

How Covid 19 Has Transformed Christian Religious Rituals in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

This article examined how Covid 19 has transformed Christian religious rituals such as worship, prayer, baptism, child dedication, Holy Communion, Ash Wednesday, camp meetings, and tithing in Nairobi, Kenya. The research paper was grounded in the social evolution theory, which holds that culture generally evolves. The argument was, therefore, that since the culture gradually changes, the same is valid with the Christian rituals. In terms of methodology, the study used various data collection tools, such as questionnaires and interviews, to collect data. The targeted sample population during the research included the clergy, the church elders, and the general Christian faithful. The study utilized various sampling techniques, such as purposive sampling and stratified random sampling. The collected data was analyzed and presented in a narrative form, which involves a general description and explanation of the study findings. The study established that Covid 19 containment protocols temporarily prevented people from attending church service, but the churches resumed their operations after they were relaxed. The study, however, noted that the pandemic transformed the manner in which long-held Christian religious rituals are carried out. The study recommended reorganization of the Christian religious rituals that not only conform to the new normal of Covid 19 but also respect and uphold the spiritual importance and objective of such rituals. The study further recommended that the clergy and the Christian leadership sensitize members of their faith on the importance of vaccination to allay fears associated with COVID-19 vaccines and embrace vaccine uptake.

Keywords: COVID-19, Rituals, WHO

Introduction

Coronavirus is a highly transmittable pathogenic viral infection that causes severe respiratory problems, or COVID 19. According to Cullen (2020), the disease presents a variety of symptoms ranging from dry cough, fever, tiredness, aches, joint pain, sore throat, diarrhea, headache, loss of taste or smell, loss of speech, and chest pain to breathing problems. These symptoms can show up within 5 to 14 days from when a person is infected. However, the symptoms vary from one person to another depending on one's level of immunity, as some may display mild while others have severe symptoms. It is also essential to observe that some people are generally asymptomatic; that is, they may be sick without showing any symptoms.

The exact origin of coronavirus is not known. However, it was first reported in the city of Wuhan in the province of Hubei, China, in 2019, hence covid 19. The town experienced the outbreak of the deadly virus at the end of 2019, where it claimed the lives of more than eighteen hundred and infected over seventy thousand within a short period (Pinchoff, 2021). Indeed, within the three years of the epidemic, China registered a slow economic growth compared to the pre-COVID period (Dhar, 2020). The virus was later reported in other Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and North Korea. In Japan, for example, the pandemic significantly affected people's lifestyle and economy in general. Abe (2021), for example, reports that it had a negative bearing on industrial production due to restrictions on movements and limited cross-border markets. Sooner, European nations such as Britain, Germany, Italy, and France reported the presence of the virus among their populations. Like the Asian world, European countries were not spared the adverse effects of covid. Apart from claiming untold lives of the European population, Covid 19 stretched healthcare facilities beyond their essential capacity. Felice et al. (2020) give an example of Italy, which, despite being in possession of some of the best healthcare systems in the world, was unable to contain the pandemic. African continent first experienced Covid 19 on February 14th, 2020, when the first case was confirmed in Egypt, and at the end of February, it had reached the sub-Saharan region when Nigeria confirmed a case. Indeed, within three months, the virus had spread to all African countries except Lesotho, which reported its first case on May 13th. In Kenya, the first case was reported on March 13th, 2020, from a traveler who had arrived from London, and by the end of April 2020, the country had confirmed 363 cases with 114 recoveries (Tanaka, 2020).

It is important to observe that the disease was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30th, 2020, and consequently, WHO declared it a world health emergency and on March 11th, 2020, WHO declared it a global pandemic (Okuku, 2021). Since then, the international body has encouraged nations to take precautionary measures such as limiting travel across borders, regularly washing hands with running water and soap, keeping social distance, and wearing face masks.

To contain community spread of the virus in different parts of the country, the Kenya government, through the president, announced several containment measures such as banning movement in and out of Nairobi metropolitan, Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale counties for 21 days since the regions were believed to be the epicenter of the virus. Besides, the president placed a night curfew, beginning at 7.00 pm running to 4.00 am. But more importantly, the president ordered the closure of all gatherings, including religious gatherings (Siche, 2020). The presidential order meant that all churches were closed and that daily and weekly worship services were suspended to prevent the community from spreading the deadly virus. This contentment measure had a significant bearing on the religious rituals of most world regions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, among others. Against this background, this study sought to examine the extent to which

the Covid 19 containment measures have impacted Christian religious rituals such as Holy Communion, church worship, baptism, children's dedication, and tithing in Nairobi, Kenya.

