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Containing the Spread of Covid-19: A Religious Interpretation to “Stay At Home” Order!

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Abstract: The biblical account on the penultimate night before the exit of Israelites from Egypt indicated that, among other instructions handed to them by Moses, they were asked to stay indoors. The “stay indoors” order was not just peculiar to Judaism but could also be noticed during the outbreak of small pox in Yoruba land when people, especially children were advised to stay indoors especially in the midday and in the midnight. This instruction was sacrosanct from both hygienic and religious points of view. This study reviews the first Passover around 1440 B.C and chicken pox outbreak in the early part of 20th century in Yoruba land, will analyze the reason why the “stay at home” order was given and how such order was partly responsible for curtailing the spread of the disease among the people. Oral interview from indigenous people especially those who believe in Sopana diety, (who the Yoruba people believe uses the disease as a punitive measure against anomaly, sacrilege or abomination) are conducted to give an insight into how staying indoors help check the widespread of the disease. In sum, this study will give a general assessment of the religious implication of this order with a view to relating it to how Africans, following such directive, which is indigenous to their belief system, helped them defy the predicted “many dead bodies on the street of Africa” to the utter surprise of the hapless international community.

Keywords: Passover, covid-19, stay-at-home, Sopona, chicken pox, religion.

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INTRODUCTION

The historical event recorded in the book of Exodus of the Judeo-Christian scriptures when Moses demanded that the children of Israel living at Goshen should stay indoors while a terrible evil was to befall the whole land of Egypt could be understood from different dimensions. However, one question that needed to be answered at this point is whether the stay at home order asides from the rituals and the sacrifice of animals has anything to do with the zero death recorded by Israelites whereas every household in Egypt recorded at least one death. If they werenot indoors as instructed would they record some casualties as well? Before the final, nation annihilating plague, some other devastating plagues also brought as punishments on Egypt were escaped by some Egyptians who stayed indoors just as the Israelites did. Does this imply that there is a cultural control method which involves staying indoors or maintaining social distance?

This work attempts to explore very concisely, the cultural practice of maintaining physical distance in order to control the spread of infectious diseases. In the course of doing this, this work will also note very carefully that it had always be part of the cultural practice among the Yoruba in the Southwest Nigeria to order people to stay at home especially towards and immediately after the midday sun and towards and immediately after the midnight. These peak periods, the noon, which could be between 11am and 2 pm and

midnight, which could be between 10pm and 3am¹ are often believed to be the peak periods when malicious spirits that carry the plagues move about to speed the diseases. While these couriers of death and pandemic move about the street, the Yoruba believe that people who stay indoors and in addition, but not totally compulsory to tie a red cloth, with cloth or palm front in front of their houses would be exempted from being attacked by these malicious spirits. In some cases, a special fruit known as *Cucumis melo* called *tagiri* in Yoruba language (commonly called Christmas melon) would be put in the house to scare away these spirits. From records and personal experiences of the researches these age long cultural practices had been very effective.

Having established this background therefore, it could be submitted that the religio-cultural “stayat home” order is not a Judeo-Christian tradition’s influence which could be termed as a religiousenrichment on African religion, rather it could be seen as a cultural similarity between the two religious traditions who later in their civilization crosses their paths. This work would be examined under the following subheadings: structure of Yoruba belief system with emphasis on the spirits,

Spirits and Structure of African belief

The structure of African belief is diffused monotheism. There is the supreme God whose eternal personality places him high above the rest of all other “elements” in the pyramid. However, he isoften seen as a distant chief who is high above his creatures and who

could be approached through the divinities who though created but are endowed with special powers to navigate both heavenly realm and the ephemeral earth.² Below the divinities are malicious spirits who in the beliefs of Africans are malicious in their actions; some alluded to the fact that they also included intentions, but in Yoruba tradition they are believed to be emissaries of Olodumare who come to balance the equation of good and evil as required by the divine providence. Yoruba believe that “*t’ibi t’ire la da ile aye.*”

Sometimes the forces of evil come into play for the ultimate good, this has a parallel similarities with the situation of biblical Joseph who was sold into slavery, lied against and faced several challenges which could be classified as evil, yet in the end it turned out for his ultimate good. John Mbiti noted that the evil by the malevolent spirits could be seen as they playing the roles assigned to them by the Supreme Being.³ However, these spirits could be harbingers of diseases and death, but in the end they play their roles in purging the earth of all evil. Despite what could be perceived as their statutory function, these spirits could also play the role of tempting or testing a person’s faith in the Almighty. This has a parallel form with the incidence in the book of Job where Satan destroyed everything Job had in order to assess his level of faith in God.⁴

Despite all the tribulations that Job went through he never betrayed God and in the end what happened was for his greater good. The Yoruba believe that the oracles could be consulted in cases when a person faces this Job-like situation in life. It is believed that the eventually the knowledge of what to do during the trying times would be revealed to the person. Sometimes it may involve sacrificing to a deity and at other times it may require taking some committed steps. Whatever the case may be it is believed that one would find immediate solution to the problem.

Spirits and Pestilence

Yoruba believe that spirits are the carriers of pestilence. They believe that they are messengers of sickness, pestilence and even death. Pestilence is often seen as supernatural response to sins and sacrileges committed by humanity. It is believed that the evil that humanity commit, especially abominable acts such as incest, adultery, murder, etc could come back to hunt not only the people involved in such acts but also the whole community, in certain extreme cases. Just like the story of Achan in the bible when the sin committed by Achan led to the defeat of Israel in battle, several sacrilegious acts committed by individuals could eventually cause untold calamity on the whole community.⁵ In Yoruba tradition, when there is pestilence, especially the one in the proportion of an epidemic, such cases are not treated as an happenstance or a coincidence. It is believed that “without smoke there wouldn’t be fire.” Even untimely deaths are viewed as unnatural. Only death at old age, when the elderly person died peacefully is accepted as a

natural transition. Deaths through accident, sickness, suicide, etc, are still viewed as abominable.

