

A Virus Became a God: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Religious Legitimacy Crisis in Africa

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Abstract:

Discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa have mainly focused on measures taken by the government and international bodies to combat this deadly virus. Little attention has been paid to the fact that these initiatives put into question the authority and influence of religious leaders and institutions. This is especially the case in Nigeria where religious leaders wield enormous powers and influence; where pastors and Imams/sheikhs lead mega-churches and mega-mosques. This presentation explores the steps taken by the government to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and how religious leaders and institutions reacted to these measures. The paper argues that contrary to the notion that religious traditions are unchanging in their nature, in the face of crisis, as seen in the COVID-19 pandemic, religious institutions innovate, and device ways, means and mechanisms to adapt and survive.

Keywords: covid-19, pandemic, religion, Islam, medicine

Introduction: Then Came COVID-19

This article brings a Nigerian African perspective to the topic and conversation on Religion in Times of Transition: The Case of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa. The outbreak of the coronavirus disease has orchestrated enormous crisis across the globe, triggering worldwide panic and anxieties over the future and survival of human beings. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the fragility of human life, the transience and ephemerality of existence and possibility of human extinction (Supriya 2021). Put differently, the pandemic has created situations and circumstances congenial to taking a leap of faith, forging mythologies and deploying transcendental accessories to make sense of existential adversities and mundane vulnerabilities (Kurtz 1974 pp. 18-19).

Projections have been made about the devastating impact of the disease (Ghosh et al. 2020; Cilliers et al. 2020), and a likelihood that the virus could lead to catastrophic let-the-dead-bury-the-dead scenes in places like Africa, parts of Asia and Oceania where weak health infrastructure exists. Although, these armageddonic forecasts have yet to materialize, the pandemic has resulted in massive loss of lives, and means of livelihoods, extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition (Chriscaden 2020). The disease has created a new normal and has changed the way human beings live, relate and interact (Carrick and Bushanan 2021). COVID-19 has disrupted the African religious enterprise (Boakye Agyemang 2020); it has altered how Africans worship, pray and conduct rituals. This is especially the case in Nigeria.

Why Nigeria?

Nigeria, with a population of over 200 million persons, is the continent's most populous nation. According to a BBC survey, Nigeria is one of the most religious nations on earth (BBC, 2004). The survey says that many of those interviewed said that they prayed regularly, believed in God and were ready to die for their religious beliefs. Although, Nigeria's religious demographics are disputed (Campbell 2020) and adherents of other religions including traditional religionists, atheists and humanists exist in the country, Christians and Muslims constitute the dominant population. The country is said to have an equal number of Christians and Muslims (Ayandele et al., 2021). Nigeria's religious pedigree makes the country the regional epicenter of Christianity and Islam.

Religious observance is widespread and intense. Worship centers dot the nook and cranny of urban and rural areas. Nigerians regularly attend prayer meetings and religious ceremonies in churches, mosques, temples and other worship centers. They consult their pastors, imams, traditional priests, prophets and prophetesses before making major life decisions. The country has megachurches and megamosques, which host thousands worshippers. In addition to being places for congregation, religious centers fulfill humanitarian, socio-economic and psycho-moral functions.

Religious leaders wield enormous influence in the everyday life of people. In fact, it has been stated that Nigerians trust their religious leaders more than the political elite (Ayeni 2020); they are more likely to listen and believe the clerics than state officers (Ayandele et al., 2021). Thus in times of crisis, Nigerians often turn to religious institutions for leadership and guidance, answers, solutions and assistance. In a country where social security systems are virtually non-existent, religious organisations provide social support for millions of citizens. Religious establishments are health/medical centers. Nigerians attend religious ceremonies to access supernatural healing and miracle cures for various ailments, or as Christians would say, to consult “Dr Jesus.”

Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

Popular and academic literature has noted the link between COVID-19 pandemic and religious manifestations in Nigeria, indicating how the perception and representation of the disease has been shaped by religious beliefs (Ndinojuo 2020; Ossai 2021). Existing research has emphasized the conflicting roles of faith-based organisations in tackling the COVID-19 disease, suggesting that belief in God has influenced the perception of the virus and the vaccines (Ayandele et al., 2021). While faith based organisations and other religious agencies have been critical in addressing public health emergencies related to Ebola and HIV/AIDS, religious leaders have also impeded efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic (Okoye and Obulor 2021; Ayandele et al., 2021). In addition, religious establishments have been involved in providing food and cash supplies to families and communities during the lockdown (Okoye and Obulor 2021).

It is important to note that while existing knowledge has highlighted the reactions of religious establishments to the COVID-19 outbreak, little is known about the legitimacy crisis occasioned by measures taken by state institutions to tackle the pandemic. The coronavirus forced the government of Nigeria to take drastic measures that affected religious establishments and activities. The COVID-19 guidelines impugned religious authority and imperiled the religious political economy.

