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The Place of Religious Practice in the Mitigation of Covid-19 among Nigerians

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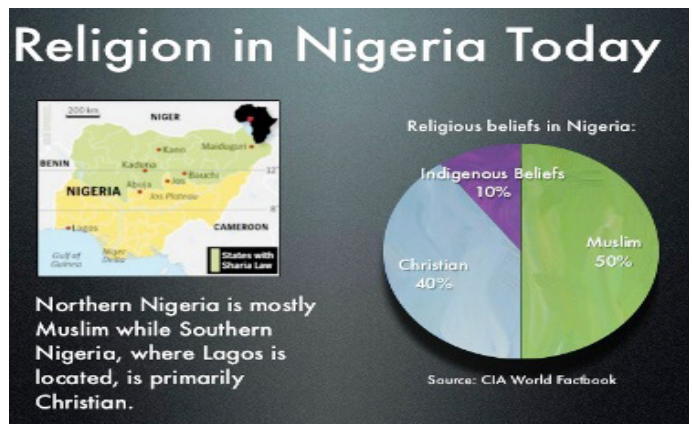
ABSTRACT

There have been lots of researches and reviews in time past concerned and preoccupied with uncovering the nexus that exists between Religion and Health. These researches have implored different frameworks as Religion has proven capability in influencing the health of societies. In a similar fashion, specific attention is drawn to the role of religion in the mitigation of COVID-19 among Nigerians. A multidimensional approach to the study was adopted as it considered both the positive and negative influences. Further, this research considered misconception, ignorance and lack of compliance while it also deems it necessary examining the infallible support of religion to COVID-19 elimination, while making worthy recommendations for better inter-relationship between the agencies concerned with health and religious bodies. This, in a bid, supports the government measure in mitigating the spread of Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is dicey in any given pluralistic society and Nigeria is not an exception. This dicey nature manifests in its unusual sentiments and strong emotions. It is also believed that Religion is as old as mankind, even dating far back to the primitive man (Behere, Das, Yadav & Behere, 2013). Primitive man had primitive religions and he worshiped the elements of nature like sun, earth, air, cloud, water, etc., until recently when religion became institutionalised. A common phenomenon to all religion is the belief in higher, unseen and controlling power. Religion appears to be a psychological necessity for mankind and its consistent practices become dogmas and superstitions. Notably, all religion in one way or the other has influence on the health of its faithful. This is in accordance with World Health Organization definition of health, encompassing the five dimensions of health; Physical, Mental Social, Emotional and Spiritual which inter relates but with special linkage to the spiritual and Mental state. Belief in and commitment to the transcendental and the metaphysical, no doubt because of its intimate link to the very sense and purpose of existence, is probably the most powerful motivator of human behaviour and behavioural change known today. Its manifestations can be either positive and constructive, or unbelievably destructive or negative (Vader 2006).

Christians remained the largest religious group in the world in 2015, making up nearly a third (31%) of Earth's 7.3 billion people but reports have it that, they have been consistent decline in Europe according to a new Pew Research Center demographic analysis (Hackett et al, 2017). A whole lot have been said in the past about Christians and Christianity. Many people refer to Christians as followers of Christ. While quiet a number of individual envisage Christians as those, who communicate the good news of God's love and salvation to mankind. The Merriam Webster dictionary defined Christianity as the religion derived from Jesus Christ based on the Bible as Sacred scripture. For conciseness and brevity, Christianity is better perceived as Jesus Christ and his gospel (Harnack, 2006). This large membership controlled by the church has triggered the formation of numerous denominations and branches in Christendom. It is then safe to suggest that the different denominations mould their practices



Source: World Factbook.

and beliefs differently, although still deeply rooted and bided by the teaching of Christ. Some of what Christians engages are baptism, taking of the Holy Communion, fervent praying and religious celebrations. A majority of which requires faithful gathering in masses sometimes called fellowshiping. Widespread, it is established that Christians are known for mass movement in whatsoever activities they engage in (Merton, 1959).

In similar veil, Islam is known as the second most practiced religion in the world with about 1.8 billion faithful worldwide in 2015 (Izberk-Bilgin & Nakata, 2016). Followers of Islam are called Muslims. They are monotheistic as they believe in the all-knowing God, who in Arabic is known as Allah (Corrigan, Denny, Jaffee & Eire, 2016). Muslims are committed to living a life of complete submission to Allah and they believe that nothing can happen without Allah's permission (Nabolsi & Carson, 2011). Muslims pray in Mosques and study the holy book of Quran, which they believe that there will be a Day of Judgment, and life after death. Every Muslim must practice religion according to the five pillars of Islam, which are: Shahada—Profession of Faith; Salah—Prayer; Zakat—Almsgiving; Sawm—Fasting and Hajj—Pilgrimage (Al-Shahri & Al-Khenaizan, 2005).

