

COVID-19 AND THE PROPHETIC BUSINESS IN NIGERIAN CHURCH

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Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 has opened a new chapter on prophecy and its relevance in modern times. Biblically, prophecy is a charism that is bestowed to serve the Church, but it is doubtful if it is really serving the Church in Nigeria, as it ought to do. Using the historical and descriptive research, the study examined the nexus between COVID-19 pandemic and the prophetic business in Nigerian Church. Data were gathered through oral interview, participant observation, and WhatsApp. Findings revealed that the inability of any of the renowned Nigerian prophets to prophesy about the pandemic during their December 31, 2019 prophetic night cast a negative light on the prophetic business in Nigeria and it made some people to declare most Nigerian prophets as charlatans and deceivers. It was found that most Nigerian prophets had departed from the more difficult path of social justice of the biblical prophets who challenged the political leaders of their days, but they had rather chosen the easier path of the fortune-tellers that brings quick financial rewards. Most Christians in Nigeria were not pleased with the materialistic trend of prophecy, which had made some Christians to lose faith in the Church. The paper recommends that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) need be reorganised as a watchdog to curb the excesses of the self-acclaimed prophets who give Christianity a negative image through exploitative fake prophecies.

Keywords: COVID-19, Prophecy, Divination, Business, Church, Nigeria

Introduction

Prophet, according to McKenzie, is from the Greek word “*Prophetēs*” and it means the same thing as the Hebrew word “*nabī*”, that is, one who speaks before others, one who communicates divine revelation.¹ Therefore, a prophet is one called by God to communicate divine message to fellow human beings. In biblical Israel, prophets censured the immorality of the nation; they were gadflies that stung the consciences of the people when the people deviated from the path of God. For instance, Nathan rebuked David for adultery and murder (2 Sam 12:1-14); Gad delivered a threat of punishment to David for taking census (2 Sam 24:11-13), etc. In fact, the biblical passage, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18a, KJV), succinctly captures the necessity of prophecy in the society as a guide

through the mirage of life. Without the prophetic guidance, human beings wallow in ignorance and they stumble. In his study, Abioje groups prophets into critical prophets who are sanitizers of the society through their criticisms of social injustice and divinatory/esoteric prophets that help to resolve the mysteries in human existence.² However, while the critical prophets are prone to persecution, the esoteric prophets are liable to exploitation and manipulation.

Most biblical prophets combine both critical prophecy and esoteric prophecy. Hence, the practical test for esoteric prophecy is that the message of a true prophet must be fulfilled (Deut. 18:20-22). In fact, this practical test cannot help people to differentiate between a true and a false prophet especially if the prediction of a false prophet happens. Hence, it is in critical prophecy that a true prophet can be known. That means, the message of a true prophet must confront evil doers and his life must condemn immorality (Jer. 23:9, 13-14).³ The moral test therefore unmasks false prophets who are ravenous wolves with high proclivity to acquire wealth with total disregard for morality. Usually, a false prophet disregards the reality of sin; in the midst of evil, he prophesies fortune for the sake of his personal benefits.⁴

During the midnight of every 31 December, most Nigerian pastors, at their crossover services, roll out divine messages for the nation in order to guide fellow citizens divinely, and most Nigerians usually believe these prophetic messages as the “will of God”. However, media reports confirmed that in early December 2019, there was an outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19).⁵ It is reported that COVID-19 is caused by a novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) that occurred in Wuhan city, Hubei province, China.⁶ On 30th January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International concern.⁷ Record shows that as of February 14, 2020, the number of laboratory confirmed cases was 49,053 while 1,381 deaths were recorded globally.⁸ As of Friday 24th April 2020, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) gave the following statistics of COVID-19 in Nigeria: confirmed cases were 981, Active cases were 753, discharged cases were 197, while 31 deaths were recorded.⁹

However, most Nigerians felt that the COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged the world and most especially Nigeria in the 2020 New Year should not have met the nation unawares because of the abundance of prophets who saturate the public space

with prophecies through Television, Radio, and Social media. Nevertheless, none of these “prophets” was able to warn the nation about the impending disease. Up until date, it has not been proven that any of the miracle-working prophets have cured any COVID-19 patients, and media reports show that the pandemic had not abated. The fear of COVID-19 led the Federal Government to lockdown Abuja, Lagos State, and Ogun State for 14 days from March 30, 2020,¹⁰ while other State Governments took a cue from the Federal Government and issued similar law in the states. The lockdown affected worship centres drastically until the Federal government of Nigeria ordered “restrictive opening” of the worship centres on June 1, 2020,¹¹ and Kwara State lifted the ban on religious gathering on June 5, 2020.¹² In other words, the advent of COVID-19 has opened another chapter on the relevance of prophecy in Nigeria.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to interrogate the nexus between COVID-19 and the prophetic business in Nigerian Church. The study hopes to achieve this purpose by finding answers to the following research questions:

