to symbolise optimism in this coronavirus war whose end should restore the happiness of the pre-virus era. The green school uniform she dons in the three poems recited in ChiNdau can be interpreted to symbolise military fatigue or a green revolution, the war against climate change and pandemics. This can be contrasted with the navy blue tracksuit she is wearing when reciting a poem in English, thus visually shifting the mood of the poet from militancy to capitulation. The salutation of the poem is both national and global, addressed to "*mbhuri yeZimbabwe*" (the family/nation of Zimbabwe) and "*mweshe mwakayaeya detembo rineri*" (everyone listening to this poem). It signifies the national and global nature of the spread of the virus and its effects—it has destroyed lives as well as national and global economies.

She also gives the terrain from where she is launching her battle, south-eastern Zimbabwe, and the linguistic weaponry of ChiNdau language at her disposal. Due to its high mutual intelligibility with the Shona language, Shona speakers in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in the world can understand her poems. Her use of English in the last poem is intended to spread the anti-Covid-19 war message to a much broader audience. Her tender age and skills in eloquence and performance add to the appeal of the poems.

Mlambo's tender age implies the innocence of childhood, which is thus contrasted with the wanton mercilessness of the coronavirus. Her second poem "*Totizirawo kuri isusu adoko?*" ("Where Shall We Children Hide?") (2020c) brings this technique into more prominence. Children were considered safe when the coronavirus pandemic started. Those post-60 years of age and those with comorbidities were at high risk. However, as more knowledge about the disease emerged, the poet laments the vulnerability of children as well. The technique generates empathy with the child poet, helping her message to be taken on board. Perhaps the most potent technique lies in her acceptance to fight in the anti-coronavirus war whereas in real wars the use of child soldiers is illegal under international law. However, the coronavirus war is total warfare. Children have to mask-up, practise social distancing and sanitise regularly in spite of earlier perceptions that the virus does not seriously affect children. That the poet is a girl child also indirectly conveys the plight of young girls being abused, impregnated and forced into marriage and other countless abuses during the new normal era. As UNICEF (2020) predicted in March 2020: "Hundreds of millions of children around the world will likely face increasing threats to their safety and well-being—including mistreatment, gender-based violence, exploitation, social exclusion, and separation from caregivers—because of the actions taken to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Nevertheless, after identifying her enemy, the "girl-soldier" proceeds to assess the nature of the destruction the virus has caused and its consequences. In any war situation this is critical, because it gives an indication of the enemy's strength and helps to determine the magnitude of the response and specific military tactics to be employed. Indeed, the enemy is unprecedentedly strong. Within a few months the virus had spread globally and inflicted heavy casualties. In the poem "Coronavirus" (Mlambo 2020b) the poet observes:

*Chinguri wakathlaya kurikitisa hama neshamwari dzedu
KuChina, Italy, Spain, UK, America, South Africa*

(It has been a while since you began brutally killing our relatives and friends
In China, Italy, Spain, UK, America, South Africa)

Governments responded through the implementation of the WHO protocols and guidelines as initial weapons. They then introduced lockdowns and advised the public to mask-up, sanitise and practise social distancing.

Zvikora, makoleji, mayunivheziti, mafekitari nemachechi,

*Kuri kupandisa masoro easharukwa eanthu,
Kuthlabanga ngewako mutombo.*

(You cause elders and everyone to crack their heads,
Thinking about the drug to cure you.)

Some governments' enforcement of Covid-19 guidelines and protocols to ensure every citizen participates in the war has unfortunately been excessive. The police and sometimes the army have beaten, killed and arrested innocent people. Although Mlambo appears silent about this issue, her overall stance concerning the fight against the coronavirus advocates unity between government and citizens. It is for this reason that she identifies her collective audience from the outset, emphasising the collective approach to the war. The poem "Coronavirus" (2020b) is addressed to "*mbhuri yeZimbabwe*" (the whole Zimbabwean family/nation) and "*Totizirawo kuri isusu adoko?*" (2020c) is addressed to "*madhodha, madzimai, arumbwana, ndombi, hundumure, neanthani eshe*" (men, women, boys, girls, toddlers and everyone else). Therefore, state brutality against citizens during the war against the pandemic has no room in the juvenile artist's war strategies.

