



A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS APPRAISAL OF THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Religion is part and parcel of human existence, hence, it can be said that man is incurably religious and as such is described as homo-religiosus. With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria (covid 19), which has its indelible marks in many countries of the world, there was a change and readjustment on every institution of society. Some of the institutions were closed down in order to prevent and reduce further outbreaks and casualties in society. In line of this, religion was not an exception because its practices were not left out in the sense that most of its gathering was suspended and if people, for any reason, should gather in the name of religion, a maximum number of persons are expected. This adversely affects religion and religious practices in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this paper is intended to examine how COVID-19 affected religious practices in Nigeria. The study will be using a phenomenological method and the theory of symbolic interactionism. The paper, therefore, discovers that COVID-19 has serious negative effects on religious practices. It also finds that with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent government order on how to curb it, religious practices bore some part of the problem. The paper concludes that in as inasmuch as covid 19 has a drastic effect on religious practices, it helps to call the religionist to order by putting more on him the consciousness that the supreme being is still in charge of the universe. The paper therefore recommends that people should not see the government order on suspension of some religious practices as being against the religious body but as a measure that must be taken in ensuring a reduction on the spread of the pandemic.

Keywords: Socio-Religious, Appraisal, Effect, COVID-19, Religious Practices, Nigeria

Introduction

Religion is an integral part of human life, deeply rooted in culture and identity. In Nigeria, a nation rich in religious diversity, faith plays a central role in both individual and communal existence. Gureje (2018) observes that the COVID-19 pandemic drastically disrupted daily life across the world, leaving no aspect of society untouched, including religious practices. Ibrahim (2013) explains that when the virus emerged in Nigeria, it led to immediate government action aimed at reducing transmission, including lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings. These measures required significant adjustments from religious communities, impacting worship routines, communal gatherings, and other religious observances. For many Nigerians, religious gatherings offer not only spiritual fulfillment but also a sense of belonging and communal support. Kuru (2015) highlights that COVID-19 imposed limitations on these gatherings, with restrictions that capped attendance numbers or prohibited certain ceremonies altogether. As a result, religious institutions faced new challenges, navigating how to maintain connections with followers while adhering to health guidelines. Olowu (2015) suggests that, for some, these restrictions posed a



threat to religious freedom, while others viewed them as necessary precautions to safeguard public health.

This research aims to examine the socio-religious effects of COVID-19 on religious practices in Nigeria. Using a phenomenological approach and drawing on the theory of symbolic interactionism, the study explores how these restrictions reshaped religious expression and practice. The findings reveal not only the negative impacts, such as disruptions in religious routines and challenges in communal worship, but also positive outcomes, such as increased individual spiritual reflection and a renewed awareness of the importance of public health within religious contexts. This study aims to contribute to understanding the complex relationship between religion and societal change during times of crisis. Recognizing the necessity of such measures, the research encourages a balanced perspective on government actions, viewing them as protective rather than oppositional to religious practice. Through this lens, Nigerian society may better navigate future challenges that call for both public health considerations and respect for religious practices.

Theoretical framework

The theory of symbolic interactionism, developed by George Herbert Mead in the early 20th century and later popularized by Herbert Blumer in 1937, offers a useful lens for understanding the social dynamics of religious practices amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological framework that explores how individuals and groups create, interpret, and communicate shared meanings and symbols in social interactions. Central to this theory is the concept that social reality is constructed through interactions, and individuals act based on the meanings they assign to people, objects, and events (Blumer, 1969). These meanings are not static but are constantly renegotiated in light of new experiences and societal changes. In the context of COVID-19 and its impact on religious practices in Nigeria, symbolic interactionism allows us to examine how religious communities have interpreted and adapted to the challenges posed by pandemic restrictions. For instance, religious gatherings are not merely routine activities but are symbolic acts that reinforce faith, community belonging, and identity. However, with COVID-19 restrictions limiting physical gatherings, religious communities had to reevaluate and adapt the meaning of worship and communal gatherings, often turning to digital platforms or small group gatherings as substitutes. The pandemic compelled individuals and religious leaders to reinterpret their practices by framing virtual worship as an acceptable replacement for in-person gatherings.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to this study as it highlights the fluid nature of religious practices under external pressures, such as public health measures. The theory of symbolic interactionism sheds light on how religious institutions and believers in Nigeria negotiated the balance between adhering to health guidelines and maintaining the essence of their spiritual practices. It suggests that religious practices are socially constructed and subject to change when the social environment shifts, such as during a global health crisis. This research underscores the adaptability of religious practices when confronted with a crisis. It reveals how Nigerian religious communities used new symbols and meanings such as online worship, social distancing



during services, and face masks in congregational settings, to sustain their faith while adhering to public health directives. Through this lens, the study concludes that while COVID-19 altered the visible expressions of religious practice, it also reinforced the resilience of faith communities by enabling them to find new ways to express shared beliefs and community ties.