Statement of the Problem

Covid 19 is one of the pandemics in world history that has dramatically disrupted people's lives, raging from socio-economic and political to religious lives. Pinchoff (2021), for instance, observes that the disease has increased unemployment among a majority of people, especially city dwellers. He cites examples of the private sector, which, in most cases, has been compelled to reduce the amount of the labor force due to a reduction in profit. In the field of technology, the pandemic has increased the technological uptake among people. Tanaka (2020) supports this view by admitting that most institutions and organizations resort to virtual meetings instead of one-on-one sessions, which characterized the pre-COVID period. As scholars put much emphasis on the economic, political, and mental effects of the pandemic on the population, unfortunately, religious impacts are largely ignored. In cases where it is touched then, the ritual aspects are rarely touched. Against this background, the study sought to examine the extent to which the pandemic has Transformed Christian religious rituals, worshiping, holy communion, camp meeting in Nairobi Kenya.

Research Objectives

The research sought to:

- i. Trace the origin of covid 19
- ii. Examine how COVID-19 affected Christian practices of prayer, baptism, and child dedication.
- iii. Assess the impacts of Covid on Christian rituals such as

Research Questions

- i. What is the origin of covid 19?
- ii. To what extent has COVID-19 affected Christian practices of prayer, baptism, and child dedication?
- iii. How has COVID-19 transformed Christian rituals such as Holy Communion, Ash Wednesday, camp meetings, and tithing?

Literature Review

Not much has been written on the Covid 19 and its socio-economic and religious impacts on society. Existing global studies have tended to learn more about the social, economic, and political impacts, leaving very little on the religious sphere. For instance, McKibbin & Fernando, R. (2020) looks at the financial impact of Covid 19 and laments how the disease has ravaged world economies. He cites the travel ban as Covid19 containment measure imposed by various world nations as a significant economic error. To him, the ban had negatively affected national economies, depriving them of critical financial streams to support national service delivery and incomes since most countries hugely depend on international trade. McKibbin & Fernando's document is rich in enlightening the world on the economic challenges brought about by Corona control measures. However, it is silent on the socio-religious aspects, which are also core to the development of a society and nation.

Similarly, Siche (2020) argues that, due to house lockdowns imposed by most nations to contain the deadly virus, most people could not participate in agricultural production. Soon, nations could not meet their food

requirement upon consuming their food reserves. The situation was made worse by cross-border travel restrictions, which disrupted the global food supply chain. With time, the world food system has continuously fallen into a situation that may draw the world into a worldwide food emergency if not watched and urgently mitigated. As one agrees with Siche on the dangers of the pandemic on food production, his thoughts are limited to agriculture and leave out religious aspects untouched.

Cullen et (2020), in their part, look at the effects of Covid 19 on mental health; they hold that the pandemic has negatively affected people's mental health and worsened the mental state of those who were already suffering from mental illnesses. He gives an example of the US, where in a sample population of 10 people, about 4 of them exhibited mental illness symptoms such as anxiety, depression, an increase in alcohol consumption or other related drugs and difficulty in sleeping or eating. He attributes this to the war and stress resulting from the job loss, inability to provide for the family, or simply fear of the unknown and the exact dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of Covid 19 on mental health cannot be over-emphasized beyond how Cullen articulated it. However, he does not realize that mental health-related complications are primarily associated with a lack of adequate spiritual nourishment, whose availability has been dramatically affected by the deadly virus.

He & Harris (2020) looks at it from the angle of social responsibility, arguing that the pandemic has revealed the soft side of humanity. To him, people, especially in this era, are known to be naturally selfish. No one can do anything without looking at how they benefit from it. This was proved otherwise when Covid 19 invaded human society as individuals would go their way to extend a helping hand to the community's most vulnerable members. He gives an example of Italy, where a group of individuals and companies would distribute food staff to the people under lockdown. Under normal circumstances, such items would be sold for profit. To him, this was done without the intention of gaining anything but somewhat out of the simple reason that it is right to do good. As One appreciates the findings of this research; it reveals the extent to which the religious aspect of the Covid 19 has been ignored.

Nationally, the available studies mainly focused on the impacts of the pandemic on areas of health, governance, economy, food security, and education. For instance, a Kenyan researcher, Ngwacho(2020), argues that apart from disrupting the Kenyan education calendar, the pandemic has revolutionized the Kenyan education system at a faster rate than otherwise could not have been reached. He cites examples of the adoption of online learning, where learners interact remotely with their teachers to cover educational content usually taught one-on-one.

