

Law, Religion, Health and Healing in Africa



Edited by
M. Christian Green
Faith Kabata
Fortune Sibanda



12 THE ROLE OF LEGAL AND RELIGIOUS RESPONSES IN DEBUNKING COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN AFRICA

Flora Alohan Onomrerhinor¹

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria was among the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to identify Covid-19 cases.² The first index case was reported on 27 February 2020.³ In an attempt to contain the spread and transmission of the virus to other parts of the country that were deemed safe at the time, the Federal Government issued stay-at-home orders on 30 March 2020. There was a total lockdown during much of the pandemic that was limited to some states in the beginning but eventually extended to others.⁴ The lockdown led to mass unemployment and other inconveniences that incurred social criticism. All social activities were prohibited. As of 21 November 2022, Nigeria had registered 266 283 cases across all the states of the Federation, with 259 643 Covid patients recovered and discharged and 3 155 confirmed dead.⁵

Most states not only adopted the Federal Government's lockdown measures, but also added to it based on their peculiar conditions.⁶ While the majority agreed with the need to maintain safety measures, some who believed in conspiracy theories challenged their necessity and imposition. The situation did not improve when vaccinations for the virus began in December 2020, as some believed the vaccine was a conspiracy to depopulate the globe.⁷ In fact, both globally and in Nigeria, the Covid-19 pandemic saw a number of conspiracy theories and misconceptions, which significantly influenced the survival mechanisms that people adopted to cope with the pandemic.

According to the Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres, a major challenge presented by the pandemic was the related pandemic of misinformation.

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- 1 LLB, LLM, PhD, BL, Lecturer, Department of Jurisprudence and International Law, Faculty of Law, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.
 - 2 Siwatu GO et al. 2021. "Impact of Covid-19 on Nigerian households: 10th Round Results (English)", *WorldBank.org* Group, 12 April.
 - 3 Nigeria Centre for Disease Control. 2020. "First Case of Corona Virus Confirmed in Nigeria", *NCDC*, 28 February.
 - 4 UNDP Nigeria. 2020. "The Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria-Potential Impact of Lockdown Policies on Poverty and Well Being, Brief 3: *UNDP*, 21.
 - 5 Nigeria Centre for Disease Control. 2022. "Covid-19 Nigeria", *NCDC*, 21 November.
 - 6 Okoye AC and Obulor I. 2021. "Religious organizations and fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 23(1):70.
 - 7 Okoye and Obulor, "Religious organizations and fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", 769.

Misinformation and belief in conspiracy theories constituted obstacles to solutions geared towards the prevention and eradication of the disease. Aceme Nyika and fellow researchers in South Africa, in a key article on the topic, have chronicled well some of the conspiracy theories that were popular in Africa.⁸ Some of these theories also gained a foothold in Nigeria. For example, the religious conspiracy theory that associated the Covid-19 pandemic with the apocalyptic plague and the Mark of the Beast (666) in the Book of Revelations in the Bible led to antagonism towards the Covid-19 vaccine by some Christian communities in Nigeria. Commenting on the dangers of conspiracy theories, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated: “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus and is just as dangerous.”⁹ In light of these challenges presented by conspiracy theories, this chapter discusses the nature of the conspiracy theories and measures adopted to debunk them, with particular attention to the role of legal and religious actors. Building on the work of Nyika and colleagues, as well as others who have chronicled the rise of Covid-19 conspiracies in Africa, this chapter analyses those conspiracy theories that were prevalent in Nigeria and which had religious origins, amplifications and implications. In many ways, Nigeria was a microcosm of the spread of Covid-19 conspiracies in Africa, but in ways that intersected uniquely with its religious culture and proved difficult for the law to contain.

COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theories are founded upon disinformation or propaganda, which erodes public trust and confidence.¹⁰ They tend to flourish in times of crisis and uncertainty, and the pandemic provided a perfect opportunity for this.¹¹ Misinformation about Covid-19, and the resultant anxiety and depression, created vulnerabilities that predisposed people to belief in conspiracy theories.¹² Conspiracy theories about the

- 8 Nyika A et al. 2021. “Covid-19 Pandemic: Questioning Conspiracy Theories, Beliefs or Claims that Have Potential Negative Impact on Public Health Interventions and Proposal for Integrated Communication and Information Dissemination Strategies (ICIDS)”, *Journal of Development and Communication Studies* 8(10): January-June”, 3. See also Sherwin BD. 2021. “Anatomy of a Conspiracy Theory: Law, Politics, and Science Denialism in the Era of Covid-19”, *Texas A & M Law Review* 8.
- 9 World Health Organization (WHO), “Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) Situation Report – 86”, Geneva: WHO, 2020:1; Imhoff R and Lamberty P. 2020. “A Bioweapon or a Hoax? The Link between Distinct Conspiracy Beliefs about the Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) Outbreak and Pandemic Behavior”, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 11(8):1110-1118.
- 10 WHO, “Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) Situation Report – 86”.
- 11 Peitz L et al. 2021. “Covid-19 conspiracy theories and compliance with governmental restrictions: The mediating roles of anger, anxiety, and hope”, *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology* 15:1-13.
- 12 De Coninck D. 2021. “Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About Covid-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources”, *Frontiers in Psychology* 12:1-13.

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

pandemic were often made up of rumours of secret cures and other pieces of forbidden knowledge that, when shared, provided feelings of certainty and control amidst the crisis.¹³ These rumours and wildly unbelievable claims were spread by everyday people who were often overwhelmed by feelings of confusion and helplessness.¹⁴ In some cases, high-level government officials also promoted conspiracy theories to hide failures or seek political benefits.¹⁵

The danger of belief in conspiracy theories is that they have serious consequences for how the public responds to Covid-19.¹⁶ In particular, they can undermine public health instructions. This is a cause for concern, since adherence to government policies and public health advice is considered crucial in efforts to control the spread of Covid-19.¹⁷ A growing body of research has identified links between conspiracy beliefs and lower compliance with governmental restrictions, such as the lockdown rules.¹⁸ Research has also shown that most people who believed in conspiracy theories tended to have a lesser adherence to public health recommendations, such as the wearing of face masks, social distancing, hand washing, and the need to get vaccinated.¹⁹ Conspiracy theories in the Covid-19 pandemic accounted for the decrease in trust in the government, health authorities and known science.²⁰

A number of theories have been advanced to explain the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccines. While some were misinformation arising from information scarcity and overreliance on social media, others were disinformation and outright propaganda.

