Coronavirus pandemic and its effect on African religiosity

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Abstract

Coronavirus is the latest pandemic that is challenging all spheres of the human economy globally. The popular "lockdown", which is a means used to ameliorate this pandemic's devastating effect, was adopted by all the countries of the world mainly to soothe human health conditions while other sectors of the global economy were also punctured. The long-term preparation towards the year 2020 for "Vision 2020" otherwise, "sustainable development" was horrifically traumatized. Moreover, African religious culture expressed as God's sovereignty and communalism suffers a great deal. This work seeks to investigate the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on African religiosity. The paper adopts the historical/ descriptive method. It attempts to trace the present pandemic with previous ones and articulate the strength of African religiosity in the face of any pandemic situation. The finding shows that the sense of communalism has since been hijacked when political leaders think selfishly only of themselves at the community's standard members' detriments. The work concludes that the global pandemic has been not only a misfortune but also a blessing, God's sovereign over the universe may allow the pandemic so that as the whole world is coerced into quarantine or lockdown, the earth may have a natural management and rejuvenation.

Keywords:
Communalism; Christianity; Ebola virus; family shrine; health; Islam; lockdown; secularism.

1 INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 was globally envisaged as an iconic and historical one, especially with the famous "vision 2020" articulated and infused into plans by many world economies as a long-term preparation towards sustainable development, technological bloom, poverty alleviation, and sustainable economic growth. For instance, Nigeria had dreamed of becoming one of the first twenty economies in the world by the year 20201. However, it is unfortunate that in the wake of 2020 came the surge of COVID-19, which became a pandemic, thereby sarcastically rendering the hallowed 2020 vision. The coronavirus outbreak has fallen lives, livelihood, and normalcy and has seemed to reset the world, making helpless even the most viable world economies. It has challenged the status quo, making nonsense of nations' technological advancement, rendering scientists and science rudderless and clueless.

Many myths surround the dreaded pandemic, though it is said to have originated from Wuhan, a city in China, its spread and reception of the status of a pandemic, affecting a large population of the world within a very short time has given rise to many conceptions, generally regarding its origin and ability to spread wide in just no time (Bassey, 2020). For instance, while most scientists have argued that the virus is a product of wildlife, many have thought it to be an expression of global power rivalry as a war of words and blame shifts between the US government and Chinese government persists. It is thereby suggesting COVID-19, a resultant of research and development, a human-made biological weapon by China to defend herself against undue international aggression from the US in times to come (Bassey, 2020). The pandemic has been considered in the light of a manifestation of biblical prophecy, as God's punishment to mankind, and as a sign of the end time (Dwiraharjo, 2020). It has also affected religiosity, mainly as the prophecies of many great men of God predicting its end. The pandemic's ravaging effects to the extent of shutting the doors of church buildings and mosques have challenged religiosity the world over. It has questioned some African religiosity elements in recent times, brought bare some African communal and religious virtues suffering annihilation. This background lays bare the task of this work.

2 ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF THE CORONAVIRUS

The blame-shifting game and words war between China and the United States on the origin of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has fueled many theories, some more believable than others. At the start of the outbreak in December 2019, the most mainstream assumption was that the virus originated from the wet market in Wuhan, the Chinese city where the virus's first cases were first reported. But due to the global spread of the virus, the role of public health laboratories in Wuhan came under intense scrutiny. As a result of the far-reaching effects of the virus on the global economy, the whole world is engulfed in perplexity as the COVID-19 pandemic has surpassed its predecessors.

