

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC, CONSPIRACY THEORY AND THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.36469.60642

### **Abstract**

*No health crisis has hit the world and brought so much controversy like the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. At the heart of these controversies are conspiracy theories making the rounds on various traditional and social media platforms. To investigate the matter, the researcher embarked on a critical review entitled "COVID-19 Pandemic, Conspiracy Theory and the Nigerian Experience: A Critical Discourse." The qualitative study which reviewed extant literature on the subject matter found that conspiracy theories among high profile religious leaders have significant consequences on the public such as vaccine hesitancy, risky health choices, slow responses to WHO recommendations for social distancing, face masking and regular hand washing and, has even led to violence and prejudice. The work recommended that both leaders and the led should scrutinise the type of information they share on critical issues while urging everyone to uphold what is true for the common good of all. It concludes that public figures who have a loud voice or are placed in privileged positions in the society and command a multitude of followers ought to influence their followers through responsible and authentic information-sharing which does not pose a threat to themselves or humanity in general.*

**Keywords:** Conspiracy, Theory, COVID-19 Pandemic, Social Media, Pastors/Leaders

### **Introduction**

When the world's most prestigious supersonic plane Concorde crashed on July 25<sup>th</sup> 2000, the global aviation and scientific successes as well as progress came to a halt in amazement about how such an advanced and carefully crafted piece of technology could be easily subjugated. This concern gave rise to the grounding of the plane and a slowing down of human quest to conquer space at an

unprecedented speed. As events unfold, this slowing down was short-lived. This could be the same bewilderment that greeted the world since the advent of the novel coronavirus codenamed the COVID-19. Since the outbreak of the disease in Wuhan Province, China in December 2019 the pandemic offered more questions than answers. Its spread pattern and style is so supersonic that the virus seems not to respect national, continental, regional, racial or ethnic boundaries. Its' fatalistic blow seems to be evasive of human effort giving birth to the 8th wonder of our age and time. In its 184th report of July 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) observed that at least 14,977,470 cases have been recorded in 196 countries and territories, with nearly 700,000 losing the battle to the virus (WHO, 2020). It is generally believed that when there is no information, there can certainly be deformation which can lead to a lot of controversies. One of such controversies is conspiracy theories about this global health crisis.

Conspiracy theory is widely acknowledged to be a loaded term. While politicians use it to mock and dismiss allegations against them, philosophers and political scientists warn that it could be used as a weapon of rhetorical to pathologize dissent (Michael, 2006). Conspiracy narrative is compelling in its rapid global movement, its focus on the actions of both the perpetrators of the evil conspiracy and the defenders of the moral order. It also attempts to explain a wide range of seemingly disparate past and present events and structures within a relatively coherent framework using disparaging facts and stereotypes as tools. The term conspiracy theory and its derivatives are often used as pejoratives implying that devotees are not reasonable interlocutors (Husting et al., 2007). If there is something every sociologist and historian can agree about in their analysis of pandemics, it is that it brings forward a New World Order (NWO). Disregarding for a moment, the conspiracy theory of the televangelist, Pat Robertson, whose idea of 'New World order' was that a secret elite establishment would create a singular government to rule the world and which evokes fear in people (Robertson, 2020).

The New World Order is a system where structures of political and economic powers, deference to traditional authority, and social relations are reassigned in the wake of the urgent changes that needed to be made during the pandemic. In abnormal times such as this COVID-19 era, time itself compresses and reality seems blique with a lot of obscurity. The legislation and social processes that would have taken a long time to prepare, and whose instituting norms would have crept on us gradually, happens in a matter of hours. That sense of urgency

envelopes us and evokes the trauma of a looming apocalypse. Without clarity on what this historical moment means and with no viable source of information than conspiracy theories circulated on social media platforms, people lost in this meaning-destroying event will eventually see through their pastors' old gimmicks of attributing things to demons and supernatural forces or to their so called leaders's political opponents and detractors scheming their political downfall or conspiracy against their good economic reforms which would have benefited the people.