On the economic aspect, Cullen (2020) laments that the pandemic has interfered with many people's economic structure. Such interference ranged from job loss to reduced income. In this respect, he argues that many private enterprises, especially which are hardly hit by the Covid 19 containment measures, such as hospitality sectors, private schools, and other private companies have been compelled to either reduce their workforce to lean and manageable level or force their employees to take pay cut due reduced in profit and business at large. In some cases, business organization have been compelled to venture in the supply of other items or change the nature of their business altogether just to survive the severe impacts of the disease. For instance, some private school owners have been compelled to convert their classrooms to rental houses due long holiday given to their clients while other companies for example, cloth making companies have been obliged to enter in the production of masks just to remain relevant in the disease ravaged market. Some private enterprises have been forced out of business and compelled to closes resulting to massive job loss

among their employees. All these can be appreciated on the line of conventional business; however, it cannot be lost on us that religious activities are also economic ventures to a group of people such as pastors who entirely depend on the church activities for their daily providence.

Alice (2021) on her part sees the effects of Covid 19 with positive lenses. She holds that the pandemic has led to a decrease in the prevalence of some stomach-related diseases normally caused by germs, for instance, typhoid, amoebic dysentery, stomach upsets, and many other diseases which attack the human body due to poor hand hygiene. This to her has reduced significantly due regular hand washing introduced as Covid 19 containment measure. This finding is good to the extent of physical health, it however leaves out spiritual health which is necessary for making someone a whole person.

To this end, studies on the effects of Covid 19 have largely bordered around economic, education, mental health, and food security, leaving very little on the religious aspects of people's lives. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the extent to which Covid 19 pandemic has affected Christian's religious rituals such as church worship, Holy Communion, tithing, and camp meeting.

Theoretical Framework

The research was grounded in the social evolution theory, which holds that cultures generally evolve in a uniform and progressive manner from a simple state to a more progressive and complex state (Ciaffa, 2008). Anthropological scholars such as Tylor and Morgan are proponents of this theory.

Tylor, for instance, argues that culture evolved from simple to complex and that all societies pass three basic developmental stages, that is, from savagery and barbarism to civilization. That evolution from one stage to another is relatively progressive depending on the society (Tylor, 2006). To him different societies are at different stages of evolution. He thus maintains that simple contemporary societies of the day have not reached the highest stages. He further asserts that in the next stage there are traces of survivals of the earlier culture as a proof of evolution. To this extent he gives an example of contemporary items made of clay such as cooking pots, eating utensils which are mainly a reflection of the earlier societies. Moreover, he notes that, cultural traits may spread from one society to another.

In a similar fashion, Morgan maintains that culture is not static but instead is in a progressive, gradual development. In his book *Ancient society*, like Tylor, he divides human evolution in three stages: savagery, barbarism and civilization where each stage is distinguished by unique technological development, political organization, patterns of marriage and family as its identification benchmarks (Morgan, 1877:3). For instance, in savagery, he says it was marked by acquisition of fish diet and discovery of fire, barbarism on the other hand was marked by pottery and domestication of plants and animals and early civilization being identical with phonetic alphabet (Morgan, 1877:7).

This theory however has been criticized for being unable to explain why some societies regressed or even became extinct. Despite the weakness, the theory provided a useful ground upon which the transformation of Christian's religious rituals could be analyzed. The argument was that, since culture gradually changes depending on the state and stage of development of the society, the same is true to the Christian's religious rituals. Thus with the age of covid 19, the religious rituals had to change to conform to the covid 19 containment measures. It is on this basis that the study examined some of the changes that have taken place in Christian religious rituals in the midst of Covid 19 pandemic.

Research Methodology

Study Area

The research was carried out in Nairobi Kenya. The choice of Nairobi was based on two main reasons: first being an urban set up, there are so many Christian denominations where the information could be easily gathered. Secondly, according to the daily reports issued by the ministry of health in Kenya, Nairobi usually lead with Covid 19 positive cases as such, the city is often affected by the government containment measures such as movement restrictions, curfews and more importantly closure of all religious gatherings. All these made Nairobi an ideal for carrying out this study.

Target Population

The targeted population during the research included the clergy, the church elders and general Christian faithful. The choice of these respondents was however influenced by a number of factors for instance the age, Christian denomination and one's position in the church. In most cases, snow ball sampling was employed with an aim of reaching out to knowledgeable respondents.