Few is centred on African religion in Nigeria. Most foreign investigators treat the religion contemptuously with derogatory and opprobrious terminologies such as idolatrous, fetish, heathen, juju, etc. (Onoyima, 2015). African Religion is the original indigenous and 'traditional' religion of the African people. It arose on the African soil and passed on by the forebears to successive generations. Its forms have been preserved in oral tradition, songs, music, invocations, prayer, myths and etc. The structure of the religion is made up of believe in God (as Supreme Being), divinities (intermediaries between God and man), spirits, ancestors, magic and medicine (Opeloye & Asaju 1994). The Liturgy of African Religion (AFREL) worship features libation, invocation, songs, music, divination and sacrifice (which can be foundational, preventive, curative and substitutionary (Okafor, 2015). There are priests and priestesses as well as other functionaries, who serve the cults of the pantheon at their respective shrines, groves and temples. The ethics, laws and values by which the society is governed derive from religion, as the taboos which served its moral regulators. Communalism is engendered by the extensive relationship network, whereby every African in a community is his brother's keeper, (Opeloye & Asaju 1994)

The emergence of COVID-19 was a big blow not anticipated by any country of the world. This created a nexus with virtually every sector of the society and has affected different facet of the society one way or the other with everyone faced with his/her challenge. For many centuries, religious communities have provided care for the poor who often lack the resources to access health services (Lloyd, Haussman & James 2019). The church as a sector is one that has not been left out in the dilemma. The story is therefore not different with COVID-19.

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS Cov-2) popularly known as COVID -19 was reported in the city of Wuhan a very busy area in Hubei Province in China (Wuhan City 2020). Within a period spanning 6 weeks, COVID-19 traveled across 20 countries of the world causing outbreaks in different sub regions of the world. In view of this urgency and emergency, the WHO declared that the outbreak became a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) (World Health Organization, 2020). On the 11th March 2020 COVID-19 became a pandemic with 118,000 cases reported globally in 114 countries of the world (Maijama'a, et al 2020). While still rampaging different countries of the world, reports of 15th April, 2020 revealed that more than 2 million people had been infected with over 127,000 death cases recorded worldwide. Although, it is predominant in countries like the United States, Spain, France, Italy, Germany and China (Worldometres, 2020). Pronounced symptoms of COVID-19 noticed, ranged from mild to severe in different individuals. Although, they are typical of respiratory infections, such as fever and cough, and in severe cases shortness and heavy breathing (Center for Disease Country, 2019). In the face of these challenges, proffering medication capable of curing this disease proofed abortive leaving the society with the sole option of effective prevention. Major preventive measures embraced include adequate awareness, hand hygiene, social distancing, use of nose mask, flight restriction, prohibition of foreigners into a country and the sit at home (lockdown) were widely implemented (Izzeti, Nissi, Gabriele & Graziani, 2020).

RELIGION AND COVID-19

Health in the Islamic tradition is closely related to the Muslim image of God and man Thus, properly practicing the principles of religion provides the Muslim believer with inner balance and harmony in life (Piwko, 2021). According to Piwko, The importance of health in the concept of religion was emphasized in the holy book of Islam—Qur'an—which contains the principles of health and disease, while indicating the appropriate dietary and hygienic habits that ensure the health of the body. Abiola (1984), further buttressed that Islam has greatly affected

generally the lives of the people of the states by the traditional religion as well as its attendant practices. After the Hausa people have embraced Islam, they stopped offering sacrifices to lifeless objects, such as trees, rivers and rocks. Islam ushered into the land both the eastern education and civilization (Amanambum, 2020). Most of the kings after their conversion made visits to the holy land where they did not only offer prayers but also engaged in Arabic education, hence causing ways of life and mode of administration to change. On getting back to their various kingdoms, these kings began to introduce those things they learnt to their various kingdoms. The fulfillment of these duties, however, changes with the onset of communicable diseases in the Islamic community. Prophet Muhammad himself recommended that during the plague, Muslims should limit all mobility: traveling, visiting each other and avoiding the sick. Muhammad also encouraged quarantine to keep the plagues from spreading. Sunnah clearly emphasizes: "If you hear that there is a plague in a land, do not enter it; and if it (plague) visits a land, while you are therein, do not go out of it" (Sahih al-Bukhari, 2005b). Coronavirus affected not only the physical part of people, causing serious illness and even death.

