

THE NEW NORMAL

Elizabeth Dwamena-Asare (Ghana)



It's another dull Monday afternoon. Welcome to Madina Market, which is, as usual, garnished with filth and polluted with deafening noise from a concoction of loud music booming from speakers, and shouts from street advertisers and traders. Today, the atmosphere is decorated with red dust. Roofs of shops and windows of parked vehicles are coated with thick layers of brown earth. *Trotros* and taxis are stuck in unmoving traffic, honking noisily at one another, and emitting harmful gases into the air. The stale air is also flavoured with stench emanating from a refuse dump where a concerned citizen stands akimbo, holding a bottle of petrol and a box of matches, ready to set it ablaze. The smoke from the burning waste will infuse the already polluted air and permeate the noses and clothes of passersby, causing them to move swiftly as they guard their noses with handkerchiefs, and with the hem of their clothes.

The Harmattan season has bowed out. Smiles and hope have embraced the faces of residents in *Accra*, who couldn't bear the dryness in the air, and the cracking of lips and soles of the feet. Although many had sacrificed a percentage of their incomes to purchase and store large amounts of *nkuto*, it is currently of no essence as the Harmattan was not as severe as expected. It however will be kept in anticipation of the next Harmattan season. The only thing no one could still not fathom was why nothing seemed to have changed after its exit. Many are earnestly waiting for the rainy

season to come, unfortunately, there has not been any positive sign yet. The farmers are the most worried.

Tilling the stubborn soil was difficult as it refused to yield much. No rains meant that the crops would not thrive, leading to little or no harvest.

Nii, a thrifty young man, left the city at the start of the season as life was tough. He'd chosen to try his luck at job - hunting in the Savanna region while visiting his grandmother. Unfortunately, his employment search was fruitless. He appeared gloomy as he raced over his thoughts, wondering what the future held for him. As the car he sat in moved slowly towards the Madina Market, he noticed that nothing had changed although he had been gone for a couple of months.

Loud coughs and sneezes could be heard from different directions. Remnants of the Harmattan winds on the people. By the roadside, stood a heavily pregnant woman spitting on the ground right before the entrance to the bus station. And just a few meters into the station comfortably sat a half-full *trotro*. The driver, in a blue t-shirt with *suro nipa* written on it, was comfortably seated behind the steering wheel sneezing every few minutes without any form of nose covering. This was despite the warning that there was a new virus roaming in town. The passengers began to murmur, wearing uncomfortable looks on their faces due to the driver's actions. They had been warming the seats in the bus for close to an hour. An unexpected heatwave from the sun visited them periodically, as they impatiently waited for the driver to start the engine once the remaining seats were occupied. Nii shook his head as he watched the scene outside the *trotro* parking lot in the bus station.

There was a long queue of buyers lined up at *Hajia Kande waakyè's* joint. Although the popular food seller is stationed just across from the market's public restroom, the line is building by the minute. Notwithstanding her location and nasty attitude toward her customers, she still has them flocking to her little eatery since her cuisine is widely regarded as the most delectable in the area. A drinking bar adjacent to her is open from dawn to dusk. The bar, which is filled with the odor of booze and sweat, is primarily frequented by an aging bunch of drunkards. On some days, they would drink to bury their sorrows, but on others, they would party and pass out at the bar.

The heat is intense. Skins turn violet as people jostle and hurry to and fro. The sun's rays hit hard on moving vehicles and the reflection cuts through the brown-and-white shells of numerous eyes busily trading under the scorching sun. It seems the rain has hibernated, for there was not even a drizzle. Sweat trickles down the faces of passersby soaking their clothes. The intense heat scorches the feet of *kayayie* carrying babies on their backs while balancing aluminum pans on their heads. They turn in various directions, trying to spot their would-be affluent clients shopping for foodstuff. For them, every day is a case of the survival of the fittest.

Nii's thoughts are drowning him out as he examines the market scene. His thoughts return to the day when the newly elected Member of Parliament vowed to transform Madina into Monaco. He'd just learned that the MP's pledge was a sham. Another ploy by a politician to sway the hearts of his constituents and get his votes.

Regardless of the harsh weather condition, there are lanky children with emaciated skin playing around the main *Borla* at the exit of the market. Of course, their hands will comb through the refuse dumps

and gutters before they're dipped into unbalanced meals after the day is over. The majority of these children have nothing better to do with their days than walk the streets. They live in the lowest areas and cannot afford to attend school. Their self-imposed occupations include impersonating the station's drivers and begging from the well-to-do on the streets as they pass by regularly. Unfortunately, not everyone is eager to accommodate them, and for others, they are a nuisance.

