

**TRADITIONAL AFRICANS' RELIGIOUS CONVICTION AND  
CHALLENGES  
POSED BY COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN AFRICA**

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DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.34534.86085

**Abstract**

*Man was not born genetically as a religious being, but man (Homo-sapien), is a religious being, and inevitably religious either overt or covert. Be that as it may, religion has offered man psychological defence against spiritualities, physical, scientific and empirical proven facts. These religious convictions and defiance adopted by man have been challenged by the challenges posed by the emergence of Corona virus/Covid-19. The leadership of the civil society has been left with no alternative measure to control or prevent the widespread contraction of the virus than to embark on total lockdown. This lockdown sincerely affected religious activities that religious practitioners were left with no other option than to practice their religions in their privacy. It is discovered in this paper, that the act of lockdown and other preventive measures introduced to save human lives against Covid-19 seriously affected the spiritual, social and economic wellbeing of religious institutions in Africa. It is the position of this paper that religion in its totality should pay attentive attention to science and government even though God is truly in charge. It should be born in our minds that we also believe that God in His infinite power created science and constituted those in authority. Therefore, they should be honoured and acknowledged by every religious adherent. In order to make a sound presentation of these issues, this study employed phenomenological research approach. Both primary and secondary materials were used, and data collected were analysed with descriptive method of data analysis. It is recommended among other things that religious institutions in Africa should form teams that will collaborate with the health teams that go for Covid-19 outreach to convince people more that Covid-19 is real and should be prevented.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Religious Conviction, Challenge, Pandemic, and Africa

**Introduction**

COVID-19 pandemic as a world health issue has gone beyond the adage that says that "a healthy nation is a wealthy nation". The corona virus spread and its effects

have exceeded beyond a particular dimension of human welfare in the whole world generally, and Africa in particular. Ordinarily one would expect the effects to exhaust its drastic influence on the economic sphere of the masses' livelihood. Be that as it may, COVID-19 pandemic stretches its catastrophic influence beyond the economic wellbeing to political, social and religious cum spiritual strands of human interaction and affairs. Economic activities were completely locked down, in terms of physical interactions, political relationship and functions were paralyzed. Social functions including sports, cultural festivals, marriage/wedding programmes, burial/funeral ceremonies were kept on a serious halt. Religious activities also underwent terrible parts in the same scene. In fact, the health and religious spheres saw the pandemic as a peculiar challenge. Within units of the more developed world, it is more or less a serious concern posed against health practitioners. But in Africa, religious and health practitioners shared virtually, equal concern and professional challenge posed against them by the outburst of COVID-19, to have spread to such dark, sunny and a notorious religious continent.

It is on this background that the manifestations of Africans religious conviction began to showcase itself, in combating and expositing counter conviction against certain information, and convictions presented by health sciences on the management and control of the spread of corona virus/COVID-19. Rev Okonkwo Chukwugekwu Henry (personal communication, 14 August 2020) states that whatever science discovers on the problematic COVID-19 pandemic, God must still deliver the innocent people who have no cause to be affected by virus. He makes references to the raising of Lazarus from death, healing of the woman with Hemorrhage, the lame, the leprosy, etc. He points that as Jesus can perform these miracles, he is always alive to protect and heal this people. This is a replica of the traditional religious conviction that exists among Africans in the midst of the challenges of COVID-19 as a world health issue. This traditional religious conviction does not just go down well with all and sundry. Within the biblical context, it is stated therein in Romans 13:1-2 thus: "Obey the government, for God is the one who has put it there. There is no government anywhere that God has not placed in power. So those who refuse to obey the law of the land are refusing to obey God..." This study finds base on this part of the bible in tackling the problem of traditional African people's religious conviction in the midst of both economic, social, political, health, and religious challenges posed by Covid 19

especially as it concerns Africans. What the bible says here also finds its place in other world religions practiced in African continent.

