OMOPO Bimbo Stanley

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND RELIGIOUS CONVIVIALITY IN IBADAN:

THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN MAINTAINING CLOSE-KNIT RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

IFRA-Nigeria
WORKING PAPERS SERIES

82 | OCTOBER 15, 2021

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND RELIGIOUS CONVIVIALITY IN IBADAN: THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN MAINTAINING CLOSE-KNIT RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Author

Omopo, Bimbo Stanley, M.A Graduate of Anthropology Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

Email: abimbolastan@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of COVID-19 on religious practices and religious conviviality in two local governments within Ibadan Metropolis – Ibadan North and Akinyele Local Government Areas. Beyond the impact of the pandemic, it also discusses the reformulations and strategies embarked upon by both Christian and Muslim leaders in ensuring that religious activities are not totally grounded, and that their religious communities remained closely knitted together. Qualitative data, through the use of individual in-depth interviews and participant observation, were collected over the space of three months, from December 2020 to March 2021. Findings reveal some general and unique impacts, which include: temporary disembodiment, an onslaught on religious and civic engagements, shrinking finances that halted earmarked projects, and the challenges of support for grieving members. In addressing these impact on activities, religious leaders embarked on some reformulations that include: employing the usage of digital technology where it applies; the transition to the use of house fellowships and cell gatherings; the (re)calibration of welfare systems to meet current demands; and the leveraging on the skills of the youth population to intensify religious worship and to sustain conviviality. The paper argues that these readjustments present a continuation to religious activities, which otherwise might seem, from a superficial perspective, as a total disembodiment.

Keywords: Covid-19; Religious Practices; Religious Conviviality; Ibadan; Nigeria

Introduction[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic, like other past pandemics in human history (Balkhair, 2020; Gingerich, 2006), caused major disruptions to a lot of human activities all over the world. It had costly repercussions, and has resulted in the loss of lives and livelihoods, crippled the conventional sense of community and social interactions, and has had a large impact on social life, religious life inclusive (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). To curb the spread of the virus, many countries initiated lockdown measures and included stay-at-home orders and closing of public buildings.

Ibadan, the capital city of Oyo State in South-West Nigeria, a city of 3.6 million people (Statista, 2020), was not left out of the attempts at initiating lockdown measures, as the number of cases in the country multiplied - though in lesser proportions than Lagos which quickly became the epicentre of the pandemic in Nigeria, and of Abuja, the capital city of the country (Adepoju, 2020). The partial lockdown measures in Ibadan, implemented in March 2020, involved sit-at-home orders, and meant that public spaces within the city were closed down for more than three months including markets and trading centres, educational institutions and schools, as well as religious organizations and places of worship that had the proclivity of further fuelling the spread of the virus. There was a partial re-opening of worship spaces in June only.

This move led to a halt in religious activities, and brought great changes to the religious lifestyle of followers of different denominations. Prior to the lockdown, physical gatherings were the norm: they were believed to bring meaning to religious worship, offered unending collective effervescence within congregations (Schüler, 2017; Draper, 2014), commanded a great level of spiritual presence, and united religious communities (Ayeni, 2020; O'Brien, 2020). Given the lockdown experience in Nigeria, and that of Ibadan in particular, the upending of communal observance of religious gatherings require further interrogations and proper understanding in view of the prevailing realities at that point in time (Kassim, 2020).

There have already been a plethora of literatures on the impact of COVID-19 on religious organizations, congregations, and spirituality (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020; Wildman *et al.*, 2020; Fardin, 2020); on the place of religion in

understanding and offering effective management and prevention of pandemics in society (Isiko, 2020; Barmania & Reiss, 2020; WHO, 2020); and on the importance of digital religion in adapting to the « new normal » (O'Brien, 2020; Obi-Ani, Anikwenze & Isiani, 2020; SDDC, 2020). Complementary to these works, this study seeks to understand the impact of the pandemic on religious practices and religious conviviality, taking the example of Ibadan in Nigeria. The objective is also to comprehend how religious leaders were able to devise effective and ingenious solutions in maintaining close-knit religious communities, despite what seems like a huge blow on activities, at religious places of worship. It thus contributes to existing knowledge on the subject of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on religion and on religious effervescence and community.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted in eight selected Churches and Mosques within Ibadan North Local Government Area, that has a population projection of 432,900, and Akinyele Local Government that has a population projection of 297,600 (City Population, 2020). The selection of these religious places of worship was based on a number of reasons that include: easy access (both LGA are adjacent), population strength of these worship spaces, and the readiness of religious leaders to agree to be interviewed.

For data collection, qualitative methods were employed, including individual semi-structured interviews with 16 religious leaders representing both religions in the two Local Government Areas under study. Eight religious leaders (4 each for both religions) were interviewed within Ibadan North LGA, while the other eight (4 each for both religions) were interviewed at Akinyele LGA. The label 'religious leader' connotes the set of people that often play crucial roles in the administration of their religious communities. Consequently, not only Pastors, Priests, Imams and deputy Imams were interviewed, but also other Church and Mosque administrators including secretaries, women leaders and youth leaders, as their input at the height of the pandemic and lockdown were noteworthy. The researcher also participated in a number of online programmes and live streaming services used by leaders of both religions, where more insights about the activities of religious leaders during the lockdown and post-lockdown were gathered. Interviews were conducted in both English and in Yoruba and translated when necessary.

The fieldwork exercise spanned over a period of two months, from December 2020 to March 2021. In conducting interviews, the researcher visited the religious places of worship from time-to-time in order to schedule interviews with the leaders. A typical interview involved the researcher meeting with leaders at their places of worship on Sundays (for churches), after joining them at their services, as well as attending Friday Juma'at services, and then interviewing religious leaders at the mosques right after.