Just around the *borla* where the children are playing, there is a poor old woman with flesh dripping off her face, melted by age. She painfully bows her fragile body to collect pure water sachets in the market as a means of livelihood. Now and then, she shuts her mind to her body screaming for rest, and keeps working to earn an income relevant to her survival. People watch as she carries a big sack filled with empty sachets from the incinerator to the nearest recycling point. She will trade it for cash and buy herself a meal for the day. Nii reflects as he alights at the Ford bus station that this is a normal market day in Madina.

He weaves his way through the mob, his black wallet securely tucked under his right armpit. His other hand was tightly grasping his backpack while hanging on to his Nokia 3310 phone. He keeps an eye out for burglars that prowl the streets at all hours of the day and night. It is common to be mugged in broad daylight at Madina Market, and he is not prepared to be a victim.

Nii has a notion as he makes his way through the crowd at Madina Market. Last night, while watching late news, the newscaster mentioned a new virus that was fast spreading throughout the world. As a result, the government was putting in place safeguards to protect its residents. Will the administration keep its word? The

bulk of the population lived in slums, while some were homeless. What would happen if the virus struck without mercy?

‘Ye-es...! Circ, Circ, Circle! Kanesh, Kaneshie!’ shouts a bus conductor.

Nii dashes towards the vehicle and hops inside. He is fortunate to have gotten the last available seat, which is rather uncomfortable. The seat features an annular bearing that connects his nose straight to the conductor’s stinky armpit. However, it is preferable to put up with it for a time than a stroll in the blistering heat.

In the moving vehicle, the radio is switched on. Passengers pay attention as the government, as usual, informs its residents about the *new normal* for which they should prepare.

“*Eiiih!* It means we will all die.” an older woman panics attracting murmurs from both literates and illiterates.

“They say, our bodies shouldn’t touch each other, hmm!” another adds as she tries to keep her distance from the passenger seated next to her.

“And they say it is called *Kofi 19*. It is the great ancestor of *Ebola*,” a gentleman speaks in jest.

“As for me, it won’t catch me oo! I am covered by the blood of Jesus,” the driver adds while making the sign of the cross.

“Mate, *Okponglo* bus stop!” a slay queen dressed in flamboyant colours with overdone makeup yells from her seat as she noisily chews on a piece of bubble gum.

When the slay queen disembarks, a herbalist carrying his dusty bag filled with his wares boards the bus. When the slay queen disembarks, a herbalist carrying his dusty bag filled with his wares boards the bus. He begins selling his medicinal herbs shortly after the bus departs.

“This particular seed is found only in Israel,” he begins. “If you chew it with coconut water, sickness will *flee* from your system forever. It is locally called *Nsiah*. Your body will be purged and you will have diarrhea continuously for a week. It will clear all the parasites from your body. In the process, it can cure over two hundred diseases – even diseases which have not yet been discovered,” he says as he looks at the faces of his potential customers.

The bus conductor smiles and shakes his head while muttering under his breath. He doesn’t trust the herbalist’s advertisement of the potency of this herb, nor does he like the fact that some passengers are patronizing it. He stares at the herbalist with disdain and asks him, ‘Can your herb cure the new virus in town?’

The herbalist first collects his money, then responds, “Oh yes! It can. The *FDA (Food and Drugs Authority)* has approved this herb for the treatment of all diseases.”

The herbalist alights at the next bus stop. He has thrown dust into the eyes of numerous passengers and successfully convinced them to buy. Mission accomplished!

Everyone fears death. No one ever feels ready to die. So it lays its icy hands on many unexpectedly – both the rich and the poor alike.

A lockdown was imposed a fortnight following the revelation of the country's first reported case. Several businesses came to a halt. Layoffs from employment were commonplace. A huge number of individuals reported symptoms of the new virus and were picked up for testing at regular intervals. Unfortunately, after they tested positive, they never returned.

Only healthcare professionals and military personnel were spotted outside of residences. Even the mentally ill patients, who were normally dressed in scruffy clothing and roamed the streets, were no longer visible.

Does anyone know where the world is headed? Is this virus real? The thought of waking up to unpleasant news sends shivers down the spines of concerned citizens.

Can we blame calamities that show up and so unexpectedly strike us? Do the young ones have a future? Of course, they do! However, it is one fraught with uncertainties and every soul must brace itself for better and or, for worse.

To avoid acquiring the virus, health professionals repeatedly reminded residents to strengthen their immune systems by eating nutritious foods, practicing excellent personal cleanliness, keeping a clean environment, and breathing in clean, fresh air. When they opted to leave their homes, every soul was required to wear a face mask, which many regarded as uncomfortable. The cost of necessities skyrocketed. However, the enormous increase in the cost of hand sanitizers and face masks made them impossible to purchase and use for the average citizen, so they turned to home cures.

