



Covid-19 and Eucharistic fellowship in Matthew 26.26-28: A legitimation and maintenance of Christian identity

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Abstract

The overall purpose of this article is to provide biblical evidence for the church's effectiveness in legitimating and maintaining a Christian identity, a matter which has recently been silenced by African government efforts on lockdown measures on the church during the emergence of Coronavirus in Africa. The objective of this study is to use social sciences alongside literary criticism to analyse Matthew 26:26-28 to explain the importance of the Eucharist and by large of the church in legitimating and maintaining a Christian identity as a response to narratives that seem to subordinate the basis for Christian identity. Critical analysis of the Roman banquet and Jewish Passover as reflected in Petronius' *Satyricon* and Mishnah' *Pesachim* 10, respectively, collectively present the social setting in the Roman Empire as the backdrop that prompted Matthew to employ the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) to legitimate and maintain a Christian identity for his community. This study attempts to answer this question; why did some Christians contest the recent government lockdown measures on the church during the advent of Coronavirus in Africa? Consequently, we argue that when circumstance arise that tend to subordinate the basis of Christian identity to some authority, the disadvantaged Christians will normally appeal to Christian belief systems that encompass traditions, norms and values not only to contest that authority but also to legitimate and maintain a Christian identity.

Keywords: Africa, Eucharist, Social Sciences, Gospel of Matthew, Coronavirus.

Introduction

To introduce the subject matter for this paper, it is crucial to briefly explore the rationale for considering the Church's voice on matters of pandemic and a brief outline of the methodology. The rationale for this research is based on the reason that Christianity is embraced by the largest part of the global population, particularly in the African continent. Conrad Hackett, Vegard Skirbekk, Brian J. Grim and Marcin Stonawski in their collective research established that of the 6.9 billion world population living in 200 countries, Christians of all ages constituted 2.18 billion, that is, over one third of the 2010 world population (Hackett, Brian J. Grim and Marcin



Stonawski, 9).¹ With such a large following spreading across the globe, it follows that Christianity ought to have a significant influence in global affairs. In 2018, a similar percentage of the Christian population existed in Africa. In their article “Christianity 2018: More African Christians and Counting Martyrs” (2017), Todd M. Johnson, Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman and Peter F. Crossing, projected the Christian global population to 1,820,926,00 of which 598,996,000, that is 32%, was in Africa (Johnson, et al. 2017: 22–27).

The location of one third of global Christians in Africa no doubt reveals how African governments ought to acknowledge the crucial continental contribution of Christianity in stipulating social economic and political policies. This ought to have been the norm even during the advent of Coronavirus in Africa. An African government that ignores the contribution of Christianity in the affairs of its citizen ignores the reality of the experiences of most of its citizens on the ground, on the one hand. On the other hand, because these lockdown measures on the church subordinate the role of Christian beliefs and worship that are important in shaping Christian identity, this provoked voice contesting these government-imposed lockdown measures. This article strives to answer this question; why did some Christians contest the recent government lockdown measures on the church during the advent of Coronavirus in Africa? Thus, this research not only has the objective of attempting to uncover the reality of Church’s hidden voices that could help in formulating pandemic related policies but it also brings to bear a critical role of Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper) in the community of Matthew to elaborate the role of early Christian beliefs and worship practices in legitimating and maintaining a Christian identity in the context of Roman banquets and the Jewish Passover which in effect collectively provides the backdrop of the emergence of community of Matthew and the social dynamics that shaped the identity of this community.

Consequently, to achieve this objective, the study is guided mainly by a qualitative research methodology that has a social identity theory constituted of these three key concepts—contestation, accommodation and legitimation—backed by literary criticism to collectively provide theoretical model for interpreting the discourse emerging mainly from the Petronius’ *Satyricon* and Mishnah *Pesachim* on Roman banquets and Jewish Passover, respectively. This approach allows us to explain how Matthew employs the Lord’s Supper to legitimate and maintain a double identity for his community. By pursuing a pathway that involves a brief literature review, the social setting of and identity formation in the community of Matthew and evaluation of African government, the study will eventually defend the argument when circumstance arise that tend to subordinate the basis of Christian identity to some authority, the disadvantaged Christians will normally appeal to Christian belief systems that encompass traditions, norms and values not only to contest that authority but also to legitimate and maintain a Christian identity.