13 Peitz, "Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories and Compliance", 1.

14 For example, Franks, Bangerter and Bauer have stated that conspiracy theories allow laypersons to interpret such events by relating them to common sense in a bid to defusing some of the anxiety that those events generate. See Franks B, Bangerter A and Bauer MW. 2013. "Conspiracy Theories as Quasi-Religious Mentality: An Integrated Account from Cognitive Science, Social Representations Theory and Frame Theory", *Frontiers in Psychology* 4:1-15.

15 Peitz, "Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories and Compliance", 1.

16 Peitz, "Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories and Compliance", 2.

17 Peitz, "Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories and Compliance", 2.

18 See Marinthe G, Brown G, Delouvée S and Jolley D. 2020. "Looking Out for Myself: Exploring the Relationship between Conspiracy Mentality, Perceived Personal Risk, and COVID-19 Prevention Measures", *British Journal of Health Psychology* 25(4):957-980; Oleksy T, Wnuk A, Maison D and Łyś A. 2021. "Content matters: Different Predictors and Social Consequences of General and Government-related Conspiracy Theories on Covid-19", *Personality and Individual Differences* 1:1-15.

19 Allington D et al. 2021. "Health-Protective Behaviour, Social Media Usage and Conspiracy Belief during the Covid-19 Public Health Emergency", *Psychological Medicine* 51(10): 1763-1769; Biddlestone M, Green R and Douglas KM. 2020. "Cultural Orientation, Power, Belief in Conspiracy Theories, and Intentions to Reduce the Spread of Covid-19", *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59(3):663-673, and Bierwiazzonek K, Kunst JR and Pich O. "Belief in Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories Reduces Social Distancing Over Time", *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* 12(4):1270-1285.

20 Plohl N and Musil B. 2021. "Modeling Compliance with Covid-19 Prevention Guidelines: The Critical Role of Trust in Science", *Psychology Health and Medicine* 26(1):1-12.

Social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, were used to spread this information.²¹ Sometimes, however, conspiracy theories were also covered by mainstream news.²² Many of the common Covid-19 conspiracy theories traded in misinformation, beliefs and claims that were based in religion in some way and had the effect of reducing compliance with legal regulations and government recommendations.

*Biblical Mark of the Beast conspiracy*²³

As noted by Nyika and fellow researchers, one conspiracy theory that arose associated the Covid-19 pandemic with the mark of the beast mentioned in the last book of the Bible.²⁴ This was the Book of Revelation, which contains the visions of the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos.²⁵ According to the Bible, in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Revelation, John saw two beasts. The first beast was like a leopard and the second beast had two horns like a lamb.²⁶ This second beast forced people from diverse backgrounds around the world to receive a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, without which no one could buy or sell. The number 666 was stated as representing the beast.²⁷ Proponents of this theory believed that the Covid-19 pandemic was the effect of this Mark of the Beast. The theory claimed that the mark of the beast, the number 666, would be introduced into people through injections, disguised as either treatment for the illness or vaccination to prevent it.²⁸

For adherents of the Christian faith with little understanding of the Book of Revelation, it was not surprising that the uncertainty and vulnerability occasioned by the pandemic led to rationalising implausible ideas, such as the above. Nyika and fellow researchers have pointed out a number of reasons why this theory is implausible. For one thing, the supposed Mark of the Beast and the number 666 had been linked with modern technology in general, rather than to any particular disease or event

21 Allington et al, "Health-Protective Behavior", 1763.

22 Spring M. 2020. "The Casualties of This Year's Viral Conspiracy Theories", *BBC News*, 26 December.

23 This theory and others such as the Covid-19 vaccine conspiracies, radiation from 5G transmission, staged health crisis propagated by the media, a disease for them, not us, traditional herbs or alternative traditional medicines cure Covid-19, beliefs in supernatural powers and Covid-19 prophesies which are presented in the succeeding subheads, have been discussed in remarkable detail by Nyika et al in "Covid-19 Pandemic: Questioning Conspiracy Theories". As indicated earlier, they are presented here to show the perception of these theories or misinformation in the Nigerian society.

24 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic: Questioning Conspiracy Theories", 5.

25 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. 1984. *Revelation – Its Grand Climax at Hand*. Brooklyn: Watchtower Society, New York, 303.

26 Group Bible Study. n.d. "15, The Mark of the Beast". Online at: <https://www.groupbiblestudy.com/engrevelation/15.-the-mark-of-the-beast?> [Accessed 21 November 2022].

27 Group Bible Study, "15 The Mark of the Beast".

28 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic: Questioning Conspiracy Theories", 3.

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

that existed before the pandemic.²⁹ For another, the conspiracy did not show why people who did not receive the vaccine died of the virus infection. It also did not give any answers to the valid questions about Covid-19 that baffled many.³⁰

Covid-19 vaccine conspiracies

Another conspiracy theory floating in connection with the Covid-19 vaccine concerned the alleged implantation of micro-chip tracking devices. This theory claimed that a tracking chip would be inserted into people's bodies simultaneously with and through a vaccine without people's knowledge or consent for the purpose of tracking them.³¹ It further claimed that the chip, which is in the form of a nano-tattoo, would be implanted in people's skin upon vaccination, supposedly for precision medicine purposes, but with the real objective being tracking and surveillance.³² Some in Nigeria who believed in this theory claimed that Dr Anthony Fauci in the United States and global elites, such as Bill Gates and George Soros, had planned the Covid-19 pandemic so that they could accomplish a sinister plot of depopulation under the guise of vaccination.³³

From the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, local conspiracy theories connected Bill Gates to the pandemic. This did not change when it was time for vaccination. In fact, the Coalition for United People's Party (CUPP) stated that Bill Gates bribed the Nigerian government with the sum of ten million dollars to pass a law to test vaccines on children. This false claim was given credence by the fact that there is a high level of mistrust for authorities in Nigeria.³⁴ As a result of the yawning gap in trust between Nigerians and the government, many members of the public saw Covid-19 as another conspiracy by the ruling elite to receive foreign financial aid and embezzle public funds.³⁵

29 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic: Questioning Conspiracy Theories", 3. Also see Michael MG. 2010. "Demystifying the Number of the Beast in the Book of Revelation: Examples of Ancient Cryptology and the Interpretation of the '666' Conundrum", *International Symposium on Technology and Society* 1:23-41.

30 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic", 5.

31 Burnard M and Richards A. 2020. "Covid-19 and 5G: Biggest cover-up in history? True or False?", *INcontext International*, 21 May.

32 Burnard and Richards, "Covid-19 and 5G: Biggest cover-up in history? True or False?". See also Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic", 5.

