

The Socio-Religious Dilemma of Kenyans amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract – Novelty is a good idea if the innovations favor humanity, however it is doom when the innovation is against humanity. The latter has been the case with novel covid-19, a disease that has rocked the world affecting even the sacred place, the altar. This paper therefore empirically discusses the state of events in the phase of the pandemic both spiritually, socially and economically. Specifically, it discusses how, inter alia, elements of worship, interactions and traditional African religious activities have been put into a state of unknown. The paper endeavors to achieve this through reviewing relevant literature in the area of focus. The paper concludes that governments, especially Kenyan in this case, have found themselves in a state of dilemma in dealing with this pandemic which affects all spheres of life. Therefore, as hope for the nation religious fraternity ought to continue praying for the nations and more so the medical fraternity for a solution to be attained.

Keywords: Covid-19, Social Distancing, Technology, Religion

I. INTRODUCTION

The faith of an individual in the society is sometimes pegged not only on the aspect of right and wrong otherwise known as morality, but also on the doctrine accompanying the denomination an individual subscribes to. In the wake of events, novelty sometimes challenges faith in a manner that leaves questions beyond the explanation of humankind. Such is the case experienced by the world from December 2019, when a novel virus known as Corona emerged from Wuhan China (Csa & Egunjobi, 2020). The virus that gave birth to Covid-19 disease that has spread very first across the world, affecting almost every nation. As a result of Covid-19, religion and faith have been tested not only in Africa but the world at large. Critical to the scenario is the reality of what has to take place during worship services and other events related to religion as opposed to what the norm initially dictated (Kimani, 2020).

In the wake of the novel Covid-19 disease that has shaken the world rendering it to a state of dilemma in terms of the best decisions for the people and nations, religious based organizations have been caught in the limbo. Various issues relating to the way human beings lead their lives have changed drastically. As directed by the World Health organization (WHO), new measures were to be put in place which aimed at taking precaution against the virus (Odhiambo & Okungu, 2020). In this case, that the social, spiritual and economic circles, which are critical in holistic representation of the modern religious inclination and the traditional African religion, have been put into a jeopardy. Given that every

institution in the world has its own culture, religious culture has been challenged in the face of this pandemic. Given that every individual gives the aspect of life the attention it deserves, science seems to have shaken religious culture to some extent (Odhiambo, Weke & Ngare, 2020).

Because of the fear of falling into the trap of the pandemic, almost every person has with care strictly adhered to the directions being given by scientists in the medical area guided under the umbrella of the World Health Organization. Strict guidelines have been issued by various leaders of nations to its citizens on what should and what should not be done. In regards to this, law enforcement agencies have been on the fore front to ensure that the guidelines are strictly adhered to. In order to show the seriousness, arrests of people trying to breach the set guidelines have been done. Not spared in the fiasco are religious leaders of both the traditional African religion and the mainstream ones (Kimani, 2020).

II. THE GIST OF THE MATTER – THE PROBLEM

Kenya is among the African nations that took into consideration the diverse effects accompanying covid-19 through some measures just as other nations. The great measures that were put in place affected individuals, organizations and the state at large. In the wake of reality, it still remains that more efforts need to be undertaken in order to curb this novel virus. In comparison to other neighboring countries, Kenya has experienced a higher rate in the number of new infected cases. Through the mainstream media, questions have been posed to the authority on the authenticity of the information provided by the ministry health about the state of covid-19 in the country. This is because of the measures that have been diversely considered (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). The gist of the matter in context is that the directives that the government of Kenya has given to its people in line with combating the pandemic have exposed the nation and individuals to a dilemma in spiritual, social and economic spheres. The effects that have accompanied the directives have caused loss of jobs, assets and even life and disbanded the social norms of life as well. Dreams of people have been shattered just in a span of less than a year. Some people have worked hard to be where they have been but within no time, a big downfall has befallen them without their expectation. The dilemma therefore has left everyone including the authority in a state of uncertainty as the future remains darkened (Odhiambo, Weke & Ngare, 2020). This paper therefore empirically discusses the state of events in the

phase of the pandemic both spiritually, socially and economically. Specifically, it discusses how, inter alia, elements of worship, interactions and traditional African religious activities have been put into a state of unknown.

III. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

a) Nature of Worship services

The culture of worship for various religious organizations has been the coming together of worshippers on a given day or days of the week in accordance to the founding doctrines. In respect to the regulations and the slogan “stay home stay safe”, worship services have been disrupted. Most Christian denominations have been affected in the manner that the usual Sunday meetings and mid-week services were for some time stopped by the relevant authorities despite the pleas from their leaders to allow places of worship to remain open. Most countries resolved to take the measure to close the worship places given the nature of gathering a large multitude of people together for purposes of worship (Simon, 2020). For instance, Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Nairobi Chapel, Mavuno church, Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM) and Repentance and Holiness Ministries opted not to open their places of worship until the disease has subsided rather than limiting the number of faithfuls gathering for worship (Parsitau, 2020). The same was witnessed even in other parts of the world as exemplified also by Church of England in England (Anglican Alliance, 2020).

