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22 THE SYNCRETISM HEALING ATONEMENT MOTIF AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL HEALING IN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES IN BOTSWANA: A RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus has recently ravaged the world in which we live, thereby taking the lives of our beloved friends and relatives. It was first considered as flu of no significance in the corner of the world located around Wuhan, China. In its inception, many thought it would not reach other parts of the world, let alone reach Africa, much less Botswana. Many argued that due to the heat in Africa, especially in Botswana and its Kgalagadi Desert, the coronavirus would not survive light and heat of the day. Some even argued that the black skin of Africans possessed the power to resist the coronavirus.² Indeed, the delayed arrival of corona in Botswana enabled the government to prepare and to put in place the procedures that would reduce its impact.

A World Health Organization (WHO) report stated that the organisation would work with the government of Botswana to make sure that the public health protocols were observed in the country for the safety of the citizens of Botswana.³ This included developing a comprehensive multi-sectoral response plan and active engagement with other sectors and communities. However, these measures did not prevent the coronavirus from spreading into the country, and on 30 March 2020 the first case of coronavirus was reported in Botswana. By 22 April 2020, the government of Botswana declared a lockdown across the whole country for 28 days in order to stop the spread. However, as of 8 August 2022, there had been 325 684 confirmed cases of Covid-19 with 2 778 deaths recorded.⁴ Furthermore, the speed by which the coronavirus reached other corners of the world was so remarkable that there is no place in the world today that has not been affected by the coronavirus.

1 Researcher, Botswana Circle, Gaborone, Botswana.

2 Vaughn L, Kiconco A, Quartey N, Smith CS and Ziz IS. 2021. "'Colonial Virus'? COVID-19, Black Immunity Myth and Africa", *Discover Society*, 1 February.

3 Siamisang K. 2021. "University of Botswana Public Health Medicine Unit contributes to the national COVID-19 response", *Pan African Medical Journal* 39:82.

4 "Covid-19 Tracker Botswana", Reuters, 15 July 2022 (last update). <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/botswana/> [Accessed 28 September 2022].

The pandemic produced claims by some in Botswana, and Africa more broadly, that they had means to heal people from corona.⁵ African Independent Churches (AICs) are one of the major religious groups that has been on the forefront of claiming to heal Covid-19 in Botswana.⁶ This chapter examines the Botswana AICs' claims of being able to heal people from the coronavirus through what I call the "syncretism healing atonement motif".⁷ The chapter, first, sets forth the history of AICs in Botswana, noting particularly their service to Botswana in time of other pandemics, such as AIDS. Second, the chapter analyses the syncretism healing atonement motif in the AICs, pointing out the reason why this method persists in these churches. Third, it describes the impact of Covid-19 on the churches in Botswana, highlighting the strategies that they used to reduce the impact of coronavirus in their communities. Fourth, the chapter presents the methodology and the research design of its underlying study to capture the responses of the AICs church in their response to coronavirus, followed by discussion of the findings from the study and conclusions drawn from the analysis.

HISTORY OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES IN BOTSWANA

Missionaries arrived in African countries in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and they planted churches in different places, including among the Setswana-speaking communities.⁸ Each denomination that participated in the missionary movement came to be associated with a particular ethnic group or groups in Botswana. This is demonstrated by the fact that each ethnic group had a direct link with the sending denomination through a missionary who was working among them. These ethnic groups benefitted from gaining resources for building school and hospitals through these missionary links. Historian Thomas Tlou notes that missionaries acted as advisors to the ethnic group chiefs, and they also brought educational systems, which the ethnic groups in Botswana perceived as important in allowing to engage with traders.⁹

While the missionary movement brought some positive and important changes in Botswana, there were conflicts with the indigenous people over Setswana practices condemned by the missionaries as pagan or satanic. This approach was not received well by the indigenous people.¹⁰ Some indigenous Christians felt that the missio-