Irrespective of the fact that the lockdown and other preventive measures introduced to save the lives of the populace sincerely affected religious activities amidst other human activities that man is left alone to practice his religion is not enough to adopt some versions of any religious document regarding to healing and miracles as a way of basing our reliability or conviction on such religious information to disobey the promulgated rules from government authorities and health science. A typical traditional religious Igbo man will always say; *Onye Chi na-azo Onwe ya*". He who God protects should at the same time protect adopts phenomenological research himself. The research approach Materials used in the study were sourced from both primary and secondary source. The information gotten were analyzed with descriptive style of data analysis. The study recommends among other things that religious institutions in Africa should organize teams that will collaborate with the health teams that go for Covid 19 outreach to play part in convincing people more, that Covid 19 is real can affect anybody and should be prevented and controlled.

### **Clarification of Concepts**

The terms that are explained in this research are: Religious conviction, challenges, COVID-19, pandemic and Africa. Religion itself has been given several definitions by so many scholars. All that attempted of the definition of religion tended to be so much influenced by their respective socio-cultural backgrounds. Individual values affected their perceptions. Failure of communication may have been responsible for this (Anyacho, 2005:28). Okwueze (2003) points that religion is one of the most difficult concepts In terms of definition. Immanuel Kant in Okwueze (2003:3) perceived religion simply as; man`s recognition of his duties as a divine command; Yinger (1970) examined religion as system of beliefs and practice through which a group of people pursues with the ultimate problems facing human life. Religion for him, is the refusal to capitulate to death, and to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart one`s human association.

A critical look at the few definitions of religion given here portrays that the definitions are given on the basis of individual scholar`s perspective as it affects their discipline and socio-cultural background. This could be suspected to have

made Onyeidu (2001:14-15) to have emphasized on the problem of definition of religion thus:

As early as 1912, James Leuba had collected some forty-eight definitions of religion. But none of these was accepted as the correct definition of the term religion. While many of the definitions are arbitrary others are subjective. Theologians define religion on the basis of God's activity in creation and redemption; sociologist from its function in society...

All these and other facts have contributed to the problem of the definition of this subject matter "Religion". That notwithstanding, there is an integrated phenomenon that defines independent religious beliefs as a unified experience of man as a member of a given society or environment. This concept could be seen as "religious conviction". Conservapedia describes religious conviction as the assertion of religious individuals that they are directed by God (in Christianity religions, or other deities in other religions) to either take specific actions in honor of their conviction. Conviction on the other hand applies especially to belief strongly held by an individual. Hayes (2008) avers that examples of religious conviction include a personal religious conviction to assist people in need, or a conviction to change personal behavior that are sinful, and keeps one apart from God's will. In fact, these and many more form instances that can aid the understanding of the idea of religious conviction.

Challenge as a noun according to Summers (2001) has about five connotations. The first sees it as something that tests strength, skill or ability especially, in a way that is interesting. The second connotation views it as a refusal to accept that something is right or legal. The third examines it as an invitation to compete, while the fourth one explains it as a demand from someone to stop and give proof of who you are and explanation of what you are doing. The fifth definition defines it on the basis of the confines of the law, which is completely out of place in this context. Mrs. Eugenia Chikelu, a lecturer in English Education Department, Institute of Ecumenical Education, Enugu (personal communication, 21 May, 2020) asserts that the terms "challenge" as it applies to ordinary human environment, is more or less a situation in which something or someone is faced with a difficult situation which places the thing or person in a condition that tests his or its ability to overcome or succumb to the difficulty. What Mrs. Eugenia Chikelu explains, covers that part of challenge explained by Summers that covers the interest of this research.

COVID-19 is a very new medical term in the globe as a whole. World health organization (2020) admits that COVID-19 is the name given by the world health organization (WHO) on February 11, 2020 for the disease caused by the novel corona virus SARS-COV2. It started in Wuhan, China in late 2019 and has since spread worldwide. COVID-19 is an acronym that stands for corona virus disease of 2019. Historically, according to WHO, on December 31, 2019, a strange new pneumonia of unknown cause was reported to the Chinese WHO country office. A cluster of these cases originally appeared in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei province in China. The infection was found to be caused by new corona virus which assumed the name "2019 novel corona virus" (2019 - COVID). It was later given another name "severe" acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2" or SARS - COV2 by the International Committee on taxonomy of viruses on February 11, 2020. It was renamed SARS - COV2 because the virus is a genetic cousin of the corona virus which caused the SARS outbreak in the year 2002 (SARS - COV). The unofficial name for the virus is COVID 19 virus. In fact World Health Organization and its embodied International Committee on Taxonomy of virus have provided every information needed in this study to elaborate on the meaning, origin and nature or characteristics of this virus disease.