### **The Principal Characteristics that Define a Conspiracy Theory:**

Conspiracy is a secret plot by two or more powerful actors (Keeley, 1999; Pigden, 1995). conspiracies typically attempt to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions. A conspiracy theory is an attempt to explain the ultimate cause of a significant event or situation as the result of a secret plot by a powerful group (Aaronovitch, 2010; Byford, 2011; Coady, 2006; Dentith & Orr 2017; Keeley, 1999). Conspiracy theories are often about the actions of governments, but they can accuse any group that is perceived to be powerful and malevolent. For example, conspiracy theories about 9/11 terror attacks of the Twin Towers in NewYork have accused not only the US Government but also other groups such as the Saudi government, other world corporations and the Jewish people. There has been conspiracy theories about climate change that have also accused climate scientists, the United Nations and the oil industries among others (Douglas et al., 2019). Husting,G., et al (2007) observed that conspiracy theory revolves around three basic characteristics namely; routinized strategy of exclusion, reframing mechanism and a mechanism of simultaneous control of information to demoralise dissenting voices. In the first instance, this happens when a person or a group is labeled a conspiracy theorist that automatically excludes them from being part of the discussion and becomes a suspect. In the second instance, it can be a reframing mechanism which deflects questions or concerns about power, corruption and motives. In the last case, conspiracy theory is viewed as a mechanism for simultaneous control of the flow of information which symbolically demobilizes certain voices on issues in public discourse.

### **Why Certain People Embrace Conspiracy Theory:**

Research in Psychological studies suggest that people are attracted to conspiracy theories when important psychological needs are unsatisfied (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017). The taxonomy derived from the system-justification theory serves as a useful heuristic to classify the motives why people are associated with the conspiracy beliefs (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008).

The first of these psychological needs are epistemic needs. Specifically, people are looking for knowledge and clarity about important events. Indeed, research shows that people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories under conditions of uncertainty (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). The second set of needs is existential. Specifically, people need to feel secure and in control of their surroundings, and studies reveal that people who feel that they lack agency and power are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2017; Pratt, 2003).

The final need is social. That is, people need to maintain a positive image of themselves and the groups they belong to (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2016). Evidence which supports this shows that people who experience a strong need to feel unique compared to others tend to show greater beliefs in conspiracy theories (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Lantian, Muller, Nurra, & Douglas, 2017).

### **Conspiracy Theory and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Analysis**

All the aforementioned needs are likely to be heightened in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The concern however is that whether or not these needs are satisfied by believing in conspiracy theories is another matter. However some experts suggest that believing in conspiracy theories is not a very good coping mechanism (Douglas et al., 2017). One example connotes the fact that instead of increasing feelings of power, conspiracy theories seem to make people feel more powerless (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999).

A distinct psychological motivation, with a more social and political flavour, was identified by Franks et al (2013). They argued that conspiracy theories spread as a device for making sense of events that threaten existing worldviews. They draw on social representation theory (Moscovici, 1961) to argue that conspiracy

theories help groups to symbolically cope with threatening events by making abstract risk more concrete and by focusing blame on a set of conspirators. Franks and colleagues (2013) argue that the spread of conspiracy theory allows people to challenge abstract expert-dominated discourses about important events. They further recommend that conspiracy theories are communicated as devices to cope with collective trauma.

Conspiracy theories that deal with public health are likely to have a serious negative impact on society. This is especially perceived in the area of vaccination where research shows that people who believe and even just read about anti-vaccine theories are more vaccine hesitant (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic may have provided a fertile ground for conspiracy theories. There is a belief that this could be harmful too. If people believe that the virus is a hoax, they might be less likely to take preventive measures such as social distancing in public places, hand washing, and working from home when possible. They might also likely refuse to be subjected to testing. Those who subscribe to Conspiracy theory, who are often very distrustful of science and conventional medicine, could also be more likely to try alternative remedies that are at best useless, and at worst fatal. Apparently, those who belong to this school of thought respond to unmet psychological needs. Human beings experience these needs at some time or another. As such to some extent, humans can be said to be 'conspiracy theorists.'

### **Conspiracy Theories: Some Consequences**

Conspiracy theories may allow individuals to question or challenge the dominant hierarchies and query the actions of powerful groups. One positive consequence of these challenges could be that governments are encouraged to be more transparent (Clarke, 2002; Swami & Coles, 2010). Conspiracy theories can also reveal inconsistencies in government or official versions of events (Clarke, 2002), may also open up issues for discussion that would otherwise be closed (Miller, 2002), and may even uncover real conspiracies (Swami & Coles, 2010).

Oliver and Wood (2014) hold that Conspiracy theory could build a strong relationship between medical conspiracy beliefs and people's health choices. People who endorse medical conspiracy theories are less likely to engage with medical professionals, and are more likely to trust medical advice from alternative sources; they are also more likely to choose unconventional

medicines. Observations from medical professionals (Chung, 2009) suggest that conspiracy theories lead to mistrust of medical authority and are associated with vaccine refusal among parents.