The poet also expresses a heightened anger against the abnormalities engendered by the virus to human life. She chides the coronavirus relentlessly in typical war discourse in which the enemy is demonised and described as inhumane. The rhetorical question "*Auzwi ngei?*" (Why are you so stubborn?) appears four times in the poem while in total there are 15 rhetorical questions the poet marshals. The questioning signifies the poet's conviction against enemy injustice. The unprecedented reality the pestilence has ushered in has triggered fear, anxiety and death. In Giordano's (2020, 12) view, while the exponential spread of the virus is a "behaviour that does not surprise scientists," it "can shock everyone else," generating fear in the process. The following lines in the poem "Coronavirus" (2020b) are examples of this repeated questioning:

*Igumo rei reunotionesa Covid-19?
Auzwi ngei mani Covid-19?*

(What kind of reality are you forcing us into Covid-19?
For God's sake why are you so stubborn?)

The artist views humans as victims of this callous virus that is so cruel it chooses to attack humans rather than dangerous reptiles.

*Kuramba wakati nanga nanga nesu anthu
Weisiye nyoka dzakati penu kudzara munyika munomu*

(You relentlessly pursue us, humans
And leave alone the so numerous snakes in this country?)

The enemy's evil behaviour has no parallels except with the devil. On that basis the poet fires the salvo "*Nxaa, Sathani! Tibvire apa nxaa!*" (*Nxaa, Satan! Get away nxaa!*). The exclamation *nxaa* expresses disapproval and anger.

In "*Totizirawo kuri isusu adoko?*" (2020c) the poet laments the suffering experienced by school-going children in the new normal. The poem begins to shift the poet's mood from the earlier combative and confident one in "Coronavirus" to a melancholic and pessimistic one, as will be seen again in "Come Great Deliverer Come." While war affects everyone, its effects can be felt differently by those of different ages and genders. Women and children are always the worst victims of war and conflict. With respect to Somalia, Gardner and El Bushra (2016, 1) state that among other war effects on women and children, war has resulted in female illiteracy, early and forced marriage, high levels of infant and maternal mortality, increasing rape cases, diminishing health services, poverty, displacement, malnutrition and economic, social and political gender inequality. Children's loss of education, entertainment and vulnerability to abuse are Mlambo's concerns in this poem. Covid-19 has caged children and there is no escape. In a war situation it is like living in an enemy-besieged city.

*Tinosarawo ere isusu ana adoko nyamwaka?
Totizirawo kuri?*

(Will we young children survive this time?
Where shall we find refuge?)

As in "Coronavirus," the poem is punctuated with rhetorical questions. The poet poses many critical questions whose answers she cannot find. The most painful issue to imagine is when the pandemic will end. Children have become nostalgic about their scintillating school experiences. They miss their teachers, classmates, friends and sporting activities.

*Zvikora, chinguriyo zvakakonywa,
Tingadei teifunda zvakahleeka neanthani,
Teitamba hedu iwee, chamutambarare, ...*

(It is a long time schools were closed,
We could be learning with others,
Playing *chamutambarare* among ourselves, ...)

School time in Zimbabwe has room for children to play traditional games such as Chamutambarare. The name of the game is derived from the ChiNdau verb, *kutambarara*, which means to "live pleasurably." The learning pleasure of childhood is sadly lost. Online learning has been embraced under lockdowns, but its challenges are that it relies on other variables such as reliable internet connectivity, computers or smartphones, availability of money to buy data and reliable power supplies. The new digital learning system largely benefits learners of rich parents and excludes the majority

of learners from poor backgrounds. A livelihoods assessment done by the 8th Zimbabwe Vulnerability Committee in December 2020 reported that only 19% of children in urban schools have access to remote learning (Ncube 2021). The effects of the pandemic on learning are grave considering it excludes children who live in rural areas where access to remote learning facilities is dismally low.