- 5 Baker A. 2020. "'Could It Work as a Cure? Maybe'. A Herbal Remedy for Coronavirus Is a Hit in Africa, But Experts Have Their Doubts", *Time*, 22 May.
- 6 Ekonde K. 2020. "The Challenge with African Countries Promoting traditional cures for Covid-19 without Research", *Quartz Africa*, 6 May.
- 7 This chapter uses the word "motif" of healing to mean a theory of healing in the AICs.
- 8 Ramsay J, Morton B and Mgadla T. 1996. *Building a Nation: A History of Botswana from 1800 to 1910*. Gaborone: Longman Botswana, 180.
- 9 Tlou T. 1973. "The Batawana of Northwestern Botswana and Christian Missionaries: 1877-1907", *Transafrican Journal of History* 3(2):112-128.
- 10 Amanze J. 2022. *African Christianity in Botswana: The Case of African Independent Churches*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 62.

nary churches did not fit with their African worldview. Among other things, the clash meant that African traditional medicine was prohibited by missionaries. The missionary movements emphasised that their Western healing methods comported with the gospel, while they perceived African traditional healing as pagan.¹¹ In this way, African traditional healing was pushed into the periphery, and out of traditional communities. Furthermore, certain concepts that are associated with the healing, such as prophecy, were also eradicated from church meetings. This move by the white missionaries entailed that the culture of the missionaries was perceived as superior to African culture and that African healing methods were perceived as unequal to those of the white missionaries.¹² This degradation of the African cultures and relegation of African to a position lesser than that of white missionaries left Africans with no option but to initiate and institute their own form of Christianity in ways that suited their culture. These African-initiated forms of Christianity took many forms, such as the mixture of Catholicism with the African culture in the Congo region and mixture of Protestant theology with African culture in others.¹³

These African Christianities believe in atonement-healing theology, which refers to the view that the efficacy of the death of Christ brings healing in the community. According to the theologian Bruce Reichenbach, this view perceives Jesus as a physician.¹⁴ Therefore, Christ took on the task of bringing healing to the community that was facing pandemics.¹⁵ In this view, Christ is still physician today and is concerned in bringing healing to the communities that are facing different maladies. As compared to missionary theology, which held to the view that the miraculous works of healing have ceased, the AICs hold to the view that Christ still heals today.¹⁶ The AICs go further in emulating Christ in healing ministry, in the sense that Christ used mud to heal a blind man in John 9:1-7. Therefore Christ was syncretistic in his healing service in that he mixed his faith with traditional medicine. The syncretism healing atonement motif is the mixing of traditional medicine and Christian faith.¹⁷

11 Kealotswe O. 1993. *Doctrine and Rituals in the African Independent Churches: A Study in Beliefs, Rituals and Practices in the Head Mountain of God Apostolic Church in Zion*. PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 30.

12 Thomas LE. 1997. "South African Independent Churches, Syncretism, and Black Theology", *Journal of Religious Thought* 53/54(2/1):39.

13 Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana*, 62.

14 Beichenbach B. 2006. "Healing View", in Beilby J and Eddy P (eds). *The Nature of Atonement*. Illinois: IVP Academic, 118.

15 Beichenbach, "Healing View", 118.

16 Molato K. 2017. *Comparative Study of Prophecy between African Independent Churches and African Pentecostal churches: A Case Study of Botswana Healing Church and Maun Assemblies of God*. Master's Thesis, University of Botswana, 39.

17 Ndhlovu J. 2020. *The Attitude of Evangelical churches towards Syncretism in Tshwane Townships*. Unpublished PhD Diss, University of the Free State, 15.