A brief review of the debate

There are two categories of literatures on Coronavirus debates that are to be reviewed in order to provide the basis for the problem and question posed for this study. On the one hand, a

1. See their monograph, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population*, a research produced by Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, established that of the 6.9 billion world population living in 200 countries, Christians of all ages constituted 2.18 billion, that is, over one third of the 2010 world population (Hachett, et al, 2011: 9).



literature review concerning the response of coronavirus by four African countries—Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and South Africa—is briefly explored to give a representative case for the African continent. On the other hand, a literature review on recent research on pandemic is briefly explored to provide the gap of knowledge to be addressed by this study. During the emergence of 2020 Coronavirus in Kenya the government of Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto was bitterly blamed by a segment of Kenyan citizens, as reflected by the media, for forceful closure of the churches (Kahura)² and for failing to balance the often over-hyped requirement for hygienic sanitization and social distance with exposure to extreme cold weather conditions (Baarak)³ and brutal use of police force to compel citizens to submission. Moreover, Kenyan government lockdown measures were riddled with corruptions that was mainly linked to Kenyan health sector (Yusuf).⁴Tanzania’s response significantly differed from that of Kenyan government particularly for recognizing the active participation of the church in fighting the pandemic, and for not closing down the churches and the country’s economy (Star-Reporter).⁵ Ethiopia seems to have reluctantly recognized the church’s role in mitigating the coronavirus and they did not lockdown the economy though they locked some social institutions like schools (Oqubay).⁶ Furthermore, although the Ethiopian government had issued orders to lock down churches, contrary to Kenya’s government, they did not use police brutality to compel the dissenting voices to submission but instead Ethiopian police encouraged the dissenting worshipers to observe social distance as they provided security to them during prayers conducted outside the church. Interestingly, in her article “Government, Church, and the Community of Believers: Managing the Coronavirus in Ethiopia during Easter Time (#WitnessingCorona),” Alice Colombo⁷ shows that although during the advent of Coronavirus Ethiopian government issued lockdown measures against social gatherings, like churches, these lockdown measures were not strictly applied. For, instance, according to Alice:

2. Daudi Kahura, in his report, “COVID-19: The Great Disruptor of the Church in Kenya” (*The Elephant*: August 20th, 2020),” <<https://www.theelephant.info/culture/2020/08/20/covid-19-the-great-disruptor-of-the-church-in-kenya/>>: Accessed on September 18th, 2020).

3. Max Baarak, “Kenya’s Pre-existing Condition: Mistrust in the Government,” appearing in the sub-section of “Democracy Dies in Darkness” in the digital version of *The New Washington Post* (May 8th, 2020).

4. Mohammed Yusuf, “Kenya Police Fired Tear Gas at COVID-19 Corruption Protesters” published by the *Voice of America*, August 21st, 2020 <<https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/kenya-police-fire-tear-gas-covid-19-corruption-protesters>>: Accessed on September 18th, 2020).

5. *Star* (March 21st, 2020: <<https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2020-03-21-uhuru-set-for-national-prayer-day-against-coronavirus-at-state-house/>>. Accessed on September 10th, 2020).

6. According to Deloitte (May 2020) report, in the pre-COVID-19 period, Ethiopia’s GDP stood at 6.2% and during Coronavirus pandemic it dropped to 3.2 %. A report entitled “Ethiopia’s Unconventional COVID-19 response”, presented by Arkebe Oqubay, a senior minister and special advisor to the Ethiopia’s Prime Minister, to 2020 *World Economy Forum* (< <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/authors/arkebe-oqubay>>: Accessed 19/09/2020).

7. See <<https://www.medizinethnologie.net/government-church-and-the-community-of-believers-ethiopia-witnessing-corona/>>.



