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How pan-African media helped Madagascar advance its claim of a COVID-19 ‘miracle cure’ as a form of medical diplomacy

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Abstract

Madagascar attracted global media attention in April 2020 when President Andry Rajoelina announced a plant-based tonic that he claimed could both prevent and cure the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19). By then, the global outbreak was proliferating and the scientific community was in a race to find a solution. Rajoelina claimed the remedy, named Covid-Organics, had been



tested and proven effective, and that the product was an African formula that would save the world. Leveraging medical diplomacy theory and aspects of information manipulation, this essay looks at the international communication and international relations implications of this development. Following analysis of global and pan-African media coverage, it is deduced that Covid-Organics has helped Madagascar extend its soft power and changed the way the country is covered in international news. There are indications that the Malagasy president and his 'miracle cure' could last longer on the international news agenda than we imagine.

Introduction

In April 2020, while the rest of the world was grappling with the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) and the scientific community was still battling to come up with a vaccine or cure for the virus, Madagascar seemed to have found the magic wand. In the capital Antananarivo, in a ceremony covered extensively by the media, President Andry Rajoelina officially launched a herbal tonic as both a preventive and curative remedy for the coronavirus. The plant-based medicine was the latest formulation of the country's Malagasy Institute of Applied Research (IMRA), which focuses on medicinal plant study. The 'miracle cure', branded as Covid-Organics, is a cocktail of two key plants – *artemisia annua* and *artemisia afra* – which are widely grown in the southern African nation and have been known to be effective in the treatment of malaria. By the time Madagascar was rolling out Covid-Organics in April 2020, the country had registered 121 cases of the virus, but with no deaths.

Rajoelina, the biggest promoter of the herbal remedy, has since leveraged the 'miracle cure' to foster medical diplomacy to his country's advantage and, by extension, attempted to boost Madagascar's national image – that of a country keen and able to offer the world a ready-made solution to a seemingly unstoppable pandemic. Madagascar has often attracted global media attention for being severely stricken by the adverse effects of climate change. The majority of its population endure difficult living conditions and it is one of the world's poorest countries, with 75% of its 25.6 million people living on below USD 1.90 a day (World Bank 2016).

However, the island country does not want to be known for its widespread poverty. Even though Covid-Organics has turned out to be controversial, the country is arguably bent on gaining worldwide prominence by offering it as an African solution to a global problem. If this is so, then it can be said that Madagascar has made some gains. As English-born American interdisciplinary philosopher Kenneth Boulding (1959) pointed out: 'The images which are important in international systems are those which a nation has of itself and of those other bodies in the system which constitute its international environment.' Beyond Africa, Madagascar's Covid-Organics has received attention in the West, where researchers at Germany's reputable Max Planck Institute, with collaboration from their peers in the USA and Denmark, moved to examine the efficacy of the herbal tonic (Max Planck Institute 2020).

Covid-Organics as a tool of medical diplomacy

Besides seeking a solution to the devastating coronavirus, Rajoelina has been keen on using the 'miracle cure' in furtherance of the country's medical diplomacy – a form of soft power. Medical diplomacy is an essential mechanism in international relations. Though there is no generally accepted definition of medical diplomacy, according to Jewayni (2014), the term refers to 'a multi-level process that involves international stakeholders and local organizations that are aimed at improving healthcare delivery by exporting medical equipment, expertise and human resources to those who need it most'. Jewayni (2014) is of the belief that medical diplomacy can be used to fix strained relations between nations or facilitate negotiations. Pioneers of the concept like Joseph S. Nye, Jr. see medical diplomacy as a form of soft power which helps in 'achieving desirable influence through attraction and cooperation', as opposed to the use of force (Nye 2004).

