

## **Fake News, Fake Prophets: Mis/Disinformation, Public Health and the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The Christian Narrative.**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

While there are several religious innovations in Africa that trace back their origin to plagues, influenzas and flus, such as the Aladuras in Yoruba land in the South Western Nigeria, because of its emphasis on faith healing and hydrotherapy, the role of fake prophets(ess) and fake news in mis/disinformation in a pandemic, such as COVID-19 has been understudied. This chapter seeks to examine the reactions of some Christian pastors to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the tail end of 2019 in Wuhan, China. Defining a methodological approach is a huge challenge but an attempt will be made to use a focused group discussion and supplemented by relevant texts, journal articles, magazines, newspapers and online resources on religion and the mass media. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the metanarrative among many pastors, prophets and prophetesses, especially among the Pentecostal Churches was discordant. But the most vocal and popular among these is that “Wuhan virus” is manifestation of “the millennial and apocalyptic imaginary” (Rosalind Hackett 2011, p385). This drew media traction as it was linked with the deployment of the 5-G Mobile Network in some countries, including Nigeria, and the mark of the beast “666” as predicted in the book of Revelation. Others demurred dismissing it as a mere health challenge. Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches due to their large followership become so influential and the outbursts from these “men of God” became worrisome to Governments and the general public as they highlight either true knowledge of the situation, or a weaponization of the press and mass media through conspiracy theory, misinformation, disinformation to deflect the global health challenge. The question is how do religious groups react in the face of health challenges? What is the impact of their rhetoric on their members and the society? What is the role of social media in this challenge? Does this challenge rekindle the old controversy between science and faith? Who are the most vulnerable in the mix of fake news, mis/disinformation in a global pandemic? How can scholars of religion as public intellectuals react to this quagmire? Unarguably, the COVID-19 pandemic has inaugurated a new World order, a *new normal*. These contestations are examined in this chapter.

**Keywords:** Fake News, Fake Pastors, Churches, Conspiracy theories, COVID-19, pandemics, Nigeria.

### **Healthcare Impulse in the Emergence of New Religious Movements in Nigeria: A Retrospect**

The search for health and healing has always provided a context for new religions to emerge because of the African conception of personhood. In Africa health is holistic. The individual is immersed in the whole. What is visible is a reflection of the invisible. The African universe is a spiritualized universe where man weaves covenants with a benevolent being in order to maintain ritual balance in the community (Kalu, 2003). Thus, the individual can only claim to be well if every part of his person is well. The 1918 influenza pandemic was an exemplar of this African worldviews and therefore provides perspective for retrospection on the formation of African New Religious Movements (ANRMs) in Nigeria. The “Spanish flu” or the 1918 influenza was recorded as one of the most devastating disease outbreaks in human history since the end of WWII. The effect was far

and wide resulting in the deaths of many people in most isolated human communities of the World. In the end it was estimated that not less than 50 million persons had died from the pandemic (Humphreys 2018, 219). Although the outbreak of 1918 Influenza pandemic was of great significance to scientists and medical experts it was also more so to the historians and social theorists and scholars of Religion. The period marked the emergence of the Aladura (or Prayer groups) Churches in Yoruba land of the South Western Nigeria. The African Initiated Churches or Aladuras owe their origin and mythology to the Influenza Pandemic (Gbule and Nwaka 2019 ) For instance, Joseph Sadare, alias 'Esinsinade', and four other pioneers members formed a prayer band a religious innovation that emphasized unflinching faith in God to heal when other traditional remedies had failed (Turner 1967, 9-10; Peel 1968, 62; Ayegboyin and Ishola 1999, 66-67; Olofinjana 2011, 21). Later, the group operated as Precious Stone Society (PSS). Other Aladura Churches that owe their provenance to Bubonic plague were "Church of the Lord" by Joseph Oshitelu and "Cherubim and Seraphim" of Moses Orimolade and Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon both in 1925. Drawing on their own indigenous leadership, these new faith communities emphasized faith healing and the rejection of orthodox medicines. Most people who wanted cure from the influenzas and other evil forces joined these new Churches. Thus the foundation was laid for the earliest form of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, the groups fondly called "Aladura", spiritual or praying churches (Turner 1979, 121). The hydrotherapy, which Sophia Odunlami proffered as a divine solution to the outbreak of the influenza has become a marked feature of Aladura healing practice. The introduction of indigenous forms of symbols, worldview, rituals and music into worship and healing practice seemed to make the Aladura and Pentecostal churches appealing to a wide range of believers. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, the Aladura churches indeed redefined the religious landscape of Nigeria and the neighboring countries in the West African sub-region. Soon it became the *representative* Christianity that gained the interest and participation of members from the mainline Churches and non-Christians (Baiyewu 2014, 27). This offered Africans a context to promote a new instrumental Christianity where they asked their own religious and spiritual questions. This was an Indigenous discovery of Christianity, as each cultural context began to express their own faith within their own sensibilities and milieu. Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh in separate meditations have described it as translatability of Christianity (1996, 2001); its strength to translate into new environment and crossing borders.