On an average, an interview lasted for about 30 minutes with each religious leader at their places of worship, and in the event of some leaders not present at these places of worship, the interviews held at their work places, or where they considered comfortable and free. Some follow-up interviews were also conducted to verify information that were hazy or that required more clarification.

Conceptualizing religious practice and conviviality

Religions all over the world incorporate the idea of religious practices believed to include, but not limited to, rituals and liturgies, prayers, missionary activities, strict adherence to an array of dietary and ethical codes/injunctions, as well as the ordering of religious communities (Boisi Center, 2007). These practices are shaped by religious beliefs, regarded to be present across all cultures, and known to animate the experiences of the majority of people at every point in time (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). Jong (2013) argues that religious beliefs, like other forms of beliefs, are cognitively associated with some object concepts – for instance God – as well as some existential (real or imaginary) and truth-value concepts (Coleman III, Jong & Mulukom, 2018). According to George & Amusan (2012), religious beliefs refer to a set of principles that members of a particular religion adhere to, which have strong links to a supernatural being that directs the affairs of men. Religious beliefs shape the perception of adherents, and permeate their experiences anytime they involve themselves in religious practices. Religious organizations play an active role in shaping these beliefs, and are generally in strong support of some kinds of beliefs while censoring out others (Levy & Razin, 2012). Levy & Razin (2012) believe that the relationship that exists between religious beliefs and practice is so strong that it becomes almost impossible to separate them. It is widely accepted in the literature that, in any case, beliefs

shape religious practices and that the repetitive performance of religious practices helps to deepen people's beliefs (Boisi Center, 2007). It is thus a mutually formed and self-reinforcing relationship that produces authentic religious experiences, and elicits spiritual, emotional engagements and commitments from adherents (McNamara, 2002; Wildman & Brothers, 1999).

Writing about the religious duties and practices of Christians, Miller (2003) spells out a number of general practices that define Christianity. These practices include private and public prayers, fasting, almsgiving, religious festivals i.e. Christmas and Easter, and a host of other festivals peculiar to existing Christian denominations, and finally, holy rites and sacraments. Not only do worship practises in Christian denominations vary widely (Boisi Center, 2007), but the multiple meanings adduced to these practices also do vary. Citing rituals as an example of Christian religious practices that could contain more than one meaning, Riggs (2006) observes that "a single ritual often has multiple meanings, and participants may perceive one meaning but not another… None of the major Christian rituals is limited to a single meaning." This verifies the dynamic nature of religious practices in Christianity, with diverse meanings colouring the entire mix, as represented in the different denominations that exist in the religion.

In Islam, a quintet of religious practices are recognized as blueprints for an effective and a religiously balanced life. Known as the five pillars of Islam, they are believed to be capable of uniting all Muslims and translating faith into actions (Riggs, 2006). The first pillar is the declaration of faith, the *shahada*, an Islamic creed declaring belief in the oneness of God, and acceptance of Muhammad (SAW) as prophet. Muslims are expected to recite the *shahada* in their daily prayers, and new converts into the religion are also required to recite it (de Rooij, 2016). The other four pillars are: the five daily prayers (*salat*) including the Friday congregational prayers (*jumah)*; almsgiving to the poor (*zakat*); fasting (*sawm*), and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). In essence, the core of the Islamic religion revolves around a central belief – *shahada*, and four practices that unite Muslims into an organic whole, regardless of race, colour, or idiosyncrasies (Rippin, 2005; Gulevich, 2004).

The relationship that exists between religious beliefs and religious practices is thus mutually inclusive, and the Covid-19 pandemic, and the measures of social distancing adopted in its aftermath, deeply challenged existing routines of religious practices, as well as religious conviviality.

The notion of (religious) conviviality

Scholars in diverse disciplines have written extensively on the concept of conviviality, with varying meanings to address different contexts and situations. Kaufmann (2010) understands conviviality to be quite powerful, to the extent that it plays a very important role in every social interaction. Vähäkangas and Leis-Peters (2018) perceive conviviality to be a necessity for social interaction and social cohesion, and they explain that the concept has found a profound definition in various theological disciplines and in a plethora of discourses in migration and diversity studies. Wise and Noble (2016) refer to the perception of Gilroy (2004), whose highly referenced position and argument places into consideration the etymological meaning of the concept - with the word being said to originate from the Spanish *convivencia*, which depicts a form of shared life, a strong sense of community that exhibits "happy moments of togetherness". The Spanish connotation of this word is regarded to be overtly different from the English meaning, as the latter only defines moments of happiness, festivities, and fun, as different from something more long-lasting – a sense of community, which is obviously much more appreciated (Wise & Noble 2016).

Haugen (2015), reformulates the concept of conviviality to capture three broad key aspects: respect for others, a profound relationship with people, and a reciprocal behaviour towards everyone. He approaches this definition to depict a situation whereby a community of people from different cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds can better appreciate diversity, and live together despite the differences they exhibit. Conviviality, in this sense, thereby recognizes the importance of a community characterized by diversity (Vähäkangas & Leis-Peters 2018). Gilroys (2006) thus defines conviviality as "a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity, but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not – as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must – add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication."

This notion of conviviality, as stated by Gilroy, finds the potential in overcoming every form of differences – racial, linguistic, religious and ethnic based ones – and celebrating social interaction and sociability despite the perceived differences (Meintel, 2016). However, the definition of conviviality, as employed in this discourse, points to a sense of sociality that finds expression among members of the same religious community. It captures interesting features such as sharing, mutual aid, and an overwhelming sense of trust (Illich, 1973), despite

the differences exhibited by the divergent ethnicities, social and economic backgrounds of worshippers in the same religious gathering or space, as is the case in the religious communities under study. Such a concept of conviviality is particularly instructive in the case of Ibadan, that is a religiously and ethnically diverse city (Nolte, Danjibo & Oladeji, 2009).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious activities and conviviality in Ibadan

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, both religions under study saw an extensive impact on their religious activities and religious communities, and both dealt with huge blows in various avenues, both in similar and different ways.