Understanding Covid 19

COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, is a respiratory illness that emerged in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 and quickly spread globally (World Health Organization, 2020). This virus primarily spreads through respiratory droplets and contact with contaminated surfaces, leading to a range of symptoms from mild to severe respiratory distress. Many patients experience flu-like symptoms, such as fever, cough, and fatigue, while severe cases can result in pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome, and in some cases, death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Understanding COVID-19 involves recognizing its biological behaviour and the factors that make it particularly challenging to control. According to Harapan, Itoh, Yufika, Winardi, Keam, Te and Mudatsir (2020) COVID-19 is highly contagious, which contributed to its rapid spread and led to widespread lockdowns and public health measures. The virus's incubation period ranges from 2 to 14 days, during which individuals may be asymptomatic yet still capable of transmitting the disease (Lauer, Grantz, Bi, Jones, Zheng, Meredith, and Lessler, 2020). This asymptomatic spread has made COVID-19 especially difficult to contain, as undetected cases contribute to community transmission. COVID-19's social and economic impact has been equally significant. Efforts to curb transmission involved stringent measures, including travel restrictions, lockdowns, and social distancing guidelines, all of which disrupted daily life and economic activities worldwide (Nicola, Alsafi, Sohrabi, Kerwan, Al-Jabir, Iosifidis, and Agha, 2020). Educational institutions, religious centers and businesses were closed or severely limited, highlighting the pandemic's unprecedented effect on social structures (Ebrahim and Memish, 2020). These adjustments have not only underscored the importance of public health preparedness but have also catalyzed new approaches to health policy and community support..

Religion and Religious Practices in Nigeria

Religion holds a foundational place in Nigerian society. The three primary religious traditions in Nigeria are Islam, Christianity, and traditional African religions each with its unique practices and cultural influences that contribute to the diverse religious landscape of the country. In Northern Nigeria, Islam is the dominant religion, introduced through trans-Saharan trade and expanded by Islamic scholars and rulers over centuries. Islam has influenced the region's culture, education, and governance, leading to the establishment of Sharia law in several Northern states. Islam in Nigeria is marked by practices like the five daily prayers (Salat), fasting during Ramadan, almsgiving (Zakat), and Friday congregational prayers at the Mosque. Muslim festivals such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are widely celebrated and observed as national holidays, highlighting the strong presence of Islam in the cultural sphere (Falola and Genova, 2012).

Christianity is largely concentrated in the Southern parts of Nigeria, spread through European missionary activities in the 19th century. Missionaries established churches, schools, and hospitals, leaving a lasting impact on the social landscape. Christianity is practiced by various



denominations, including Catholicism, Anglicanism, Methodism, Pentecostalism, and numerous indigenous churches. Each denomination has its distinct traditions, but many Christians in Nigeria are actively involved in regular worship services, Bible studies, and community events. Sacraments such as baptism and communion hold significant spiritual meaning, and major religious holidays like Christmas and Easter are celebrated nationwide. Christians in Nigeria engage in vibrant worship styles, often incorporating traditional music, dance, and other cultural elements into their religious practices, creating a unique blend of African and Christian traditions (Ibrahim, 2013). In addition to Islam and Christianity, traditional African religions are still practiced, especially among ethnic communities that honor ancestral spirits, deities, and natural elements. These religions emphasize a strong connection to the earth, community, and ancestral lineage. Traditional religious practices include offerings, ritual dances, and ceremonies led by spiritual leaders or priests who serve as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. Despite the influence of Islam and Christianity, traditional beliefs continue to shape cultural identities and community values, often coexisting with other religions (Kuru, 2015).

Religion in Nigeria influences not only individual lives but also the nation's political and social systems. Religious leaders hold significant sway over their followers, thereby guiding their social behaviours, moral values, and political opinions. However, Nigeria's religious diversity can also lead to tension and conflict, particularly when religious affiliations intersect with ethnic identities. The country's North-South divide is often framed in terms of religion, with Islam associated with the North and Christianity with the South. Such religious divides can lead to social polarization, political friction, and in some cases, violence. Religious intolerance has contributed to conflicts and has posed challenges for national unity, with episodes of religious violence periodically flaring up in areas where ethnic and religious tensions are high (Falola and Genova, 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrates the influence and adaptability of religious practices in Nigeria. Government-imposed restrictions to curb the virus's spread required by religious institutions in order to modify their practices, such as limiting gatherings, enforcing social distancing, and adopting digital platforms for worship services. Many religious leaders and congregants turned to online services to continue worship, while some small groups met with careful adherence to health protocols. This adjustment was challenging, particularly as communal worship is a central aspect of Nigerian religious practices. However, the pandemic highlighted the resilience and resourcefulness of religious communities, as they found new ways to maintain their faith and fellowship while adhering to public health guidelines (Ebrahim and Memish, 2020).