However, in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century "Aladura Churches" began to lose popularity as most members were not comfortable with the practice of indigenous religious rituals associated with African Initiated Christianity (AICs), some of them wanted to purify the movement from the accretions of traditionalism and transformed it to purer form of evangelical Christianity otherwise known as Pentecostalism. A classical example is the Redeemed Christian Church of God, (RCCG) by Pastor Enoch Adeboye. This trend has continued unabated and today majority of believers in Nigeria profess the Pentecostal brand of Christianity which offer explanation for some of existential problems of life. The Pentecostal Churches lay emphasis on speaking in tongues, exorcism, faith healing, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit is as the foundation and ethos of ecclesial organization. The Pentecostal Churches have become so popular that it is estimated that there 550million in Africa only. The rapid growth and spread have altered the demography of Christianity worldwide. Thus there's a shift a Christianity's centre of gravity from the North Atlantic rim to the South Hemisphere, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania ( Walls 1996). Mapping Pentecostalism is very a difficult exercise because it is not a homogenous movement. thus there are literally several mutations of Pentecostal denominations in Africa. This has confounded the Secularist pundits who had predicted the death of religion, as one of the religious globalization of our age. But generally Pentecostalism is a radical brand of Evangelical Christianity that places emphasis on the gifts of Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues, prophesying, exorcism, and the soon return of Jesus. Pentecostalism promotes the experience of the Holy Spirit as part of normal Christian life and worship. The Holy Spirit becomes a defining element of belief, religious ethos and ecclesiastical organization. According to one commentator "God is swallowed liquidized" (Anderson, 2003). In Africa the scorching poverty, violence, sicknesses and diseases, feminization of poverty have provided the Pentecostals the apocalyptic vision of the world they construct and this narrative is susceptible to falsehood and fake miracle cures that some of them peddle. So it is not surprising that with such huge health challenge as COVID-19, these pastors became purveyors of fake news to deflect the public health issue to be signs of the end time. It was inscrutable to for some Pentecostal Churches to accept the Government protocol of ban on public gathering, closure of Churches and places of worship, social distancing, maintaining shelter places, wearing of masks, and lockdowns. These

measures were World Health Organization (WHO) directives to contain commodity transmission, but the Pentecostals saw them as part of end time assault of the people of God and consequent incision of the mark beast “666”. Nowhere was the contest more visible than in some Pentecostal Churches like the Believers' Love World, a.k.a, Christ Embassy Church and the Mountain of Fire Ministries.

### **The Nexus Between Religion and Mass Media in a Pandemic: Fake News, Mis/Disinformation, Conspiracy Theory**

The scholarship on religion and mass media in Africa is now legion ( Hoover 2006, Ihejirika 2006 Asamoah Gyadu , 2005; Ukah, 2003, Hackett, 1998; 2003, 2006, 2010). The reason for this is the new understanding that both cultural flows are driven by waves of globalizing process, communication, technology, and migration. In Africa, Pentecostalism utilizes the media more than any cultural product. They are the major consumers of airwaves, the internet, social media, Facebook, and other outlets to the effect that the vibrancy of press and the mass media is attributable to Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches that dot the last landscape of Africa. The question that readily come to mind how are the messages that the faith communities constricted to avoid mis/ disinformation. However to understand fake news underscores the question of what constitutes the nature of real news. Several perspectives have proliferated in the discourse of what constitutes real or authentic news. This ranges from an account of a recent, interesting, and significant event (Kershner, 2005), or significant events that impact on people (Richardson, 2007), to a dramatic account of a novel or strange event (Jamieson and Campbell, 1997). While what constitutes news may be contested, Guy Berger (2018, 7) argues that ‘news’ is verifiable information in the public interest. However, news is often an output of the press and news media, providing “independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information” for the public (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007, 11). Thus, the news media is expected to present the truth according to the ethics of the profession. As a powerful advocacy to frame political and influence social action, the press and news media are sometimes referred to as Fourth Estate or fourth power. But the news is socially constructed (Herman and Chomsky 2002; Tuchman 1978), and thus, becomes a vulnerable tool both for mobilization and manipulation for or against public, or external forces, or government, or the economy (White 1950; Shoemaker and Reese 2013; Tandoc, Wei Lim, and Ling 2017, 4).