"Disembodied" religious communities:

When the Oyo State government decided to halt all physical religious activities in March 2020, a pastor heading the media section of a Pentecostal church with over 500 members recalls that:

> 'The lockdown felt like being under attack. The fact that we no longer would be able to gather together and pray, hold hands, sing songs of praise, and act like brothers and sisters that we are, and hold church services that helps to strengthen the bond we share, was baffling. It was like being hit by a meteor from space.'[2]

Most, if not all of the religious leaders interviewed for this work, exhibited a dominating and pervading feeling of disembodiment in their responses regarding the impact of the pandemic on their congregations and religious activities. They were so used to the physical and face-to-face dimension of worship that, at the time the lockdown started, some felt that the government stance on a no-gathering measure would not last for a long time – not longer than a month or so. However, the seriousness of the authorities, and the harsh reality of the pandemic nudged them to adjust to this new normality. It can therefore be said that there was a similar perception about physical worship among the religious groups – that an embodied spiritual community was irreplaceable, and

---

[2] Interview with Pastor P., Head of Media, God's Love Tabernacle Ministry, Ibadan North LGA, on 22nd January, 2021.

that true worship implied gathering together, engaging in group actions, recognized to be evident characteristic of true believers.

These arguments relate to what Hutchings (2014) describes as a strong element of Christian discourses on the importance of physicality and particularly of the body, as an undisputed aspect of religious worship. In the context of COVID-19, this feeling of disembodiment also was strongly felt by some Muslim congregations, who had a tradition of hosting members of their congregations to *Iftar* meals, during Ramadan. Usually, this meal meant that members of the congregation observing the fast, who are heading back from work, or might be financially incapable of getting quality meals after the day's task, were treated to delicacies that include fruits, food and snacks. A couple of Chief Imams of Muslim organizations in Ibadan shared the same thoughts on the situation.

> "I lead a congregation of over two thousand members. As a tradition, every year during Ramadan, we would have well-to-do members contribute sums to aid us in offering Iftar meals to our people. As a mosque, we would add to this sum to make it wholesome. We do this because not everyone can afford to have a good meal after the day's work, and we consider it giving back to the community of people who make it to pray and worship with us. This has been a tradition we have observed for years on end, but the COVID-19 did its worst, with us not being able to execute such religious acts like we used to do. Those who depended on the cooked meals, particularly less privileged members of the congregations were largely affected. I still wonder how those people felt about the lockdown."

The imams described a situation where themselves and members felt denied of the collective effervescence that was the norm pre-lockdown, a thing people constantly looked forward to. The case of the *Iftar* also reveals how religious conviviality pre-lockdown created a close-knit relationship between the rich and the poor. Privileged members were often present, which created a relationship across social classes, especially during the fasting month of Ramadan. In essence, some religious activities that usually would provide energy, enjoyment, emotive experiences, and charged atmospheres were disrupted. This observation backs Dox's argument (2020) that the lockdown disrupted "visible body-to-body religious gatherings, it also disrupted the ways those gatherings bind people's

bodies — eyes, mouth, skin, nose, ears, and organs — to a shared sense of transcendence." [3]

A disruption on civic engagements:

A plethora of studies have established a relationship between religion and civic engagements, as well as the important civic roles played by religion and religious activities (Campbell & Yonish, 2003; Park & Smith, 2000). Religion also constructs what Levitt (2008) refers to as the theologies of change, with an emphasize on how to make the world a better place. Stating exact ways through which religion generates vital civil society, Smidt (1999) avers that religion contributes to dynamic civil life, particularly through fostering social connectedness, negotiating social and political participation, and finally, promoting civic behaviour among members of religious congregations. The idea of making the world a better place thus underlies civic engagements by religious groups, and these efforts attend to the improvement of lives of members, as well as those of non-members.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the capacity of the Christian and Muslim groups to embark on civic engagements were affected to a large extent. Some leaders of Muslim groups within Akinyele Local Government, particularly a Mosque where Yoruba and Hausa traders worshipped and which also shares close proximity with a construction materials market, had a couple of coordinators of the Qur'anic and adult education unit – the madrasa – lamenting strongly about the situation. These Qur'anic classes, mostly unpaid, had students of different age ranges in daily attendance. Classes usually held from Monday to Saturdays after school hours, and usually had students coming in from 4pm. The aim of these Qur'anic classes was, as with other madrasa, "to enhance students' skills in reciting, understanding and appreciating the Quran taught" (Che Noh et al., 2013). As noted by Abdul Hai (2017), as important as secular education is in reflecting the philosophy or ideology underlying the existence of a nation, Islamic education also does reflect the philosophy of life of Muslims, which are based on the teachings of the Qur'anic and the Hadith. Commenting on the

<hr>

[3] Interview with Alhaji Adebayo Afuye, the Chief Imam, Bodija Central Mosque, Ibadan North LGA, on January 12, 2021.

closure of mosques, with an obvious ripple effect on Qur'anic and Islamic education, a teacher at an Akinyele madrasa asserted:

> "For us, it wasn't just about the prayers, or the gathering together to worship. I assure you that there were so many other things that connected us together, one of which was the adult literacy programmes and Qur'anic classes we held. The Qur'anic classes had more young people learning the Qur'an and the Hadith – an avenue for us to prepare them for a life outside of the mosque. There is need to keep them in shape, helped by values we hold dear in Islam. All came to an abrupt end, and we could note the disappointment among students who needed those lessons the most. But there was nothing we could do about it – we needed to adhere to government's instructions."[4]

The fact that classes had to end was grim enough for the teachers, but they also feared that the faith and learning of students would be most affected. Beyond that, students from different ethnicities, also leveraged on such meetings to bond with each other and teachers alike. Overall, the teachers had concerns about the morality of students, considering the close down of classes.. Another madrasa instructor averred:

> "We consider character moulding not the preserve of parents and guardians alike, but also the efforts of the Muslim Ummah. This, and many more, we seek to achieve at our madrasa. We consider it a civic duty to help build character and godly values in our students, training them to do the bidding of their creator, from when they are young. The lockdown dealt us large blows in that regard."[5]

These attempts at organizing social life and creating close-knit religious communities were not just for members of the religious communities under study. During the lockdown, some churches and mosques which were previously known to hold HIV sensitization programmes, lead blood donation movements, as well as conduct healthcare outreaches that both members and non-members of their religious communities could benefit from, were hugely

---

[4] Interview with Alhaji Fatai, Member, Mosque Committee, and Madrasa teacher, Sasha Central Mosque, Ojoo, Akinyele LGA, on 8 February, 2021.

