

## PERCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN OYO METROPOLIS OF COVID-19 VACCINATION

---

Charles. A. Oguntoye<sup>27</sup>

---

### Abstract

*The Nigerian government launched the AstraZeneca brand of Coronavirus Vaccine, with the President, Vice-President, members of Presidential Taskforce on Covid-19 (PTF) as well as the medical and health workers being the first to be vaccinated. State governors and their cabinet members have also been vaccinated in order to boost the confidence of the public on Covid-19 vaccine. Yet, this has not resulted in the change of attitude of many Nigerians towards Covid-19 vaccination. The reason for the public's hesitance towards the Covid-19 vaccine can be linked to the controversies around the world, particularly the suspension of the vaccine by the European Union and France on the claim that it causes blood clot in the brain, modification of DNA, among other unsubstantiated claims. A survey of religious leaders in Oyo metropolis reveals that the failure of the government to deliver good governance, resulted in lack of faith and trust in the leaders' appeal for people to accept vaccination. The failure of the government to be accountable to the citizens, as well as seemingly cozy relationship between the media and the government compounded the public's mistrust on public information on Covid—19. Also, the continuous doubts of the Kogi State government and his refusal to accept the vaccine: as well as the failure of the Federal Government to prevail on the Kogi State government over its negative campaign against vaccination, all contributed to vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria. This paper submits that the government at all levels in Nigeria needs to rebuild public trust in order to change public attitude towards public information at a time of health emergency such as Covid-19 pandemic*

**Key words:** Covid-19, Leadership, Vaccine and Trust.

### Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of individuals and groups around the world. It has negatively impacted the global economy and sources of livelihoods. Due to the lack of adequate measures to curtail the pandemic, a lot of economic, religious and social activities have been paralysed. For instance, about 1.2 billion learners are out of school and 73.8% of the world's school population have been affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2020a). In effect, this has led to inequality in access to education. And has also reshaped education delivery across the world.

---

<sup>27</sup> Charles. A. Oguntoye lectures at Department of Public Relations and Advertising, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo

The clamour to put an end to the pandemic, such that the world could rebound back to normalcy, the search for a vaccine became apparent. Many pharmaceutical companies went on frenzied research for a cure. However, while the search was on, the virus claimed many lives in Europe, Asia and America, etc. which further necessitated the drive to acquire a possible cure in the shortest period. Finally, a vaccine was developed and the testing begun. This was one of the numerous vaccines created within the period of one year of the raving pandemic.

Fortunately, the discovery of covid-19 vaccine brought about hope for the world's population. The emergence of the vaccine was seen as a step in the right direction, at least it brought hope to many that the world was about to experience normalcy once again. However, the emergence of this vaccine was met with equally disturbing cases of rejection, trust and efficacy. The rejection arose as a result of negative testing carried with humans or volunteers who died few hours or days after the administration of the vaccine. This to a large extent raised suspicion about the authenticity and viability of the vaccine.

consequently, the Nigeria government launched the AstraZeneca brand of Coronavirus Vaccine in Nigeria with frontline health workers and members of Presidential Taskforce on Covid-19 (PTF) as well as the President, and the Vice-President been vaccinated. So many states have also commenced vaccination but it has not changed the attitude of many Nigerians of not willing to take the vaccine. Despite the launch of this vaccine, the case of outright rejection of surfaced for several reasons. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine the perception of religious leaders as regards Covid-19 vaccine in Oyo Township.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Conceptualizing the keywords of this paper is essential.

### **Covid-19**

The Coronavirus Disease-19 (COVID-19) outbreak started in Wuhan, the megacity of China in late December, 2019, spreading to 213 countries and territories, with more than 7.5 million total confirmed cases and 421,801 total deaths globally as at 12 June, 2020 (John Hopkins, 2020). Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that can cause disease in both animals and humans. The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus strain known as SARS-CoV is an example of a coronavirus. SARS spread rapidly in 2002–2003 (Begum, Akbar-Mir, Dev, Buyamayum, Wani, 2020). The new strain of coronavirus is called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The virus causes coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19). The new coronavirus has spread rapidly in many parts of the world. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) Trusted Source declared COVID-19 a pandemic. A pandemic occurs when a disease that people are not immune to spreads across large regions. Prior to covid 19, many variants of the novel corona virus and their manifestations have existed. For instance, SARS is another type of coronavirus. It became a global pandemic in 2002–2003. Around 9.6% Trusted Source of SARS cases led to death.

However, COVID-19 is more contagious, and it is already the cause of more deaths worldwide.

The CDC Trusted Source recommend that people wear cloth face masks in public places where it is difficult to maintain physical distancing. This will help slow the spread of the virus from people who do not know that they have contracted it, including those who are asymptomatic. People should wear cloth face masks while continuing to practice physical distancing.