The formation of the AICs was centred on the centrality of African culture in the practice of Christianity, while the missionary churches were European focused in their practices. Theologian Kofi Appiah-Kubi writes, "In contrast to a cold, frigid, professionally aired Christianity that is mainly interested in form, these churches are free, emotional, and to some extent fanatical in their Christian worship. Several of these churches are charismatic, lay, egalitarian, and are voluntaristic in contrast to the established, professional, hierarchical, prescribed religion of the missionary churches."¹⁸ Church Historian Bengt Sundkler, who has done extensive research on the AICs in Southern Africa, argues that the AICs were a bridge between Christianity and paganism. Furthermore, Sundkler points out that the AICs are the "rebirth and revitalization of African culture in the guise of Christianity."¹⁹ In his critique of the AICs, Sundkler argues that, in the AICs, the ancestral spirit has replaced the Holy Spirit in such a way that the role of a prophet in the AICs is that of a traditional healer. As such, the healing methods which are used by the AICs should be eradicated and never be used in the African communities. Missiologist Marthinus Daneel, however, takes a more gracious view than Sundkler. Instead of viewing the AICs as going back to African traditional belief, Daneel describes them as instance of biblical doctrine being transformed into the culture of the people.²⁰ When the biblical concept takes on the culture of the people, it creates a new sense of belief and a meaning, which is only relevant and understood by the practitioners. To an outsider, this might seem like a departure from the Christian faith, but to the practitioner, it is what Christianity is supposed to be in that context. The practices that the AICs espoused led the earlier missionary movement to perceive them as non-Christian and also to view them as the enemy of their flock, because they claimed that their practices might lead the flock astray.²¹ Daneel argues that the acceptance of polygamy by the AICs made the missionary churches to believe that they were not Christian and that they were pulling people back into paganism of African practices.²² This entail that the AICs beliefs and its practices, especially the aspect of healing, should not be accepted neither be used because it resembles some form of paganism practices.

In the AICs in Botswana, and in Africa more broadly, the paramount distinguishing mark is that they take African culture seriously.²³ Religion scholar James Amanze notes that the AICs in Botswana preserved Setswana culture and spirituality, which

18 Kofi AK. 1979. "Indigenous Christian Churches: Signs of Authenticity", in Appiah-Kubi and Torres S (eds). *African Theology En Route*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 118.

19 Kealotswe ON. 2014. "Acceptance and Rejection: The Traditional Healer Prophet and His Integration of his healing methods", *Boleswa Journal of Theology and Religion* 1(1):109.

20 Daneel L. 1971. *The Background and the Rise of Southern Shona Independent Churches*. The Hague: Mouton & Co.

21 Nkomazana F. "The Botswana Religious Landscape", in Togarasei L, Mmolai SK and Nkomazana F (eds). *The Faith Sector and HIV/AIDS in Botswana: Responses and Challenges*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 13.

22 Daneel, *The Background and the Rise of Southern Shona Independent Churches*, 455.

23 Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana*, 62.

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the missionaries had condemned.²⁴ In the AICs, these key issues of African culture resurface in the practice of Christianity, and the Western culture that was paramount in the missionary churches was eradicated in these new churches. As well, the biblical doctrines come to be draped in the African cloth, such that they resemble the African way of life. This method of contextualisation is called “adaptation transformation theory”. Through it a biblical doctrine become enmeshed in the cultural sitting to such an extent that that it totally resembles the culture of the people.²⁵ In this way, the AICs churches identified with the people on the ground. This is what South African theologian Helen Hlongwane calls “grass-roots theology”.²⁶ The desire to reach the people with their theology and to incorporate African culture in their theological practice facilitated the growth of AICs in Botswana.

Writing in 1999, Amanze stated that AICs were the majority of the churches in the country.²⁷ Botswana theologian Fidelis Nkomazana, referencing a study done by the cultural globalisation scholar Wim van Binsbergen, has estimated that two out of three adults in Botswana are members of AICs.²⁸ One of the major theological concepts that arises from the AICs is the concept of healing, particularly the idea that God still heals today. This concept sets the AICs apart from the missionary churches that rely on the Western form of healing. In their inception, the AICs were built upon the prophets (*baporofiti*), who included both men and women. These AIC prophets, who were mostly founders of the AICs churches themselves, were spears that pierced the activities of the kingdom of darkness and established the kingdom of God in their society. As such, the concept of healing in the AICs established the point that God is active in the church and that he cares about his people. By definition, the prophets in the AICs are people who are endowed with the supernatural power to heal every sickness and also with the ability to diagnose sickness and the cause thereof.

In the present study, which I conducted in a Botswana healing church in 2017, these prophets were the shepherds of the congregation functioning under the bishops of the church, but they were also servants of the community in the sense that they diagnosed and healed people from the community who were seeking some assistance.²⁹ Zimbabwean biblical scholar Lovemore Togarasei and Botswana theologian Obed Kealotswe note that the AICs healers heal varieties of sickness, such as headache, diarrhoea and many other diseases that cannot be cured by Western medicine.³⁰ Furthermore, the AICs prophets not only cure diseases, but can also

24 Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana*, 62.