1. In your opinion, is the nature of prophecy a business in Nigeria today?
2. Has COVID-19 pandemic affected the act of prophecy in Nigeria today?
3. Have the modern Nigerian prophets deviated from the pattern of biblical prophets as we read in the scriptures?
4. Does the failure to prophesy the COVID-19 pandemic have any effect on the faith of Christians in Nigeria?
5. Does the failure to prophesy the COVID-19 pandemic have any effect on the reputation of the Church in Nigeria?
6. Does the failure to prophesy the COVID-19 pandemic have any effect on the prophetic business in Nigeria?

Research Methods

The purposive sampling method was adopted in order to choose participants for the research. Foley explains that the purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their own judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their study.¹³ The sampling method was adopted because the selection of eligible participants for the study was not based on probability. Data were collected through structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, and WhatsApp social media. Interviews were conducted with the pastors, prophets, and Christians of different denominations

in Odo-Owa, a village in Kwara State, Nigeria as participants. WhatsApp social media was used to gather data from other eligible Nigerians living at Ilorin, Kaduna, Lagos, New Bussa in Niger State, Funtua in Katsina State, and Port Harcourt. Findings were critically analysed and qualitatively generalised.

The Prophetic Business in Nigerian Church

The prophetic business in this study consists of the soothsaying ability of pastors that has become an enterprise in the Church especially in Nigeria. This prophetism is noticeable mostly in the Pentecostal brand of Christianity. Pentecostalism is a collection of different Christian groups demonstrating spiritual experiences, such as speaking in tongues, as a mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit in them.¹⁴ Other Pentecostal beliefs and practices in Nigeria include Faith healing, holiness of life, evangelism, emphasis on material possession as a mark of God's favour or blessing, prophecy, repeated prayers and emphasis on deliverance, prayer against witches and wizards, payment of tithes in order to receive God's blessing, etc.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Odo-Owa Chapter's prayer booklet for the 2020 Universal Week of Prayer reveals that there are twenty-three (23) Churches in Odo-Owa.¹⁵ The presence of 23 Churches in a village where the inhabitants are predominantly farmers and petty traders is a sign that Church is a lucrative business in Nigeria. This lucrative feature of the Church informs Oderinde's assertion, "Owning a church has become a big business- *pastopreneurs* are on the rise in Nigeria".¹⁶ The researcher agrees with Oderinde because it is reported that Oyedepo, the founder of Living Faith Church, has earmarked N10.3 billion to build ten thousand (10,000) new Churches in Nigeria,¹⁷ a nation that is noted as the "poverty capital of the world".¹⁸ One may ask whether Nigeria is bereft of Churches. However, investing N10.3 billion in Churches is an indication that Churches are faster means of generating returns on investments. As long as Pentecostalism projects owning Church as a means of social mobility and financial breakthrough, Pentecostal Churches will continue to multiply.

Furthermore, the study of Adedibu shows that Nigerian Pentecostal adherents are now missionaries in England and other urban cities in the West. This reveals that Nigerian Pentecostalism is now a "non-commodity export to the West".¹⁹ It is doubtful whether the boom experienced in Nigerian Pentecostalism would have occurred if the founders tow the path of critical prophets in the Bible or the apostolic poverty. Prophetic Churches have become moneymaking ventures in

Nigeria through advertising miracles, competition for crusades, vigils, conventions, prayer sessions, exorcism, selling of books, olive oil, stickers, and prophesying. Generally, prophecy is one of the charisms (1 Cor. 14:1), and the prophets edify, exhort, and encourage the Church (1 Cor. 14:3). "Prophecy is one essential Christian heritage and a sign that God still speaks."²⁰ However, in modern Nigeria, prophecy has been abused.