### **Leadership**

Leadership means different things to different kinds of people. It may be considered as the process (acts) of influencing the activities of an organised group in its efforts towards goal setting and goal achievement. There is a strong assertion that situations, contexts, culture, working environment, new laws and regulations, information overload, organizational complexities and psycho-socio developments remarkably impact the concept of leadership (Zakeer & Allah, 2016). In other words, leadership is not static but invariably dependent on changing dynamics of an environment (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta & Kramer, 2004). Furthermore, Yukl (2001) posits that leadership is crucial to development and growth of a people.

### **Vaccine**

Vaccine is a medical intervention to stop an epidemic or a pandemic or other disease that threaten human existence (Singh & Mehta, 2016). It is important to note that that while vaccination is the most effective medical intervention ever recorded in human history; vaccine development and production is a financially demanding and herculean task requiring months to several years of pre-clinical and clinical trials before advancing to the licensure stage (Singh & Mehta, 2016, Begum, Akbar-Mir, Dev, Buyamayum, Wani, 2020). According to WHO, there are five stages or criteria for vaccine evaluation and prioritization. They include: safety profile, potential for efficacy, vaccine stability, vaccine implementation and vaccine availability (WHO, 2020). **Vaccination:** This is the act of giving a large population of people living in a particular community or what could be call pandemic area vaccine to enable then prevent the spread of a particular disease. Vaccination is to prevent diseases in humans and animal.

Other important issues abound when it comes to vaccine and vaccination. They include: availability of health workers, vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccine movement. Vaccine hesitancy is usually refers to delays of acceptance or refusal by a person, usually parents, of a vaccination. In the same vein, anti-vaccine movement usually refers to an active campaign by various groups that reject the use or even the idea of vaccine. Very importantly, vaccines are especially needed by health care workers on the front lines and other vulnerable members of the population who have a higher risk of contracting the infection (Itodo, G. E, Enitan, S.S, Oyekale, A. O, Agunsoye, C. J, Asukwo,U.F, 2020).

## **Trust**

Trust is a strong word when it comes to the issues of governance, products and services delivery especially in the area of health care delivery. The reason why trust is important in health care service is because products that are not tested and trusted can have severe health challenges which may or may not lead to death or other forms of danger. It is this seemingly common point that places trust above other key variables when we are faced with issues of medical products and health care services.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this paper was In-depth Interview (IDI) with religious leaders in Oyo town. In-depth interview (IDI) is an interview in which participants are encouraged and prompted to talk in depth about the topic under investigation without the researchers' use of predetermined, focused, short answered questions (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The In-depth interview was conducted in order to provide the study with experiential information about the subject matter of the paper which is rejection of covid-19 vaccine. A total of four interviews were conducted with religious leaders who have a sizeable number of followers and whose voices and influence could go a long way in determining the acceptability or outright rejection of the vaccine.

## **Religious Leaders: Potential Influencers**

It has been observed that religious leaders have followership capacity and thus the tendency for great influence capacity. This is a great tool that is not over-emphasised especially in the domain of politics, where number is an added advantage. Political leaders, being overtly aware of this potential lobby religious in order to achieve certain agendas, especially when it comes to acceptance by the people (Zakeer, & Allah, 2016). As important as this aspect of human development and leadership, it has been used severally in both positive and negative directions. Thus, understanding the influence and effect of religious leaders as regards Covid-19 vaccine become pertinent.

Nigeria is one of the nations of the world that hold religious institutions in high esteem. It could be observed that leadership, economy, education, commerce and social development are conspicuously hinged on religious affiliations. Perhaps that has constituted a grave setback in the development of Nigeria in the past few decades. Religious leaders have far reaching importance in the decisions of Nigerians (Zakeer, & Allah, 2016). As such, they should not be casually jettisoned in the scheme of things. This paper is examine the influence of religious leaders on the acceptance of Covid-19 vaccine.

Incidentally, several interpretations of phenomenon have been recorded in connection with covid-19 and other vaccines in Nigeria and outside the country. For instance in 2014, the northern leaders boycotted polio vaccines based on religious beliefs. They were assumptions that Fpizer polio vaccines was an attempt at enhancing birth control in the northern part of Nigeria. That singular act resulted in the increase of polio among children. This was however

pioneered by religious leaders who examine information made available to them through religious sentiments. This clearly points to the fact that religious connotations have a larger impact on the health care services and products. Towards the end of 2020, there was a religious connotation that 5G was responsible for corona virus and further attributed to the sign of the anti-Christ. This interpretation was made by a renowned Christian leaders pastor Chris Oyakilome of the Christ Embassy Church denomination.