33 Aladekomo A. 2021. "Covid-19, A New World Order, Vaccine Safety, Effectiveness and Our Human Rights", *Social Science Research Network (SSRN)*, 27 March.

34 Kalu N, Oduadu-Erameh E and Thomas E. 2021. "Attacking Gates, Attacking Vaccines: How Conflict, Religion and Conspiracy Theories Drive Covid-19 Misinformation in Nigeria", *The Guardian*, 23 September. See also Donnelly E and Hassan I. 2021. "Nigeria's Political Leaders Need to Win Trust to Tackle COVID-19", *Chatham House*, 23 April. See also Archibong B and Annan F. 2021. "What do Pfizer's 1996 drug trials in Nigeria teach us about vaccine hesitancy?", *Africa in Focus* (blog), 3 December, Brookings Institution.

35 Olatunji OS, Ayandele O, Ashirudeen D and Olaniru OS. "'Infodemic' in a pandemic: Covid-19 conspiracy theories in an African country", *Social Health and Behaviour* 3(4):153.

In addition, Pfizer, one of the leading companies that manufactured the Covid-19 vaccine, had earlier undertaken a drug trial on Nigerian children in 1996 that left 11 children dead and dozen others disabled.³⁶ Although Pfizer paid compensation to the families, it was widely rumoured that it paid bribes to the authorities to avoid criminal charges.³⁷ The company, however, insisted that the cases were resolved by mutual agreement and that its conduct was proper at all times. Viewed from this perspective, it was therefore not surprising that many Nigerians bought the idea that a foreign billionaire and foreign drug companies were trying to harm the Nigerian population with the permission of their government.³⁸ In fact, the situation was so bad that *The Guardian* reported that were Bill Gates to have visited Nigeria at the time, he might have received a less than favourable welcome. Indeed, some Nigerian commentators described Gates as being in league with Satan himself.³⁹

The belief that governmental authorities conspired with foreigners to use their citizens for some kind of biological experimentation was not limited to Nigeria. In fact, most members of the African society held this view at one time or the other during the pandemic,⁴⁰ so much so that John Magufuli, the president of Tanzania, remarked that he would not allow the citizens of his country to be used as guinea pigs.⁴¹ Such remarks from a well-known and respected political figure accounted for vaccine hesitancy in these parts.

Radiation from 5G transmission

Research has shown that one common theory associated the pandemic with radiation from the 5G transmission.⁴² According to Nyika and colleagues, this theory, claimed that radiation emitted by 5G transmitters caused the pandemic.⁴³ In Nigeria, some believed that radiation emitted by 5G transmitters caused the pandemic or that the pandemic was a hoax perpetrated by media and technology companies seeking

36 Wise J. 2001. "Pfizer accused of testing new drug without ethical approval", *British Medical Journal* 322(7280):194.

37 Stephens J. 2000. "Where Profits and Lives Hang in Balance", *Washington Post*, 17 December; "Pfizer: Nigeria drug trial victims get compensation", *BBC*, 11 August.

38 Lenzer J. 2006. "Secret report surfaces showing that Pfizer was at fault in Nigerian drug tests", *British Medical Journal* 332(7552):1233. Also see Kovac C. "Nigerians to sue US drug company over meningitis treatment", *British Medical Journal* 323(7313):592 and Archibong and Annan, "What do Pfizer's 1996 drug trials in Nigeria teach us about vaccine hesitancy?"

39 Kenechi S. 2020. "Chris Okotie says Bill Gates leading agenda to destabilise the world with Covid-19", *The Cable*, 13 July.

40 In South Africa, for instance, there was a protest at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The reason for the protest was that the protesters did not want Africans to be used as guinea pigs. See "'We are not Guinea Pigs' say South African Anti-Vaccine Protesters", *Reuters*, 1 July 2020.

41 "Coronavirus in Tanzania: The Country that's Rejecting the Vaccine", *BBC News*, 6 February 2021.

42 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic", 4.

43 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic", 4.

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

to install a new 5G network facility that would harm the world.⁴⁴ Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, a well-known Pentecostal pastor in Nigeria and the general overseer of the Believers Love World Ministries (also known as Christ Embassy), a Nigerian church with branches in South Africa, was among those who believed in this conspiracy theory. Oyakhilome's religious media empire enabled this charismatic figure to speak to global audiences.⁴⁵ He stated that the virus attack was a ploy by the technological giants to divert human attention to facilitate the setting up of their 5G infrastructure around the world.⁴⁶ The spread of this conspiracy theory that associated Covid-19 pandemic with the development and launching of 5G networks compelled the Office of Communication (OFCOM), the British broadcast regulator, to sanction and prevent Pastor Chris Oyakhilome's Love World Television from airing in the British air space in May 2020.⁴⁷ The belief in this conspiracy theory was widespread and some people took to social media to propagate it.⁴⁸ Interestingly, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome later abandoned this claim and stated that he was only opposed to the 5G initiative because of its perceived health risks and the silence of authorised regulators to address its advantages and disadvantages.⁴⁹

Staged health crisis propagated by the media

Nyika and fellow researchers also revealed that another conspiracy theory that was widely circulated in Africa was the claim that the devastating effects of Covid-19 and the critical shortages of required equipment and infrastructure shown by the media were a stage-managed programme aimed at creating fear and chaos for sinister purposes.⁵⁰ According to social and legal psychologists Roland Imhoff and Pia Lamberty, it was unclear what these sinister purposes were, but some alluded to the ensuing fear being used to hurt national economies or pass unpopular or restrictive laws.⁵¹ Inobemhe et al indicated that this was also the case in Nigeria.⁵² The common believe in Nigeria was that the Covid-19 pandemic was exaggerated.

44 Adekanye M. 2020. "Nigerians react to the claim that 5g network causes coronavirus", *The Guardian*, 4 April.

45 Asamoah-Gyadu JK. 2021. "Pentecostalism and Coronavirus: Reframing the Message of Health-and-Wealth in a Pandemic Era", *Spiritus* 6(1):162.

46 Aworinde T. 2020. "5G controversy: Oyakhilome makes U-turn, cites health risks", *Punch*, 12 April.

47 Okoye and Obulor, "Religious organizations and fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", 68.

48 Inobemhe K, Santas T and Udeh TS. 2022. "Influence of Social Media on the Fight against Covid-19 in Nigeria", *Journal of Media and Information Warfare* 15(2):9; Ovenseri-Ogbomo GO et al. 2020. "Factors associated with the myth about 5g network during Covid-19 pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Journal of Global Health Reports* 4:2.