Research Instruments

The study employed two main data collection tools: questionnaire and interview. Questionnaire for instance was systematically prepared with a set of questions deliberately designed to elicit response from the respondents during data collection exercise. In this case the questionnaires were both structured (closed) and unstructured (open ended) questionnaires. Through the use of questionnaire, the respondents got adequate time to respond to the question items. More importantly we realized that questionnaire could be answered at the convenience of the respondents and picked at a later time.

Interviews on the other hand were done orally with the respondents. It was important in the research topic since through it, the research was able to generate information that was considered useful to the study area. Furthermore, it facilitated collection of information from the illiterate people such as the old elders.

Ethical Considerations

Before and during the research, specific ethical considerations were put into place. For instance, the respondents received a detailed briefing about the purpose of the study, and they were informed that it was purely for academics. Secondly, the respondents only participated based on informed consent and were assured confidentiality of their information. In this case, only respondents who willingly wanted to be quoted were quoted by names. Additionally, all the secondary sources were cited correctly to avoid cases of plagiarism.

Sampling Techniques

In terms of sampling, the research utilized a variety of sampling techniques. First Purposive sampling which was employed where a group of people to be sampled were selected based on their knowledge and professional judgment on the issues related to the study area. Secondly, there was use of Stratified random sampling where population was divided into different groups or strata then the final subject was randomly selected proportionally from different strata. This ensured that an appropriate sample from various subgroups was selected.

Lastly the study employed Snowball sampling where; the current respondent referred the researcher to other respondents who met the criterion of the researcher. This was useful in identifying more respondents especially those with the relevant information on the study area.

Data Analysis and Presentation

The collected data was analyzed and presented in a narrative form which involves general description and explanation of the study findings. This is useful in ensuring that information was presented in a form that is easily understood and utilize.

Research findings

Effects of Covid 19 on Prayers, Holy Communion, Ash Wednesday, Camp Meeting and Tithing

Covid 19 pandemic has far reaching effects on the people's religious lives to an extent that, the commonly practiced religious rituals are no longer practiced the way they ought to be. Ngwacho (2020) for instance observes that, for safety reasons Christian churches have significantly reduced their members attending religious gathering per session. This has forced most denominations to adopt live streaming in order to reach the majority of their congregants, as such it has made the adoption of technology by churches a matter of necessity rather than a choice. This, however, has not been received well by a section of the faithful who finds it hard to adapt to the new normal. *Mzee Tigiri* (O:I, October 12th 2020) of the Seventh Day Adventists observed that live streaming has denied them the essence of Christian fellowship and prayers which come with physical interaction. Besides, most of them are unable to afford the amount of data bundles that one requires for listening to sermon coupled with the challenges associated with handling technology such as networks. To him, if the situation is not keenly handled, it can take a majority of people into a spiritual darkness.

In addition to this, the pandemic affected tithing which is an important religious ritual in Christian doctrine. Pinchoff (2021) for instance argues that due to restrictions on the physical contact, Christian denominations have encouraged their members to tithe through mobile money transfer services such as Mpesa. Because of this, a good number of faithful do not give either because of lack of money or on the simple reason that they have not been physically attended to. With time, the clergy who entirely depend on this money have found it difficult to sustain their families and even live streaming of the church services especially in the young churches.

On the Holy Communion, the research found out that the pandemic has drastically changed how the Eucharist is celebrated. In explaining this change Okuku (2021) observe that, out of the fear of infections, Christian churches have adopted a wait and see approach. In denominations where it is practiced, then it is carried out with great caution which a times interfere with its original nature and intention. For instance, among the Roman catholic where the ritual has been traditionally practiced through a common communion cup, the pandemic has compelled the church leadership to go slow on the ritual and in cases where it is carried out, it is done with caution with the highest form of hygiene. This is based on the belief that the practice would possibly serve as a vehicle of transmitting the highly contagious infection. Similarly, among the Christian denominations such as Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Mennonites and Adventists where foot washing is a norm as a sign of humility during the Holy Eucharist, Millett (2020) notes that, the pandemic have compelled these churches to approach the ritual with deep caution or abandon

it altogether out of the fear of spreading the deadly virus. One of the responded for example observed that “this this disease is changing every aspect of our worship, today we are advised not to carry out foot worshipping as our norm dictates to prevent the spread of this deadly virus...” (Momanyi, O:I, January 11th 2021).