[5] *Ibid*.

challenged in such regards, and they were forced to discontinue such projects. For example, in Nigeria, John & Ekeke (2017) note the role of religious leaders for the inmates in prison. Though not peculiar to Christianity, only Christian leaders in this study were involved in these activities: they stated that the other social good that they were used to performing pre-lockdown to prisoners, which include buying clothing items, beverages, registering inmates for examinations like the West African Senior School Certificate Examination, making payment for legal representation of wrongly accused inmates, and generally ensuring that their rights were upheld despite their incarceration. All these actions, regarded to be germane humanitarian projects necessary for the preservation of the dignity of the imprisoned human (Iheanacho, 2015), faced great challenges that hindered their full civic effectiveness.

Shrinking finances:

The social distancing and the unprecedented nature of the lockdown meant that adherents were disallowed from accessing religious places of worship, and this had a direct impact on the finances of all the religious groups under study, as they plunged beyond expectations. According to an Imam, the Friday prayers were the major moment for the generation of funds in running the activities of his mosque, as members felt more obliged to donate to the mosque to execute projects on this day of the week. He recalled that:

> 'We were running into a recession no doubt, but thanks to a few
> financially stable members, we would have been put under."6

This situation was made more problematic considering the financial situation of many worshippers. Most adherents of the congregations under study belong to the lower class, with the majority of them earning their living as cab drivers, street cleaners, restaurant staff, labourers at construction sites, and hosts of other menial jobs. The closure of many of these onsite work places meant that salaries and wages of many of them were stopped, with others slashed, and some others getting laid off permanently. A female welfare officer at a church, whose husband was grossly affected by the economic crisis that followed the lockdown, asserted that these" trying times" required a great level of faith: in order to survive those periods, they needed to trust God. Such a comment shows how religion and

---

6 Interview with Alhaji Adebayo Afuye, the Chief Imam, Bodija Central Mosque.

spirituality help people respond to, and make sense of their experiences during trying times (Park, 2007).

Drawing from their experiences during the pandemic, a senior pastor and his assistant stated how physical giving at their church lagged. Many other churches and mosques also did lack the systems that favoured online giving, as well as the absence of live streaming capabilities that could have encouraged people to give more. The senior pastor observed a strong relationship between physical giving and the feeling of accomplishment that comes with it. According to him, having pastored for over a decade, the prayers said after dropping tithes and offerings mean more to congregants, but all that mostly ended with the pandemic. As many members could not "pass the offering basket" around during the lockdown, the steep decline in finances led to a sharp decrease of building projects, social and civic responsibilities, and community projects.

The challenges of support for grieving members:

Mourning at the loss of a loved one or family member is a widespread practice in any society and, when such incidences happen, people gather around the bereaved to help lift their spirits up from grief and offer their condolences and support. As noted by Appel & Papaikonomou (2013), bereavement is culturally nuanced, and bereaved individuals that are socially supported are less likely – than others who don't – to suffer pathological reactions or other health challenges (Parkes, 1996).

At the height of the pandemic, some of the religious groups under study had a number of deaths that stemmed from natural causes and not COVID-19. Some senior citizens passed on due to old age, and as is the tradition in some of these places of worship, they usually would select some members of the congregation to pay solidarity and condolences visits to show their support. The head of the welfare team of a 2,000-member mosque at Ibadan North Local Government averred:

> "It was the tradition to send representatives to the homes of members who have lost a loved one to death. During the pandemic, the restrictions on gatherings prevented us from continuing with this tradition of showing support and care. Beyond grieving with members, we usually would have the Chief Imam and other leaders be at the funerals of such people,

especially if they were devout members of our congregation. We also would donate to the burials of such people."[7]

The position of religious organizations in the grieving process of members was described as a social support that involves reaching out to bereaved members, praying for the repose of the soul of the dead, and encouraging the bereaved to not question God but taking the incidence as a trial of faith. This situation thus points to what Golsworthy & Coyle (1999) refers to as a conscious effort by religious and spiritual people to prevent the bereaved from making meaning of the death of their loved ones and ensuring that God is not questioned in the whole process. During the Covid-19 pandemic, showing solidarity and support became a very difficult task while the lockdown lasted and this had a large impact on the conviviality and the sense of familial relationship that people shared, especially in moments of pain and loss of a loved one.

Response of religious leaders to the pandemic, and efforts to keep close-knit communities.

During the pandemic, religious leaders in the congregations under study embraced measures to cope with the changes that the situation induced. Their objective was to create local solutions to address the challenges presented by the pandemic. Their shared purpose was to keep close-knit communities, despite what seemed like a break-in transmission as heralded by the lockdown measures instituted by government.

A media-enhanced connection with members:

As in other fields of social life, many religious leaders decided to embark on a connection with their congregations via various media – radio and television broadcasts, social media broadcasts on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, as well as on live audio and video apps like Mixlr and Periscope. The idea was to share soul-lifting messages to a congregation far-flung apart by the pandemic. These methods ensured that despite the situation, congregants, though socially distant, were spiritually connected (Adetoro, 2020).