49 Aworinde, "5G controversy: Oyakhilome makes U-turn, cites health risks".

50 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic", 12.

51 Imhoff and Lamberty, "A Bioweapon or a Hoax?", 1112.

52 Inobemhe, Santas and Udeh, "Influence of Social Media on the Fight Against Covid-19 in Nigeria", 9.

The general perception of the pandemic by people who held this belief was that the virus was not a real threat. They played down on the danger of Covid-19, calling it no worse than a flu, and suspected others to purposefully claim otherwise for their own advantage.⁵³

In Nigeria, many claimed that the figures of cases of infections and deaths given by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control was exaggerated.⁵⁴ In southeastern Nigeria, the governor of Abia State claimed that the state had been promised by God that Covid-19 won't get to it. A month later, he tested positive with the disease and was admitted into an isolation centre.⁵⁵ Similarly, the Kogi State government claimed was free from Covid-19 and accused the Nigeria Centre of Diseases Control (NCDC) of cooking up figures about the pandemic in Kogi State. In Kano State, the government refuted allegations that the deaths recorded during the pandemic were Covid-19 related,⁵⁶ and Yobe State, in Northeast Nigeria, declared zero cases of Covid-19 admission and discharged all patients without negative test results.⁵⁷ The high level of denial by political leaders at the state level about the disease likely promoted the belief in conspiracy theories. One version claimed that what was declared to be a Covid-19 pandemic was part of global economic competition and and geopolitical wars between leading countries, such as China and the United States of America.⁵⁸ Another version of the claim was that the purpose of the purported stage-managed pandemic was to weaken the global economy in order to enable the powers that be to take over critical sectors of the global economies when share prices became extremely low.⁵⁹

A disease for them, not us

In some African countries, including Nigeria, the coronavirus was proclaimed to be a disease that affects people in the temperate regions and not the tropics. Some even claimed that the virus could not survive the African heat.⁶⁰ These claims were widely held in the early days of the pandemic, when it was winter in Europe, but they lost some of its credibility when millions of deaths were reported in hot

53 Imhoff and Lamberty, "A Bioweapon or a Hoax?", 1112.

54 Olatunji et al. "Infodemic in a pandemic", 153.

55 Omilana T. 2020. "Abia Governor Okezie Ikpeazu Tests Positive for Covid-19", *The Guardian*, 8 June.

56 Abdullahi M. 2020. "Study says Kano deaths linked to Covid-19, experts worry over community transmission", *HumAngle*, 5 May.

57 Saharareporters. 2020. "Yobe Discharges all COVID-19 Patients, Declares Zero Case Admission", *Sahara Reporters*, 1 July 2020.

58 Bahi R. 2021. "The geopolitics of Covid-19: US-China rivalry and the imminent Kindleberger trap", *Review of Economics and Political Science* 6(1):76-94.

59 Imhoff and Lamberty, "Covid-19 related Conspiracy Theories", 1112.

60 Raistrick N. "Debunking Africa's Covid-19 Conspiracies", *IWPR- Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 12 August.

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

countries, such as Brazil and India. Still, some people held on to this claim.⁶¹ For a long time, the Tanzanian government insisted that the country was free from Covid-19.⁶² Even when it became obvious that the pandemic was real in Tanzania, its minister for health, Dr Dorothy Gwajima, stated at a press briefing that citizens should improve personal hygiene and use herbal steam and other natural remedies, not because the virus was in Tanzania, but because it was ravaging neighbouring countries.⁶³

Beliefs or claims about who was susceptible to Covid-19 infection came in several versions, based on various differentiating characteristics that included geographical location, socio-economic class, race, religious belief and others. Religious beliefs also caused some people to have a sense of protection against the Covid-19 infections.⁶⁴ Some religious leaders prophesied to their willing congregations that Covid-19 could not infect them since they are carrying corrosive anointing in addition to being covered by the special blood of Jesus.⁶⁵ Goodheart Val Aloysius of Father's House International Church in Calabar asked the government to assemble all the people who had tested positive for Covid-19 in an isolation centre so that he could heal them. To demonstrate his seriousness, he called on the government to hang him if he failed to heal them.⁶⁶ Socio-economic class was the basis for some theories, with poor people perceiving Covid-19 infection as a disease for the rich and vice versa.⁶⁷

OTHER COVID-19 MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Disinformation refers to the deliberate transmission of false or inaccurate information from person to person with the intent to deceive, while misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information or communication which may not have been passed with intent to cause deception. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, are a particular kind of false information that attribute the root causes of events or trends to shadowy networks or cabals carrying out secret plots to control, undermine or exploit the public, governments or institutions.⁶⁸ In addition to conspiracy theories, there were other examples of misinformation and outright disinformation

61 Ibrahim I. 2021. "Debunking the Claim that Heat Kills Covid-19 in Nigeria", *African Resilience Network*, 5 August.

62 "Coronavirus in Tanzania".

63 "Coronavirus in Tanzania".

64 Okoye and Obulor, "Religious organizations and fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", 67.

65 Okoye and Obulor, "Religious organizations and fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", 67.

66 Nwaka JC. 2020. "Between religious freedom and the public good: Reactions to religious restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", *Kujenga Amani* (blog), Social Science Resarch Center, 20 May.

67 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic: Questioning Conspiracy Theories", 14.

68 Wonodi C et al. 2022. "Conspiracy theories and misinformation about Covid-19 in Nigeria: Implications for vaccine demand generation communications", *Vaccine* 40(13):2115.

or propaganda about the Covid-19 pandemic, which influenced the response of Africans in general, and Nigerians in particular, to the pandemic and its subsequent vaccines. Some of the beliefs, claims and prophecies commonly held in some African societies are discussed below.

Traditional herbs or alternative traditional medicines to prevent or cure

In countries like Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Madagascar, there were claims that some herbs or alternative medicines could prevent or cure Covid-19. These claims were not based on transparent and conclusive evidence apart from the word of those making the claims.⁶⁹ On 20 April 2020, the president of Madagascar claimed that the herbal tea produced from the artemisia plant, called Covid Organics, could cure Covid-19.⁷⁰ He even avowed in a press conference that tests had been carried out and two people were cured by the treatment.⁷¹ Some countries even planned on importing it,⁷² even though the remedy had yet to be tested by internationally accepted standards,⁷³ that is to say, in properly designed research and clinical trials in accordance with the standards set by national regulatory authorities, health ministries or international organisations, such as the African Union and the WHO.⁷⁴ Perhaps, one reason the Covid Organics was so popular was because it included a blend of artemisia,⁷⁵ a plant with proven efficacy against malaria, and some of those infected with the virus manifested symptoms similar to malaria, such as high fever.⁷⁶

The use of hydroxychloroquine for treating Covid-19 patients before conclusive clinical trials had been completed was another example of a claim of a coronavirus cure. The drug generally used for treatment of malaria or autoimmune disease was promoted for the treatment of Covid-19 patients by some,⁷⁷ even though no conclusive evidence of their benefit had been demonstrated.⁷⁸ In fact, earlier studies

69 Wonodi, "Conspiracy theories and misinformation about Covid-19 in Nigeria", 2115.

70 "Coronavirus: what is Madagascar's 'herbal remedy' Covid-Organics?", *Al Jazeera*, 5 May; "Madagascar President Launches coronavirus remedy", *France24*, 21 April 2020.