Pandemic as one of the keywords in this research is defined by website (2020) as something that occurs over a wide geographic involving multiple countries or continents and typically affecting a significant area. Summers (n.d) also defines it as a disease that affects people over a large area or the whole world. The pandemic meant in this context has much connection with wide or global spread of such as COVID 19 which forms the subject matter of the study.

Africa is that continent of the world commonly known to have most of its countries as members of the third world or developing countries. Mr. Ibezim Timothy (personal communication, 19 February, 2020) points that scientific observations prove that most part of Africa experience a higher heat in terms of weather and climate. In the words of Macdonald, (2019: 1-2) Africa is discussed thus:

The word "Africa" is an evocative one that conjures up different images for different images for different people for some, it's an irony - tusked elephant standing before the snow - capped peaks of Mount Kilimanjaro: For others, it is a mirage shimmering on the horizon of the Avid Sahara Desert. It's also a powerful

word – one that speaks of adventure and exploration, corruption and poverty, freedom and mystery. For 1.2 billion people, the word “Africa” is also synonymous with the word “home” but where does it come from? No one knows for sure, but in this article, we take a look at a few of the most likely theories.

The major theory that has given classical explanation to the origin of “Africa” is the Roman theory MacDonald (2019:3) continues thus: “some believe that the word “Africa” came from the Romans, who named the land they discovered on the opposite side of the Mediterranean after a Berber tribe living in the cartage area (now modern – day Tunisia).

There are also different versions from different sources on the origin of Afri and its name. But it is worthy to note that the most popular is Africa. More so, it is thought that the Romans called the region Afri – Terra, meaning “the Land of the Afri”. Later, the idea would have been taken to become contracted to form the single word “Africa”. In a different version, some historians suggest that the suffix “-ica” could also have been used to mean “the land of the Afri”, In which the same way that the Celtica, which is a Zon of modern or present day France was named after the Celtae or Celts that lived in the territory. Invariably it could also be taken that there is the possibility that the name was at the same time a misinterpretation of the Berber’s own name for the place where they lived. The Berber’s word Afri means of the cave, and could also be referred to as the place of the cave dwellers. The point and fact very glaring here are that the name Africa has been in existence since the Roman era, even though it could initially be referred to as North Africa only.

In fact, there are other theories that try to examine the meaning, origin and the people of the continent known today as “Africa”. Historians have propounded the Phoenician Theory, the Weather Theory, the African Theory, and the Geographical Theory. All these theories are targeted towards providing concrete and elaborate information on the people and their geographical setting. The continent is very vast in ethnicity, race, geography, culture and religion. This would help to suggest why there could be numerous perception and convictions among the people. If the nature of this study had permitted the research to delve into details of theories stated here, an audience would concur totally that the nature of the people’s history ought to create room for divergent ideologies and convictions amidst other factors attached to foreign or alien influences.

Though religion is just an aspect of a culture, but according to Okafor (2001:1) he avers:

To a very wide extent religion has greatly affected the human society, including the moral, social, philosophical and political life of man morally, it has played a great role for moral development in the world of mankind, and the campaign of many world living religions for morality evidenced the fact that the earthly focus of almost all of these religions is acceptable moral behaviour (righteousness) of which the reward, to most of them, is eternal life, abundant pleasure, etc in the world to come. Christianity, Orthodox Buddhism, Judaism etc have clear set-rule for their adherents for moral behaviour.