The home environment is no longer friendly to children. Lockdowns have reduced children to idleness, with some parents having to stand in for their teachers. In the same poem, Mlambo (2020c) bemoans children being forced to go and fetch firewood and water, work in the fields and clean the house:

*Tiri pambhatso, chekubata wee apana
Kwai ende kuhuni, enda kusawa*

(While at home we are just idle
Now they [parents] say, go fetch firewood, go fetch water)

Perceptions regarding what constitutes child maltreatment vary because of socio-cultural beliefs that determine what is considered tolerable and intolerable treatment of children (Gracia and Herrero 2008, 1058). However, giving children work that deprives them of their education and entertainment or is more taxing than their physical and mental strength allows becomes abuse. In Zimbabwe and the rest of the world, cases of domestic violence, including sexual abuse, shot up as family members stayed together for too long. As in real war, rape and forced marriages are used as weapons of war. In the coronavirus war this scenario is re-enacted with similar consequences. Therefore, Mlambo decries the horrendous experiences some children are being subjected to during the new normal.

The poet also makes a tactical shift from the physical to the spiritual front. She contemplates if she could imitate baby Jesus's biblical flight to Egypt as an escape from the coronavirus war. Unfortunately, she discovers the strategy is a non-starter and with difficulty the poet comes to terms with the painful reality of the ineffectiveness of this strategy.

*Asi kutizira Egypt kani kwakatizire Jesu akaponereyo?
Vaperawo ndiyo Covid-19.*

(Maybe escaping to Egypt where Jesus fled to and survived is a good strategy?
Covid-19 is also decimating them.)

The situation is complicated by the reality that the coronavirus is an invisible enemy. It is only seen in medical laboratories through special digital technology and microscopes. The virus is presently the king of the world as it changes its camouflage and identity through mutation, evading all weaponry used against it. Its only constant identity is that of being shaped like a crown, hence the moniker, "Corona." In the poem "*Coronavirus*

uh...uhmm!” Mlambo (2020a) clearly delivers these devilish connotations. She describes the virus as “*muthakathi wemene*” (the real witch). Witchcraft is the most feared evil in African religion. The exclamations *uh* and *uhmm* imply doubt and suspicion. With lockdowns restricting people’s freedom, it appears the virus is imposing its own laws on humanity, becoming the world’s de facto ruler. The true God’s crown symbolises power to bring deliverance. What sort of a crown (divine power) brings unlimited suffering? To the artist, the enemy is thus the devil himself or his incarnate, and it is an enemy that has to be rejected and fought:

Ndosaka ndichiti, inini hangu Coronavirus uh ... uhmm!
Andidi kana kumboiona.
Ndiyo ere Corona yetinoemba mukuwo weshe weshe techiti:
Kana tapedza kushanda tinopiwa Corona, ...?

(This is why, myself, I say Coronavirus uh ... uhmn!
I don’t want to see it.
Is this the Corona [Crown] that we always sing about saying:
When we accomplish our work we will be crowned, ...?)

The poet suggests that the contagion crown is an antithesis of the spiritual crown that is bestowed upon a believer upon the accomplishment of the spiritual race as articulated in the Christian hymn, “*Kupiwa korona*” (“To be Crowned”). She consequently rejects Covid-19’s crown because it betrays believers’ expectations of a divine crown and its influence in their lives. The phrase “*ngaidarike hayo*” (may it pass on) evokes Christ’s passion prayer in the garden of Gethsemane in which he pleaded with his Father to let the cup pass from him.

Despair compels the poet to her strategy on the spiritual battlefield:

Kahle titizire hedu kuna Iye Musiki Mwari wedu
Unodaidzira emene kuna Mateo 11 vesi 28 echiti:
“Uyai kwendiri imwimwi mweshe munoremba”

Dangani tingaponawo isusu adoko.