---

[7] Interview with Alhaja Akerele, member of the welfare unit, Bodija Central Mosque, Ibadan North LGA, on January 15, 2021.

In some online services, the execution of the communion, a very important aspect of Christian services, was done by members who were breaking bread and drinking wine at home. In a physical interview, the church secretary of one of the branches within the local governments under study explained:

> "Prior the lockdown, it was a physical activity to observe the communion, and it is a doctrine that defines our collective faith as Christians. To an outsider, this might not make much sense, but to us, it does. The church leadership considers this as an adequate avenue to keep the community together, despite being far apart. Regardless of the lockdown, we consider it to be a propitiatory sacrifice that should be done with no one being left behind."[8]

Although the use of online media seemed appealing and ingenious, some religious leaders still had reservations considering their many followers without internet connection, those who did not have access to mobile phones to join or those without the skill set to handle such applications. The responses from the church leaders points to a decisive effort to not leave any follower behind. For example, most congregations put in place a well-structured system that allowed members to register their internet broadband needs and leaders scheduled data sharing to facilitate easy access to streamed services online. Responding to the needs of the older members of the church took a different trajectory: extracts from services were sent via WhatsApp messages and the children of the members were asked to stream at a central space within their homes, so everyone could partake in the services.

The same challenges were also faced by the Muslim groups, especially by members who were not tech-savvy, had no access to the internet, and even did not have devices that allowed them access to streaming services. The solution found by the respondents involved hosting services on radio programmes: as the transistor radio is a regular feature in many Nigerian homes, more people had access to the preaching from Muslim clerics. Moreover, the ubiquitousness of an affordable brand of Chinese-made phones that are easy to charge and which come with radio applications pre-installed, had both members and non-members of their congregations gaining access to preaching and exhalations delivered via

---

[8] Interview with Mrs. Wunmi Fabiyi, Administrative Secretary, God's Love Tabernacle Ministry, Ibadan North LGA, on January 19, 2021.

different frequencies and stations. Although the sense of physical connection was impacted, spiritual connections through the radio were sustained.

House fellowships/Cell gatherings:

Given the immediacy of the government's lockdown instruction in March 2020, many of the religious leaders were absolutely disconcerted and were pushed to set-up committees to find solutions to the situation. One of the decisions reached by many was the setting up of house fellowships and cell gatherings that took different forms in both religions, with peculiarity exhibited in different denominations and worship centres. In the churches under study, the already-established house fellowship system involved families who shared close proximity, gathering together – mostly on Sundays – to pray, hold Bible study sessions, and encourage each other in their religious practices. There would usually be a leader, oftentimes a church worker, heading these family fellowships, and believed to have an in-depth understanding of the scriptures: he or she would be responsible for leading services and taking charge of other activities in respect with the church's doctrines.

Responding to questions on the impact of house fellowships on the congregation, a house fellowship leader, quite active at the height of the pandemic, averred:

> "The house fellowship is an extension of the church. Beyond being
> an avenue for members who live close to each other to learn God's
> word, and better understand the church's doctrine, it offers a
> strong support system that helps to bind us together. We all are
> present in one another's lives, and we do everything together in
> love."[9]

The perception shared by many religious leaders was that house fellowships were extensions of the church and were usually spaces where members displayed religious conviviality - warmth, brotherliness, care and communal living. Though being physically outside of the church, the cell system retains the ideas of the church, and is generally regarded by followers as a safe space for people to share their thoughts and emotions with others they regard as family. At the height of the pandemic, house fellowships were effectively utilized in

---

[9] Interview with Minister Ibiwoye Boluwaji, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Olororo, Akinyele LGA, on January 24, 2021.

sustaining the churches, in passing the gospel, and in maintaining the conviviality that was connectively shared in person pre-lockdown.

For some other churches, they had to further breakdown the house fellowships into home cells, with parents being saddled with the responsibility of establishing and maintaining the microcosm of the church right in their homes. With a set of tools that included the Bible, study outlines, hymnal books and basic musical instruments, they were able to hold services on days earmarked for church programmes. For example, a church with fewer than 50 members had the clergyman, together with other church leaders, planning a timetable of visits to members 'home. Each Sunday, they would go the rounds to the homes of these families, with the pastor only participating in the home services instead of leading it in the church as he usually would pre-lockdown. This pastor stated:

> "We would not know when next we get to see them, as we have to
> visit other families as well. The purpose of allowing the heads of
> each home to do so is because they will have to keep leading until
> the government agrees that we return to church As a matter of
> fact, we were creating more leaders who can better handle their
> spiritual affairs."[10]

As earlier stated, the experiences of Muslim groups were slightly different. Despite not having already established home cell groups prior the lockdown, some leaders also ensured the continuation of religious activities right in the homes of members. During Ramadan and Eid, the leadership of a particular mosque instructed members to not gather at the mosque for *Iftar* meals, but instead, share it with their families and loved ones. Considering the need to safeguard the lives of worshippers, praying and recitation of the Qur'an at home, it was expected that it would not only lift their souls up, but also contribute to supplications to Allah in suppressing the spread of the virus. In support of this observation, some islamic scholars like Hirani (2020) argued that sickness including COVID-19 pandemic, was a legitimate excuse to miss congregational prayers in mosques, and that worshippers could pray with their families at home, and rest assured of getting the rewards of congregational prayers.

---

[10] Interview with Minister Ibiwoye Boluwaji, The Redeemed Christian Church of God.

Recalibrated welfare systems:

Almost all faith leaders interviewed spoke passionately about the recalibration of the welfare systems of their religious groups to suit the circumstances posed by the pandemic. First, well-established pre-lockdown databases of members made possible to keep in touch with the communities. The welfare teams had been tasked with collecting information such as names, phone numbers, places of residence, and date of birth of the followers. During the lockdown, the leaders of such welfare systems channelled much of their energies to texting and making calls to members that had mobile phones with three major goals: keeping in touch with members to understand if they were matching up with their spiritual obligations; passing across messages of hope and goodwill; and seeking to know if members had any need that they could be of help with.

