

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

The Emergence and the Rise of Covid-19 in Rivers State: A Christian Traditional Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper focus on the Emergence and the Rise of Covid-19 in Rivers State: A Christian Traditional Perspective. The paper argues that Covid-19 according to Christian perspective is the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy that was foretold by Christ 2000 years ago concerning the occurrences of pestilences in the history of mankind; one of the signs of the 'last days' of human history and a practical reminder of Christ's return to judge and reign over the earth. The paper contends that Covid-19, in the context of African Traditional Religion is akin to ogbanje, sorcerers and witches in the sense that it is associated with death, suffering, panic, fear, psychological trauma. The paper adopted historical approach to trace the emergence of Covid-19 and its gradual increase in the State. The paper recommends that the Rivers State Government should intensify more effort to ensure compliance of its citizens to Covid-19 precautionary measures because the virus is real and still ravaging.

Keywords: Rivers state, Covid-19, emergence, rise, Christian traditional perspective

1. Introduction

Rivers State came into existence on 27th May, 1967 when the then regime of General Yakubu Gowon created it from the former Eastern Region. There are 23 Local Government Areas (LGA) in Rivers State. The LGAs are Abua-Odual, Ahoada East and Ahoada West, Akuku-Toru, Andoni, Asari-Toru, Bonny, Degama, Eleme, Emohua, Etche, Gokana, Ikwerre, Khana, Obio/Akpor, Ogba/Egbema/Adoni, Ogu/Bolo, Okrika, Omuma, Opobo/Nkoro, Oyigbo, and Port Harcourt. Rivers State is located in the Coastal Southern part of Nigeria, it covers an area of 11,077 square kilometers with a population of over 7million people spread across the 23 LGAs. Rivers State is divided into upland and Riverine. Those from upland include Ogoni, Ikwerre, Etche, Ogba, Eleme, Abua, Ekpeye, Ndoni, Egbema and Oyigbo. Those that make the Riverine are Kalabari, Andoni, Okrika, Bonny/Opobo, Odual and Nkoro. Rivers State is bounded on the South by the Atlantic Ocean, to the North by the Anambra, Imo and Abia States, to the East by Akwa Ibom State and to the West by the Bayelsa and Delta States.

The State produces 100 per cent of gas supply and about 65 per cent of Crude oil supplies in Nigeria thereby contributing to National development, Fishing and Farming are the major economic activities of the people. Port Harcourt the State capital is the largest city in the South-South of Nigeria. More than 70% of all foreign investments in the region is located in Port Harcourt. As the Treasure base of the Nation, it is the centre of the oil and gas industry-technology in Nigeria and the West African sub-region; Port Harcourt holds the largest accumulation of heavy and light industry technology in Nigeria and the West African Sub-region (Amanyano, 2013, pp.126-127).

2. Covid-19

The word Covid-19 was coined by the World Health Organization (WHO) on February 11, 2020 to refer to the disease caused by the novel corona virus SARS-Covid 2. Originally, it started in Wuhan, a city in Hubei province of China on December 31, 2019. From there it spread across the globe like a wide fire. Thus, given it the name Covid-19 Pandemic. Thus, Covid-19 is an acronym that stands for Corona virus disease of 2019. It is called a 'novel' in the sense that it is a new corona virus that has not been previously identified in humans. This means that it is different from corona viruses that are responsible for common cold and those that caused severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002 and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012. What this means is that before the outbreak of Covid-19, several other corona viruses which are common in human and animals' viruses had been in existence.

These were first discovered in domestic and poultry in 1930s (nigeriainforpedia.com.ng extracted on the 13th November 2020, 3pm) In animals, these corona viruses are responsible for all kinds of respiratory, gastrointestinal, liver and neurological disease. Like SARS and MERS, the novel corona virus is a zoonotic disease which means that it begins in animals and is transmitted from animals to humans.

Symptoms relating to Covid-19 include difficulty in breathing, high-fever, severe cough, catarrh, while measures for prevention involves social distancing, decontamination, wearing of face masks and practice of hand hygiene by constantly washing or using of alcohol-based hand sanitizers as directed by the World Health Organization (WHO) (nigeriainfopedia.com.ng extracted on the 13th November 2020, 3pm).