71 Baker A. 2020. "'Could it Work as a cure? Maybe!' A Herbal Remedy for Coronavirus Is a Hit in Africa, But Experts Have Doubts", *Times*, 22 May 2020.

72 Tih F. 2020. "Madagascar Leader Urges Use of Supposed Covid-19 Cure", *Anadolu Agency*, 22 May.

73 Tih, "Madagascar Leader Urges Use of Supposed Covid-19 Cure".

74 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic: Questioning Conspiracy Theories", 9.

75 Baker, "Could it Work as a cure? Maybe!".

76 Baker, "Could it Work as a cure? Maybe!".

77 Pastick KA et al. 2020. "Hydroxychloroquine or Chloroquine for Treatment of SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19)", *Open Forum Infectious Diseases* 7(4):130.

78 Wright C, Ross C and Mc Goldric N. 2020. "Are Hydroxychloroquine and Chloroquine Effective in the Treatment of SARS-COV-2 (Covid-19)?", *Evidence-Based Dentistry* 21(2): 64-65.

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

had raised concerns about serious life-threatening adverse effects that could outweigh any potential therapeutic benefits the drugs might have.⁷⁹

Beliefs in supernatural powers

Some claims were based on belief in the supernatural. For instance, adherents of African Traditional Religions in Nigeria, who believe in and worship gods and deities, claimed that the pandemic was caused by evil supernatural powers that could be conquered by benevolent supernatural powers. Their leaders claimed to have positive supernatural powers that could set people free from the clutches of the evil powers believed to be responsible for the pandemic.⁸⁰ Also, Elijah Ayodele, a pastor of a Pentecostal church in Nigeria, claimed he was in possession of holy water and oil that could cure the disease.⁸¹ Others, adherents of the Christian faith, claimed that the pandemic occurred because the evil of the world had become too overwhelming and the only way to avert the disaster was for people to repent of their sins and turn to God. Claims that holy ashes could protect believers from the Covid-19 pandemic were spread by some religious leaders in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.⁸² The tenacity of belief in the supernatural in some African societies was evident in the fact that the beliefs continued even after the religious leaders who claimed to have the supernatural power to cure Covid-19 died from it.⁸³

Covid-19 prophecies

Several prophets spread various prophecies about the pandemic. Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, a pastor in a Pentecostal church in Harare, Zimbabwe, prophesied that the pandemic was going to be miraculously wiped away by rain on 27 March 2020.⁸⁴ In the same way, the late Prophet T.B. Joshua of the Synagogue of the Nations Ministry in Nigeria also predicted that Covid-19 would disappear after heavy rainfall on the same day.⁸⁵ There were also claims that the Covid-19 pandemic was

79 Luca S and Mihaescu T. 2013. "History of BCCG Vaccine", *Amaltea Medical, Editura Magister* 8(1):53-67.

80 Nyika et al, "Covid-19 Pandemic: Questioning Conspiracy Theories", 12.

81 Okoye and Obulor, "Religious organizations and fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", 67.

82 See Lawal S. 2020. "What the Church in Africa is Doing to Combat the Coronavirus", *America Magazine*, 21 May; "Apostolic Sect Gives Church Members Ashes to Eat for Protection Against Covid-19", *New Zimbabwe*, 11 April 2020.

83 Petersen C. 2020. "Pastor Dies from Covid-19 Just Weeks after Holding a Packed Church Service", *News 24*, 14 April. See also Maqbool A. 2020. "Coronavirus: Pastor Who Decried 'Hysteria' Dies after Attending Mardi Gras", *BBC News*, 3 June; Boorstein M. 2020. "Covid-19 Has Killed Multiple Bishops and Pastors within the Church of God in Christ, the Nation's Largest Black Pentecostal Denomination", *Independent Tribune*, 22 April.

84 "Apostolic Sect Gives Church Members Ashes".

85 Okoye and Obulor, "Religious organizations and fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", 67.

the disease that was referred to in a 2016 prophecy that a disease worse than HIV and cancer was going to come from underneath the ocean by a weed or a creature in the ocean or from eating seafood.⁸⁶ No time frame for the coming of the predicted deadly disease was given by the prophecy in 2016. Still, followers and believers in this prophecy claimed that it was the Covid-19 pandemic that was predicted.⁸⁷

DEBUNKING CONSPIRACY THEORIES: RELIGION, MEDIA AND THE LAW

Role of religion

Although members of Pentecostal Christian churches played a part in the spread of some of the conspiracy theories above, they also had a significant role to play in debunking them. As noted by historian of religions Asbjørn Dyrendal and social psychologist Daniel Jolley, conspiracy theories are sometimes deeply rooted in religious and religion-like beliefs.⁸⁸ This is evident in some of the conspiracy theories discussed above. In most African societies, there is usually respect for and trust in the information presented by religious leaders. Most of the time, their words carry a lot of weight.⁸⁹ Most people who hold political conspiracy theories are likely to reject direct counterarguments from governments and other authorities because they are perceived to be part of the conspiracy.⁹⁰ Therefore, religious leaders can play a significant role in countering these theories by passing accurate information to audiences who hold them in high esteem.

This important role was evident in what played out in Tanzania in the early days of the pandemic. While the government was in denial of Covid-19 and gave the impression that it was a hoax, leaders of the Catholic Church warned the public of its existence and encouraged them to observe health measures to curb the spread of the virus.⁹¹ The secretary of the Tanzania Episcopal Conference told BBC Swahili that the church had noticed a rise in funeral services in urban areas, which was indicative of the fact that something was definitely amiss.⁹² As a result members of the church were encouraged to take public health instructions seriously in order to avoid the infection. Without doubt, this prompted positive action on the part of the congregation.