Curtailement of a Pandemic

The Nigerian government announced a lockdown and guidelines for the containment of the spread of the coronavirus in March 2020. The lockdown took immediate effect in Lagos, Ogun and Abuja, and was later extended to Kano and then other states. Incidentally, Lagos, Ogun, Kano and the Federal Capital Territory are locations of some of popular worship centers, including the country’s megachurches and megamosques. For instance, the headquarters of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, popularly known as the Redeemed Camp, The Faith Tabernacle’s Canaanland and Dunamis International Gospel Center are located in these areas. The lockdown required people to stay, study, work and pray from their homes. Places where people used to convene to socialize, such as hotels, drinking bars and restaurants, schools and universities, public parks and religious houses were closed (Ibrahim et al. 2020).

The government also prohibited social gathering of persons above 20 in number. Following the prohibition, churches and mosques where thousands of people gather to worship and pray were compelled to convene meetings of not more than 20 worshippers. At these religious events, attendees social distanced, wore face-masks and avoided body contact during meetings as usually the case during prayers and worship. Churches and mosques became deserted places, and scantily populated during services (Orjinmo 2020).

Locking down Religions: From Mega to Micro-churches and Mosques?

The lockdown and other measures taken by the government to contain the pandemic led to a crisis of faith (Muhumuza 2020) because these initiatives limited religious activities and sidelined religious experts and institutions. Clerics draw their power and influence from the faith of their members, which is expressed at regular meetings and worship. Restriction on social gathering impinged on the expression and exertion of faith; it yielded a diminution of belief in the men and women of God, as servants of God or God’s spokespersons who use their teachings to nurture the faith of their followers and deliver the goods of healing and salvation. The prohibition denied religious leaders of the space and audience to assert and exercise their authority. In addition, measures to contain the pandemic led to a decrease in physical church and mosque attendance turning mega-churches and mosques into micro-worship centers. More importantly the lockdown and restriction on religious gathering led to a reduction in the flow of funds and income. Religious leaders and institutions depend on financial contributions and seeds of faith (Akabike et al. 2021) that members sow during services and ceremonies to finance their activities and businesses. Thus, as the lockdown lingered pastors and other religious leaders became desperate and started campaigning for a relaxation of the measures to curb the spread of the virus. In the light of the enormous impact on religious political economy, clerics and religious institutions

responded in various ways.

“Teacher said no corona...”

Many religious leaders opposed and resisted measures that the government put in place to stem the spread of the virus. Some muslim clerics dismissed COVID-19 pandemic as a form of western deceit and propaganda (Daka 2020). One cleric claimed that COVID-19 pandemic was a plot to depopulate Muslims and a conspiracy to stop Muslims from performing their religious duties (Hoechner 2020). Thus some of the clerics and their followers engaged in religious activities in defiance of the directives from the government. In a particular instance, some young Muslims demonstrated and chanted in support of a muslim teacher’s position stating that COVID-19 was a hoax: “*Malam Yache Babu corona, muma munchai Babu corona*” which means “Teacher said no corona, we also say no corona” (Alao 2020).

The exclusion of religious institutions from the list of providers of essential services incensed some religious leaders. Some clerics proposed that religious houses should be treated like banks, hospitals and grocery stores, as essential-service-providers. One of Nigeria’s foremost megachurch leaders and general overseer of Winners Chapel, David Oyedepo equated the shutting down of religious houses to closing down hospitals (Alao 2020). Apparently, Oyedepo wanted church leaders to be accorded the same treatment as medical doctors and other health workers.

Another televangelist, Apostle Suleman of the Omega Fire Ministries urged the Nigerian government to allow men and women of God with the gift of healing into the isolation centers so that they could go and heal the COVID-19 patients (Inyang 2020). From his appeal, the exclusion of faith healers undermined efforts by the government to tackle the disease.

Furthermore, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of the Christ Embassy declared COVID-19 as the greatest cover up in history; he attributed the outbreak of the disease to the introduction of 5G technologies, anti Christ and the End Times (Ossai 2021). I was told that some Muslim clerics in Kano conducted prayers and organize events in violation of COVID-19 protocols. According to my informants, social distancing does not align with Muslim mode of praying because Muslims do not leave any spaces amongst themselves whenever they are praying. In fact some make sure there are no spaces in between their legs because if spaces are left during prayers, the devil would occupy them.

In addition, not all mosques complied with the restriction on religious gathering. I was informed that while mosques that were located along the main streets in Kano complied with the ban and restrictions on social gathering, others did not.

Mosques located off the main streets continued to conduct prayers as usual. And in order to avoid attracting the police, the managers of these mosques disabled the public address systems.

Furthermore, in some Muslim dominated areas there was a conspiracy of silence over the violations because the residents and police officers were mainly Muslims. Thus there was nobody to report to. Even in situations where some officers were not Muslims, they looked the other way while prayers and other religious activities were conducted in violation of the COVID-19 guidelines.