3. Emergence and Rise of Covid-19

Like I said earlier, the '2019 novel corona virus' (2019-n cov) was first discovered in Wuhan, a city in Hubei province of China on December 31, 2019. Later it spread to other parts of the globe like a flying rocket. For example, on March 12, 2019 Turkey confirmed its first case of Covid-19 after three weeks of insisting it had no cases. As part of the effort to limit the viral spread, on April 6, the government made wearing face masks on public transportation mandatory and closed 31 cities to non-essential traffic. Similarly, on March 2, 2019 Saudi Arabia also confirmed its first Covid-19 case with a man who was on a trip to Iran and Bahrain. It recorded the first death on March 24, 2019.

In much the same vein, on March 24 2019 Libya's Health Ministry confirmed the country's first case with 73year old man who returned from Saudi Arabia via Tunisia. On March 16, 2019 the government closed all land crossings and airport and ordered all schools and universities closed as measures to curtail the spread of the virus. Further, on March 2, 2019 Tunisia confirmed its first case of corona virus with a Tunisian man who had traveled to Italy. As part of measures to prevent the virus, the government on March 17, 2019 imposed a 12-hour curfew from 6am to 6pm, closed its borders, suspended flights and shuttered mosques, restaurants and cafes. It also banned all public gatherings including Friday prayers. (www.covid-19pandemic/outbreak/origin/effects_in_the_globe/extracted on 7th November, 2020).

In Nigeria, the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed on February 27, 2020 in an Italian who visited Lagos. On March 29, 2020 Nigeria confirmed its second case of Covid-19 in Ewekoro, Ogun State in a Nigerian who had a contact with an Italian visitor to Nigeria. This however, further explains the fact that the disease is not originally in our locality but imported by aliens who visited the country and later from our brothers and sisters who were returning from countries that area highly infected by the disease. As part of the effort to prevent the spread of the virus, the federal government ordered the complete shutdown of airport operations (domestic and international). This is closely followed by a lockdown which ordered her citizens to stay at home and observe precautionary measures as advised by World Health Organization (WHO) to curtail the spread of the pandemic disease.

On May 31, 2020 the federal government set up a presidential task force chaired by Boss Mustapha, the secretary to the government of Federation to ensure compliance to Covid-19 protocols which include mandatory wearing of face masks, regular washing of hands, regular use of alcohol based sanitizers, avoid crowded places like burials, weddings, social distancing as instructed by the World Health Organization (WHO) (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/covid-19 & world religions/retrieved 10th November, 2020).

In Rivers State, it recorded her first case of Covid-19 on March 26, 2020 in a young female model who visited epicenter countries such as Italy, USA, France, Greece, etc. for Covid-19 before her return to Nigeria. It also recorded her second case in a male retiree who had returned from the United Kingdom (Ojerinde; 2020, p.36). as part of the Rivers State Government efforts to control the spread of Covid-19, as State-led Covid-19 sanitization campaign was embarked upon to educate her citizens on Covid-19 and its preventive measures. Also, WhatsApp for social good by volunteers was used to sensitize community members on ways to protect themselves and their families from being infected. Furthermore, a cross-section of major stakeholders in the State which include the media, traditional and religious leaders, heads and principals of schools, the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), traders, the military, paramilitary, police, oil companies, Local Government Chairmen and Secretaries were engaged and provided with the right information and materials to send to their various community members on Covid-19 preventive measures. Five-man committee was setup to superintend the campaign and was chaired by Commissioner of Information, Mr. Paulinus Nsirim. In addition to this is the Bill Boards, which were used all over the State to convey Covid-19 messages. Following closely is the Rivers State Executive order regulating conduct of public burials in the State which among other things specified a fine of 10million for any violator and Covid-19 Marriage/Wedding guidelines which requires prospective couples to obtain approval letter from the Governor through the Commissioner for social welfare. This is closely followed by a total lockdown which include closure of land and sea boarders, off-shore operations, markets, restaurants, hotels, pleasure parks, night-clubs schools, etc. (www.the importance of political will in the fight against covid-19/the rivers state examples/retrieved 10th November, 2020).