Following the launch of the herbal tonic, Rajoelina stressed: 'The Covid-Organics will be distributed free of charge to our most vulnerable compatriots and sold at very low prices to others.' However, the country has dispatched hundreds of thousand doses of Covid-Organics to countries that have shown interest in it, including Nigeria, Tanzania, Comoros, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Congo and The Gambia (Obaji 2020, Wion Web Team 2020, *Al Jazeera* 2020). Most of the medical consignments have reached their beneficiaries with the inscription 'With love from Madagascar'. Public diplomacy theory would contend that media coverage of the medical gift will shape favourable attitudes towards Madagascar in the beneficiary countries. And in all of this, some pan-African media organs have played a crucial role in promoting the 'miracle cure'.

The launch of Covid-Organics raised a lot of curiosity and concern. It also sparked controversy and orchestrated international issues. Madagascar's 'miracle cure' attracted unprecedented global media attention, in addition to local coverage by state-owned *Télévision Malagasy (TVM)*, *L'Express de Madagascar* and *Madagascar Tribune*. Covid-Organics has been widely covered not just by the continent's leading news organs like the Nation Media Group, the SABC, *The Mail & Guardian*, Africanews, Voxafrica, Afrique Media, but also by UK's *The Guardian* and *Economist*, the USA's *CNN* and *Wall Street Journal*, China's *China Daily* and *CGTN*, France's *Le Monde* and *France 24*, Russia's *RT*, Germany's *Deutsche Welle* and a host of news agencies like Reuters, Xinhua, AP, dpa, AFP, etc. This has had serious international communication implications.

Thanks to pan-African media, the formulation of the herbal tonic as a remedy for COVID-19 provided an opportunity for Madagascar to advance its public diplomacy on the health front. And since desperate times require desperate measures, several African countries placed their hope in Madagascar and requested a supply of Covid-Organics. Madagascar accepted, consolidated and maintained the status of saviour for its African neighbours. Paradoxically, its own health system is about 80% supported by foreign countries, aid agencies and international nongovernmental organisations (Kadetz 2020).

Covid-Organics, which claimed to have the potential to cure COVID-19 in patients in just 10 days, did not receive wide acceptance beyond Africa as a breakthrough in medicinal research. From the onset, Madagascar started receiving applause from those who believed in the potency of the herbal tonic until the World Health Organization (WHO), the agency charged with directing and coordinating international health within the UN system, declined to endorse Madagascar's 'miracle cure'. In a 4 May statement by the WHO Africa Region, the body, citing specifically *artemisia annua*, insisted that any plant-based cure for COVID-19 must go through thorough clinical trials, as is done in the West. According to the WHO, 'many plants and substances are being proposed without the minimum requirements and evidence of quality, safety and efficacy'. The WHO, implicitly referring to the Madagascan case, then warned people against consuming untested COVID-19 remedies as these are harmful and provide a false sense of security.

The WHO's public bashing did not go down well with Rajoelina, who unleashed a conspiracy theory in order to counter the censure, maintain his 'saviour' position, continue with his medical diplomacy and keep Covid-Organics orders flowing in. The Malagasy president claimed that the WHO was dismissing the remedy simply because it had not originated from the West. He has held firm to his stance that the agency's refusal to approve Covid-Organics is a well-calculated conspiracy to denigrate Africa as a continent that is unable to find its own cure to the coronavirus. In an exclusive interview with Perelman and Boisbouvier (2020) of *France 24* and *RFI* respectively, Rajoelina said there would not have been so much doubt if the medicine had been discovered by a European country. The president vowed that no one – not even the WHO – will stop Madagascar from moving forward with Covid-Organics, as his country had found the formula to save the world.

This narrative, which to some extent created resentment against the WHO, was widely picked up by social media enthusiasts and even traditional media in some African countries. Supported by some continental media organs like *Tanzania Perspective*, Rajoelina's conspiracy theory went viral worldwide and gained traction as proponents argued that the reaction of the West to discoveries on the continent helped kill African ideas. That no country in the West has made a request for Covid-Organics has helped to shape the conversation and worked in Madagascar's favour, as African countries continued placing orders for the herbal tonic and Africans continued to consume it.