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Prophetic Business in Nigerian Church

Like most Nigerians, Adadevoh believes that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria without prior notice should make everyone doubt the authenticity of the so-called prophecies by most Nigerian pastors. Adadevoh is disappointed that while the "prophets" forecast bliss, political upheavals, natural disasters, or demise of public Nigerian figures²¹, which are normal events in human societies, none of the 2020 prophecies that flooded the social media in January 2020 concerned COVID-19 to the best of the knowledge of the researcher. The question on the lips of most people is whether COVID-19 has not exposed most Nigerian prophets as fake. One cannot come to any conclusion until the answers to the research questions have been analysed.

Based on the objectives set at the beginning of the study, it was discovered that although money and finance have affected modern prophecy in Nigeria, genuine prophets do not merchandise. However, "It is evident that any Christian ministration without esoteric/divinatory prophecy as a major ingredient is not regarded as an authentic one. Therefore, esoteric/divinatory prophecy has become a way of selling our ever-increasing new churches. One can therefore say that esoteric/divinatory prophecy is a big business today. This is why "Christian Praying Ministry" is more lucrative than "Teaching Ministry"²². Hence, "It is evident that the self-acclaimed prophets who see prophecy as a business are the people who project prophecy as strategic advertisement for a new Christian assembly and a way of attracting followers and growing their membership"²³. Most participants believe that prophecy has become a business that brings in quick money, and "this makes it attractive to most pastors such that even when they are not prophets, they ascribe prophets to themselves"²⁴. Therefore, prophecy has become a lucrative business in Nigeria, "a means to cajole and brainwash people in order to exploit"²⁵. Adewumi believes, "Most prophets are in the business today because of what they want to eat. Because of money, prophets have become soothsayers who say what people will like to hear"²⁶.

Furthermore, findings showed that the massive crowd that used to attend programs at Babalola Memorial Prayer Mountain, Odo-Owa before COVID-19 was no longer available.²⁷ With regard to this, a participant said, "It is now difficult for prophets to identify themselves as prophets because the pandemic has cast a doubt on their prophecy".²⁸ Although some respondents opined that it may be too early to assess the negative effects of COVID-19 on prophecy in Nigeria, however, it was asserted, "Some people now doubt if there are actually prophets in Nigeria because if there are prophets, they should have seen the pandemic beforehand."²⁹ While another respondent opined, "COVID-19 has shown that most modern prophets are fake prophets because none could forecast the pandemic, and none has predicted correctly when it would end".³⁰

However, even though the "prophetic noise" has waned during the pandemic, it was believed that after COVID-19, "the business will pick up since most Nigerian prophets are more of fortune telling rather than prophets".³¹ Onyekwelu is apposite when he affirmed, "COVID-19 has not actually affected the prophetic business negatively. Every good marketer knows the act of rebranding. Business only changed from the usual prophecy to a blend with Coronavirus phenomenon."³²

Notwithstanding, all respondents believed that the lockdown due to the pandemic has temporarily halted the multiplication of Churches and it has decimated the number of crusades and revivals, which serve as platforms for prophecy in Nigeria. How the prophets will couch their post COVID-19 preaching to attract prospective clients is what everyone awaits. It is the general opinion that the effects of the pandemic would be short-lived because the so-called prophets will soon come up with new narratives that will suit the mentality of their gullible audience.

What is happening in Nigeria is similar to the events in biblical times concerning true and false prophets. The encounter of Amaziah, the priest of Bethel who would not want king Jeroboam of Israel to hear of any misfortune, with Amos (Amos 7:10-13), the true prophet, is obvious in Nigeria. This case shows that dependence on the king, or any political power for living may easily corrupt the prophet. "Most modern Nigerian prophets are not prepared to suffer like Jeremiah or Amos; they do not like to become the enemies of the State because this will lead

to stoppage of their sources of income. Hence, most have turned to electoral prophetism because this type of prophecy brings in more money rather than towing the path of righteousness".³³

In addition, the study also inquired into whether the failure to prophesy the pandemic has any effect on the faith of Christians in Nigeria. Most respondents declared that the failure to prophesy the pandemic has greatly affected the faith of most Christians "because many people ordinarily had expected the prophets to warn them about the pandemic before the various health institutions started to declare measures to curb it. If the prophets had forewarned the people, it would have contributed to the prestige of Christianity in no small measure and to the Christian faith, and more importantly to the reputation of the prophets".³⁴ In the same light, "The failure to foresee the pandemic has affected the faith of some Christians because such Christians now doubt whether God has power to kill COVID-19".³⁵ On the other hand, it was noted that the pandemic has strengthened the faith of some Christians. Thus, Afolabi opined, "The pandemic has drawn people more to God for help where human solution has been in vain".³⁶