25 Molato, *Comparative Study of Prophecy between African Independent Churches and African Pentecostal churches*, 92.

26 Hlongwane W. 1972. *Pentecostalism*. London: SCM.

27 Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana*, 89.

28 Nkomazana, “The Botswana Religious Landscape”, 12.

29 Molato, *Comparative Study of Prophecy between African Independent Churches and African Pentecostal churches*.

30 Togarasei L, Mmolai S and Kealotswe ON. 2016. “‘Quinine’, ‘Ditaola’ and the ‘Bible’: Investigating Batswana Health Seeking Practices”, *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29(1):95-117.

determine the root or the cause of diseases. This corresponds with the African Setswana worldview, which assumes that nothing just happens – it has one way or the other to be caused by witchcraft. In this way, the AICs prophets acts as both traditional healers and pastors in the local church. In fact, during the HIV and AIDS pandemics, the AICs were in the forefront of trying to address the situation in Botswana. In this way, the modern form of healing was not only the means by which AIDS pandemic was addressed and healed. Thus, religion scholar Musa Dube notes that the HIV and AIDS pandemic called for the multiplicity of approaches in order to educate and heal the Botswana communities of this pandemic.³¹

SYNCRETISM AS A HEALING METHOD IN THE AICs

Syncretism is synthesis of cultural concepts with religious concepts in such a way that the religious concept is submerged into the cultural space, thereby losing its original religious form. Religious scholar Mark Mullis notes that syncretism is usually understood as a combination of elements from two or more religious traditions, ideologies or value systems.³² In the social sciences, this is a neutral and objective term that is used to describe the mixing of religions as a result of cultural contact. In theology and missiological circles, however, it is generally used as a pejorative term to designate movements that are regarded as heretical or sub-Christian.³³ The legitimate cultural reshaping of Christianity is referred to as the “enculturation” or “contextualisation” of the gospel, though most social scientists would also include these cultural adaptations as examples of syncretism.³⁴ The term “syncretism”, Mark Mullis asserts, is often viewed as a pejorative and derogative term used to demonise the practice of those who correlate cultural concepts with biblical concepts.³⁵ Mainline churches and missionary churches use this term to assert that the AICs should not be viewed as Christian churches and are to be viewed instead as heretical.

The question, however, is whether the term can be used in a positive manner in relation to the church for the purposes of the scientific study of religion. For it is only those who perceive themselves as superior in their way of doing theology who refer to those upon whom they look down upon as syncretists. It would seem that there can be a legitimate use of the term, in a scientific sense, to argue that any theological practice is shaped by the context in which it is presented.³⁶ As such,

31 Dube WM. 2019. “Remembering the Teacherly Moments of HIV and AIDS Texts”, *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43(4):320-333.

32 Mullis MR. 2001. “Syncretic movement”, in Sunquest SW (ed). *Dictionary of Asian Christianity of Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 809.

33 Ndhlovu, “The Attitude of Evangelical churches towards Syncretism in Tshwane Townships”, 15.

34 Mullis, “Syncretic movement”, 809.

35 Mullis, “Syncretic movement”, 809.

36 Johnson PC. 2002. “Migrating bodies, Circulating Signs: Brazilian Candomblé: The Garifuna of the Caribbean and the Category of Indigenous Religion”, *History of Religions* 41(4):302.

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every practice on the ground is syncretistic in nature. It is in the positive sense that I analyse syncretism in relation to healing methods in the AICs in Botswana in this chapter.

Writing of the context of AICs in South Africa, theologian Linda Thomas has studied the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church and the way that it uses syncretism in church practices.³⁷ Thomas notes that at the centre of the church is her ability to heal, and these healing practices are centred on the prophetic ministry. As such, the prophetic ministry encapsulates the traditional concept of divining and the biblical concept of prophecy. This concept is similar to one that I observed during my research in Botswana at the village called Maun in an AIC church called the Botswana Healing Church.³⁸ The prophetic ministry of this church is tied to the healing in the sense that, before the healing is practised, the prophet or diviner must diagnose the root cause of the disease. This is based on the cosmological worldview, which perceives that disease does not occur without cause in the spiritual realm. The question of why sickness and death has occurred calls upon the role of the diviner in African traditional religions, while the prophet fills this role in the AICs. In this sense, through the means of prophecy the prophet identifies the wrong doers of certain occurrence of evil deeds among the congregants.³⁹