The coronavirus name is originated from Latin corona, meaning crown or wreath, which itself is borrowed from Greek korone, which means Garland or wreath (Tang & Wang 2020). The corona was coined by June Almeida and David Tyrrel, who first observed and studied human coronaviruses. The corona word was first used in print in 1968 by an informal group of virologists in the Nature journal to label the new virus family (Tang & Wang, 2020). The name refers to a characteristic appearance of virions by electron microscopy, which has a fringe of large, bulbous surface projections, creating an image reminiscent of the solar corona or halo. This morphology is created by the viral spike peplomers of the virus (Guo, 2020). According to Estola "coronaviruses were first discovered in the 1930s when an acute respiratory infection of domesticated chickens was shown to be caused by infectious bronchitis virus (IBV)" (Mushi, 2020, pp. 43). Human coronaviruses were however said to have been discovered in the 1960s.
Recent events have resulted in an interchangeable use of the terms coronavirus and COVID-19 to refer to almost the same idea. It is ideal to explain that coronaviruses are a group of related viruses that cause diseases in mammals and birds and thus itself a generic term. Coronaviruses cause respiratory tract infections that can range from mild to lethal in human. Mild illnesses include some common cold cases while more lethal varieties can cause Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome and COVID-19 (Sanicas, 2020). Here particularism is laid in the COVID-19 outbreak, which has asserted itself strongly to dislodge normalcy in the world's system, a task to which we now turn.

The coronavirus pandemic is an on-going pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome2 (SARS-CoV-2) and was identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019 as outbreak. "This coronavirus was initially named as the 2019 novel coronavirus (2019nCov) on 12 January by the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO officially named the disease coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the coronavirus study group (CSG) of the international committee proposed to name the new coronavirus as SARS-CoV-2, both issued on 11th February, 2020 (Sanicas, 2020). In Wuhan, health authorities reported a cluster of viral pneumonia cases of unknown cause on 31st December 2019 and an investigation was launched in early January 2020. These cases mostly had links to the Wuhan seafood wholesale market and so the virus is thought to have a zoonotic origin hence the current scientific consensus of the natural origination of the COVID-19 pandemic. Symptoms of COVID-19 can be relatively non-specific and infected people may be asymptomatic. "The two most common symptoms are fever (88%) and dry cough (68%). Less common symptoms include fatigue, respiratory sputum production, loss of the sense of smell (initially estimated at 30%) but later only at 15%,14 shortness of breath, muscle and joint pain, sore throat, headache, chills, vomiting, hemoptysis and diarrhea (WHO 2020).

Following the disease's intensity, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern on January 30th, 2020 and recognized it as a pandemic on March 11th, 2020 (WHO 2020). "The virus primarily spread between people during close contact, often via small droplets produced by coughing, sneezing, or talking. People may also become infected by touching a contaminated surface and then touching their face."16 The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has since spread throughout and outside China and received worldwide attention. As at April 2020, more than 3 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported in 185 countries and territories, resulting in more than 212,000 deaths. However, more than 931,000 people have recovered (Jirjees et al., 2020). As of now, there are no vaccines for neither the cure nor the prevention of the pandemic.

3 AN APPRAISAL OF COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND PREVIOUS PANDEMICS

The world has had an age-long history of health hazards; thus, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic is not the first ailment to pose a global health threat. It is not presumptuous to assert that the COVID-19 pandemic has been more treacherous than its preceding pandemics of global concern. The social upheaval caused by the new coronavirus has awoken many to what some infectious disease experts have been warning for than a decade. Over the years, many diseases have emerged, from HIV, flu, Ebola, SARS, MERS etc., and now COVID-19, with a high propensity for the outbreak of more in the coming years due to some environmentally hazardous human activities.

The outbreak of a disease can be declared a pandemic when the infectious disease can spread beyond geographic boundaries and lead to a high mortality rate (Campagna, 2020). Additionally, a pandemic also affects the social, economic, and political dynamics of a region. The outbreaks like COVID-19 that occurred earlier include Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). The coronavirus disease 2019 is considered deadlier than the other two viruses and has affected more people over a particular period as compared to the other two outbreaks. In a comparison by NBC News 19, "there were 8,437 cases of SARS which broke out in 2002 and 2,499 cases of MERS" while COVID-19 in just a matter of time, has had explosive cases of more than 3 million cases and is increasing. It is reported that COVID-19 had in five days of emergence, surpassed the preceding pandemics' records (Allan Smith 2020). The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic is spreading faster than previous pandemics due to its ability to travel faster in the air.