Another possibility of the negative effects of conspiracy theories is the denial of science. Goertzel (2010) ties ideology and political commitment to conspiracy theories about science, including HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories, Genetically Modified Food (GMO) conspiracies theories, 'anti-vax' conspiracy theories, and climate change conspiracy theories (Weigmann, 2018). One recent survey showed that over third of Americans agree that global warming is a hoax (Public Policy Polling, 2013), making climate skepticism very much a mainstream belief.

This situation is not any different from the COVID-19 pandemic because a good number of people still believe it is a hoax. For instance, at the onset of the pandemic, The president of the United States of America, Donald Trump undermined the reality calling it a hoax, a Chinese virus while insinuating that the WHO could be part of the conspiracy (Caballero-Anthony, M., et al 2020). Such an attitude from the world's most powerful nation on earth could have devastating effects not only on Americans but even to other nations that look up to the US especially, third world countries.

### **COVID-19 and 5G Conspiracy Theory in Nigeria: A Crucial review**

As a nation which got its political independence in 1960, Nigeria has had great deal of struggles in its socio-political, economic and religious spheres of life. Amidst all these, ethnicity and religion have always been fingered as major concern for Nigerians who are mostly Christians, Muslim and African Traditional religionist. For some times now, Nigerians have been accustomed to sensational prophecies by pastors and various religious leaders. These so-called prophecies are often given at the beginning of the New Year. Unfortunately, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, it sent a powerful message to the world leading her into a tailspin. It also revealed the vulnerability of the human body even as it exposed how weak and unreliable our constructed economic, political and religious systems could be.

The apocalyptic effects of the global pandemic landed on Nigerian consortium of religious leaders as well. For the time being, Pastors and Imams are still scrambling for an answer to these world-changing events. From the frivolous

ones who threaten that they will go to China to destroy the virus or confront it with 'corrosive anointing oil' to Pastors of megachurches such as Enock Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God who has provided a moral meaning for the moment, to pastors like Johnson Suleiman of Omega Fire Ministries International and Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy, or some Imams in the Northern part of the country who claim that the virus does not exist, or who in their desperation to seize control of the narrative, resorted to circulating anti-vaxxer and 5G truthers conspiracy theories about the looming 'new world order'(ThisDay, 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2020).

Nigerian Prophets, Pastors and Imams responses in the past days about New World Order, demonic attacks, anti-vaccine campaign, and retroactively claiming God warned them about the pandemic but they kept it to themselves suggest they are still reeling from the aftershocks and have not yet fully processed what the pandemic would ultimately mean for them. When it was announced that an Italian infected with the virus was being isolated in Lagos, many Nigerians on the social media called it a hoax contrived by the government to siphon money (Punch, 2020). Till this moment, some naysayers remain incredulous about the existence of coronavirus in Nigeria. They include popular personalities like Femi Fani-Kayode, who shared a lengthy conspiracy theory on Facebook that COVID-19 was a lie concocted by the Illuminati in concert with the World Health Organisation to create fear in the world and then launch a lethal vaccine that would reduce the world's population. In the same event, Senator Dino Melaye, a former lawmaker believes the 5G network has something to do with the coronavirus-related deaths. According to him, 5G technology is what is now helping to mobilize flu that comes in the form of coronavirus (@dino\_melaye, 2020).

When Nigeria recorded its first coronavirus case, in February 2020 (Rest of World, 2020), the immediate concerns were familiar: A lack of adequate testing kits and personal protective equipment for frontline healthcare workers, the potential collapse of an underfunded and overburdened public health-care system, and the disease's effects on a fragile economy. There was also fear of misinformation on social media. What nobody saw coming was popular religious Leaders and prominent politicians spewing conspiracy theories. As the world grapples with finding its bearing on the ongoing outbreak, Apostle Johnson Suleiman, a Nigerian televangelist and the Senior Pastor and General Overseer of Omega Fire Ministries International in Nigeria held that the disease

is a chemical weapon contrary to what medical experts are classifying it to be. "COVID-19 is an experiment and now they are rejoicing that they could share the world. They will wait for another two years to strategize again and bring something worse in 2022 and it will originate from them" (Sulieman in Mnewafrica.com, 2020).