A couple of church leaders explained that they ensured that there were dedicated phone lines where people could call in for prayers, get emotional and psychological support, and also get pastoral care and counsel. The Muslim groups had generally similar experiences and they made sure to not leave senior citizens isolated. As a result of a pervading sense of fear of the unknown, prompted by medical reports, studies and news about older adults being more susceptible to hospitalization and death from COVID-19 (Sharma, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021), some Muslim leaders devised means to ensure that they get in constant touch with these categories of people: they selected a few people, notably the Imam, a respected member of the mosque's leadership, and a member of the welfare team – oftentimes a woman – to join in the visitation of the elderly members. By making the numbers small, they believed they were adhering to COVID-19 protocols and that their activities did not endanger the lives of those being visited.

In a particular mosque, the Imam had a record of all elderly people who used to attend the mosque on a daily basis. Him and his team would head to their houses on the designated dates scheduled for the visits to say a few words of exaltation and some prayers. Stating the necessity of visiting these vulnerable and somewhat isolated people, an Imam averred:

> 'By supporting the aged, and by extension their families while
> taking the right precautions, we are doing what is expected of us

by Allah – assisting our fellow humans in trying times, as he
would, for us, in our lowest periods."[11]

The stability of these welfare groups thus presents an unaware readiness for an unforeseen event like the COVID-19 pandemic. The resilience of these groups helped to cater to the spiritual and dietary demands of the needy and isolated members of religious groups. From phone calls and text messages, to visits to the homes of senior citizens, people with disabilities or marginalized, they aimed at restoring the hopes of members, and assured them of a better life despite the shutdown of all physical places of worship (Gemade, 2020).

« Foot soldiers of hope » in trying times:

Considering the large number of the youth population within their communities, religious leaders capitalized on their skills to ensure the continuity of religious activities. In reference to the impact of these young people, a clergyman addressed them as the "foot soldiers of hope". Indeed, many church congregations faced challenges in transferring services online because of the non-acquaintance of many leaders to technology i.e. cameras, setting up applications, and live streaming of worship. In this regard, the tech-savvy nature of many young people came in handy. At other times, they helped with pre-recording of messages which made transitioning to the digital space easy for churches and mosques who embarked on such moves.

The head of a welfare group in a 1,500-member mosque also explained:

"At some point, we could no longer keep up with demands from
members who were in need of provisions and food items. The
presence of young people and their activeness truly helped us
manoeuvre perilous times posed by the pandemic, as they helped
in the distribution of food items to our members, all the time
maintaining social distancing and keeping to other COVID-19
rules."[12]

A proper examination of the work and impact of young people at this period presents an interesting situation as they were delegated some power to them, to assist in handling complex situations. For more conservative leaders and those who felt that physical interactions between them and members were germane,

---

[11] Interview with Alhaji Adebayo Afuye, the Chief Imam, Bodija Central Mosque.

[12] Interview with Alhaja Akerele, member of the welfare unit, Bodija Central Mosque

they leveraged on the youth population to assist in improving group conversations. Young people therefore provided a lot of the energy necessary to maintain close-knit communities in their congregations. Power, which used to be the preserve of religious heads, found much devolution to these set of young people. It is hard to determine how long these changes would last, but it reflects a form of adaptation in dire circumstances.

The changed sense of worship spaces and connection

For many religious organizations, the lockdown resulted in a changed sense of "worship spaces", translated mostly from physical gatherings to the use of technological tools and applications to create a non-physical worship space. The effects of this translation from the physical to an online worship space were two-fold: first, the question of the spirituality, or the sacredness of online worship. A youth pastor, who doubled as media head, stated that it was a source of concern at some point, considering how things such as notifications from chatting applications could serve as a distraction from accessing the divine in worship sessions, and could also be a source of untold profanity. Such feelings came across as a negative perception of online communication channels as being imperfect tools for keeping congregations in active religious worship. The positive responses got from members of the congregation finally convinced the youth pastor that it could be a great way of keeping the church alive. This situation reflects the submission of Campbell (2005), who argued that technology can be spiritually shaped by religious users towards their own desires and goals - a proof that the internet could, as a matter of fact, be an indisputable resource for spiritual purposes (Ramorola, 2021).

The second reaction, closely related to the first, is the question of an outright loss of collective effervescence, stemming from the use of online technology to host meetings for the religious groups involved. In existing literature on the subject of communication technologies and religious worship, this has also been a concern for many authors. For instance, Dawson (2005) questions the possibility of a true sense of online religious worship, stating a number of factors he believes limit true worship: detached spaces, lack of a real shared time and cultural memory, as well as the absence of 'real people' to drive worship. This sentiment was also held by some of the religious leaders interviewed, who found it hard accepting technology and the transit to online services as a pertinent aspect of religious worship. This was particularly related to the importance, particularly among some Christian denominations, of the giving of tithes and offerings. Online

giving and bank transfers were progressively set up to address this challenge and, consequently, the perception of online worship gradually became more positive. This transition to online worship, despite the initial attitude, gradually improved group communication, especially between leaders and members, as announcements, Bible study materials, Qur'anic sermons and verses, and a host of other information were shared.

Another effect of the pandemic on religiosity is the growing sense of worship spaces that partly moved away from the four walls of a religious house to the homes of adherents. The sense of space therefore changed, and the distinction between what is sacred, as well as what is profane, became blurred. This dynamic is evident in the consolidation of cell gatherings and house fellowships as well as strategizing to make evangelism look inward. This hybrid or augmented spaces of worship, outside of the churches and mosques, kept religious communities together, and reflects the sense of adaptation of leaders, which can be said to have stemmed from necessity and the demands of the lockdown.