Nii sits still in his bedroom, his face pensive. He fixes his gaze on a section of his wall, adorned with plaques and accolades from the Tertiary Football Club. The remainder of the wall is covered

with quirky paintings by a well-known James Town artist. As he reflects on his day in Madina Market, a great sorrow comes over him, and he wonders if the people will survive this fight. The market was strewn with dirt, and when the rains fell, the ground became clogged, resulting in floods that lasted several days.

‘Will people survive this deadly virus? Is there hope for survival? Does the government possess enough resources to fight it in all boldness? What if the majority of the youths are lost to it? What if no one manages to do business ever again? How will parents and guardians feed their young ones? How will the homeless cope? What about the orphans and street children?’ fear wells up in his throat as he questions no one in particular?

The grim expressions of the military personnel parading the streets are enough to convey how serious the lockdown is. Anyone who breaks the rules is dealt with — without question!

Nii sighs and shakes his head. He has worries about the government’s ability to care for its citizens. Fear overcomes him as he recalls how his entire family was moved to a separate facility after testing positive for the virus. The rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins and arteries sends him flying like lightning.

At dawn, he sneaks out of his neighbourhood shielded by the heavy fog which blinds the military men parading the streets from spotting him. Moving quietly through an unidentified path, he periodically ends up in vast artificial holes in the ground. He intends to cross the border into a neighboring country and seek asylum. He will return once everything has normalized. The road he takes is shrouded in dismal darkness, with no fireflies to illuminate the way. The region is filled with the quiet of the tall trees that appear

to be spying on him, creating an uninterrupted hush. Nonetheless, he remains unfazed.

Nii arrives at the Ghana-Togo border on the third day of his journey. As he fixes his gaze on the signage, he flashes a boyish grin. His delight lasts only a few seconds before he notices military officers patrolling the border.

‘How will I cross over?’ he thinks to himself.

He dips his hand into his pocket and feels the bundle of cedi notes – his life savings to commence life afresh in another country. That might be his passport to cross the border. He marches towards the military guys, his duffel bag on his shoulder, his confidence restored.

“Hey! Stop!” he hears an order.

He becomes terrified as a result of this. His voice has been trapped in his throat. He instantly raises his hands in submission and carefully turns around, looking for the direction from whence the order was echoed.

“Where are you off to?” a military commander in shades asks. His hands are tucked into his pocket.

“Togo, Sir,” he answers briefly, stealing glances in different directions.

There are other Ghanaians, busily trying to manipulate the military men to cross the border.

“Are you a Togolese national?” the commander asks.

“Yes, Sir,” replies Nii.

“Passport.” the commander says while stretching his hand towards Nii.

‘Missing, Sir.’ He replies.

“Liar! *Vous parlez français?*” the commander inquires in French searching the young man’s face.

Nii is at sea. He cannot speak basic French to save his dear life.

“Very well!” the commander responds as he signals another officer to join them.

“Okay, okay.” Nii who has finally found his voice says, “I am a Ghanaian but I am crossing over to Togo. Officer, I have money. Take it.” He shoves the bundle of fresh notes into his hands.

The military commander smiles and says, “You may cross, but you do so at your own risk.”

“Thank you Sir!” he salutes and walks excitedly towards the border gate. If only he knew what awaits him.

Nii passes through the border town before boarding a bus bound for the main city. He is confronted with an unexpected scenario — the country’s position has deteriorated. There is disarray and mayhem everywhere. The community was in shambles due to a conflict and the problem of Covid-19. The rebels have taken control. Women are weeping for their husbands and children, who lay dead

like fowls on the streets. Children appear despondent as they hunt for their parents.

“He-ey!” a young rebel yells.

Nii’s heart skips a beat, and he begins to run. Provoked by his actions, the rebel, aided by his companions, pursues Nii and ultimately captures him. He is unable to understand their language and is imprisoned in their camp to prevent him from fleeing. The independence he desired has vanished. Was it worth leaving his homeland for a foreign land where he was welcomed with such a cold treatment?

If he could only see his family once more. What if they had been sent home after the required 14-day quarantine period?

Nii awakens at midday two days after his incarceration, feverish. He coughs hard and feels his head, which has a high fever. He’s smoldering. His nostrils are congested, and he is struggling for air. His face is masked by lingering shock, and his sunken eyes appear forlorn. Had he been infected with the virus without realizing it? Thoughts of death invaded his thoughts, but he sought to avoid the unpleasant facts, which proved fruitless. He lowered his head and sobbed in remorse for his deeds. Wouldn’t it have been better to deal with the new normal at home instead?