Relatedly, Botswana theologian Obed Kealotswe has studied the life of Doctor Ookeditse Batisani of Jerusalema Bethsaida Church. According to Kealotswe's research findings, Doctor Batisani is a traditional healer, who also functions as a prophet in his local church. In his role as a traditional healer, Doctor Batisani uses sticks to communicate with the ancestors in order that the ancestors may give him permission to heal those who seek help. If a patient is a witch, the ancestors will reveal to him that he should not touch the patient. As a traditional healer, Doctor Batisani uses *diwacho* (placebos), which are made out of seawater, and he also makes *diwacho* with a mixture of traditional herbs.⁴⁰ In this scenario, Doctor Batisani acts solely as a traditional healer, which entails that he consults the ancestors to guide him in his profession. In this form of healing practice, Doctor Batisani gives his patient from the church *diwacho* of seawater. In this sense, the *diwacho* of the seawater is not perceived as a healing element, but it is used to induce faith of the believers. Therefore, these elements become a form of contact in order to connect with healing forces that cannot be seen with the naked eyes. Kealotswe notes that most of the AICs in Botswana do not agree with the assertion that they mix prayer and traditional healing practices. Instead they revert to the idea that prayer is the

37 Thomas, "South African Independent Churches, Syncretism, and Black Theology", 40-41.

38 Molato, *Comparative Study of Prophecy between African Independent Churches and African Pentecostal churches*.

39 Sundkler M. 1961. *Bantu Prophets In South Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.

40 *Diwacho* is a plural noun for *Siwacho*. The mixtures which are used to make *diwacho* differ from one group to another.

most fundamental element of their healing services, and elements such as traditional herbs are used as a point of contact.⁴¹

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHURCHES IN BOTSWANA

Covid-19 has caused stress in the society, because many people lost jobs due to the lockdown, and many people were affected by the threat of death to themselves and to their families and communities.⁴² The financial constraints were also a key reasons why the anxiety among the Batswana increased during Covid-19, especially during the lockdown.⁴³ Many churches rely on the generosity of their members, and when the members have no form of income, the effectiveness of the church is limited.⁴⁴ Some Batswana called on Facebook for men of God, the pastors, to come forth to pray in order to stop the spread of coronavirus In Botswana, as in other countries, there were many hypotheses raised against coronavirus. Some argued that argued that it was the work of the devil and called for men of God stand against it. The argument that many Christians raised about corona being the work of the devil had much to do with the inability of the church to function.⁴⁵ Some of the pastors argued that since some of their public service were allowed to function and were deemed to be essential services, they should be given a permit that allowed them to attend their many congregation members who were suffering.⁴⁶ In the face of hindrances to their being allowed to do this, many pastors and church members argued that the government did not take the churches seriously.⁴⁷

Some of the church leaders in Botswana advised their church members against the corona vaccine, arguing that it was an omen from the devil and that Western nations wanted to reduce the African populations. Rev Tsuaneng of the secretary of Botswana Council of Churches was quoted in *Botswana Gazette* issuing the following warning to pastors: "We are aware that there are those who peddle untruthful statements about the vaccine and it is quite unfortunate to be having such people within our community, I do not know of any sensible government across the world that can

41 Kealotswe, "Acceptance and Rejection", 114.

42 Stone LS, Stone MT, Mogomotsi PK and Mogomotsi MJ. 2021. "The Impacts of Covid-19 On Nature- Based Tourism in Botswana: Implications for community development", *Tourism Review International* 25:265.

43 Stone et al, "The Impact of Covid-19 on Nature-based Tourism", 265.

44 Amanze J and Madigele T. 2021. "Churches and Covid-19 in Botswana", in Sibanda S, Muyambo T and Chitando E. *Religion and the COVID Pandemic in Southern Africa*. London: Routledge, 7.

45 Sibanda F, Muyambo T and Chitando E. 2022. "Religion and Public Health in the Shadow of Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa", in Sibanda et al (eds). *Religion and Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*. New York: Routledge, 6.