Thus, the lockdown occasioned by Covid-19 has impacted largely on the various aspects of our Nation. On the economy, one noticeable impact of the lockdown occasioned by Covid-19 is the constant drop in the oil prices at the international market. Here, the 39 per cent slash in the initially approved 8.41 Trillion naira is a telling example. This further suggests that the country will spend less on her programmes and other developmental projects come 2021. This is worse than a tragedy for a country that depend largely on oil to execute her numerous policies, activities, and other developmental projects.

Apart from this, there is hike in the prices of goods and services at the market across the 36 States of the federation. For instance, a basin of Garri usually sold for ₦20,000.00 – ₦25,000.00 is now sold for 60,000.00 and above. A 50kg of Garri usually sold for 18,000.00 is now sold for 25,000.00. 5-8 tomato-fruits usually sold for 200.00 is now 3-4 fruits for 200.00. Six plantain fingers usually sold for 400.00 now sold for 3-4 fingers for 400.00 leading to farmers harvesting premature produces for sales. Today, the obvious fact is that Nigeria is back again into recession as a direct result of this. Also, there is fear of food insecurity in the country come 2021 since the farmers are harvesting without sufficient cultivation/planting as there are no labourers to hire as a result of stay at home to curtail the spread of the

pandemic disease. Since its emergence in Rivers State, the virus has been on the rise till the time of this research (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342135515> effect of covid-19 lockdown on farmers retrieved 6th November, 2020).

On education, one major impact of the lockdown occasioned by Covid-19 is that it interrupted the academic calendar thereby resulting in the repetition of semesters and classes at all levels. Those who are supposed to go to the next level or promoted to the next class still remain where they are. This affect the motor psycho domain of the students owing to the fact that throughout the period of the lockdown the students were not students properly engaged in any serious and meaningful academic exercise to update their knowledge.

It also makes academic activities boring and uninteresting. Also, it amounts to extra-academic load on the teachers and lecturers. Although, it is a fact that during the period of the lockdown, the government created the E-learning platforms to engage the students in order to update their knowledge. Unfortunately, the platform did not solve the problem for which it was created because many could not access the platform due to the fact that they had no money to buy smart or android phones, laptops, and data. Also, those in the rural areas where there is no network too could not access the platform. On religious activities, ideally, worship formally organized in churches and mosques is believed to be a place where worshippers congregate to express their faiths and to commune and communicate among themselves on one hand, and between them and God/Allah on the other hand. Here, ban on religious activities to online worships via cables, TV, smart phones, laptops, etc. not only affect the spiritual life of the worshippers but also deprived them the avenue to maintain their vertical relationship (between them and God/Allah) on one hand and also the horizontal relationship (among themselves) on the other hand. (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342135515> effect of covid-19 lockdown on farmers retrieved 6th November, 2020).

4. Views on Covid-19

Individuals of various inclination and different religious group have differing views on Covid-19. For some people, Covid-19 is a biological weapon from China to hijack the world power from the US in order to bring the whole country under their hegemony and become a force to reckon with in terms of global politics. Others sees it as a deliberate plan to keep people at home while the 5G engineers install the technology across the globe. Yet for others it is an elaborate hoax intended to rob Donald Trump of his chances of re-election. Yet some others, however, have linked the spread of the pandemic with Bill Gates and the Big Pham. For them, these leagues of cartels have deliberately installed a substance into a device known as tracking chips to demonstrate to the entire globe to the extent of their ingenuity and dexterity in their professions. Bill Gates is a renowned American computer programmer and a high-profile international business mogul and a co-founder of Microsoft Corporation while the Big Pham on the other hand is a global pharmaceutical industry comprising of physicians, drug regulators, etc. However, among the world religions, Islam sees it as a welcome development. For instance, in the US, Islamophobia has a link with the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre, Washington DC by Bin Laden. Since then, the Muslims in that country have been discriminated against at all places - at work, café, market, school, etc. they are hated and described as terrorist group. For them, it is a punishment from God to the injustice and oppression committed against the Muslims by the Westerners considering the Islamophobia that is prevalent in the US and in the Europe. On the contrary, however for Buddhism the pandemic illustrates a core Buddhist principle that human beings are subject to suffering which according to them is a hallmark of human existence as found in the four noble-truths. For them, corona virus is part of human life as experienced on daily bases. (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/conspiracy_theories_coronavirus/extracted 10th November, 2020).