The word “fake” is often used interchangeably with words such as copy, forgery, counterfeit, hate speech, and inauthentic (Andrea 2016). Contemporary discourse, especially in media coverage, seemingly perceive fake news as referring to viral posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports (Tandoc, Wei Lim, and Ling 2017, 4). But recently, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, 213) defines fake news as “articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.” Another study defined fake news “as deceptive reviews provided with an intention to mislead consumers in their purchase decision making, often by reviewers with little or no actual experience with the products or services being reviewed” (Zhang et al. 2016, 457).

Fake news has now become a buzzword with current references enlarging it in meaning and scope. Earlier studies applied the term to define related but distinct types of content, such as news parodies, political satires, and news propaganda. Current applications cover the description of false stories spreading on social media, and the smearing of some news organizations’ critical reporting. Hence one is moved to poke into the motive(s) of the fake content producers. Two main motivations are conspicuous: financial and ideological (Tandoc, Wei Lim, and Ling 2017). Fake news like hate speech is outrageous. As it goes viral because its peddlers are patronized with advert revenues. Beyond the finances, the peddlers have a commanding followership. By promoting ideas that resonate their followers, they frame opinions and ideologies with far-reaching social influence. (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

### **The Controversy Between Faith Communities and Their Messages**

Pentecostal leaders in Africa inspire far greater level of trust among their members than the political elites. This is because they exhibit ethics, ascetic codes and ritual practices that enhance their social mobility, visibility and vociferousness. This historical antecedent is seen in life of the African prophetess Beatrice Kimpa Vita, who in 1864 prophesied the restoration of the golden age of the kingdom of Kongo from the Portuguese overlords. Her message appealed to popular level of society but resented by Portuguese Catholic establishment. The King of Portugal Pedro IV considered her message as heretical and capable of inciting violence arrested and

had her executed in 1706 for peddling false news. But the most controversial faith community notable for false prophecies and the end of the world are the minority Christian sect known as the Watch Tower Movement or the Jehovah Witnesses. The group are very itinerant moving from house circulating literatures such as *Awake* and *Watch Tower*. The Watch Tower Society has been known to set previous dates for the end of the World in 1873, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975, 2000, but all predictions failed. This pattern of prediction, failure and revision had earned them the sobriquet of “peddlers of falsehood” (*ele amugha*) among the Ikwerre of the North Eastern Niger Delta. The failure of their predictions has often postured them in opposition with some national governments in Africa, like Malawi and Zambia because they create a “cognitive dissonance” of reconciling belief with truth (Chryssides 2016, page 223).

The inference being drawn here is that the discourse on fake Prophets, and fake news is not neologism. It has part of the social construct ranging from mis/disinformation to conspiracy theories. However, it assumed more currency during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of the social media which has made it easier to track news at real time. Today it is estimated that about 1million people had been killed by COVID-19 pandemic and most national economies in left in ruins as result. The attempts to unravel the *mysterious* Covid-19 from religious perspectives followed the daring consequences the pandemic had on the religion. The sacred space, which boomed with the patronage of its adherents, was greeted with low or almost no attention. Those that ministered on its altar felt both the adverse economic and social impact. The introduction of social distancing, the wearing of face-mask, imposition of curfew during the most part of the night hours, and the closure of the worship centres, followed by the limiting of the number of worshippers to a maximum of 50 persons at a time, all dealt a devastating blow on the religious centres. To survive in the face of this quagmire, the social media and the internet became the worship centres. The church became the point where the religious leader was as at the time of prayer. The congregation followed online. The Electronic church (E-Church) grew in prominence, size and form. Every religious group developed strategies to show their presence, and reach out to their members and non-members. The followers, indeed, needed to be kept “together”. Above the tithes and offerings declined, and many Pentecostal leaders felt the protocol put in place was to limit the growth and expansion of the Churches, despite WHO's advice to contrary. There was therefore no surprise that the argument took a new turn as an Apocalypse, Pastor Chris Okotie titled his radio podcast. The attempts to unravel the *mysterious* Covid-19 from religious perspectives followed the daring consequences the pandemic had on the religion. The sacred space, which boomed with the patronage of its adherents, was greeted with low or almost no attention. Those that ministered on its altar felt both the adverse economic and social impact. The introduction of social distancing, the wearing of face-mask, imposition of curfew during the most part of the night hours, and the closure of the worship centres, followed by the limiting of the number of worshippers to a maximum of 50 persons at a time, all dealt a devastating blow on the religious centres. To survive in the face of this quagmire, the social media and the internet became the worship centres. The church became the point where the religious leader was as at the time of prayer. The congregation followed online. The Electronic church (E-Church) grew in prominence, size and form. Every religious group developed strategies to show their presence, and reach out to their members and non-members. The followers, indeed, needed to be kept “together”.