Precedence shows that the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has had a severer economic, social global impact. Its dread has shut the doors of worship centers, event arena, party houses and even stadiums. It has caused some companies to shut down with the possibility of many folding up after it has been contained, due to an emerging global economic backlash. After the 14th century's black deaths, there has not been a deadlier outbreak of a pandemic as the coronavirus disease 2019. According to Guo et al. (2020: 14), "the emergence of the coronavirus disease 2019, since the SARS coronavirus in 2002 and MERS in 2012, marked the third introduction of a highly pathogenic and large-scale epidemic coronavirus into the human population in the 21st century". However, every affected nation of the earth, scientists and medical personnel are working round the clock to proffer solutions to the health hazard and ensure that normalcy returns as soon as possible, but until then, many have resorted to faith and other religious practices as a remedy for the plague. It is a reality such as this that has triggered our discussion on African religiosity and how it has been affected by this issue of global panic. A case study to which we now turn.

4 AFRICAN RELIGIOSITY

Religiosity is the state of being religious or too religious (Edor & Ayuk, 2020). Much academic and popular literature portrays Africans as being more innately religious than other people. African religiosity thus describes the relevance, priority, and unavoidability of religion in a typical African life. It goes beyond asserting that an African is a Christian, Muslim, or Traditionalist; it implicates the inextricable aspect of the African's religious consciousness within the ambience of private, public, secular, political, and economic life. It is simply an asseveration of the intricate part of
religion in the cultures of Africa. Religion permeates almost all facets of every African society and influences in ways unimaginable the collective mind-sets of African people. Religiosity to an African is not just mere beliefs in spirits as often misconstrued by distant critics; it acknowledges and depends on a supreme authority, a connection to being. For Ugorie (2017, p. 388) religion in its Africanis is "man's innate consciousness of his dependence on a transcendental supra-human being and a consequent natural and spontaneous propensity to render homage and worship". Beidelman and Mbti (1992) while acknowledging the difficulty in trying to define religion in the African context, asserted that for Africans, religion is an ontological phenomenon; it pertains to the question of existence and being." Religion to an African is not just a typical function or variable amongst other variables; it constitutes the root from which the different branches of life sprout, grow and flourish (Edor, 2016). On this note, religious ideals have continued for centuries to form the basis of the judgment of an African's social, political, and economic life. They have also shaped government institutions' modus operandi, influencing mutual interactions, food choice, and even life philosophy. This underscores the level to which religiosity has gone in Africa so that one can say that the Africans are people who, in all things, are religious.