The high transmission of the virus between people forced spiritual leaders to change the organization of religious practices. Every follower of Islam, always before praying, must perform ablution, consisting in ritual washing of the body. Cleaning should be done with water, but in the absence of water, it is acceptable to use a clean felt-tip pen or gravel, e.g., when traveling. That is why there are bath-houses in mosques and houses of prayer, in which ritual washing should be performed. Despite such an obligation, mosques introduced a ban on gathering for common prayer. Fearing an intense increase in infections, Saudi Arabia closed Mecca to pilgrims, the holiest city in Islam, where the only Muslim temple is located. Every believer should at least once in his life make a ritual pilgrimage to Mecca, at the time prescribed by religion. In 2020, the time of the most important religious event was from July 29 to August 3 (Piwko, 2021). In 2021, Saudi Arabia eased restrictions related to COVID-19 pandemics during the month of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr holidays. However, precautionary measures are still recommended, such as social distancing and hand disinfection. Other Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia and Iraq, have restricted their shops during Eid al-Fitr holidays to avoid crowds in shopping malls (Al-Jazeera, 2021).

Traditional Indigenous knowledge and practices suffered marginalization when it comes to seeking solutions to social problems. The world misses out on the richness of this knowledge and practices and role that they can play. This qualitative existential phenomenological study explored experiences of African indigenous knowledge holders and practitioners on their views regarding solutions towards COVID-19 pandemic. This finding showed African knowledge and practices that could combat COVID-19 in terms of restrictions, heat related remedies and plant related remedies, and how these knowledge and practices can be applied through ancestral, environmental, metaphysical and generational modes. Africa and the world could benefit from how indigenous people respond to diseases such as COVID-19 and adopt/adapt some of these knowledge and practices; indigenous knowledge and practices have a role to play by contributing solutions to the world's problems (Gumbo, & Gaotlhogwe, 2021). The gods of the land keep the peace and the people in check. They were here long before we came. In many Nigerian mythologies, it is believed that the gods once walked this earth and even lived here. They took in wives, had children and when the world got too filthy for them, they moved to a supernatural place, somewhere that we've somehow convinced ourselves is up in the sky. But that doesn't mean that their supernatural presence left the earth (Dennis, 2019).

Africa is expected to be the most vulnerable continent to be rampaged by COVID-19 due to her very poor economy and medical strength. Ironically, it became the last continent to be affected by the pandemic (Moore, Gelfield, & Adeyemi, 2017). A lot of countries in Africa have reported numerous cases of incidence of COVID-19 and they are faced with challenges on how to deal with this unprecedented menace. The emergence of COVID-19 in Nigeria was treated with different views by Christians in the country. Many Christians do not take the existence of the virus seriously as they believe God is able to heal them of any kind of diseases that comes their way. They believe so dearly the part of the Bible in Psalm 91:10 that says, "No evil shall be allowed to befall you." This complex reality in this instance is the coronavirus, which many Christians have interpreted as being under the control of God. According to Inuwa (2020), though coronavirus is unexplainable, Africans, especially Nigerians, believe that it is God alone that can bring an end to it. Supporting this assertion, a poll conducted by the World Values Survey in 2015 as quoted by Falade and Bauer (2018) shows that 88% of respondents in Nigeria agree that, "Whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right". With this, it is not surprising to see Christians in the country responding that God is worthy to save them and even rescue them if at all they are infected by the disease (Falade and Bauer 2018).

Nigeria's first index case was reported on the 28th February 2020 and rose to 323 recorded cases

and 10 deaths confirmed as at 13th April 2020 (Wikipedia 2020). This prompted a widespread concern about the fragile public health care system of Africa's most populous country boasting a population of 200 million people and the inability to cope with a rapidly spreading pandemic (Paul 2020). Many individuals further claimed daily statistic released by NCDC lacks accuracy and precision as those tested initially for COVID-19 where individuals who had recent travel history or being hijacked at the airport. This further predisposed the country to an increase in the incidence of this novel disease leaving many individuals at great risk of being infected (Chinenyenwa, Adeleye and Tauseef, 2020). There was a shift of concern as many feared that the lackadaisical approach on the part of the government will in no time result in widespread infection with the commercial capital at risk of infecting about 30, 000 individuals in a short time. (Eagles Online, 2020).