### **Covid-19 Rejection of Vaccine: Issues**

Following the discovery of covid 19 vaccine, various local and foreign groups have rejected vaccinations across the world. This opposition adds to the challenges for the government's covid-19 vaccine programme. Several reasons have been given for rejection of vaccine. In this paper, we shall take a look at a few of these reasons. Firstly, it is important to note that some of the negative sentiments experienced have been shaped by socio-cultural backgrounds such as personal beliefs as regards religion. Secondly, Structural factors are also seen as contributing to rejection of vaccine. For instance, we see that for a vaccine of this magnitude to be produced, it is usually a partnership between public and private sector. For instance we have Gavi, the vaccine alliance with the WHO, UNICEF, World Bank and Bill and Melinda Gates foundation at the core, other partners include: national governments, pharmaceuticals companies and other private sector businesses. This partnership has been criticized based on unfair approaches, equal distribution. The public are afraid that the distribution would affect specific people and not the generality of the people.

Thirdly, lack of trust in the vaccine industry is contributing to vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccine movement. Lack of trust in government also contributed to the rejection of the vaccine. trust issues became apparent also when controversy of the European Union and France suspension of the vaccine on the claim that it can cause blood clotting in the brain of people, modification of DNA, among other unsubstantiated claims.

### **Perception**

Perception is vital in almost every issue of life. According to Zakeer, & Allah (2016), perception is how people view things from their private, collective prism. The reason why perception is important, even as it affects all human endeavours is because it has its complications when it involves society and social activities. People are different in all ramifications and that affects the way they perceive everything in the society and life as a whole. Perception is tied to various phenomena namely: background, society, and individualism. Someone's background is capable of affecting the way he/she sees things or reason. For instance, the way an educated adult in Nigeria, who is current and versatile in issues of health, sees corona virus is different from that of an illiterate personality. In addition, some people with certain religious affiliations have been observed to perceive events differently. More so, perception could be individualistic or otherwise.

### **Perception of Religious Leaders in Oyo metropolis of Covid-19 vaccination**

This paper examines the perception of religious leaders in Oyo as regards Covid-19 vaccine that was flagged off by the Federal Government of Nigeria in conjunction with WHO and other international institutions. The methodology adopted by the paper was In-depth Interview (IDI) which enabled the researcher to get vital information about their perception on the exercise. The following constitute interactions and responses from the interviewees. The questions raised were to ascertain personal disposition towards the vaccine and why it should be accepted or not. This is being in mind that their perceptions was capable of impacting negatively on their followers.

During an In-depth Interview (IDI), respondent A asserts thus:

Well, it is important for us to understand that covid-19 vaccine has not been fully verified. Testing and research are still going on. In view of this, massive vaccination of what is not fully verified and properly tested cannot be entire a step in the right direction. This is important because human beings are directly involved here. We cannot afford to joke with the lives of people who have vision, dreams and aspirations just because a few people want it so.

Furthermore, an In-depth interview with respondent B reveals that there is hidden agenda by some international institutions to monitor people through the use of the vaccine.

You see, there has always been an attempt by some anti-Christian assemblies to bring the world under control through technological innovations and in so many instances, it has proved abortive and I think covid-19 vaccine could just be an opportunity for them to successfully carry it out without the world knowing or suspecting it. Let us not forget that it takes years for a vaccine to be derived, tested and trusted, but in this case, it took scientist few months to arrive at a vaccine for a pandemic of this magnitude. Meanwhile for several years they have not been able to produce a vaccine for HIV, Tuberculosis and other human threatening diseases. Why the hurry? Something is fishy here.

In furtherance of the argument, respondents C mentioned that:

Our leaders in this country and Africa at large have not shown commitment towards bettering the lives of the citizenry. No solid public health policies and development strategies, how can they now tell Nigerians that the vaccine is healthy for our consumption?

Respondent D sees the entire exercise as only known to the international community. In the interview it was stated thus:

The way we are in Nigeria and Africa as a whole we don't have any yardsticks to measure anything that is sent to us. We are consuming

nation or continent. Whatsoever is packaged and sent to us cannot be easily and thoroughly examined. So, how can we be so sure of the intents of the western world, who have shown a great disinterest in the welfare of the black race? In the first instance, the pandemic has not affected Africa to that extent to warrant us accepting a vaccine that we know little or nothing about.

From the interviews carried out, few issues were however raised against the acceptance of this vaccine. The first issue is that the vaccine has not been certified and fully tested to know the efficacy for humans to start consumption owing largely to the period of production.

Oyo is an ancient city with equal distributions of people along religious lines. That is to say, all major religions are represented. For instance there are Muslim, Christians and those of tradition. The campaign for the acceptance of the AstraZeneca brand of Coronavirus Vaccine in Oyo state can be seen from different perspectives: government, religious leaders, and opinion leaders and perhaps from social media influencers. After the federal government declared covid vaccine injection efficient and free, its acceptability of the said vaccine became contestable. Many people see it as a way of spreading the virus speedily without citizens aware of the negative after effects. There was skepticism about the efficacy of the vaccine especially owing to the fact that WHO was somewhat surprised about the low impact of covid 19 in Nigeria and other Africa countries. This was seen as a way of ensuring that many people in Nigeria get infected and through that means ensure that the spread of the virus was evenly distributed. Why was there skepticism about the vaccine? This question has been on the minds of many.