Religious Practice During Covid 19 Period

The COVID-19 pandemic had a ripple impact on religious practices around the world, and Nigeria was no exception. As a country with diverse religious traditions, the pandemic led to significant changes in how Nigerians practiced their faith. With the government's restrictions on public gatherings to curb the spread of the virus, religious practices had to adapt rapidly. This shift not only affected the ways people worshipped but also brought into sharp focus the resilience and adaptability of Nigerians. At the onset of the pandemic, the Nigerian government, in accordance with health guidelines from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Nigerian Centre for



Disease Control (NCDC), ordered for the suspension of religious gatherings including congregational prayers, church services, and other religious events (Ebrahim and Memish, 2020). This was an unprecedented move as religion in Nigeria is typically deeply a communal affair. For Muslims, the ban on congregational prayers meant that Friday Jumu'ah prayers and other regular gatherings at mosques were suspended, while Christians had to cancel Sunday services and other community-oriented worship activities.

One of the most noticeable changes during this period was the adoption of digital platforms for religious services. Many religious leaders, churches, and mosques turned to online streaming platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, and WhatsApp, to continue delivering sermons and worship services (Falola and Genova, 2012). This allowed congregants to participate in religious activities from the safety of their homes, thereby maintaining a sense of connection with their faith despite physical distancing measures. For example, many Nigerian churches adopted online services, broadcasting prayers, worship music, and sermons, making use of virtual communication tools to reach their congregation. The shift to digital platforms also allowed for a creative approach to religious observances. For instance, in Christianity, some denominations introduced virtual communion services, where members were encouraged to partake in the sacrament at home using household elements such as bread and wine. Similarly, Muslim communities adapted by hosting virtual Ramadan lectures, prayer sessions, and iftar gatherings, thereby enabling people to maintain the spiritual and communal aspects of the holy month restrictions (Ibrahim, 2013). In addition to digital worship, some religious practices saw a shift toward smaller, more intimate gatherings. For instance, while large congregational prayers were prohibited, some mosques and churches conducted services with very limited attendance, adhering to social distancing protocols. These services were often restricted to religious leaders or a small group of individuals, and congregants who were encouraged to worship from home. Some families also organized private prayer sessions thereby creating smaller support networks within their households. Despite the shift to digital worship and small gatherings, the pandemic had an emotional and spiritual toll on many Nigerians. The inability to meet with fellow believers, particularly during important religious holidays like Easter, Christmas, or Eid al-Fitr, created a sense of isolation and loss.

Many religious leaders used these virtual platforms to provide support, offering words of encouragement and reassurance to help individuals cope with the uncertainty and anxiety brought about by the pandemic. This period also saw an increase in the need for pastoral care, with religious leaders offering counseling and spiritual guidance, especially in light of the emotional and psychological challenges caused by the pandemic (Kuru, 2015).

The pandemic also highlighted the role of religion in providing social support. Religious organizations, both Christian and Muslim, engaged in charitable activities, including the provision of food and medical supplies to vulnerable communities. Many religious groups also organized prayers for healing, peace, and the end of the pandemic, demonstrating the ongoing importance of collective prayer in times of crisis (Ebrahim and Memish, 2020). Furthermore, many individuals and religious communities questioned the role of physical gatherings in worship and whether virtual services could be an effective alternative. In some cases, religious practices during the



pandemic prompted a shift toward more individualized forms of worship, with people placing more emphasis on personal devotion and the individual's relationship with the divine, rather than solely on communal gatherings. This trend aligns with the broader global movement of rethinking religious practices in light of changing circumstances, suggesting that some of the adaptations made during the pandemic may persist even after the restrictions are lifted (Falola and Genova, 2012).

Effects of COVID-19 on Religious Practice in Nigeria

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted religious practices in Nigeria, leading to major changes in how people worshiped and engaged with their faith. In a country like Nigeria, where religion plays a central role in daily life, the restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the virus affected both Christian and Muslim communities. With the government enforcing lockdowns and social distancing measures, religious gatherings such as Sunday church services, mosque prayers, and religious festivals had to be either limited or completely suspended. For many Nigerians, attending church or mosque regularly is an important part of life. However, with the pandemic, large gatherings were no longer possible. Churches and mosques were closed to prevent the spread of the virus, and this left many people feeling disconnected from their religious communities. This was particularly felt during major religious events such as Easter, Christmas, and Ramadan, which are usually celebrated with large gatherings of families and friends. The usual communal prayers and celebrations were put on hold, and this created a sense of isolation for many worshippers (Oluwaseun, 2020).