Conclusion

This article tracked some of the impact of the COVD-19 pandemic on religious worship and religious conviviality in selected Christian and Muslim places of worship within two local government areas in Ibadan, Oyo State – Ibadan North and Akinyele Local Government Areas. The study, employing qualitative methods of individual in-depth interviews and participant observation of some online services, explored the general and specific ways at which the pandemic affected religious activities, and how religious leaders were able to maintain close-knit and active religious communities despite the existence of a pandemic that disrupted physical activities.

Findings have shown that leaders were dazzled by the government rules for a lockdown to stem the spread of the virus. Regardless of the direct impact it had by bringing to a halt physical activities, leaders were able to devise other resourceful and ingenious means to continue worship and to sustain religious conviviality. Such moves, as Cavaliere (2020) observes, are reformulations and redesigning that leaders had to embark upon to ensure cohesion in their social and spiritual communities. These reformulations include: employing the usage of digital technology where it applies; the transition to the use of house fellowships and cell gatherings; the recalibration of welfare systems to meet current demands; and the leveraging on the skills of the youth to intensify

religious worship and social contacts. Such measures aimed specifically at maintaining some sense of religious conviviality in an unprecedented and challenging context. The findings in this paper further points to the fact that, despite what seems like an outright dissolution of religious worship and sense of community, there was a smooth transition to keep things moving. In more ways than one, lessons on risk management, transitioning in the wake of an epidemic/pandemic, and devolution of power to a new crop of 'accidental leaders' – young people – were learned and would survive, despite the return to a more « normal » situation after the lifting of lockdown measures.

References

Abdul Hai, K. (2017). The Islamic Education Methods in Al-Quran. Ta'dib: Journal of Islamic Education 22 (1), 1-10.

Adepoju, P. (2020). Coming to Terms with COVID-19 in One of Nigeria's Major Cities. Health Policy Watch. Retrieved Apr. 10, 2021, from https://healthpolicy-watch.news/coming-to-terms-with-covid-19-in-one-of-nigerias-major-cities/.

Adetoro, A. (2020). "Socially distant, spiritually connected": Religious activities on the University of Ibadan campus amid the coronavirus pandemic. Retrieved Jun. 15, 2021, from https://remoboko.blogspot.com/2020/10/socially-distant-spiritually-connected.html?m=1.

Appel, D., and Papaikonomou, M. (2013). Narratives on Death and Bereavement from Three South African Cultures: An Exploratory Study. Journal of Psychology in Africa, 23(3), 453–458.

Atran, S. and Norenzayan, A. (2004). Religion's evolutionary landscape: Counter-intuition, commitment, compassion, communion. Behavioral and Brain Sciences 27, 713–770.

Ayeni, T. (2020). Religion in Nigeria despite coronavirus measures. The African Report. Retrieved Apr. 16, 2021, from https://www.theafricareport.com/25532/religion-in-nigeria-despite-coronavirus-measures/.

Balkhair, A.A. (2020). COVID-19 Pandemic: A New Chapter in the History of Infectious Diseases. Oman Medical Journal 35(2), 1-2.

Barmania, S. and Reiss, M.J. (2020). Health promotion perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic: The importance of religion. Global Health Promotion, 0(0), 1–8.

Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life (2007). Religious Practice in the United States. Boisi Center Papers on Religion in the United States (1). Retrieved Apr. 22, 2021, from

https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/bc_papers/BCP-Practice.pdf.

Campbell, D.E. and Yonish, S. J. (2003). Religion and volunteering in America. In Waco, C.S. (Ed.), Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good. Baylor University Press, Waco, 87–106.

Campbell, H. (2005). Spiritualizing the Internet: Uncovering discourses and narratives of religious Internet use. Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, 1(1). Retrieved May 08, 2021, from http://archiv.ub.uniheidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5824/pdf/Campbell 4a.pdf.

Cavaliere, P. (2020). Religious Institutions in Japan Responding to Covid-19-Induced Risk and Uncertainty. Journal of Religion in Japan, 10(1), 31–63.

Che Noh, M.A., Hussein, A., Ghani, O., and Suhid, A. (2013). The Study of Quranic Teaching and Learning: A Review in Malaysia and United Kingdom. Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research 15 (10), 1338-1344.

Coleman III, T., Jong, J., and Mulukom, V. (2018). Introduction to the Special Issue: What are Religious Beliefs? Contemporary Pragmatism 15, 279-283.

Dawson, L. (2005). The mediation of religious experience in cyberspace. In Højsgaard, M., & Warburg, M. (Eds.). Religion and Cyberspace, 15–37. London: Routledge.

de Rooij, L. (2016). Religious Practice. ResearchGate. Retrieved Apr.27, 2021, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312292863_Religious_Practice.

Dox, D. (2020). Transformation in and from Quarantine. In Campbell, H.A. (Ed.), Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World, 1-60. Texas: Digital Religion Publications.

Draper, S. (2014). Effervescence and Solidarity in Religious Organizations. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 53(2), 229-248.

Durkheim, E. (1912/1954). The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. (J. Swain, Trans.) New York: The Free Press.

Fardin, M.A. (2020). COVID-19 Epidemic and Spirituality: A Review of the Benefits of Religion in Times of Crisis. Jundishapur Journal of Chronic Disease Care 9(2), 1-4.

Gemade, C.K. (2020). Pentecostalism and Information Communication Technology in the Face of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria. IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities 6(10), 25-34.

George, T.O. and Amusan, T.A. (2012). Religion and acts of worship among the Nigerian people: Implications for development and national unity. In Jegede, A.S.

(Eds.) Peoples and Cultures of Nigeria, 309-325. Ibadan: Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Gilroy, P., 2004. Postcolonial Melancholia. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gingerich, B.S. (2006). Pandemic Outbreaks: Definitions, History, Mandates, and Initiatives. Home Health Care Management & Practice 19(1), 63-65.