(Possibly, we can take refuge in him the Creator, our God
Who calls upon us all in Mathew 11 verse 28 saying:
“Come, all of you who are tired,”

Maybe, we might survive, us the children.)

Many people in various parts of world, particularly in Africa, where religion strongly influences people’s interpretation of the universe and their coming to terms with catastrophes, have surrendered their fate to God as the virus infects and decimates millions. In addition, religion plays a key role in the psychological dimension of war where dying in the name of the religion is seen as martyrdom and is rewarded with

paradise. The difference between Mlambo's use of religion in the war against the coronavirus and actual war is that she uses it as a source of refuge and not an inspiration to continue with the war. Although young children flee to God because their parents and elders cannot protect them, that strategy is not completely effective. The word "*dangani*" (maybe) in the last line of the above extract expresses this fact. This turns Mlambo's vision modernist.

In the last poem "Come Great Deliverer Come" (2021) Mlambo projects a pessimistic vision and there is a modernist tinge in her imagination. The title of the poem is an imitation of American hymn-writer, Fanny J. Crosby's (1820–1915) hymn "Come Great Deliv'rer Come." Borrowing a title from as far afield as America could suggest the universality of the war against the coronavirus since its impact is universally similar. The United States was one of the worst ravaged countries by the Covid-19 pandemic which, from the poet's view, also requires deliverance. However, in this poem, there is a sense that the poet feels helpless, defeated and abandoned in the face of Covid-19:

Where are you when your people die like nothing?
I look for you everywhere ...
But cannot find you ...

A modernist unease is also invoked above in the persona's ironical appeals to a seemingly unconcerned God in search of rescue for the contagion-ravaged humanity. The poet also deploys rhetorical questions again: "Don't you care if we die?"; "Where did we go wrong, Oh Mighty God?" The questioning tone is both reminiscent of the twentieth-century modernist sense of helplessness felt in times of catastrophe and war and culturally with Ndaou (African) religious beliefs. In African religious practice people are empowered to question or reprimand the spirit world when they fall into complex tragedies. God and the ancestors (*vadzimu*) are there to protect the living. As a result, Mlambo's question is justified, especially considering that people have done and are doing everything possible to fight the virus, but to no avail. The question, "So where did we go wrong?" implies that God is not on the side of the people in the anti-coronavirus war and thus highlights, in a bleak way, the ravaging effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Zimbabwe and the rest of the world. However, despite Mlambo's doubt and lack of confidence in the spiritual strategy, she still reserves some faith in God, whom she showers with epithets: "Mighty God," "Our Creator," "Father of Nations," "The Precious One" and "Great Deliverer."

Conclusion

The article sought to evaluate the young poet Flight Mlambo's Covid-19 verse. It was noted that her poetry is a significant contribution to the various strategies employed to combat the highly lethal and transmissible coronavirus. Her four poems analysed are all in digital form, which is an effective platform to fight Covid-19, and reflect on the WHO and government protocols and guidelines enforcing lockdowns and requiring people to practise social distancing, to sanitise and to avoid other socio-economic activities.

Mlambo is among the pioneer artists to employ digital literature in the fight against the novel coronavirus in Zimbabwe and is arguably the first to use verse for that purpose. Her poetry is best classified as war poetry by virtue of its weaponisation against the elusive virus. For that reason, the existence-as-war theory was adopted as the conceptualisation framework for the study. The young poet also displays a fascinating understanding of the coronavirus epidemiology and shows the effectiveness of her digital verse in mobilising people against the virus. It was also noted that Mlambo's poetry shifts from its original combative and confident tone to a defeatist one that has resonances of modernism. Thus, having been disarmed by the so far tactically superior virus, she shifts her battle front from the physical to the spiritual terrains to confront the Creator and plead for divine intervention, which unfortunately has not shown any indications of coming. Finally, the article also underscores the way crisis conditions such the outbreak of Covid-19 open avenues for the production of literature that becomes circulated in new forms, such as digital platforms, and hence calls for further research on the implications of the role and effectiveness of digital literature in addressing local and global challenges.

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