Another issue raised was that of leadership. It is imperative to note that leadership has been a complex phenomenon especially as it relates to Africa and its various leaders in the past six decades. It is stated that the problem of Africa as a whole is leadership. Several arguments have been advanced for this by many scholars. Leadership became one of the issues that culminated in the rejection of covid-19 vaccine in Nigeria. The leadership of Nigeria seems to be lackadaisical about the welfare of Nigeria. To the point that it seems that anything government cannot be genuine and cannot be trusted in Nigeria. It affects even government institutions in the sense that people do not give their best for the purpose of development. The concept of "*chop I chop na government money*" has eroded the entire landscape. Therefore, with this situation, it became apparent that even when various heads of government accepted the vaccine, citizens were told that what they accepted was water and not the actual vaccine.

Indeed, while some of the key government officials accepted the vaccine, others were either silent or came out rightly to denounce their commitment to taking it. An example is the Kogi State governor who publicly rejected the vaccine and also warned Nigerians about taking the vaccine. The scenario here can be further explained. Governor Yahaya Bello is an active member of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration and for him to champion a

movement towards the rejection of the vaccine leaves more to be desired. The level of vehemence at which he went about the campaign was a pointer to some high level charade. Whether he was right or wrong is immaterial. The important issue here is the acknowledgement of the fact that his actions and campaigns instigate or make some Nigerians disregard the acceptance of the vaccine. This to a large extent shows some major level of leadership challenge for a health programme that had crippled many nations of the world.

Furthermore, the issue of using the vaccine to control the world's population was also seen to have played out during the interview. The new world order has been in the pipeline for some time now and some religious leaders see the administration of the vaccine as a comfortable way of bringing it to existence officially without much persuasions.

### **Conclusion**

From the interview carried out with religious leaders in Oyo township, it could be deduced that acceptance of covid-19 vaccine is problematic based on certain issues raised. Although, these issues are paramount, the onus lies in the inability of leadership to show commitment to the welfare of the people. Whether the lack of acceptance or favourable disposition is done in ignorance or for the share interest of protecting lives, it goes a long way to display a high sense of distrust in the way and manner leaders in Nigeria are not accountable to their constituencies. The perception of religious leaders in Oyo might not be entirely different from those of other big towns and cities in Nigeria. This is because Oyo state is a cosmopolitan state made up of people from different walks of lives.

### **Recommendations**

It is thus recommended that government at all levels be able to carry the citizenry alone in order to awake in them the sense of patriotism which would further make the governance a more robust and creative affair. Furthermore, religious leaders should see their position as capable of bringing about negative or positive attitudes among citizens who are followers and who pledge support for their religious and moral creeds. Failure to teach and admonish their followers aright can affect the people and government alike.



## References

- Amabile, T. M., Schatzel, E. A., Moneta, G. B., & Kramer, S. J. (2004). Leader behaviours and the work environment for creativity: Perceived leader support. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15, 5–32.
- Begum J, Akbar-Mir N, Dev K, Buyamayum B, Wani MY, et al. (2020) Challenges and prospects of COVID-19 vaccine development based on the progress made in SARS and MERS vaccine development.
- Itodo, G. E, Enitan, S.S, Oyekale, A. O, Agunsoye, C. J, Asukwo, U. F, et al. (2020) COVID-19 among Healthcare Workers: Risk of Exposure, Impacts and Biosafety Measures- A Review. *Int J Health Safety Environ* 6: 534-548.
- Johns Hopkins University Center for Systems Science and Engineering (JHU-CSSE) (2020) Coronavirus: COVID-19 Global Cases by the JHUCSSE as at June 10, 2020.
- Singh K, Mehta S (2016). The clinical development process for a novel preventive vaccine: An overview. *J Postgrad Med* 62: 4-11.
- Sukmawani Bela Pertini (2021). “Why do people still reject COVID-19 vaccines in Indonesia? We need to solve structural problems behind the anti-vaccine movement. Retrieved on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2021 from [http://:www.the conversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)
- Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (2011). *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*. 9th Edition. Wadsworth Publishing Company: Belmont.
- World Health Organization (2020) Criteria for COVID-19 vaccine prioritization.
- Yukl, G. (2001). Leadership in organizations. *Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hal*.
- Zakeer, A. K. & Allah, N. I. K. (2016). Leadership Theories and Styles: A Literature Review. *Journal of Resources Development and Management*. An International Peer-reviewed Journal. Vol.16, 2016.