The general belief is that they are caused by some malevolent spirits. It is even believed that a person could be manipulated “spiritually” to take their own life. Having established the link between spirits and disease which is that sickness could be the divine response to evil committed by man and that pestilence, epidemic and pandemic could in turn be a divinely punitive measures for the sin committed by one individual in the community or a section of the community and in extreme cases, the whole community. Yoruba agree with the bible that death is a wage paid for sin, but this death is viewed more as untimely or unnatural death, rather than eternal or spiritual death. Yoruba also agree with the bible pestilence is an emissary of the Supreme Being. This is in line with the response of God to Solomon’s prayers in 2 Chronicles chapter 7. The response of God clearly stated that “if I bring pestilence to my people...” Another aspect of Yoruba belief which also has remarkable semblance with the bible is that these spirits do not work on their own but derive their powers and authorization from God.

Notable instances could be seen in stories of the lying spirit that was sent to confuse the prophets that attended to Ahab⁶ and also the story of Satan and God in the book of Job.⁷ The kind of “working agreements” between spirits and Supreme Being exist in Yoruba mythology and belief structure. The aim of this study is to establish the fact the Yoruba traditional belief has some remarkable similarities with some of the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the Jews in both Old and New Testament eras. As earlier noted, pandemic is seen as divine response to the sacrilege committed by humanity. Then the questions are; do Yoruba people have religio-cultural ways of handling epidemics and are there remarkable similarities between the ways they handle such epidemics and what is seen in Exodus chapter 14 at the inaugural Passover sacrifice. This paper will attempt to answer these two questions. See the appendix for the structure of Africa belief system viz Christianity and Islam.

Yoruba Religio-Cultural Ways of Handling Pandemics

Since Yoruba believe that epidemics have spiritual connections, therefore, they also attempt to find spiritual solutions to it. Bolaji Idowu explained that the Babalawos have knowledge of if that makes them understand the root cause of human predicaments and what they needed to do in order to solve such problem.⁸ By act of divination, whatever is “in the dark would be revealed” and in the end the suggested solution would be laid bare before the person that is being afflicted. However, while the afflicted person is still in the process of finding solution to their problems, they may be required to stay away from large gathering, scorching sun or thick darkness especially the night period.

For instance, when a person is afflicted with measles, it is believed that Sapona deity is the cause of such disease and the disease is highly contagious. It is also believed that the spirit of Sapona walks about in the “heat of the sun” and “under the cover of the night.”⁹ That is why someone who has measles is not expected to be walking about during the heat of the sun and should be on his bed before the midnight. During the time that measles is rampant, children are often asked to play outside before the heat of the sun becomes too hot and should be indoors before nightfall. There are certain cultural beliefs attached to this practice of staying indoors. Apart from avoiding the spirit of Sapona from wrecking more havoc in a particular household, it is also believed that the heat of the sun makes the pains unbearable. It is believed that being in a cool environment will slow down the spread of the disease.

In a particular household if one person is inflicted, the other members of the family would try as much as possible to avoid getting too close to the person. They also avoid using the same plates, cups, sponge and cutleries with the person. These are ways of curtailing and containing the spread of the disease. From religious perspective, certain sacrifices are also performed to ward off the spirit of Sapona from a particular household or the whole community. In some households, one could see blood or water being sprinkled in front of the house or palm front or small charm being tied on the lintel of the house. A special fruit which is believed to have potency in preventing the spread of the disease is also put in the house, especially at the corner of each room.

Are there any remarkable similarities between the biblical account’s approach to curtailing the spread of disease or pestilence in Exodus and the cultural practice in Yorubaland? The answer to these could be inferred from the remarkable similarities on causes of epidemic and what could be done to manage the spread of the disease both culturally and religiously. In both traditions, people were instructed to stay at home and in also to get some rituals done. They were also asked to use some special plants and also make some marks on a part of their household.

Discrepancies between the Contemporary “Stay at Home Order” and Traditional Practice

It should be noted from the position taken by the paper that there are basic differences between the contemporary practice and the cultural one when it comes to restrictions in social and physical interactions during pandemic. The medical practice does not believe that diseases are transmitted by invisible spirits. Rather, they believe that diseases could be airborne, water borne, etc. The contemporary physical restriction is meant to restrict person to person contact which increases the risk

of transmission of the virus from one person to the other. In most countries of the world, this restriction was enforced and offenders prosecuted. There is also compulsory wearing of masks to restrict the possibilities of contracting the disease. The virus is believed to be resident in mucus, saliva, etc. But this is slightly different from the perception of the original Yoruba cultural practice.

The cultural belief is that the virus is transmitted by unseen spirits. These spirits are believed to spread the virus in line with the dictates of the Supreme Being who instructed them to carry out the punitive actions against his errant creatures. The cultural approach therefore is to avoid any contact with the malevolent spirits. Though the cultural restriction is always advised, it is never enforced. But, due to fear of the unknown, most people obey without being compelled to do so. In many Yoruba communities cultural practices like following stay at home order is handed down from generation to generation. In some cases, parents sometimes enforce it within their household, and older children also act as moral guide for their younger members of the family.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This comparative study attempts to draw remarkable similarities between the biblical stay at home order and that of the Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria. The study established some remarkable similarities in the way both cultures from differences sources and belief structures view source, nature, and control of epidemic. It was concluded that the stay at home order, and social and physical distancing as experienced during the first wave of covid-19 in Nigeria was not an enrichment on Yoruba cultural belief through Judeo-Christian influence, rather, it had always been the practice of the Yoruba people before they had contact with missionary religions.

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