86 Chirisa S. 2020. "Prophet Makandiwa Coronavirus Prophecy which was made in 2016", *iHarare*, 21 May.

87 Munhende L. 2020. "Zimbabwe: Hands off My Coronavirus, Makandiwa Says to Fellow Prophets", *All Africa*, 22 April.

88 Dyrendal A and Jolley D. 2020. "Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom: Problems and Potential Solutions", *Religions MDPI* 11:494-501.

89 Ayandele O, Okafor CT and Oyedele O. 2021. "The role of Nigeria's faith-based organisations in tackling health crises like Covid-19", *Africa Portal*, 27 January.

90 Douglas KM. 2021. "Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24(2):270-275.

91 "Coronavirus in Tanzania".

92 "Coronavirus in Tanzania".

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

Religious leaders also helped to debunk conspiracy theories in Nigeria. Nigeria is a multi-religious state with two predominant religions: Christianity and Islam.⁹³ Although there are other religious groups, such as the African traditional religions, Hinduism and atheists and other nonbelievers, they are in the minority, as the majority are either Christians or Muslims.⁹⁴ The dissemination of vaccines in places of worship helped a great deal in convincing anti-vaxxers of the importance of the vaccine in building herd immunity. This went a long way in countering the theory that the vaccine was a Mark of the Beast or a feature of the Antichrist. This accords with the results of a 2009 study, carried out by Matthew Nisbet, a professor of communications and public policy, which recommended the use of a “trusted messenger” to reduce the impact of conspiracy theories.⁹⁵ In other words, combatting conspiracy theories may have more success if the counterarguments come from trusted sources, such as valued in-group members, instead of out-group members who are typically associated with mistrust.⁹⁶

Religion was also used to debunk conspiracy theories that decreased trust in science by showing that religion is not incompatible with established science. For example, the website of the Jehovah’s Witnesses published religious materials and articles arguing that religion is compatible with science.⁹⁷ As a result, the over 230 000 members of the congregations of Jehovah’s Witnesses across Nigeria were kept abreast of efforts to combat the pandemic, including the need to adhere to public health instructions. Jehovah’s Witnesses do refuse blood transfusions and treatment made with blood products, but they were consistently or repeatedly informed that the vaccine did not contain blood or blood components in these updates.⁹⁸ The updates helped hesitant members of the group to reevaluate the benefits of vaccination and to counter theories that associated the vaccine with vampires and the drinking of blood. A recent article published in the website of Jehovah’s Witnesses admonished readers to beware of misinformation, such as misleading news, false reports and conspiracy theories.⁹⁹ Since Jehovah’s Witnesses are known for their door-to-door preaching in most parts of Africa, including Nigeria, the

93 “Religious Beliefs in Nigeria”, World Atlas, 2019.

94 Onomrerhinor AF. 2019. “Addressing the Problem of Terrorism and Extremism in Nigeria: Secularism to the Rescue?”, *African Journal on Terrorism* 8(1):122.

95 Nisbet MC. 2009. “Communicating Climate Change: Why Frames Matter for Public Engagement”, *Environment* 51:12-23.

96 Douglas, “Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories”, 272.

97 Examples of such articles include: “Reconciling Science and Religion”, published in *Awake!* magazine, “Science Religion and the Search for Truth”, published in *The Watchtower* in 1994, “Science-Mankind’s Ongoing Search for Truth published in *Awake!* of 1993, Evolution and Religion – The Debate Continues”, published in *Awake!* in 1974. Online at: <https://www.jw.org>

98 See Jehovah’s Witnesses. “JW Broadcasting Governing Body Updates 1-10”. Online at: <https://www.jw.org>

99 Jehovah’s Witness. 2022. “Protect Yourself from Misinformation”. Online at: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/series/more-topic/conspiracy-theories-misinformation/>

fact that their preaching from house to house was stopped and only resumed in September 2022 served to inform the Nigerian society, including members of other religious groups, of the threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Just like the Jehovah's Witnesses group, the leaders of the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church (Church of Nigeria), the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Dunamis International Gospel Centre (DIGC), the Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners Chapel International), the Elevation Church of the Christian faith in Nigeria directly or indirectly helped to counter conspiracy theories. Specifically, they modified traditional rites and rituals associated with their style of worship in line with the lockdown guidelines. Some of the modifications included the suspension of services and masses, initiation of online worship channels and stations, splitting of congregation into smaller numbers, creation of home cells, provision of water and hand sanitisers at their places of worship, enforcement of mask wearing at worship centres and in public places, education of their congregants on how to stay safe during the period and other measures.¹⁰⁰ Most importantly, religious organisations supported government efforts towards preventing the spread of the virus by not only making financial and material donations, but also making their facilities available to the government for use as isolation and quarantine centres.¹⁰¹ By preaching compliance with public health instructions and government regulations on the pandemic, they helped to counter the belief that the disease was a myth. Islamic religious leaders in Nigeria were also instrumental in countering Covid-19 conspiracy theories.

The president-general of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Sultan of Sokoto Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, reminded the country's Muslim community that Prophet Muhammad himself had advocated for social distancing in times of disease. They temporarily suspended congregational prayers and Jumu'ah (Friday) prayers. Further, the Sultan stated that Muslims had a religious duty to prevent the spread of disease and admonished them to observe personal hygiene in order to contain its spread. Taking cognizance of the fact that festive periods often witness increased human movement, travels, congestion and contacts that created risk factors for escalating community transmission and spread of the virus, he directed all the imams and district heads in Sokoto State and the larger Muslim communities in the country to observe Eid prayers at the mosques in their towns and villages instead of at the customary Eid grounds. This measure, according to a press statement that was signed by the Chairman Advisory Committee on Religious Affairs, Sultanate Affairs, Sokoto, Professor Sambo Wali Junaidu, on behalf of the Sultan on Wednesday, 22 July 2020, was taken because of the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Okoye and Obulor, "Religious organizations and fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", 73.

¹⁰¹ Adebawale-Tambe N. 2020. "Covid-19: Catholic Church donates 425 health facilities as isolation centers – Official", *Premium Times*, 12 May.

¹⁰² Olisah C. 2020. Just in: Sultan of Sokoto declares July 31 as Eid-El-Kabir, no prayers at Eid grounds", *NairaMetrics*, 22 July; "Covid-19: Nigeria to get online lectures in Ramadan",

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

Role of the media

The media, that is, the various means of mass communication, such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines and the internet, played a very significant role in the fight against misinformation and conspiracy theories. At the height of the pandemic in Nigeria, both mainstream media and social media such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp shouldered the heavy burden of ensuring that the public was informed about matters affecting people's health and lives.¹⁰³ Discharging this responsibility meant playing a leading role in debunking theories that were circulating both in the global community and in most African societies.