46 Mothobi T. 2020. Presidential (COVID-19) Task Force. *Botswana Bulletin*, Issue 93, 10 August.

47 Mpuang L. 2020. "The Church Clashes with Gov't over Covid-19 Relief Fund", *Botswana Gazette*, 23 April.

procure with people's money something that is intended to eliminate the whole nation."⁴⁸ This kind of behaviour reveals some of the concern from the public about the government procedures to reduce the impact of the corona in the country. The other concern that churches had, was in relation to the opening of churches after the lockdown. Attendance of church members was limited to fifty people per service and two services per week in Botswana.⁴⁹ Most of the churches pointed out that students were allowed to go back to school and workers have been allowed to go back to work. Their question was why the church was not being allowed to have their church members at full capacity at a time when they needed spiritual guidance and spiritual leadership. The attendance limits raised some concerns from church members, who complained that the church was being marginalised and being looked down by the government, which did not understand the role of the church in the community.⁵⁰

In a study of church organisations in Botswana, included the Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana (EFB), the Botswana Council of Churches (BCC) and the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), theologians James Amanze and Tshenolo Madigele noted the impact that coronavirus had among the churches.⁵¹ They noted that the churches experienced financial crises in this period. As such, some of the churches that were renting buildings closed because they did not have the finances to sustain themselves. Moreover, some of the church members experienced depression and stress because their loved ones were dying from coronavirus. The ministers of churches were confined to their houses and could not assist in the way they were used to. The *Botswana Gazette* writer Letlhogile Mpuang captured this point in observing, "The Church relies on offerings and tithes, and since there are no church services, things are now very difficult. Pastors' welfare has significantly changed as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic and also since the extreme social distancing protocols were put into effect."⁵²

In their study, Amanze and Tshenolo observed that the churches in Botswana implemented strategies in order to take care of their members. Some of the strategies included forming WhatsApp groups to which sermons were uploaded so that each and every member had access to the word of God. Those living with their families were encouraged to pray and read the Bible as a family. This strategy played a big role in uniting the families, since they could now pray as a family and seek a ways assist one another in dealing with the stress of losing their loved ones to coronavirus.

48 Molelo L. 2021. "Botswana Council of Churches Caution Delinquent Church Leaders Against Covid-19 Vaccine Falsehoods", *Botswana Gazette*, 11 March.

49 Chikwanah E. 2020. "African church begin to reopen", *UM News*, 9 June.

50 Amanze and Madigele, "Churches and Covid-19 in Botswana".

51 Amanze and Madigele, "Churches and Covid-19 in Botswana".

52 Mpuang, "The Church Clashes with Gov't over Covid-19 Relief Fund".

AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES IN BOTSWANA AND THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

For the present study, a qualitative method was used to undertake the measure of AICs response to Covid-19 in Botswana. As such, six churches were chosen from the different areas of Botswana in order to undertake this study. To capture the responses of the participants, the study used a phenomenological design with both in-person interviews and telephone calls. Phenomenological design is a method that is used in qualitative research, especially in the social sciences and health sciences. According to British researcher Stan Lester, phenomenological research is used “to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation”.⁵³

For the present study, the following questions were included in the interviews: (1) How did your church respond to COVID-19? (2) What were the healing method used to heal and help those affected by corona? (3) Are your methods reliable in comparison to Western methods of healing corona? The questionnaire was sent to six AICs in different parts of the country. The participants were required to provide the answers to the questions within a space of a month and half. This allowed them to think through the questions carefully and to process their answer to their own satisfaction. Researchers Mira Crouch and Heather McKenzie have noted that interview questions must guide research and provide valid information that will ultimately enhance the research project.⁵⁴ With this in mind, the data collected from the participants was thematised according to the literature review and the interview questions.