According to him, he got a revelation that world leaders will come together and have synergy and make all religions have a common ground and the Pope is part of it. "America is their Target but the President (Donald Trump) is their obstacle. America should not joke with the next election because they all will support the opponent of the current president. If Donald Trump is not re-elected, then the world is finished. The opponent is not the issue but his running mate is," the Nigerian clergyman added. He revealed that the running mate to the opponent is a lady. If the opponent wins, he would be impeached and the lady will take over to fulfill the *New World Order*. He pointed out that "the virus was manufactured by these people. It is not a biological issue; it's a chemical weapon. Many people contracted it through testing." He informed his congregation that a vaccine would be introduced but it will be a carrier of the actual disease. This report from him created great controversy across the nation making many people believe that COVID-19 was a hoax. This created complacency among many people and uncertainty.

In his account on the disease Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy in his account about COVID-19 asserted that unnamed but powerful forces were ushering in a "**New World Order**" through **5G technology**. He claimed that lockdowns were happening so that 5G structures could covertly be built while disclosing that the ultimate goal of the lockdowns and social distancing was not to curb the spread of the disease, but to create the antichrist and go after the Church of Jesus Christ. As Oyakhilome devoted more and more airtime to this fringe theory, the link between 5G and coronavirus became a mainstream topic of conversation in Nigeria. As of May 7, his April 5 video has been viewed 148,534 times on his personal YouTube channel (Rest of the World, 2020), and has been disseminated even more broadly through other accounts and platforms.

Government agencies also felt obliged to weigh in on the controversy. As theories were starting to circulate, the Ministry of Communications and Digital economy tweeted that it had not issued any fully operational 5G license despite having initially been enthusiastic about an [MTN 5G trial run](#) in November 2019.

Many Nigerians assailed Oyakhilome for promoting a dangerous fiction, but his followers came out in force with the hashtag **#IStandWithPastorChris** which trended on social media for several days.

In a sermon, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome told his members in a sermon that the lock-down over corona-virus was to facilitate the 5G and the *new world order* wherein some figures of authority in the world were trying to build a religion, economy, and government for the entire universe. Quoting Revelation Chapter 13, he said there is no need for a vaccine, adding that these are part of the Antichrist's plan for a new world order. In a viral video where Pastor Chris was responding to questions, the cleric maintained his claims and further explained that President Muhammadu Buhari was forced to lock down Abuja and Lagos so that the 5G would be installed adding that other states would follow suit. He insisted that Coronavirus did not kill anyone in the Wuhan City of China but 5G did.

On his part, the founder of the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN), Temitope Balogun Joshua, simply known as 'T.B. Joshua' was the first to put his credibility on the line when he predicted an end to the deadly Corona-virus pandemic. The famous man of God mentioned the end of March 27, 2020, specifically as the time the novel virus was to go away at its own will, saying the situation cannot be remedied by the power of medicine because it was not medicine that brought it (Vanguard, 2020). Unfortunately, the cure for COVID-19 is not yet a reality. The General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) Pastor Enoch Adeboye, opined that God told him loud and clear that the world will be on a compulsory holiday. He claimed that he didn't include this vision on coronavirus in the New Year 2020 prophecy because he thought it would be a terror attack. He described Coronavirus as a compulsory public holiday from heaven. He said God will remove the plague once he achieved his purpose. Adeboye also urged Nigerians not to panic as coronavirus spreads across Nigeria, adding that only those "whose time has come" will die of the disease. The pastor also indicated that the pandemic will soon be over after God intervenes and mankind would have learned their lessons that God is in control.

An excerpt from an article published in the Sahara Reporters titled "COVID-19 And Mark of The Beast" written by Femi Fani-Kayode and dated April 1, 2020, has it that "the Illuminati and the agents of Satan are at work. The whole thing

was planned and contrived over the centuries and they are firmly on course. They are trying to destroy us all and establish a New World order in the name of Lucifer and place us under the rulership of Beelzebub and the Prince of Darkness. Coronavirus or "Covid-19" is part and parcel of that unholy and evil agenda. It is a ravenous beast and an unrelenting evil plague. It is a demonic spirit that they cultivated and manufactured through the introduction and usage of 5G network and that they invoked from the pit of hell (Fani-Kayode, 2020). Kayode also revealed the source of his privileged information as revelations of one David Icke - a well-known British conspiracy theorist whose work he acknowledged he has been reading for many years.

He also asked members of the public to ditch science and listen to someone that once described how he visited a psychic and was told how he was placed on earth for a purpose and so would be getting direct messages from the spiritual realm. He also advised that when the Covid-19 vaccine finally becomes available, people should stay away because it is from Satan and the Illuminati noting that it is meant to kill everyone in their quest to dominate the world. Kayode argued that the solid facts of science cannot measure up with the divine revelation available as a committed disciple of David Icke and his school of conspiracy theories (Kayode, 2020).