Some religious leaders, who violated measures put in place by the government to curtail the spread of the virus, were sanctioned (Ayandele et al., 2021). The state taskforce shut down churches that refused to comply or act in accordance with the guidelines. In a particular case, a pastor, who was conducting an Easter Sunday service jumped the face of the church to evade arrest (Johnson 2020).

God’s Compulsory Holiday

There are religious leaders who considered the ban on social religious gathering as appropriate (Olonade et al. 2021) and complied with the directives from the government. Some clerics dismissed as false and misinformation the idea that linked COVID-19 and the vaccine to 666 and end times (Agency Report 2021). Others urged pastors to allow their church premises to be used as isolation centers for the patients (Alao 2020). Although, the COVID-19 pandemic escaped the predictive permutations of Nigerian clerics, some men and women of God weighed into the problem as soon as the impact became obvious to assert their prophetic and clerical authority.

Pastors engaged in retroactive prophecies recalling messages from God that foretold the outbreak of the

pandemic. Many clerics tried to adjust and realign their prophetic exercise, preaching, healing and ministration activities. Pastor Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God recalled some message from God that he would cause the world to go on a 'compulsory holiday'. In addition, he also encouraged members of his church to get vaccinated (Oyero 2021).

On the other hand, T.B. Joshua of the Synagogue Church of All Nations, who died in June 2021, stated that the pandemic would end on March 27. When the prophetic declaration did not materialize, he claimed that he meant that the virus would halt in Wuhan in China. In a related development, a traditional ruler stated that God had instructed him to sacrifice himself and urged the virus to come and attack him, and spare the world of the calamity (Ogunsile 2020).

In line with the directives from the government, the Council of Ulama and Imams in Kaduna suspended Friday prayers and other events that involved more than 20 persons (Ayeni 2020). In an attempt to get Muslims to comply, a council member stated that the directive was in accordance with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Meanwhile, a Muslim group suspended an Imam for complying with the directive of the government (Isenyo 2020). So it was not only clerics who violated the COVID-19 guidelines that suffered penalties, religious leaders who complied with the directives from the government were also sanctioned.

Smart Religious Services

Some religious leaders and institutions took innovative steps to reclaim and reassert their authority. They adopted mechanisms to cope with the COVID-19 situation. Some church and mosque leaders organized religious services in line with the guidelines, with 20 worshippers who social-distanced and wore facemasks (Oyero 2020).

Some clerics started online services and had their members virtually join for prayers and worship (Ayeni 2020; Alao 2020; Krippahl 2020). They tapped into emerging technological facilities to boost their evangelical power base and reach. To address the shortfall in the flow of funding, some churches introduced e-payment of tithe and offering. Some pastors sent messages via WhatsApp, Short Message Service and other Social Media platforms urging members to pay their tithes (Akinkuotu 2020; Owolabi 2020). Other clerics advertised COVID-19 prevention oil, including claims and testimonies of healing COVID-19 patients (Asuquo B., 2020; Ero 2020). Some Christian religious institutions modified, or suspended long-standing traditions such as the administration of the holy communion, shaking of hands during worship and laying of hands during healing services (Chukwuma 2021). In some Catholic churches, worshippers would nod their heads or wave at each other during the kiss of peace.

Conclusions

The outbreak of COVID-19 has orchestrated a global crisis, and turned a virus into a deity that is treated with a mix of fear and reverence. The pandemic compelled the government of Nigeria to take urgent steps to curb the spread of the disease. These measures, which included restrictions on religious gathering, social distancing, wearing of facemasks undermined the credibility, authority and legitimacy of religious institutions. COVID-19 curtailed the powers and influence of religious agencies, consigning pastors, imams and other actors in the religious field to the margins of social relevance and consequence. In response to these measures, clerics and religious organisations resisted, opposed and violated the guidelines from the government.

Others complied and acted in accordance with the directives from the state. To restore and regain their influence and authority, some religious leaders and institutions devised new ways and mechanisms of practicing their faiths despite the pandemic and in line with COVID-19 protocols.

Contrary to the notion that religious traditions are fixed and unchanging, reactions of clerics and religious bodies to measures put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 have shown that sacred traditions change and take new forms. Religious institutions adapt, and adjust their doctrines and practices, rituals and ceremonies to suit changing situations and to survive difficult and challenging times.

It is important to note that the internet, online and smart technologies have played enormous role in the responses of religious leaders and institutions to measures taken to curb the spread of the virus. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced some smart profound changes and technology based transformations of the African religious landscape. Coronavirus has occasioned a significant shift from physical to virtual or

hybrid religious services and operations. The role of the internet, smart/emerging technologies in religious formations and practices in COVID-19 and post COVID-19 Africa needs further research and exploration.

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