Golsworthy, R., and Coyle, A. (1999). Spiritual beliefs and the search for meaning among older adults following partner loss. Mortality, 4, 21-40.

Gulevich, T. (2004). Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions. Michigan: Omnigraphics, Inc.

Haugen, H.M. (2015). Approaches to Inclusive and Equitable Societies: Diaconal Perspectives. Diaconia 6(2), 150–166.

Hirani, A. (2020). What Does Islam Say About the COVID-19 Pandemic? Retrieved Jun. 23, 2021, from https://www.bostonislamicseminary.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/What-Does-Islam-Say-About-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-Shaykh-Dr.-Asif-Hirani-1-1.pdf.

Hutchings, T. (2014). The Dis/Embodied Church: Worship, new media and the body. In Vincett, G. (Ed.), Christianity in the Modern World, 1-27. Farnham: Ashgate.

Iheanacho, N.N. (2015). Religion in Prison: The Challenge of Human Rehabilitation. Bassey Andah Journal 7, 110-119.

Illich, I. (1973). Tools for Conviviality. London: Calder & Boyars.

Isiko, A.P. (2020). Religious construction of disease: An exploratory appraisal of religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda. Journal of African Studies and Development, 12(3), 77-96.

John, E. and Ekeke, E.C. (2017). A Comparative Analysis of Religions among Nigerian Prison Inmates in Calabar, Cross River State. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) 22(7), 37-43.

Jong, J. (2013). Implicit Measures in the Experimental Psychology of Religion. In A New Science of Religion, 65–78. New York: Routledge.

Kassim, A. (2020). Where is God in all of this? COVID-19 and the Palliative force of Religion. The Republic. Retrieved Apr. 19, 2021, from https://republic.com.ng/vol5-no1/covid-19-and-the-palliative-force-of-religion/.

Kaufmann, S. (2010). CUBA –Fostering Artificial Conviviality by a Web-based Feed Framework. International Journal of Digital Society (IJDS) 1(2), 94-102.

Levitt, P. (2008). Religion as a path to civic engagement. Ethnic and Racial Studies 31 (4), 766-791.

Levy, G. and Razin, R. (2012). Religious Beliefs, Religious Participation, and Cooperation. American Economic Journal: Microeconomics 4(3), 121–151.

McNamara, P. (2002). The Motivational Origins of Religious Practices. Zygon? 37(1), 143–160. doi:10.1111/1467-9744.00418.

Miller, W.M. (2003). Beliefs and Practices of Christians: A Letter to a Friend [Revised] Paperback. Uttar Pradesh: OM Books.

Nguyen, N.T., Chinn, J., Nahmias, J., et al. (2021). Outcomes and Mortality Among Adults Hospitalized With COVID-19 at US Medical Centers. JAMA Netw Open 4(3). doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.0417.

Nolte, I., Danjibo, N., & Oladeji, A. (2009). Religion, Politics and Governance in Nigeria. Religions and Development Research Programme, Working Paper 39, 64-66.

O 'Brien, H. (2020). What does the rise of digital religion during Covid-19 tell us about religion's capacity to adapt? Irish Journal of Sociology 28(2), 242–246.

Obi-Ani, N.A., Anikwenze, C., & Isiani, M.C. (2020). Social media and the Covid-19 pandemic: Observations from Nigeria. Cogent Arts & Humanities 7(1), 1-15.

Oyo State in Nigeria. (2020, July 25). Retrieved February, 2009, from https://www.citypopulation.de/php/nigeria-admin.php?adm1id=NGA031

Park, C.L. (2007). Religiousness/Spirituality and health: A meaning systems perspective. J. Behav. Med. 30, 319–328.

Park, J.Z. and Smith, C. (2000). 'To whom much has been given…': religious capital and community voluntarism among churchgoing Protestants. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 39 (3), 272–286.

Parkes, C. (1996). Psychiatric problems after bereavement. Psychiatry in Practice, 3(4), 28–33.

Ramorola, M.Z. (2021). Rethinking Religious Practice and Activities through the lenses of Information and Communication Technologies in the era of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Pharos Journal of Theology 102 (2), 1-15.

Riggs, T. (2006). Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices, Volume 1. Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale.

Rippin, A. (2005). Muslims Their religious beliefs and practices (Third edition). Oxfordshire: Routledge.

Schüler, S. (2017). Aesthetics of Immersion: Collective Effervescence, Bodily Synchronisation and the Sensory Navigation of the Sacred. Aesthetics of Religion, 367-388.

Sharma, A. (2021). Estimating Older Adult Mortality from COVID-19. The Journals of Gerontology Series B, 76(3), e68–e74. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa161.

Statista, (2020). Largest cities in Nigeria in 2020. Retrieved Apr. 15, 2021, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/1121444/largest-cities-in-nigeria/.

The Strength in Diversity Development Centre (SDDC), (2020). A Position Paper on Religion and Covid-19 Pandemic: Role of Interfaith Leaders and Faith-Based Organizations in Nigeria. Retrieved Apr. 05, 2021, from https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Position-on-Religion-and-COVID-19.pdf.

Vähäkangas, A., and Leis-Peters, A. (2018). On the need of conviviality: Experiences of religious diversity of Nordic youth.

Wildman, W.J., and Brothers, L.A. (1999). A Neuropsychological –Semiotic Model of Religious Experiences. In Russell, R.J. (Eds.) Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives of Divine Action, 347-418. Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, and Berkeley: CTNS Divine Action Project.

Wildman, W.J., Bulbulia, J., Sosis, R., and Schjoedt, U. (2020). Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic. Religion, Brain & Behavior, 10(2), 115-117.

Wise, A., and Noble, G. (2016). Convivialities: An Orientation. Journal of Intercultural Studies 37(5), 423–431.

World Health Organization. (2020). Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19. Retrieved Apr. 16, 2021, from https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331707/WHO-2019-nCoV-Religious_Leaders-2020.1-eng.pdf.