The continuing bloom of religiosity in Africa even in the 21st century when the so-called secularism has established itself in many societies is a subject that is being investigated by contemporary scholars. While many factors have been identified as drivers of this religious boom, the nexus between culture and religion, the African culture especially, has been considered a more probable factor. For Lewis and Hammer (2007) "religions are cultural innovations". This implicates culture as the breeding space for religion and perhaps an avenue for the same to be tested and to grow; therefore, new religions must first interact with, permeate, and complement the culture of its new environment. Quite often, difficulties ensue in many attempts to distinguish religion from a given people's culture, especially in a religion-culturally been considered a more probable factor. For Lewis and Hammer (2007) "religions are cultural innovations". This implicates culture as the breeding space for religion and perhaps an avenue for the same to be tested and to grow; therefore, new religions must first interact with, permeate, and complement the culture of its new environment. Quite often, difficulties ensue in many attempts to distinguish religion from a given people's culture, especially in a religion-culturally conjoined society as Africa. Religion can be conceptualized as a form of culture because it is a unified system of beliefs and practices that vary across different religious traditions (Cohen 2009). Religion uniquely focuses on the relationship with the divine and faith; here, the idea of divine is conceptualized according to cultural exposure and according to people's experience within the context of their environment. Faith points to the reality of the divine within a particular culture, and progressively, consciousness and beliefs about the divine became the religion of a given society. This is to say that culture, raises the need for certain beliefs and practices while religion defines the nature, meaning and approaches to these beliefs and practices through the endowment of divine sanctions. To this end, "religion and culture are inseparable as beliefs and practices are uniquely cultural" (Nasir, 2020, pp. 54). However, religiosity is deeply rooted in the African people's culture in that it is impossible to study African culture in avoidance of African religion and vice versa. Thus, for Adekoya (1990, pp. 106) "whenever African culture is being studied, African religion features prominently in such study". While for Anyanwu (1990, pp. 45), "religion is part and parcel of African culture". To this end, religiosity is not just a sentimental attachment to an ideology or philosophy of life, it is a way of life native to a vast population of Africans, this is because "religiosity grew spontaneously out of the culture of the African people" (Nasir, 2020, pp. 54). The Africans are not sentimentally but naturally religious, a careful reason proselytizing religions such as Christianity and Islam upon gaining reception in Africa flourished much more than they now flourish in their initial places of origin.

Religion in Africa constitutes a vertical and horizontal framework, this means developing a healthy relationship with God and the divinities above and with the fellow humans across the society. This idea of maintaining a good relationship with the divine through a healthy relationship with a fellow clan man gave African communalism an enabling environment to thrive. This brings to bear the fact that the way of life indigenous to an African is an extremely communalistic one, the same being an inseparable African culture aspect. African communalism underscores the traditional ways rural African societies functioned before now. It recalls decades of co-existence in Africa without hierarchies, with equal access to land and rivers to all. However, some elements of this way of life have been displaced with western capitalism in vogue while some persist. For Ikuenobi (2018, pp.589-604) "African communalism is a moral doctrine that also values human dignity, rights and responsibilities. It does not necessarily see conflicts between individuals and communities, they are naturally supportive and people are required to have the moral attitude of contributing to the community for their wellbeing." This implicates the fact that a person can only be a person because he or she lives and acts in a community.

In traditional Africa, existence apart from the community or the universe of life first is unthinkable, thus, "in African communalism the individual decides and chooses for himself and the community, in turn, chooses through individual choices of the members of the community" (Njoku, 2002: p. 31). The African "maintains a vital relationship with God, nature, the deities, the tribe, the clan, the ancestors, extended family and himself or herself" (Edeh, 1952, p. 24). Of course, the religiosity of the African is the major driving force of this communalistic living, especially since it starts from the microcosm of the society--the family. Religion is the strongest element and exerts probably the most significant influence on the African people's thoughts and actions. Africans according to Mbti (1999, p.82) "are notoriously religious, they eat religiously, dress religiously, and dance religiously", and of course, live and coexist religiously. For Kunhiyop (2008, p. 226) "speculative reflection without practice has never been characteristic of Africans, the two always go together". Thus, there is no such thing as compartmentalization or dichotomization when it comes to human existence: there is no division between matter and spirit, soul and body, religious practices, and daily life, hence the interconnectedness of the African worldview.

It is important to note that due to the proliferation of religions in Africa, induced by proselytizing Christianity and Islam, religiosity has not changed religiosity. It could result in a technical error in any attempt to term Christianity and Islam in African soil as foreign religions; this is because over the years there have developed brands of Christianity and Islam that are largely Africanized in a bit to respond to African needs. On this note, note is taken of how elements of Africa's traditional religions have crept into the theology of these intruding religions. While interacting with these new forces, there is a need to retain the African notion of the Supreme Being and, of course, communalism. The African does not owe loyalty to his or her religion nor the cultic functionaries, but to God, in Whom the African's life is centered, which
begins before birth till death (Kidzu & Ncha, 2017; Ncha, 2018). The African God can cure diseases, influences governance and economy; punish lawlessness, negligence, ineptitude and inhumanity. There is a non-abatable level of dependence of the individuals in the community and vice versa and on God, a sense of confidence that prioritizes the Supreme Being and the community in the face of war, pandemics, etc., as the only remedy.