It is this religious philosophy stressed here by Okafor that should be the focus of every religious votary. Adherents of 1 African Traditional Religion, Islam, Christianity, etc in Africa should focus on morality and righteousness in all ramifications. If the whole idea on every religious conviction will be in agreement with the harmonious relationship with societal order. It is on this background that this research considers the position of religious conviction as it affects the prevention and control of COVID-19 in so many aspects of the Traditional African People's welfare, be it economic, health social, political and spiritual or religious.

### **Religions Conviction in the Midst of Health Challenges Posed by COVID-19.**

In Africa, health is earnestly taken at high esteem. Traditionally, every health measure is fundamentally attached to a particular spiritual force, which is worshipped or accorded religious rituals in both specific and occasional intervals. This has made African medicine almost appear to be clothed with spirituality in its entirety. Moreover, certain illnesses are too strange to the people's cosmology. This alien intrusion of diseases in the world, does not water down very well to African man's experience of the world around him. Chief Nweke Aniako (Personal Communication, 23 March, 2020) points that since he was born, as old as 73 years now, he has heard about several diseases with a central name "virus" as their cause. These diseases according to him include: HIV/AIDs, Ebola and COVID-19. There is another one called Lasa Fever he said, He further argues that within his community; no one among the rural developer in his locality has manifested any symptom of any of these dangerous illnesses. He argues that the only aboriginals

who have shown such symptoms, of which some have died of such disease especially HIV/AIDs are the Diaspora sons, daughter or wives. He adds that the earth goddess and their ancestors reject occurrence of such illnesses which are always pandemic to enter the traditional environment to torment the traditional environment and the rural drivellers.

On a similar realm, Mrs. Udego Ogugofa (personal communication 13 June, 2018) asserts that the earth goddess, ancestors, and spirit of medicine and divination are spiritual custodians of the African man's health. On this note, she proclaims that they Africans do not know these deadly illnesses, of course, those diseases will never know or locate them in their lives. COVID-19 for many traditional Africans is perceived as punishment from the gods and ancestors, just as it is to HIV/AIDS. Ekeopara (2005:102) buttresses such belief on the scourge of HIV/AIDS thus:

If Africans have indeed abandoned their gods and broken the sanctify of the human body, then it might be that the HIV/AIDS Scourge is a punishment from the gods for sexual immorality. Since Africans believe that the gods abhor immoral acts, all sexually derived HIV/AIDS disease could be said to be a curse and punishment from the gods. If the gods are the guardians of morality and Africans have broken the moral order of the universe of man, then HIV/AIDS is the consequence of this offence. Again, since punishment for offences are not only limited to the offender (s) the whole of Africa is suffering the punishment of the gods for the sins of one person or a few individuals.

This is for HIV/AIDS Epidemic or pandemic Today, typical African traditionalist most of who are not formally literate conceive COVID-19/SARS as a more sincere way of punishing the world for her atrocities. This time they believe that human uncleanness has out grown sexual immoralities. The corona-virus scourge is digested by many Africans as the punishment against the wealthy people who have committed a lot of sins against humanity in politics, social; life, economics life etc.

This is the conviction that is because the rich men are mostly affected by the virus. Therefore, the righteous African should not worry about the spread of the disease. Most importantly, Africans agree with the wonders of Western medicine, but still believe that their traditional religion remains the final hope where physical medical efficacy is concluded in the traditional rituals. Onunwa (1990:90) elaborates this fact thus:

The hospital is believed to be good for certain diseases whose treatment must however, be validated by some ritual offerings at home. This is based on the people's world-view. In spite of the contributions of modern medicine, some traditional Igbo-men still believe that healing is incomplete if some necessary rituals are not performed. They do not completely despise the achievements of western medicines, but believe that there are some ailments which the hospitals cannot cure.

It could be possible that there are diseases the hospital might not cure, but the point is that even when the hospital can cure certain ailments the African man, finds essence in embarking on healing rituals. All these excessive dependence on spirituality and religion have caused the lack of interest among the people to pay needed attention on the guides or measures of controlling the health challenge posed by COVID-19 against the people.