For instance, the Africa Resilience Network (ARN) brought together Kenyan and Nigerian journalists with African and international media trainers to combat Covid-19 misinformation and disinformation. The project was launched in February 2021 and focused on open-source intelligence and investigative journalism techniques to probe the sources of some of the most prevalent fake news stories.¹⁰⁴ It successfully challenged a considerable number of conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation.¹⁰⁵ This included the conspiracy theory that the Covid-19 vaccination programme was a plot involving Microsoft founder Bill Gates, the United Nations and Satan, which would end with the recipient "drinking blood consistently so that they become vampires for their sustenance."¹⁰⁶ In effect, that theory stated that Covid-19 vaccination turn people into vampires.¹⁰⁷

The media reports of conversion of conspiracy theorists also played an important role in changing the narratives. For instance, reports in the media of the conversion of die-hard anti-vaxxer, such as Femi Fani-Kayode, a public figure with a strong media presence in Nigeria, was in itself a debunking of one of the Covid-19 vaccine conspiracies.¹⁰⁸ Before 30 March 2021, when he announced on Twitter that he had taken the Covid-19 vaccine, he was foremost among those who publicly opposed Covid-19 vaccination.¹⁰⁹ He described the vaccine as a ploy to create a new world order. He tagged vaccination an exercise that would result in the deaths of millions

Andalu Agency, 21 April 2020; Adediran O. 2020. "Covid-19: Islamic leaders donate N2.5m to Ogun govt", *Blueprint Nigeria*, 9 April.

103 Nunziato DC. 2020. "Misinformation Mayhem: Social Media Platforms' Efforts to Combat Medical and Political Misinformation", *First Amendment Law Review* 19(1):32-98.

104 Raistrick, "Debunking Africa's Covid-19 Conspiracies".

105 Such as: Vaccines turn people into vampires; holy water prevents Covid-19; Covid-19 is the same as malaria fever; hydroxychloroquine and steam can cure Covid-19; the Covid-19 vaccines are being used to exterminate Africans: the coronavirus cannot survive the African heat, claims of home cures for Covid-19, raw onion and garlic cure Covid -19; and Covid-19 vaccine was created by Bill Gates to make Africans infertile or Covid-19 vaccine can cause infertility.

106 Raistrick, "Debunking Africa's Covid-19 Conspiracies".

107 Raistrick, "Debunking Africa's Covid-19 Conspiracies".

108 Raistrick, "Debunking Africa's Covid-19 Conspiracies".

109 Busari K. 2021. "Nigeria: Anti-vaccination Champion takes Jab", *Africa Resilience Network*, 11 August.

and dissuaded his followers from getting vaccinated by tweeting unconfirmed information and conspiracy theories about Covid-19.¹¹⁰

In addition to mainstream media, social media platforms, which played a significant part in spreading the Covid-19 conspiracy theories, were also instrumental in debunking them. Arguably the most important challenge for social media platforms at the height of the pandemic was responding to the rampant spread of medical misinformation. In contrast to their previous hands-off position, the major platforms rose to the challenge and took some decisive actions in response to misinformation about the coronavirus.

Role of law

African legal systems provided both a framework and tools with which a cross-section of actors, particularly governments, responded to the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹¹ In South Africa, the emergency regulations protected persons living in urban poverty from eviction during the pandemic.¹¹² In Ghana, the Establishment of Emergency Communications System Instrument, 2020 (EI 63) was enacted to aid contact tracing in public health emergencies.¹¹³ In Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari called upon his emergency powers under the Quarantine Act of 1926 to declare a state of emergency to address the pandemic. The Quarantine Act of 1926 gave the president sweeping powers towards preventing the introduction, spread and transmission of dangerous infectious diseases in Nigeria, as well as the power to make regulations for these purposes.¹¹⁴

Nigeria belongs to the category of nations with a constitutional framework for emergency powers. However, the Covid-19 pandemic did not meet the requirement for the declaration of a state of emergency under Section 305 of the Nigerian Constitution, hence the utilisation of the Quarantine Act, 1926, to declare a state of emergency and provide a basis for the president to issue the first set of regulations, the Covid-19 Regulations, 2020, which declared Covid-19 a “dangerous infectious disease” and made lockdown orders in the Lagos, Abuja and Ogun States.¹¹⁵ Other relevant laws enacted to deal with the pandemic were the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Act, which conferred information provision functions on

110 Busari, “Nigeria: Anti-vaccination Champion takes Jab”.

111 Durojaye E, Lwabukuna O, Oette L and Williams-Elegbe S. 2021. “Introduction: Covid-19 and the Law in Africa”, *Journal of African Law* 65(2):173-180.

112 Dube F and Du Plessis A. 2021. “Unlawful Occupiers, Eviction and the National State of Disaster: Considering South Africa’s Emergency Legislation and Jurisprudence during Covid-19”, *Journal of African Law* 65(2):333-346.

113 Gawu DA. 2021. “Covid-19 Contact Tracing and Privacy Rights in Ghana: A Critical Analysis of the Establishment of Emergency Communications System Instrument, 2020 (EI 63)”, *Journal of African Law* 65(2):361-373.

114 Abdulrauf L. 2020. “Nigeria’s Emergency (Legal) Response to Covid-19: A Worthy Sacrifice for Public Health?”, *Verfassungsblog*, 18 May.

115 Abdulrauf, “Nigeria’s Emergency (Legal) Response to Covid-19”.

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the public health emergency legislation.

These pieces of legislation did not specifically address the problem of misinformation and disinformation.¹¹⁶ As a result, some questioned the role that the law should play in curbing misinformation and debunking conspiracy theories in Nigeria.¹¹⁷ As already indicated, social media platforms played a large role in the spread of Covid-19 conspiracy theories and misinformation during the pandemic. Unfortunately, the bill to regulate social media presented before the pandemic was met with a lot of resistance because the public perception of the Nigerian society was that it focused largely on curtailing criticism of government. So, the public claimed that it was a threat to free speech.¹¹⁸ In general, concerns around censorship and limitations on free speech become an issue when considering whether the law should intervene in limiting misinformation and spread of conspiracy theories. Perhaps this is why the ongoing legislative efforts on developing public health emergency legislation have not focused on misinformation or disinformation. However, the challenges that disinformation and conspiracy theories presents are such that efforts should focus on disseminating accurate and important information.¹¹⁹

The NCDC Act confers the role of communicating relevant public health information to the NCDC, thus it neither specified the role of the public nor addressed issues relating to misinformation. In this regard, the law needs to be revised so that it can adequately provide the right resources and incentives for spreading the right information. However, pursuant to the role assigned to it by the Act, the NCDC has played a significant role in countering misinformation and conspiracy theories by consistently disseminating timely and accurate information during the height of the pandemic. The law has a role to play in supporting the provision of the right information and the commendable efforts of the various social media platforms to counter misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories during the height of the pandemic, so that communication can be regulated without resulting in censorship.