In the course of this, there was the need to explain what the pandemic stood for. Three strands held sway; namely, 5G Conspiracy Theory, Apocalyptic Theory, and Health Challenge Theory.

One of the groups of Nigeria's religious actors who tried to explain Covid-19 traced it to the effects of the 5G. For this group, 5G, which came as a relief for a better society and humanity, was a monster in disguise. It carried the agenda of the secret powers that controlled the world; the agenda to control the population. Hence, for them the introduction of the 5G birthed Covid-19. With the global lockdown introduced as one of the measures to forestall the spread of the pandemic, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the founder and President of Believers Loveworld Inc (alias Christ Embassy) added his voice to the 5G debate. Pastor Chris claimed that the lockdown of Lagos and Abuja was to enable the Federal Government to install 5G infrastructure, which the presence and possibly resistance of the masses would have stalled. In his YouTube message, he contended that

The federal government was pushed to lockdown Abuja and Lagos specifically. Why? Because of 5G in Abuja and Lagos. They already tested 5G in Abuja and they are engaging it already in Lagos. That's the reason the federal government had to lockdown Abuja and Lagos. So the 5G could be installed. There are other cities planned for (Augoye, 2020).

According to him, what killed people in Wuhan, China was not coronavirus, but 5G. Hence, he concluded that the noise about the pandemic is a global deception to deceive the people to the true situation being dealt with (Ndinojuo 2020, 8). Pastor Chris Oyahkilome

adds that if the virus is claimed to be airborne, then isolation or staying at home cannot save anyone from the virus.... the reason for the social distancing campaign was to make sure people could not gather to protest and or communicate with one another when the effects of 5G start manifesting, thus, the best way of striking fear into the population is to stoke the existence of a phantom and deadly virus. Categorically, he states that this should not be seen as a conspiracy theory but rather a proven reality, a fact, and an antichrist initiative. He also claims that the images being shared on the internet about the impact of the virus may be doctored images (Ndinojuo 2020, 9).

Pastor Chris accuses the media and health bodies of insincerity. According to him these agencies carry photos from China, or from Italy, or Spain and show to the Americans, show to the British. You see things like “oh this is really happening,” but it’s not. They do not tell what’s killing the people. Two things are killing the people. The first one is where those 5G signals are being tested and have been turned on. A lot of people died. This is real. Number two, where are the people that normally got sick with the flu? Where are they? Nobody is talking about the flu right now” (Augoye, 2020).

Analyzing Pastor Chris, Ndinojuo (2020) categorizes his controversial view as falling within the sphere of conspiracy theory. First, Pastor Chris is wrong in his submissions on the relationship between 5G and Covid-19. Secondly, Pastor Chris fails to provide any empirical foundation to his claims. “The scientists who have opposed the rollout of 5G technology have done so based on its health implications on human, not because of a new world order, about to take over governments in the world” (Ndinojuo 2020, 10).

Even though Pastor Chris’ theory received diverse reaction (in the form of support, criticism, and caution) both from the religious and political classes, his corresponding action thereafter was a thorough departure from his early stand on 5G and Covid-19. First he backtracked on his earlier claims about 5G being the cause of the coronavirus. He further stated that “he was only opposed to 5G because of its perceived health risks and the seeming silence of authorized regulators to speak on its merits and demerits” He thus claims to be more concerned about the health implications of the technology and as a healing minister that cares and heals the sick, he would not like to see more people suffer. (Ndinojuo 2020, 10; Ojo, 2020).