Senator Dino Melaye, the former Lawmaker claims the 5G technology is responsible for deaths associated with coronavirus. According to him, it is the reaction from this 5G that has some biological interactions with our cells (Melaye, 2020). In a trending video (<https://www.legit.ng/1318203-dino-melaye-attack-coronavirus-deaths-caused-by-5g-mobile-networks.html>), Senator Dino Melaye asserted that 5G technology is evil, 5G technology is a killer, and that the technology is what is now helping to mobilize flu that comes in form of coronavirus. He also claimed that it is also helping to kill the human immune system and called on President Muhammadu Buhari to make hay while the sun shines.

### **Reported Cases Versus Effect of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in Nigeria**

The mainstream conspiracy theories about coronavirus in Nigeria comes are in four categories viz: those who doubt the existence of a virus or see it as a hoax, those who believe it is a chemical weapon, those who blame it on 5G technology and the creation of a New world Order and those who accept it as a divine

punishment from God. As of July 19, Nigeria recorded 36,663 confirmed cases of coronavirus, 15,105 patients have been treated and discharged and there have been 789 fatalities in 36 states including the Federal Capital Territory (NCDC, 2020). However, there are still thousands, if not millions of Nigerians still living in denial and believing that the COVID-19 story is a spurious tale. To them, the viral pandemic is a hoax. Many of them are quick to back the numerous conspiracy theories in the country as discussed. These Nigerians are the most difficult to convince to abide by the NCDC (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control) protocols which are aimed at curtailing the spread of the rampaging disease across the country.

On the 18th of March 2020, a Nigerian polling service, **NOIPolls** announced that 26 percent of Nigerians were in doubt as to the existence of the disease (Punch, 2020) (<https://healthwise.punchng.com/covid-19-in-nigeria-a-tale-of-denial-and-deaths/>). It noted that while some claimed they are protected by their religion from contracting COVID-19, others believed that their strong genes, alcohol and hot climate were the antidotes to COVID-19. Although these myths have since been debunked by the NCDC, and several medical professionals in the country, many still hold unto the belief that the disease is not real. This conspiracy belief by the majority of the citizens that the virus is a hoax has rendered the process of contact tracing, testing and isolating of index victims a herculean task. There is strong certainty among health workers that more people might likely be infected by the virus than the current reported confirmed cases. This is obvious as most people do not subject themselves to testing even though they might be showing symptoms. Keying into the conspiracy theory that people get infected in the process of testing has made many people afraid of testing, fear has been developed in individuals not to succumb to testing. Those who think that the virus is a divine intervention from God, do not border on anything but are rather looking forward to the appointed time the pandemic will miraculously disappear as prophecy by their Pastor or Prophet. It is a known fact that the more testing, the more confirmed cases are reported. The sabotage of conspiracy has affected the work of the NCDC. As a consequence, it is likely that the updated reported cases in Nigeria are far less than the true number. The Nigerian government, therefore, needs to do more in the area of the enlightenment campaign to educate members of the public who are still in denial and doubt no thanks to conspiracy theories.

## **Conclusion**

Conspiracy theories have significant consequences. They are associated with vaccine hesitancy and other risky health choices, climate denial, violence, crime, and prejudice (Jolley & Douglas, 2014 a & b; Einstein & Glick, 2015). Conspiracy theories are important to study because they can have harmful consequences which by far outweighs its pros. While people are drawn to conspiracy theories to cope with difficult circumstances, they seem, if anything, to make things worse. When trusted and powerful men of God venture an opinion, their followers tend to see it as sacrosanct and sacred, even over government and experts recommendations and policies.

Spreading of fake news is a tool which leaders use to take advantage of people's ignorance for their gain. That way, Pastors, Imams and politicians keep their followers at their beck and call. Because Nigeria is divided by ethnic, religious, and political lines, when controversial issues arise, opportunistic leaders often deploy the "Us versus Them" narrative to keep a hold on their followers. As citizens of the world, it is both a duty and a responsibility to be a bit more circumspect in what one says or put out for others to consume. The audience must not be offered if there is no proof that the theory propagated by one is true. It borders on criminality when such distortion tends to sway the public into making irrational decisions. The unfortunate part is that the most vulnerable in society are the ones who have been victimized by these misinformation campaigns. Human beings do not live in a vacuum and their actions do have consequences. This is obvious when one is a public figure with a loud voice and commanding a multitude of followership. Unfortunately, a good number of influential individuals continue to act irresponsibly in a way that poses a danger to themselves and to humanity. Such recklessness from those that should know better is a sad menace.

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