Further recommendations

Debunking conspiracy theories is essential to curb misinformation and disinformation. To counter conspiracy theories and misinformation, one must explain why something is false and draw attention to the strategies used to deceive and providing facts, rather than simply labelling information false or misleading.¹²⁰ Social media companies tried to stop or limit the spread of misinformation, disinformation and

116 Onyemelukwe C. 2020. "Covid-19 Misinformation and the Law in Nigeria", *Bill of Health*, 20 August.

117 Onyemelukwe, "Covid-19 Misinformation and the Law in Nigeria".

118 Onyemelukwe, "Covid-19 Misinformation and the Law in Nigeria".

119 Onyemelukwe, "Covid-19 Misinformation and the Law in Nigeria".

120 Sherwin, "Anatomy of a Conspiracy Theory", 555.

conspiracy theories in Nigeria.¹²¹ In general, the social media platforms undertook extensive measures to remove false or harmful information, such as posts that advocated drinking bleach to cure Covid-19, and they labelled and reduced the reach of posts that contained misinformation or conspiracy theories. The platforms' efforts thus far are commendable; however, they must act much more quickly to remove harmful false and misleading medical misinformation before it goes viral.¹²²

In addition, social media platform should make deliberate efforts to counter conspiracies that are circulated on their platforms. For instance, videos that Covid-19 vaccine is associated with the Antichrist or that it contains implants that could make people magnetic or traceable were shared on Facebook. These videos accounted for vaccine hesitancy among the youth. Some Nigerian youths interviewed by *News Express* stated that these videos posted on Facebook led to their vaccine hesitancy.¹²³ Unfortunately, Facebook did not counter the information presented in the videos.¹²⁴ Some of those interviewed stated that they did not find videos on Facebook countering such content or tagging same as misinformation.¹²⁵ Therefore, social media platforms like Facebook needs to do more to counter or debunk conspiracy theories.

Commendably, though, the different approach taken by the social media platforms, such as labelling or deleting harming posts and establishing a coronavirus information centre (Facebook), deleting or suspending the account of users responsible for disinformation (Twitter) and adopting new misinformation policies that enabled service providers to delete posts containing disinformation and redirecting users to the official pages of the NCDC, showed that laws regulating communication can be made without censorship. Efforts should be made to balance the right to free speech with the necessity to curb misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories, especially during emergency or crisis, such as that presented by the Covid-19.¹²⁶ It is important to note that freedom should have limits, especially in a situation where freedom is likely becoming inimical to the growing society.

Given that internationally generated social media content are easily accessed by African audiences, including Nigerians, it is imperative that Nigeria adopt a strategy to counter such content. One way to achieve this is to adopt the redirect method that has proved successful in countering online-based or digital violent

121 Sherwin, "Anatomy of a Conspiracy Theory: Law", 578.

122 Nunziato, "Misinformation Mayhem", 37.

123 "Covid-19: How Facebook Contributes to Vaccine Hesitancy among Young Nigerians", *News Express*, 27 March 2022.

124 For reference to the video see "Covid-19: How Facebook Contributes to Vaccine Hesitancy Among Young Nigerians", *Daily Trust*, 27 March 2022.

125 "Covid-19: How Facebook Contributes to Vaccine Hesitancy among Young Nigerians".

126 Gambo S and Shem W. 2021. "Social media and the spread of Covid-19 conspiracy theories in Nigeria", *Journal of Ideas in Health* 4(3):432-437.

12. The role of legal and religious responses in debunking Covid-19 conspiracy theories...

extremism.¹²⁷ The method should target audience members who actively look for Covid-19 conspiracy content and redirect them towards others disproving such content. To achieve this, the Nigerian government will have to partner with Google and other social media companies.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic presented unparalleled challenges to the world, including misinformation and disinformation. Conspiracy theories have serious consequences for how the public responds to Covid-19.¹²⁸ Conspiracy theories flourish in times of crisis, when people feel threatened, uncertain and insecure. The Covid-19 pandemic created the perfect circumstances for conspiracy theories, and research suggests that conspiracy theories have negative consequences for people's compliance with preventive behaviours.¹²⁹

Most conspiracy theories stem from fear and existing tension between groups. In Nigeria, for example, the lack of trust between the ruling political elite and the public or masses helped to promote some conspiracy theories. As long as the pandemic continues, conspiracy theories and misinformation will continue to influence the level of adherence to public health instructions and Covid-19 guidelines, as well as decisions about whether to get vaccinated. This chapter has shown that countering misinformation and conspiracy theories requires that trusted and well-respected members of the African society provide accurate information that can help members including Nigerians to make informed choices about Covid-19 pandemic. It has highlighted the significant role of the media, religion and the law in debunking conspiracy theories and misinformation about the virus and its vaccine. It has also shown that religion and the media, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic are a double-edged sword. They have contributed to the development and spread of conspiracy theories, and they have also played a significant role in debunking conspiracy theories and curbing the spread of misinformation.

The role of the media, both mainstream and social media platforms is commendable and should continue to be harnessed in the ongoing fight against the pandemic in order to ensure the survival of the African people. During times of crisis and instability, it can be difficult to know what information to trust. Given the anxiety and uncertainty that the pandemic occasioned, it was not surprising that the global community, including Africa, was caught in the web of unscientific theories of conspiracy and healing. The efforts of the governmental authorities and the media in ensuring that accurate information about the pandemic is made available should be applauded and regarded as a protection instead of censorship.

127 Amit S, Barua L and Al Kafy A. 2021. "Countering violent extremism using social media and preventing implementable strategies for Bangladesh", *Heliyon* 7:6.

128 Peitz, "Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories", 1.

129 Douglas, "Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories", 274.

The law played a significant role in supporting the provision of the right information. It is essential for the law to use culturally appropriate measures to encourage compliance. Progressive strategies, such as public education and risk communication, should be given a foundation in the law to support persistent communication of the current facts. In addition, deliberate spreading of false information should be sanctioned in order to punish the harm that misinformation and disinformation portends for all and to act as a deterrent to the spread of disinformation.