To curtail the spread of COVID-19 and protect the health of Nigeria in general, the government of Nigeria placed set of guides like ban on international flights, all form of mass gathering involving schools, churches and other activities, wearing of face mask in public, regular hand-washing and the use of alcohol- based sanitizers.(Nigeria Center for Disease Control 2021). Many Christian organizations have given great support to medicine and have joined the battle in fighting disease by providing hospitals and physicians. Many of their beliefs and practices promote healthy lifestyle and prohibit risky behaviours like risky sexual practices (Holt et al., 2014). Many of these beliefs further help in stress management and prevent depression (Spangler 2003) and Promotion of healthy diets and feeding (Oman, 2018). However, some worrisome, unhelpful, perceptions and attitudes towards COVID-19 and other diseases have been linked to religious beliefs. This in turn impedes their willingness to comply with medical preventive advice (Kalichman and Simbayi 2004). Nevertheless, a few of this measures and strategies employed by the government have resulted in controversies among different individuals most especially the ban of Christian religious gathering. On the other hand, The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), led by Pastor E. A. Adeboye complied with this directive as his church directed all its branches to obey the directive. The service held on Dove Television (the church's owned cable television) on Sunday, 22nd March, 2020 showed Adeboye ministering to less than 20 people, in accordance to the directive.

Some Christian denominations also responded to the presence of the virus by adhering to the directive of the government on the use of face mask. Starting with the Lagos State Government on 25th April, 2020 mandating the use of face masks in public, many adjusted to this new means of life. While some make use of the medical face masks, others made use of cloth face masks.

The ban on mass gathering in churches took different dimension in different location of the country. Different state showed variation in their response to government directives as different degree of compliance and execution of this rule was experienced. Some states with great pull of activities and population like Lagos, Abuja and Kaduna experienced total restriction. Many denominations gave compliance to Government directives, while many others in compliance, modified their services to suit the present. Congregation with large population were grouped in to smaller units known as fellowships to hold services in unit in houses of church members. Many opted for different service sessions accommodating 20 to 50 members each service day. The most common practice was the great switch of physical religious services to online worship platforms. Hence, bringing flexibility and creating an ambience where the church can take full advantage of social media platforms in propagating the gospel. To complement the government, many churches donated to the vulnerable and the economic disadvantaged. However, a number of Christian religious centers and ministers showed great resistance to government, leading to lack of consensus between both parties.

Many religious leaders fell into the bad book of the government; quiet a number were arrested and harassed. Cases of perceived inequality in the enforcement of rules with other religious bodies were speculated, while a reasonable number lived on the ideation that COVID-19 was strategically satanic aimed at keeping believers away from God. Ministries further offered spiritual and economic solution to the pandemic (The Independent, 2020). This, if misunderstood by members could impede their readiness to embark on basic preventive measures towards the disease.

Another response of the Christian church is in the area of "666" controversy. Some of the Christians believe COVID-19 is linked to 666, the number believed to be the "mark of the beast" recorded in the Book of Revelation 13:18. They believe the quarantine or a vaccine is linked to the supposed mark. Using Gematria, they apportioned a numerical value to the name of the disease based on its letters.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the study, it should be stated that the approach of religious bodies to COVID-19 pandemics was impres-

sive. This is probably because some spiritual leaders have tried with all their might to emphasize the importance and power of prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences from time past have shown that the church is capable of promoting peace, unity, development and even the health status of a country. Given the role of Christianity and prominent leaders of the church in the country, a long term engagement with religious organizations holds great potential of community outreach. Hence, past studies have shown that religious leaders have great influence on health related activities involving their members (Bopp et al., 2013; Baruth et al., 2015).

Also, the position of the church on the modification of the timing, number of participants and activities they organized is very crucial as to whether it aligns to preventive strategies. The position of the church could either be positive or negatively tilted. Some observers find these negative effects worrisome. The problem actually is that when religious beliefs conflicts with scientific explanation about how disease are cause d and transmitted consequences may include inaction, ineffectiveness and delay in seeking appropriate treatment which result in serious consequences (Heggehougen et al, 2003). Government should therefore explore the volatility of the church by involving clergymen in decision making and making them aware of the ability of both the religious and health sector to coexist for the good of the society. Thus religious leaders' should be included as active participants in public health decision making for a country struggling with keeping up to the standard expected of a good health sector. There is a clear cut need to expand search for solutions to the pandemic. Hence, collaborating the efficacy of prayers and miracles with good health practices would not be a bad idea after all.

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