FINDINGS REGARDING AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES’ RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN BOTSWANA

As the Covid-19 took hold in Botswana, the coronavirus was associated with flu by many AIC members. They argued that the symptoms of flu and Covid-19 were the same and that the effects are the same. The symptoms, such as headaches, sneezing and dizziness, were associated with the novel coronavirus, but they had been seen before in the person suffering with flu. Insofar as they argued that Covid-19 was like flu, they also argued that they already had remedies for coronavirus. The remedies they had used for years in dealing with the flu were same remedies that they could reduce the impact and the effect of coronavirus among their church members. This approach by the AICs practitioners prompted them to overlook Western healing methods, such as vaccination, for they argued that they had been dealing with these issues before the hype which is associated with the coronavirus. Some voices from the AICs argued that they could heal corona in the same way that they did the flu, even though the effects of the coronavirus were more devastating. This approach had a negative effect in neglecting the scientific investigations; however, it also

53 Lester S. 1999. “An introduction to phenomenological research”, *ResearchGate*, January.

54 Crouch M and McKenzie H. 2006. “The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research”, *Social Science Information* 45(4):485.

has some positive effects in reducing fears that engulfed the population.⁵⁵ Healing practitioners in the AICs used this psychological approach in dealing with those affected by corona to reassure them and reduce anxiety levels. The question was whether this approach could be replicated broadly to reduce both collective and individual anxieties.

Water

The main healing remedy that the AICs in Botswana use is water. Water is most often perceived as a link or a point of contact that induces faith and releases healing from God. The common use of water in the AICs involves sprinkling and also steaming, the latter process known as *go aramela*.⁵⁶ One of the study participants argued that they had been using *go aramela* steaming method for a long time, and now the scientific method of healing was attempting to hijack the traditional method, even though the latter was gaining new popularity during the time of Covid-19. Since one of the symptoms of coronavirus is fever and steaming has been used to cure fever, it was easy for the AICs' healers to recommend steaming as a cure for coronavirus.⁵⁷ Steaming came to be perceived as important in preventing coronavirus by opening up the nasal passages and thereby easing a stuffy nose; however, experts are divided with regard to its effectiveness.⁵⁸

The AICs' recommendation of steaming is grounded in a theology of water that is common in African traditional religions.⁵⁹ In this way, the theology of water as a healing remedy is rooted in the African culture.⁶⁰ In the North-West District of Botswana, when the water flows from the river, people use it to clean themselves from things like bad luck and also to bring themselves fortune. Culturally, it is perceived as possessing powers that can heal even severe sicknesses. In some instances, some AIC healers prefer to use seawater.⁶¹ This use of water is considered to be more powerful than the anointing oil that is usually used in the Pentecostal-charismatic churches.⁶² In this way, the AICs drew on a theology and cosmology of water as a healing motif in the coronavirus pandemic.

55 World Health Organization (WHO). "Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide", *WHO.int*, 29 April 2020.

56 Carrasco LN, Zulu M and Bukasa KP. "Steaming in the fringes; healing rituals in Johannesburg", *International Journal of Complementary & Alternative Medicine* 12(2):59.

57 Orisakwe OE, Orish CN and Owanaforo EO. 2020 "Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) and Africa: Acclaimed home remedies", *Scientific African* November:1-5.

58 Zeeman K. 2021. "Does steaming really help fight Covid-19?", *Sunday Times*, 9 July.

59 Kealotswe, "Acceptance and Rejection", 114.

60 Hagan G. 2020. "Water and Spirituality in some African Cultures and Traditions", Vatican Commission on Covid-19, 1. Online at: <https://www.humandevlopment.va/content/dam/sviluppoumano/water-resources/33.pdf> [Accessed 16 December 2022].

61 Kealotswe, "Acceptance and Rejection", 114.

62 Molato K and Dube M. 2021. "The Christic Okavango Delta of Botswana", in Chirongoma S and Kiilu W (eds). *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and World Religions and Environmental Imaginations*. Third Edition. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 46.

Plants

One of the plants that the participants note that it is helpful in reducing the effects of corona in the body is called *legala la Badimo*, literally translated as “coal of the ancestors”. They note that this plant is mostly found in the mountainous and top of the hills. It is believed that this plant encapsulates smoke that has a touch of the ancestors, which no flu can withstand. According to the participants, the plant has been used from the time immemorial to deal with flu, and it has been found that it can also heal corona. The healing remedy from this plant is contained in its smoke. The sick person must inhale the smoke and allow the smoke to reach their lungs. The smoke reaches to the inner being of the person, including the lungs, which the AIC practitioners believe are hugely affected by coronavirus. These practitioners state that if the pain does not dissipate, they add additional plants known as *legala la Tshwane*, which is literally translated to “baboon coal”.