Most countries resolved to take the measure to close the places of worship given the nature of gathering a large multitude together for purposes of worship. Among the regulations recommended by WHO is the aspect of social distancing which in the beginning of the spread of Covid-19 seemed a mountain to climb but is being practiced as time goes by. Additionally, the enforcement of wearing masks in public places came in as something totally new for people especially in churches, given the nature of services conducted (Olingo, 2020).

However, the Kenyan government formed an interfaith committee to come up with guidelines that would help in reopening of places of worship. Amongst the issues of concern in the guidelines is the aspect of barring the elderly members above 58 years of age and children below 13 years from attending worship services. As much as this seems a reprieve for places of worship in Kenya, the dilemma here remains the spiritual status of the age groups that are locked out of the worship services. Furthermore, most leaders in the places of worship especially the clergy are at least advanced in age, leaving most houses of worship with the question, “who will lead us?” In addition, other requirements like social distancing, one and a half hours of worship and 100 people per service seem to leave houses of worship which have hundreds of congregants on crossroads on the way forward (Olingo, 2020).

b) Technology call

In an effort to try and remain relevant, technology has been very vital for religious worship services. Technology, an element of modernity that has been for long questioned by some of the religious leaders with some terming it as an enemy to religion gained relevance beyond expectation since the declaration of Covid-19 as a pandemic. In most cases, the use of technology for religious purposes was totally limited but the arrival of Covid-19 implied that religious leaders were to rely on it totally for both worship services and church administration (Wildman, Bulbulia, Sosis & Schjoedt, 2020). Relating to the change caused by this pandemic, technology is not a venture that is to end soon but rather one that is there to last. Religious leaders who had earlier understood that the world is moving towards technological advancements found it easy to shift from mass worship services to broadcast services at a zero cost given that technological facilities were already in place. However, presenting itself as a challenge, the use of technology for broadcasting the live services or even recorded ones stopped a lot of religious leaders from reaching their congregants. The shift in the culture of congregating at a worship place implied those religious leaders who were less fortunate in technologically-related issues remained in the dark with their hope pegged on the reopening of places of worship fully (Kajilwa, 2020).

The reality is that, despite the merits it carries with it, the use of technology is expensive. As it has proved, it is not only expensive in matters of cost, but also knowledge. Given that most of the religious leaders are less conversant with the use of technology, the shift that has occurred at once was impossible for most of them to implement. Furthermore, the status of most of the congregants in matters technology preparedness is wanting. Presenting the question of effectiveness in terms of reaching the congregants online, the limbo remains how to help the church accept that technology is part of it now and it's there to stay. The only common technological gadget within the reach of some church leaders and congregants is just a smartphone with the cost of internet bundles being an issue for most of them (Wildman, Bulbulia, Sosis & Schjoedt, 2020).

c) Sociocultural Perspective

Sociocultural elements of life in Africa have been affected greatly by the issue of Covid-19 as directed by WHO. In an African setting, face to face integration is very important since it gives the sense of togetherness and promotes the spirit of unity. Generally the social aspect in Africa is given much priority and is core for most relationships. Talking an example of Christianity, most funerals in the African culture would take at least three days of mourning before burial of the dead. Interestingly, the actual day for burial is accompanied with long services where relatives, friends and family members gather in what is referred to as giving the last respect. This funeral culture was accompanied by great cost implications that were a burden to the bereaved. In this regard therefore, the rise of Covid-19 has solicited mixed reactions among the

people as some would wish that the funerals take the shortest time possible, even in the absences of Covid-19 (WHO Africa, 2020).

Additionally, religious festivals and events like prayer meetings, weddings, conferences, feasts and rituals in some regions of Africa came to a standstill in response to the directions given for curbing the pandemic. Given the importance of marking such activities, the seriousness behind these observances and involvement implies that the pandemic strongly sent a signal into the thought of how religious culture should be handled. For instance, Muslims had a rough time during Ramadhan as a result of meeting restrictions which went against their traditions but were left without a choice other than following the restrictions. Reflecting on the same restrictions, Christian prayer groups that were conducted during lunch hours, evening and morning devotions were altered leaving individuals with a personal decision to seek God. In such settings, the faith of individuals has been direly put to test given that most people understand issues to do with faith as a fellowship affair (Ndungu, 2020).