5 EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON AFRICAN RELIGIOSITY

The surge of the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic caused by the coronavirus has dramatically influenced social, economic, political, and religious activities the world over. Especially with the COVID-19 induced lockdown and the social distancing precautionary measures in vogue, many activities have come to a standstill, including religious gatherings. Following the inseparable nature of Africans from worship and other religious activities, the stringent prescriptions of religious gatherings in the mosques and church buildings have raised mixed reactions amongst the extremely religious Africans who believe the government is fighting God who Himself is the harbinger of solutions required to cease the global panic. While religious authorities in America, Europe, and other continents, which are epi-centers of the spread of the pandemic, have accepted these measures in good faith, Africans have thought it is the best time to get closer to God in worship and prayers to seek from God succor for the world, hence, the view of the preservative order to shut down places of worship as persecution. To this end, the virus has, like a great wind, opened some veiled aspects of African religiosity, it has in a great way exposed the level of fideism (faith without reasoning) that is prevalent in the practice of religion in Africa.

The ravaging danger and spontaneous spread of the dreaded disease have also dissipated energy to uncover the religious illiteracy prevailing in the black continent, even in the 21st century. Earlier, we noted that it would be out of place to consider Christianity, for instance, as a foreign religion in Africa because of the development of some African strands of the religious practices as time evolves. Practices common to indigenous religious practices have crept into the Christian faith, and how soon they will not stop has been illuminated by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is an instance of people having to heed an instruction of a particular prophet to flip through the Holy Bible's pages for strands of hair, boil it and drink the flavored water to be a preventive measure against contracting the virus. A lot of people fell for this without any critical thought given to it. This shows how carefully religious illiteracy or rather unintelligence has been knitted to the practice of religion in Africa and the need for religious institutions to tackle the same in the coming years.

While in other continents such as the Americas and Europe precisely, the virus's causal diagnosis has acceptably implicated wildlife. Africans objection to this scientific causal postulation, an objection that is traceable to the relationship between the profane and the sacred, this-worldly and the otherworldly in African cosmology, the centrality of God in the African society and all that occur there. Africans have variously seen the virus and its devastating blow on the world as punishment from God for the world's many sins. One may dismiss this theological origin of the virus as not being intelligent, especially when compared to the present scientific findings, but this only resurges the nature of African religiosity, God's place in African communalism. In African communalism, "one lives from birth to the grave, in an unbroken inter-dependence, life is essentially cooperation and mutual co-existence" (Etta et al., 2016). Therefore, just like a football team, every single member feels the joy of victory or bitterness of defeat; it is on this note that an outbreak of a disease is traced to sin against fellow community members or the divinities, thereby attracting the wrath of the Supreme Being who supervises the communal society and rewards every action. Therefore, it is worthy of note that cases like this only point the African to God instead of alienating him from God, hence the continuous steadfastness and prayers to God for a solution regardless of shutting down the doors of worship. This points to God as the epicenter of African religiosity; whether there is a place to worship or not, the African finds himself an abode of God and believes His omnipresence and thus worships anywhere.