5. A Christian Traditional Perspective

About 2000 years ago, Christ made a prophecy to His disciples. In that prophecy, He declared thus; there will be pestilences in the land (Matt. 24:3-8; Luke 21:10-12; Deut. 28:15-22, 58-62; Rev. 6:8; Rev. 9:18-20; Rev. 11:6; 15:1-68; Rev. 16:9,21; Rev. 18:4,8; Rev. 21:9, Hebrew 12:26). For the past 2000 years of human history several plagues, pestilences had devastated mankind viz - cholera, flu, bubonic plague, small pox, influenza, Hiv/Aids and now Covid-19 which has been adjudged as the worst global pandemic.

For the Christian, corona virus is the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy that was foretold by Christ, 2000 years concerning the occurrences of pestilences in the history of mankind. According to Christians, it is one of the signs of the 'last days' of human history; a practical reminder of Christ's return to judge mankind and reign over the earth (Matt. 24:3-8, Luke 21:10-12, 28). Thus, they also see it as a sound warning to the entire human race to retrace their steps in order not to incur the anger of God upon them. This for them is also a reminder to the world powers who are struggling supremacy with God due to their scientific innovative prowess that in spite of this, God is still an embodiment of knowledge par-excellence and sovereign ruler of the universe whose authority is not only final but unquestionable. However, Covid-19, in the context of American Traditional Religion is not totally strange to the African peoples. Prior to its emergence, belief in *ogbanje*, sorcerers and witches are common among many Africans. According to Tasie, (2013) '*ogbanje* spirits are a group of adventurous evil spirit, who are on a visit to the human world. It is a wicked spirit that enters the womb of a pregnant woman only to die soon after birth' (pp.5-6). Among the Africans, *ogbanje* are believed to cause untold suffering to their parents because they are believed to be on the circle of constant birth and rebirth. As for sorcerers, they are those that use bad magic to harm others while witches are those that possess the inherent psychic power to send out their spirit invisibly, or through lower creatures to harm others (Awolalo and Dopamu, 1979, p.246). For the African peoples, *ogbanje*, sorcerers and witches are regarded as malevolent due to their mischievousness (Peter Chimaobi, 2009, p.42). They are seen not only as destructive agents (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, p.127), but also as human agent of evil (Ikenga-Metuh,

1987, p.157). for Awolalu and Dopamu (1987) they are feared and hated, and are agents of evil believed to cause death, illness, disease, misfortunes and other untoward happenings in the society (p.157). One can deduce from the above that Covid-19 is akin to *ogbanje*, sorcerers and witches in the sense that it is associated with death and psychological trauma. Many have lost their lives, yet others are struggling to recover from it due to the pandemic. Apart from this, hunger, fear, and panic have overwhelmed everybody due to Covid-19 pandemic.

6. Conclusion

The 2019 novel corona virus (2019 n Cov) was first discovered in Wuhan in China. Later it spread to the other parts of the globes. It was first confirmed in Nigeria on February 27, 2020 in an Italian who visited Lagos. In Rivers State, it recorded her first case of Covid-19 on March 26, 2020 in a young female model who visited epic countries such as Italy, USA, etc. for Covid-19 prior to she returned to Nigeria. As part of the effort to curtail the spread of the virus, a lockdown order was put in place and this in turn left adverse impact on the socio-religio-economic life of the country and that of Rivers State. Upon its emergence in Rivers State, the virus has been on the rise. One remarkable view relating to its outbreak is that it is seen a deliberate plan to keep people at home to enable the 5G engineers install the technology. From the Christian perspective, it is the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy concerning the occurrences of pestilences in the history of mankind: one of the signs of the 'last days' of human history that herald Christ's coming to judge and reign over the earth. As for the African, Corona virus is akin to agents of destruction (*ogbanje*, sorcerers and witches) against the backdrop that it causes death, illness fear, suffering, psychological trauma, etc.

7. Recommendation

- The Rivers State government should put in place a functional task force to ensure compliance on Covid-19 precautionary measures considering the fact that the virus is real and still ravaging.
- There is need to reopen the other sectors of the economy in the State to cushion the effect of hunger occasioned by Covid-19.

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