Moreover, opinions differed on whether the failure to prophesy the pandemic has any effect on the reputation of the Church in Nigeria. While some interviewees opined that because no prophet predicted that the Church would be lockdown in the year 2020 before it happened, therefore, COVID-19 has affected the reputation of the Church in Nigeria, others believed that the failure to prophesy COVID-19 did not necessarily affect the reputation of the Church. For instance, Asaju reported, "Because of the COVID-19, some people now suggest that there is no need to attend Church anymore since the pandemic has led to the closure of Churches and forced pastors to conduct their services online".³⁷ Whereas, Ghado declared, "Only shallow-faith Christians have lost faith completely in the Church".³⁸ The different opinions reveal the level of peoples' understanding of the Church. "People who have a limited understanding of the Church as an institution for fortune telling were those who should be disappointed. People who understand the message of Jesus know that there is more to Christianity than ostentatious display of prophecy because the essence of the Church is to proclaim the values of the Good news of Jesus Christ and translate these values into everyday life", Musa declared.³⁹

Lastly, by investigating whether the failure to prophesy the pandemic has any effect on the prophetic business in Nigeria, findings revealed that COVID-19 had affected the prophetic business negatively because of the inability of the so-called prophets to foretell the pandemic.⁴⁰ A respondent observed, "Even Apostle Suleman and Prophet T. B. Joshua gave conflicting messages concerning COVID-19",⁴¹ which indicated that they did not receive any vision about the pandemic. Since the so-called prophets and miracle workers did not prophesy about COVID-19, it has cast doubt on their miraculous claims and powers. "COVID-19 has exposed most Nigeria prophets as deceivers; it has blocked their sources of income due to the absence of congregation to whom they prophesy in order to get money".⁴² There was a prophet who used to sell handkerchiefs, stickers, and water for miracles, but "the storm of COVID-19 has affected his Church and it had collapsed. His members had dwindled drastically because of lack of signs and wonders",⁴³ Ajimoti declared. In addition, Evangelist Sanni noted, "COVID-19 has negatively affected the prophetic business because some prophets lamented that they had no job."⁴⁴

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has shown that there is a connection between COVID-19 pandemic and the prophetic business in Nigeria. It revealed that there is a problem with prophecy in Nigeria orchestrated by several factors such as poverty, love of money, desire for fame, power, and lack of central institutional control over Churches, and this has made some so-called prophets to abuse the charism of prophecy. The study also revealed that true prophets still exist even if they are few. One of whom is Evangelist Sanni who said, "Around December 2019, as I was praying on Babalola Memorial Mountain, Odo-Owa, God revealed to me that a sickness was coming that would begin from the political leaders, the wealthy, and those in power. I rang the bell round the village to inform the villagers to pray and move near to God. I believe that COVID-19 has fulfilled this revelation".⁴⁵ Some pastors⁴⁶ testified that Sanni rang the bell round the village concerning this vision. However, Sanni is not a popular Television prophet; hence, his revelation did not go viral.

Furthermore, the study revealed that the advent of COVID-19 pandemic had greatly affected the prophetic business in Nigeria. However, it was found that sooner than later the prophetic business will resurrect in Nigeria as long as there are gullible Christians who would consult the prophets. In addition, most Nigerians have a wrong perception of prophecy in terms of only

esoteric/divinatory role. Hence, for such people, a prophet is an herbalist, a fortune-teller, and an exorcist. Therefore, Nigerians with such wrong perception will easily fall victims of prophetic manipulation and exploitation. Christians are advised to have a holistic understanding of a prophet in terms of critical and esoteric/divinatory roles while the criticisms of social injustice and personal morality form the basis of ascertaining a true prophet.

Investigation has revealed that money is the motivation for most Nigerian prophets. Therefore, it is recommended that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) needs to be reorganised as a watchdog to curb the excesses of the self-acclaimed prophets who give Christianity a bad image through exploitative fake prophecies. Although, religious freedom is enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution, the study believes that the Nigerian government needs to protect its citizens from fake prophets. Therefore, there is a need for a deliberate collaboration between CAN and Nigerian government to curb the activities of prophets who make spurious claims with the intention to deceive people so that sanity may descend on the prophetic climate in Nigeria.

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