Pastor Chris Oyahkilome's conspiracy theory concludes that the 5G and all that it goes with, including Covid-19, are strong signs of the end-times. Pastor Adewale Giwa of Awaiting The Second Coming Of Jesus Christ Ministry towed the line of Pastor Chris. Giwa condemned those castigating Pastor Chris as “rabble-rousers.” He added to the conspiracy theory that evil people are using the 5G network to lay the foundation for the coming of the antichrist. Thus both 5G and Covid-19 are part of the signs Jesus Christ warned the people not to be alarmed when they start seeing them (Opejobi, 2020). The activities of Bill Gates towards providing vaccines for Covid-19 were placed side by side with the purported imaginations of the “Illuminati” to subject the world under One World Government; a state that the Christians believe explain the apocalyptic events of the antichrist. The widely publicized micro-chip that would be introduced to certify those that receive the vaccine was concluded in some circles as the mark of the beast as discussed in Revelation 13. The effect of the lockdown on churches received criticisms as a demonic ploy to stifle the church, believed to intercede for the protection of humanity against the intensions of the antichrist. Consequently, prayers and fasting were advocated as the panacea for Covid-19. The likes of TB Joshua claimed to have healed Covid-19 patients through faith-healing. Some churches embarked on programs to overcome the ‘spirit’ of Covid-19. Social media became selling point for oil and water for the cure of Covid-19.

But on a close analysis, one sees a decline in the emphasis on this theory which shows a misinformation. Apocalyptic events and the appearance of the antichrist are not tailored to one event. More so, going by the account of John from the Island of Patmos, prayer can neither slow down nor stop the apocalyptic events. The apocalypse represents a set of events that seems to be decreed to take place at a time that cannot be predicted.

### **The Challenge Fake Prophecies and COVID-19 Global Health Pandemic**

There is yet the third group whose stand became known as reactions followed Pastor Chris' conspiracy theory. Augoye (2020) reports that three pastors stood at different platforms to condemn Pastor Chris' postulations. The three clerics are Poju Oyemade, Sam Adeyemi and Matthew Ashimolowo. For Ashimolowo, the senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre, there was no correlation between 5G and end-time signs. Adeyemi, the senior pastor of the Daystar Christian Centre, recalled that during the 1918 influenza pandemic churches, mosques, schools, and markets were closed in Nigeria. Thus, the closing of the worship centres does not implore a demonic but salient war against any religion. Adeyemi concludes on his Instagram page, there are opportunities in every crisis, and it is the leader's duty to see the opportunities and not to project fear on his/her followers. Adeyemi was supported by Oyemade. ((Ndinojuo 2020, 12-13).

From these expressions, Covid-19 is a health challenge that accosted humanity at this time. Just like other diseases that hit humanity at a time in history, became devastating, and came under control with the manufacturing of vaccines and medications to handle them, so shall covid-19 be brought under control with the production of the right medication(s) for it. Prayer for cure, from their stand, is needed as Divine intervention in human affairs could make available the wisdom to manufacture the cure. However, God, they believe, can heal Covid-19, but at His discretion.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Because most Pentecostals and their members have a besieged mind they are very susceptible to fake news, mis/ disinformation. Everything is constructed within the framework apocalypticism. Hence the COVID-19 is likely to be perceived as a sign of the end times. The use of "God hypothesis" to explain and predict time space events then becomes a stable diet for the leaders. For these leaders of Churches, the spiritual and political have collapsed, and it would be inscrutable to convince their congregations that COVID-19 pandemic is a health challenge and not an apocalypse; and that science not faith takes priority how public health should be constructed and interpreted. Knowing that Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches make profound use of the press, mass and social media as well as other forms of technology to their Faith Communities, it becomes difficult tracking whether their message reflect real news or a deflection of information. With the fear if COVID-19 pandemic all manner of fake news, mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories will be an overarching trope in the new normal in the Nigerian public space. Again, now that most countries in the West are undergoing epidemic pressures for clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines, there is public skepticism about the vaccines suited to the African cultural contexts. So the challenge shifts to "infodemic", that is how to deflect the mis/disinformation of some fake pastors about the vaccines and the mark of the beast "666" as some of them had earlier touted, especially in a country where there is public cynicism of Government 's decisions and actions.

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