As pan-African media continue to spread Rajoelina's narrative and criticism of the WHO for demonising Covid-Organics, they are inducing many people to overlook the scientific basis of the herbal remedy. By 15 June 2020, two months after Rajoelina announced the herbal tonic which was distributed door-to-door on the island, Madagascar had registered 1,290 coronavirus cases, with 10 deaths and just 384 recoveries (Worldometer 2020). The country is yet to produce any evidence that Covid-Organics works against the virus. It conducted a trial of the herbal tonic on less than 20 people in under three weeks, which falls far short of the minimum requirement in standard science practice. Furthermore, the way Madagascar packaged its information about the Covid-Organics is problematic. Globally accepted standards require that after a vaccine or cure is identified, it must undergo rigorous laboratory testing, and then clinical trials in three phases (WHO 2004). This often takes a

considerable period of time – about 12 months or more – and involves hundreds of people to ensure the medicine’s effectiveness and safeness. But the Covid-Organics trial is yet to go through these phases. The University of the Witwatersrand lecturer of governance William Gumede argues that such scientific and evidence-based solutions are considered Western colonialism, and thus resisted by Africans. ‘Under the rubric of fighting decolonization, every African problem or solution to a problem is wrongly often positioned as either Western-originated, and therefore to be rejected; or African-originated and therefore to be embraced’ (Gumede 2020).

Rajoelina’s determination to exercise soft power by forging ahead with the continent-wide distribution of Covid-Organics as a tool of medical diplomacy led to the manipulation of information, both deliberate and not deliberate. A case in point is the 14 May 2020 edition of *Tanzania Perspective*, which carried the headline: ‘WHO offered \$20m bribe to see Covid-19 medicine poisoned – Madagascar President’. The newspaper claimed that the Malagasy president in an interview with *France 24* had confirmed that the WHO had tried to bribe him. Indeed, Rajoelina did grant an interview to *France 24* and *RFI*, but at no instance did he talk of the supposed bribe attempt. Malagasy authorities dismissed the media report as false. The WHO, for its part, said no such attempt was made and blamed distractors for the disinformation.

Furthermore, other attempts at distorting news of varying degrees have been inspired by Rajoelina in his quest to push through his country’s ‘miracle cure’ for COVID-19. For instance, it was widely reported by bloggers that Madagascar had quit the WHO while calling on other countries to do the same. However, at the time that this ‘fake news’ was being disseminated, Madagascar was still listed as a member country on the WHO website, and the country had just ascended to the WHO’s executive board. Other misleading, if not incorrect, claims related to Covid-Organics that have gained global media prominence include: President Putin’s admission to having requested a million batches of the ‘miracle cure’; the WHO’s endorsement of Covid-Organics; and US President Donald Trump’s offer of \$2.5 million to support the development of the herbal tonic. All these have been in an attempt to get Covid-Organics to be viewed favourably in the media.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the outbreak of the coronavirus and the subsequent discovery of Covid-Organics as a potential cure was a turning point for Madagascar in international relations and international communication. For a long time, prior to COVID-19, global media coverage of the southern African country had largely focused on its endemic poverty and political instability. But, for better or worse, Covid-Organics has shifted the conversation.

Rajoelina’s propagation of the idea that the West was condescending towards Africans has raised much interest, as well as concern. Proponents of the herbal remedy have

engineered the publication of positive articles about it, while skeptics have supported negative coverage. This has created confusion that could deny the world the truth about Covid-Organics and created disinformation and misinformation on both sides – those who are for it and those who are against it. The one thing that remains true is that pan-African media have aided Madagascar in its attempts to use its herbal tonic against the coronavirus disease to further its public diplomacy.

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African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19

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The series is a partnership of Wits University's Journalism Department, the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) and the Africa Portal, a project of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).



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Photo credit: Madagascar's President Andry Rajoelina drinks a sample of 'Covid-Organics' at a launch ceremony in Antananarivo on 20 April 2020. (Rijasolo/AFP via Getty Images)

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