### **African Religious Conviction and Challenges of Religious Welfare during the COVID-19 Lockdown**

Christians, Muslims and traditional religious practitioners in Africa were seriously affected by the COVID-19 lockdown. Church activities were momentarily closed; the Mosque prayers and other observation were also kept on halt. Even in the rural areas traditional worships were at the same time affected by the lockdown. At a time when religious gathering was allowed to commence, there are also measures that restricted complete observation of the religious liturgies or activities normally observed. The Roman Catholic worshippers are restricted from their liturgy of hand shake as a sign of peace; the Holy Communion is received hand to hand, as against the usual hand to tongue. Other religious bodies or denominations are also affected liturgically, in one way or the other. Apart from the liturgy, there are central measures introduced by the agencies involved in the control of the spread of COVID-19. The problem that bothers this paper is, to what extent are these regulatory rules and measures obeyed among African religious practitioners and adherents. Rev. Wisdom Ukachukwu (personal communication, 2 September, 2020) stresses that they the clergy are always instructed in meeting with relevant bodies, of which they pass the information to the congregation. But the problem therein is that many do not observe the rules. Some anchor on the belief that with god all things are possible. In this faith, people believe that in the presence of God they cannot contract any illness. If they did, God will heal them.

Many African Christians use the healings in the bible as their reference points. Some refer to the healings of COVID-19 patients by Prophet T.B Joshua and so on. Fani-Kayode advises that:

It is time for Nigeria to join millions of people in the world to benefit from the work God was doing with Joshua. I challenge the Federal Government to hook him up by satellite through his Emmanuel T.V to isolation centres in Nigeria as well and see the result. More than ever before we need the healing touch of God to deliver us from this evil plague and we have someone that can provide that through prayer on television right here in our shores. Millions all Over the world are tapping into this great anointing and blessing but some Nigerians remain skeptical and cynical...

Apart from T.B Joshua of Synagogue Church of all Nations (SCOAN), there are other men of God /clergy especially those from the African independent Churches that claim to cure the virus from affected patients. African Christians make reference to the healing of the leper/leprosy in Matthew where Jesus Christ reached out his hand and touched the man, "I am willing and he said; be clean", instantly the patient was cured of his leprosy. It is recorded in Matthew 10:8 thus: "heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils; freely ye have received, freely give". In Acts 8:18 a similar power is emphasized among the apostles. It is majorly on this background that many African Christmas keep laying their conviction that COVID-19 even if it exists. According to African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) COVID-19 cases and deaths as at 31 August, 2020 are recorded by Hassan Isilow thus:

The total number of people infected with the novel corona virus in African exceeded 1.2 million have died from COVID-19 related deaths, while 975, 643 patients have recovered from the virus to date. South Africa recorded the highest number of cases at 670, 084, followed by North Africa with 228, 417 infections, west Africa with 159,960 and eastern Africa with 133, 104...

These simple statistics show that the traditional African people's religious conviction did not set Africans free from the spread of the virus. Africans contacted it; Africans died of it. To the Muslims, they also have a similar conviction. Most Muslims in the northern part of Nigeria resisted the lockdown with the belief that Allah will not allow such disease to affect them; rather every claim about the spread of the decease is all falsehood. It could be understood here

that this religious conviction that had left some Africans stubborn adamant against the preventive and control measure on the spread of COVID-19 in the continent must have contributed to the increase in number of cases and deaths. Noteworthy is the fact that some religious groups gather secretly in a very close range due to the conviction that God can do all things, thereby spreading the virus. The healings and protests that involved African religious adherents were not devoid of physical interactions.

### **African Religious Conviction and the Socio-Political Challenges at the Emergence of COVID-19**

COVID-19 posed serious social and political challenges on the African continent. Social gatherings including night club were locked down. Political gatherings including political parties' ward, local government, zonal, state and national executive and general rallies were strictly prohibited. During this period in Africa, it became very difficult for the less privileged, some people make some money and earn living in some social and political activities. Some visit politicians in their homes for assistance, others meet friends and neighbors for social, political and economic aids. All these opportunities were marred by COVID-19. Prof Ike Neife (Personal communication, 20 August, 2020) postulates that COVID-19 restrictions and lockdown is one of the factors that necessitated the prolonged industrial action of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) because public or group meetings were locked down.