It could also be argued that the association of God with the outbreak of the global pandemic as punishment for the ills perpetrated by many complicates the loving nature of the Supreme Being. However, to the African, the community, supervised by the Supreme Being cannot be faulty ex nihilo; it must be a resultant effect of a disrupted order, a disharmony in the nature or human relationship with the universe and with the unseen forces therein. "Many experts now believe that the surge in the new infectious diseases is being driven in part by some of humanity's most environmentally destructive practices, leading to increased contact between highly mobile, urbanized human populations and wild animals" (Táiwó, 2016: pp. 43). This implicates the clear evidence that we are driving disease emergence through less sustainable use of nature. Therefore, God could have allowed the pandemic as a strategy for controlling some hazardous environmental human activities and, by so doing, allowed the earth to regenerate naturally. The uncontrollable spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a global lockdown to ensue, thereby putting more than half of the world's population under control, together with their activities. For instance, technology and industrialization activities that produce aerosol and chlorofluorocarbons to cause depletion in the atmosphere and contamination in the entire ecosystem are at a standstill. Judging from the above illustration, the Africans cannot but spot the hand of God, who knows the extent of human wisdom in the outbreak and spread of the pandemic. It could be God's strategy of recreating the earth. God is sovereign over the universe and may allow the pandemic so that as the whole world is coerced into quarantine or lockdown, the earth may have a natural management.

The presence of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic has reiterated the need to return to traditional African communalism when the entire community shared the pain and happiness of an individual. "Every unit and process of the African community were aimed solidly at the wellbeing of the entire community" (Venter 2004, pp. 162). This sense of communalism has since been hijacked in recent times when political leaders think selfishly only of themselves and relatives at the detrims of other individual members of the community. Prior to the COVID-19 reality, political bigwigs
and business moguls left dilapidated health and educational structures for the common members of the society and embarked on health pilgrimages to countries with advanced health and functional educational systems as well as good structures in the case of themselves and their children. Since the pandemic has induced a global ban on traveling, thereby impeding every effort to travel abroad for treatment once they contract the virus or any other ailment, there is a dawning reality to put up good hospitals and deploy viable facilities there. For instance, in Nigeria, the pain of individual members of the community has been communalized; this is typified in the donation of palliatives in cash and foodstuffs by public-spirited individuals to abate the untold hardship the pandemic has wrought on average Nigerians.

There has arisen a renewed spirit of African religiosity in the face of the pandemic. Since the churches and mosques have been closed, Africans have developed a new religious movement; a resurge of family "shrines" in traditional African religion. It could be recalled that a condition like this contributed to establishing African Independent Churches (AICs). For instance, "a few important indigenous churches owe their origin to the deadly influenza epidemic which spread through West African in 1918, the mission churches had seemed helpless in the face of the disaster arousing a disappointed feeling among some African Christians who began a prayer and healing fellowships to tackle the disaster" (Venter, 2004, pp. 53). That was the beginning of the establishment of AICs, introducing some elements of African religiosity. Similarly, the convergence of Muslims and Christians on Fridays and Sundays respectively dealt a great blow on a family fellowship in many African families. Thus, the mitigation of these gatherings by the COVID-19 induced social distancing and lockdown enforcement has caused a U-turn to family worship fellowship in some families. The global pandemic has not only been a misfortune; it has also been a blessing. Although it has challenged the status quo, crippled world economies, and cause a pause in people's plan for the year, it has helped to return Africans to their fundamentals; a resurge of identity, and the need to adopt African religiosity communalism for sustainable development in the 21st-century African society.

6 CONCLUSION

African religiosity is an inseparable stratum of African life; it encompasses everything African. It influences social norms, politics, economy, and mutual relationships. It goes beyond professing a particular religion in recent time to acknowledging one sovereign reality; God who superintends the earth's affairs. Therefore, the African's dependence on God for solutions and safety in the face of pandemics is not a weakness, as critics and atheists claim, but an expression of the interconnectedness of the divine and humanity in African cosmology. The dreaded pandemic has thrown many things to the spotlight; it implicates the impossibility of dislodging African communalism and invites Africa to retrace her history to develop a fitting theory to drive and sustain her development. God, not a religion, is the epicenter of African life; an African life from birth to death in constant rituals to maintain his relationship with God and, therefore, impossible in the face of secularism or outbreak of infectious disease to dislodge the consciousness of God from the black continent.

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