In response to the restrictions, many religious groups in Nigeria quickly turned to technology. To maintain their connection with their followers, many churches and mosques began streaming services online. This move to online platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom allowed religious leaders to still reach out to their communities, even though they could not meet in person. Christian churches held virtual Sunday services and prayer meetings, while Muslim communities conducted online Ramadan lectures and prayers (Ali, 2020). These online services provided an opportunity for people to continue practicing their faith at home, but they also highlighted the digital divide in Nigeria. Not everyone had access to smartphones or a reliable internet connection, especially in rural areas, which meant that some people could not participate in online services.

Another important effect of the pandemic was that it pushed people to think more deeply about their relationship with God. With physical church and mosque services suspended, many Nigerians turned to private worship at home. People began to focus more on personal prayer, reading religious texts, and reflecting on their faith without the usual group activities. This shift to individual worship showed that religion could be practiced outside of large gatherings and that the relationship between an individual and their faith was still important even without the usual communal rituals (Adedayo, 2020).

Despite the difficulties, religious groups in Nigeria also found ways to help their communities during the pandemic. Many religious organizations launched charity drives, distributing food, medical supplies, and financial aid to those who were struggling due to the economic impact of



the virus. Religious leaders also held special prayer sessions, calling for the end of the pandemic and healing for those affected. These actions showed that religion could still provide hope and support during difficult times (Oluwaseun, 2020).

Suggesting Ways Forward

In light of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on religious practices in Nigeria, there are several ways forward to help religious communities better adapt to future crises while maintaining their faith practices. These suggestions aim to balance the need for public health safety with the importance of religious and spiritual well-being.

Religious communities should consider maintaining a hybrid approach to worship, combining both physical and online platforms. While in-person gatherings should be prioritized when safe, the use of virtual platforms should continue to cater to those unable to attend physically. This will make religious services more accessible to people with disabilities, those living in remote areas, and others who cannot physically attend. As technology becomes more integrated into daily life, having an online presence will ensure that religious practices can continue in any circumstances (Ali, 2020).

Religious leaders can play a vital role in promoting public health measures, given the trust many Nigerians place in them. By incorporating health messages and awareness into religious services, leaders can encourage their followers to follow government guidelines, such as wearing masks, social distancing, and getting vaccinated. This will also ensure that religious gatherings, when allowed, are safe for all participants and that public health and safety remain a priority alongside spiritual growth (Adedayo, 2020).

Religious communities can emphasize the importance of individual and family worship during times of crisis. Encouraging people to maintain personal devotional practices, such as prayer, Bible study, and Quranic recitation at home, will help preserve the spiritual connection even during times of social distancing. This can also foster deeper spiritual reflection, as individuals will not rely solely on communal activities for their faith but build a personal relationship with God (Oluwaseun, 2020).

During times of crisis, religious communities should provide more focused support for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the sick, and those facing financial difficulties. Religious organizations can establish or strengthen their charity programs, ensuring that help reaches those who are most in need. For instance, distributing food, medical aid, and financial support during health crises can help the most disadvantaged members of society while also reinforcing the role of religion in promoting social justice (Ali, 2020).

A partnership between religious organizations and the government is essential for better crisis management. By fostering collaboration, both sectors can create guidelines that balance the needs of the community with health and safety measures. For example, during future pandemics or emergencies, clear communication between religious leaders and government officials can help



ensure that religious practices can continue while still maintaining public health standards (Kuru, 2015).

The pandemic has placed an emotional strain on many people, leading to increased mental health challenges. Religious communities should provide spaces for counseling and emotional support, offering spiritual care for those affected by the pandemic's social and psychological impact. By recognizing the importance of mental health in the spiritual journey, religious institutions can become key players in providing holistic care for their congregations (Oluwaseun, 2020).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted religious practices in Nigeria, highlighting both the challenges and resilience of religious communities. The suspension of communal gatherings, especially during key religious events, forced many to adapt quickly by embracing virtual platforms for worship and focusing more on individual and family-based religious practices. While this shift posed challenges, especially for those without access to technology, it also underscored the flexibility of religious faith in maintaining spiritual connections, even in times of crisis. Moreover, the pandemic revealed the crucial role that religious leaders can play in promoting public health measures and supporting their communities. Religious organizations in Nigeria rose to the occasion by offering aid, counseling, and moral support to those affected by the economic and psychological impacts of the virus. However, these developments also pointed to the need for long-term adaptations, such as embracing hybrid worship services and strengthening community support systems to better prepare for future emergencies. Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the importance of faith in providing hope and comfort during uncertain times. It is clear that religious practices in Nigeria, while facing disruption, can adapt to meet the needs of society while still fostering a deep spiritual connection. Moving forward, religious communities should focus on innovation, collaboration, and a renewed emphasis on individual and community well-being, ensuring that religion continues to serve as a source of strength and unity in challenging times.

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