At a time, it became obvious that African people began to disobey these COVID-19 rules. Keke-tricycles were asked to carry out two passages buses to carry only two passages in a row. Initially people were asked to stay indoors etc. Schools were temporarily closed etc. In all these, it is discovered that some parents and teachers started organizing secret lessons for their wards especially in their private schools. Some were doing home lessons. Transporters transit beyond boundaries, carry more than the number of passages required. Some organized and invited guests for burial, marriage ceremonies etc in their rural villages where the law enforcement agencies would not have interest to supervise. The truth remains that one of the major grounds that build the impetus of these people's disobedience is their religious conviction. They believe that God will always protect them. A tricyclist, Mr. Abuchi Nwofor (personal communication, 25 July, 2020) argues that he has been carrying four passengers in his tricycle and had not felt any symptom of COVID-19 because God is always with the black man. He stresses that the

disease kills the white people because they have turned away from God. This young man is convinced that Africans are always in continuous contact with God, for this reason, God will always protect Africans. He made emphases on African peoples' tenacious attachment to religion more than the peoples from Europe and America. As this conviction continues, more Africans were affected by the virus.

### **Economic Challenges in Africa Religious Conviction During the Period of COVID-19 Observation**

Economically, COVID-19 affected traders, business people, private public servants, and other economic welfare of the populace including production and distribution of finished products worldwide. People could not render their economic services. Palliatives that would have been given via cashless and non-contact means was relatively made impossible. Richer individuals, international communities, and government at different levels provided palliatives. The art of distribution, under normal circumstance should pose a problem because of lockdown. But due to poverty, in this part of the world, those palliatives were distributed to be shared to the masses. Mr. Achu Azubike (personal communication, 3 July, 2020) stresses that they have decided to go and distribute the palliatives to the people because; the poor masses should not be left to die of hunger. He continues that it is God that holds human life, that all the restrictions will protect their community members only when God signs or approves it. He is of the view that when Jesus says no, nobody can say yes. This conviction finds its defense in the bible, whereas it is said that if God does not secure the environment, in vain the guards watch. All these convictions turn to showcase as disobedience which is also contained in the same bible Koran and other African people's religious dogma.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended in this study that:

1. The clergy should always organize sensitization programmes to direct people properly whenever issue of general health concern arises.
2. African communities should be provided with test apparatus at any time there is disease outbreak to help facilitate early discovery and control of the infection because their religious conviction appears to be a barrier to their adherence to certain scientific instruction.

3. Special law enforcement agencies should be provided with severance post to help enhance the control of spread of COVID-19 and similar pandemic especially in rural settings.
4. African should be offered with more advanced theological education for future and better understanding of religious issues
5. African Religious bodies should deploy their members to join the health agencies in combating the spread of COVID-19 and other pandemic that may occur because their involvement will help to make their members re-think in their religious convictions.

### **Conclusion**

Though man was not born with religion but man is a religious being. Be that as it may, religion has taken the psychological aspect of man, because religion has been considered by many as the last resort for defence of his life. Even when he could not do any other thing, he holds on religion. Man might not be wealthy enough to challenge oppositions and some things in life, but when he remembers his religion and his God, man feels relaxed that God must take care of his life. Based on this, the problem of COVID-19 gave man, mainly the Africans a serious and heavier concern because man does not go to the church, mosque, and traditional worshipping centres because the African man is notoriously religious (Mbiti, 1969:1). Even though there is COVID-19 which restricted man from attending to public worshipping centers, he still holds on the religious conviction which makes them to perceive the condition as nothing they should fear. This has made them not to observe reasonably the stipulated rules. Some do not wear face mask or shade, wash hands, some snick to their work places and other businesses, etc.

It should be noted here that such disobedience or negligence motivated by African man's religious conviction, is also against their religious doctrine and dogma. Take for example the Christians are instructed in the letter to Romans to obey people in authority because God constituted them. The research therefore advocates that religious adherents in Africa should always obey health rules notwithstanding their religious conviction for health, social, political and economic security in the continent.

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