Camp meeting is another ritual common among most of the Christian denominations such as Methodists, Pentecostal, seventh day Adventist among others. It is usually celebrated once a year, where people gather for a week to worship God in adherence to Christian scriptures. Like other rituals, the organization of camp meeting has heavily been affected by Covid 19 restrictions. In support of this, Alice, (2021) records that, as opposed to the norm in most Christian churches where people would meet physically for a week, Covid 19 restriction have limited such meetings to a few people who are primarily meant to air the camp proceeding virtually. To him this has bared a majority who for one reason or another are unable to catch up with virtual technology from attending the crucial Christian religious ritual. On a similar ground Kithiaa (2020) adds that, with continued spread of the novel corona virus most churches have stopped some of the religious practices associated with camp meeting rituals for instance group singing. In few cases where congregational songs are held, then it is practiced in strict compliance of Covid 19 protocols for example wearing of masks, which many adherence claims have diluted the worshipping session.

Imposition of ashes is another Christian ritual heavily affected by Covid 19 pandemic. Commonly known with the catholic, the ritual is celebrated worldwide where foreheads of believers are marked with ash in the shape of a cross as a reminder of mortality and belonging in the Christian faith, an act commonly known as Ash Wednesday. However, with the advent of Covid, Kithiaa(2020) observes, that the churches have been compelled to re-structure the practice of the ritual while keeping faithful to its importance and meaning. One of such changes is adoption of application of ash on the back of people’s hands instead of their foreheads as a means of reducing contacts and completely avoiding contact with people’s faces. This has left some believers confused and wondering whether the hand marking truly reflects the original significance and intention of the practice.

On a positive note, Sulkowski (2020) argues that the pandemic has made people more prayerful and brought them closer to God than ever. He adds that, even people who rarely prayed are reaching to God for help through prayer. Such prayers are coupled with regular study of God's word for deep understanding of God's will, in the process people have grown closer to God than ever. He further adds that the pandemic has changed people's perception towards healing miracles. This view is supported by one respondent who jokingly observed that "even the mighty men of God who perform healing miracle are waiting for the Covid 19 to subside for them to continue with their healing mission" (Okelo, O: I, February 10th, 2021). In other words, it has made people realize that most of these healing miracles are stage managed and therefore far from reality.

Effects of Covid 19 on Baptism and Child Dedication

Child dedication is another important ritual heavily hit by covid pandemic. According to Kimani (2020), this is a Christian religious ceremony of commitment between the parents and God on behalf of the child. In this commitment, the parents promise to raise their baby according to the two God's law until the child is old enough to make personal confession of Jesus Christ. In undertaking the ritual, the clergy lay hand on the Baby when saying a prayer of blessing, this is done in front of a crowd of witnesses. Like other ritual,

dedication has been hugely affected by the advent of Covid 19. For instance, it is rarely practice in most churches and in places where it's carried out, the clergy omits the laying of hand to avoid the spread of contagious virus. Besides, large crowds who forms key part of witness is discouraged as witnesses reduced to close and few family members. To some believers, this erodes the importance and aim of this noble religious custom.

Most importantly the diseases have greatly changed the manner in which baptism is carried out among Christian denominations. According to Olsen (2020) baptism by water is a core fundamental belief of every Christian faith that is geared towards purification or renewal and admission of a person into Christian faith. The form differs from one denomination to another for instance among the Catholics it is done by sprinkling water to the forehead of a baby while among a majority of protestants it is through immersion. It is important to observe that, whichever manner, the advent of deadly Covid 19 has affected the ritual of baptism. Among the Catholics for example, the common practice has been that, baptism is carried out by a priest who sprinkles water on the forehead of the baby, holds the child and pronounce the words of grace to the child in the presence of a multitude of people who serve as witnesses. With the advent of Covid 19 , the practice has changed. McKibbin (2020) observes that, to day most priests do not hold children instead sprinkle water at a distance as they pronounce words of grace to the baby. Similarly, among the Protestants where the practice is mainly carried out through immersion, some churched have adopted the practice where a close relative is delegated the responsibility of immersing the candidate in a running water preferably a river, lake or ocean as the clergy admits an oath and prayer to the candidate. In all these instances, the number of witnesses is reduced to a small group of people preferably close relatives. This is opposed to the large crowd of witnesses familiar in such ceremonies during pre- Covid.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the research, it was established that Covid 19 ravaged the practice of Christian religious rituals such as Holy Communion, tithing, communal worship etcetera. In this respect, the study recommended reorganization of the Christian religious rituals to conform to the new normal. Such restructuring should be structured to respect and uphold the importance and objective of religious rituals. It also emerged that Covid 19 is not getting over any time in the near future. The research therefore recommends to the clergy and the Christian leadership to talk to the members of their faith on the importance of vaccination to allay fears that are associated with Covid 19 vaccines and embrace vaccine uptake.

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