The second plant that these practitioners think is helpful is a root of a tree called blackthorn (*Acacia mellifera*). The healing practitioners explain that when blackthorn is applied to chest, it relieves the pain from affecting someone who is sick. Scientifically, blackthorn is used to “treat colds, breathing conditions, cough, fluid retention, general exhaustion, upset stomach, kidney and bladder problems, and constipation; and to treat and prevent stomach spasms.”⁶³ When I mentioned this to one of the participants, he noted that the problem with the scientific healing methods is that they always steal indigenous ideas and then present the effects without reference to their roots in the indigenous practices. AIC participants note that what makes the blackthorn roots effective, as compared to Western medicine, is that it is used and applied to a sick person mostly in the healing clinics. It is believed that the presence of God is significantly present in the healing clinics. One of the AIC members postulated that she might be sick when she is at home, but when she reaches the healing clinic, the sickness often disappears.

Syncretism

The question that is paramount to this study in linking the indigenous or the syncretic method of healing with the modern medicine is whether the remedies mentioned above can be replicated and confirmed in a scientific laboratory. This is crucial in trying to establish a link between the faith-healing method and the scientific method of healing. Undergirding this is the question of borrowing some healing remedies from the scientific healing motif and the syncretism healing atonement motif, which is the mixing Christianity and traditional African healing concepts. To be sure, there has been demonisation of the indigenous healing motif by many scientific healing practices.

Research carried out by Tongarasei and Kealotswe has noted that though the scientific method of healing is perceived as taking precedence over the faith-healing methods and indigenous healing method not only in theory, but also in practice,

⁶³ “Blackthorn”, [Supplemented.co.uk](https://supplemented.co.uk), 2 October 2020.

the syncretic method of healing by the AICs healing practitioners is preferred by the people.⁶⁴ But even though the traditional methods described above are useful in dealing with coronavirus, study participants noted that they cannot heal or approach a person who is sick without God's guidance. Above all, they argue that it is God who guides on what to do when the person is sick, especially with relation coronavirus. So, whether the method is traditional or scientific, all healing ultimately comes from God in their view. Thus, there is an irreducible religious and spiritual element to healing.

CONCLUSION

The syncretic method, which is the mixing of Christian faith with the traditional means of healing, remained one of the leading methods of healing coronavirus in Botswana, even though the government ultimately required every citizen in the country to be vaccinated. The government of Botswana prohibited people to travel, especially those who were leaving the country, if they were not vaccinated. In places such as government offices, there was an obligation by the government to make sure that all their workers were vaccinated. However, the traditional means of healing practised in the African Independent Churches still remained the most relied upon means of healing in the country. Would AIC healing practitioners have used Western forms of healing coronavirus without the intervention of the government and to what extent would Botswana have used vaccination without the intervention of the government remain interesting questions for further research.

The objective of this study was to find out how the AICs in Botswana responded to the coronavirus using syncretic methods of healing. This chapter started by presenting the impact of the coronavirus in Botswana, focusing on the churches. Churches in Botswana, including the AICs, were affected in a tremendous way, which led to the closing of the churches in Botswana. The role of the church, especially the pastors' ability to attend to church members who were affected by coronavirus, was seriously constrained and the pastors were not allowed to attend their members. This was very different from history of AICs in Botswana and their previous responses to plagues and pandemics.

Though the syncretic healing method had long been described in derogatory terms by those who thought that their theological or scientific motif of healing were superior, positive use was made of syncretic methods by AICs in order to reduce the impact of coronavirus among their members. AICs in Botswana treated coronavirus as nothing more than a flu, which turned out to be an approach that actually had a positive impact upon those affected by coronavirus by reducing depression and anxiety levels through analogy to epidemics with which they had successfully dealt in the past. The AICs used traditional medicine methods, such as *go aremela*, *legala la Badimo* and *legala la Tshwane* that had been used to heal flu in a robust example of the syncretism healing atonement motif.

64 Togarasei et al, "'Quinine', 'Ditaola' and the 'Bible'".