In the same sense, traditional African rituals have not been spared too since the arrival of the pandemic. Most elders who are law-abiding in some countries quickly agreed to the fact that suspending traditional activities which are observed annually was one of the best actions to take in line with the fighting the pandemic. Events associated with circumcision in Bukusu and Tiriki communities have been direly affected causing the community elders to scrap it off against the traditional norms (Ijamaa, 2020). In the same breath, the Masai community who are known to conduct initiation ceremonies that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood have been also been forced to suspend their activities in response to the government directives. Those are just but the few communities that have shelved their traditional norms in order to try and curb the deadly novel pandemic. This implies that the cycle of initiation, rituals and rites has been totally halted causing delays to some individuals whose expectations were otherwise ready for the cultural practice (Wight, 2020).

The traditional African religion through society elders perceives occurrences in the society in a very different manner. Despite the fact that Covid-19 has been proved to be a virus that is scientifically rooted, some people in Africa have held on their own views that promote superstitious and mythical positions. As the disease continues to kill people regardless of their age, disposition and gender, people have nailed their own thoughts and imaginations. In a typical African setting, the notion of witchcraft cannot cease in such like a novel disease. Seeking to justify that Covid-19 is just a disease that can be controlled through various anti-witchcraft approaches; elders have approached the shrines for sacrifices of cleansing and refuting the bad omen. The danger involved here is that most of these people who have been postulating the narrative of witchcraft have been defying the government regulations of social distancing and putting on masks. In their

view, invoking their gods implies that protection from such instances (Renzaho, 2020).

Similarly, the main point in directing the religious bodies in Kenya is that prayers would solve everything. This has been the point for some religious faithful whom to an extent thought that the pandemic was a punishment from God, which can just be stopped by Him. Arguments have been witnessed in response to the safety measures terming them as shadow remedies with prayers being seen as the main solution to the problem. However, atheists have taken advantage of the fact that the closing of the church implies that there is no God as their theories postulate. Taking into account that religious leaders are among those that have lost their lives during this pandemic, the atheists used the platform to propel its agenda about religion (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).

d) Education

One of the hottest debates that have been shaping out during this Covid-19 season is the status of education from primary schools to university level. Affected with the occurrences, most countries in Africa and specifically in Kenya opted to shut the education system till further notice. Religious leaders have been heard voicing tier concerns on the unpreparedness to handle the pandemic in response to the learner's wellbeing. Since religion affects most areas of an individual's life, making their stand known is imperative in such in such instances (WHO Africa, 2020). The attachment of the education system and religion is so strong in a manner that most of the learning institutions are attached to a given religious sect (Muoki, 2017).

As religious leaders continue to call for the consideration of health and safety of learners and teachers, the period that Covid-19 is to stay still remains a concern. Key to the proposals in place to suspend learning is the issue of safety of learners amid the congestion nature of our learning institution. Despite the fact that the academic calendar has been tampered with, the choice to suspend learning remains the best way to safeguard learners from being exposed to covid-19. Education stakeholders have therefore agreed that repeating of the classes cannot be avoided given that a whole year has gone into wasting (Areba & Ngwacho, 2020). This situation however leaves religious leaders in a very tight situation of dealing with the aftermath of children staying at home for a long time. For instance, religious leaders have been heard cursing the incidences of schools girls getting pregnant and young boys engaging in some juvenile delinquency-related activities. During this period, thousands of students have been reported to have been impregnated leaving parents and teachers in a dilemma, whether their children will get back to school or not. Similarly the government remains with a task to ensure that such a situation is curbed in the phase of the main covid-19 pandemic (Oluga, 2020).

However, research in Kenya indicates that the religions have considerably employed a good number of individuals

who depend on the proceeds of the church to earn a living. Most of religious sects have established hospitals, private schools and private vocational training institutions that are owned by religious sects. In this regard therefore, paralyzing the religious activities and education system implies that most of the people working under private contract jobs lose their jobs. The government of Kenya has been silent on this issue where people employed in such private sectors have expressed their concerns over loss of jobs and income (UNAIDS, 2020).

IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the share of negativities that come packaged with Covid-19 have totally left every individual wondering the direction to take in the society. Like other African nations, Kenya still faces the challenge in terms of handling the virus despite the directives and guidelines stipulated the government. As the cases of covid-19 continue to fluctuate, the government finds itself in a dilemma on what it should do best to respond and curb the virus. The only hope remaining therefore is the issue of intervention by religious leaders. The government has called on the church to continue pleading for the mercies and intervention from God. It is however imperative for the society to understand that a healthy nation is a wealthy nation implying that health is paramount for social, economic, and spiritual well-being. In reflection to this, all the relevant authority should remain on the fore front on advocating for the safety and health of people as hope still abides on the fact that the pandemic will subside and more so through prayers from religious circle for medical fraternity.

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