However, the government did not enforce these measures as strictly as expected, even though – especially during a State of Emergency, as in this case it was in power. For example, the believers who kept gathering in front of churches were tolerated by the police, who would just demand not to stand too close to each other. Additionally, they received a very Christian Easter message from their Prime Minister <https://www_mediz-inethnologie.net/government-church-and-the-community-of-believers-ethiopia-witnessing-corona/, Alice Colombo>: Accessed 19/9/2020).

Relaxation of the lockdown and state of emergence rules by Ethiopia's government agents, as presented here in Colombo's report, reveal Ethiopia government's reluctant recognition of the Church's active participation in addressing the pandemic. Thus, by avoiding the closure of the economy and applying relaxed lockdown rules and avoiding police brutality to enforce lockdown rules, Ethiopia's approach to Coronavirus was more human and closer to Tanzania's than Kenya's approach. Although South Africa response to Coronavirus focused mostly on scientific consultation, the government was criticized by members of South Africa Academy of Sciences for lack of consulting humanities and social sciences right at the advent of Coronavirus. Members of this academy complained that:

it is crucial that the National Coronavirus Command Council, and the structures reporting to it, such as the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19, include in its advisory bodies' scientists from a much broader range of disciplines. While it is important to have epidemiologists, vaccinologists and infectious disease experts on these bodies, we believe that the pandemic is not simply a medical problem but a social problem as well. This means that social scientists and humanities scholars should also form part of these advisory structures (June 11th, 2020: <https://theconversation.com/the-voices-missing-from-south-africas-response-to-covid-19-139403>. Accessed on 10/09/2020) (Naicker).⁸

The concern expressed by members of South African Academy of Sciences not only reveals the South African government' lack of consulting the social sciences to mitigate Coronavirus pandemic but it also shows the government's lack of concern for church's active participation. Although these lock down measures were accepted by some church leaders, they were vehemently contested resisted by some individuals, for instance, a pastor Beki Ngcobo who was compelled to obedience by a magistrate court (Nkanjeni).⁹ Ngcobo's call for his church members to defy government lockdown rules is backed by his theological convictions. Ngcobo claims that:

8. Naicker, "Voices Missing from South Africa's response to COVID-19", published in *The Conversations*", a publication of South African Academy of Sciences, presents a public statement on COVID-19 recently released by the South African Academy of Sciences that cautiously states. The statement is also found in "Public Statement on COVID-19," South African Journal of Science. Vol. 116 no.7/8 (July 2020), p32.

9. Unathi Nkanjeni, the *Sunday Times* <March 20th, 2020: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-03-20-pastor-bheki-ngcobo-insists-easter-services-should-continue-we-will-worship-the-lord-in-numbers/#>. Accessed on 12/09/2020).



“God knows more than everyone in this world. I trust God more than medical practitioners. I trust God more than the presidents of all countries.” Although the congregation responded negatively to Ngcobo’s call to defy the government lockdown rules, Kaveel Singh, reporting for *24 News* noted that Ngcobo himself remained true to his call. This he did by going for a solitude prayer on the Mountain on Easter during curfew hours. Ngcobo was fined ZAR 1500 by a Durban Magistrate Court for failing to confine himself to his residence during the nationwide lockdown between 27th March and 30th April 2020 (Kaveel).¹⁰ Ngcobo’s case might look like an isolated one in view of South African response to Coronavirus. But when viewed in the context of the defiance of Ethiopia lockdown rules by some Christians and the conviction of Tanzania’s president, JP Magufuli, Ngcobo’s contestation cannot just be rejected but ought to be considered as a representative voice for many citizens in the continent of Africa that vehemently contested lockdown of the church. The observation of these dissenting voices that contested lockdown of the church prompted the following question to be addressed by this article; why did some Christians contest the recent government lockdown measures on the church during the advent of Coronavirus in Africa? Answering this question is not only important because it helps to understand the convictions that prompted the dissenting voices, but it also attempts to address the need of a segment of citizens often neglected by some African government. To be noted from this brief literature review is a contestation against African government by a segment of Christians in Africa. By ordering for the closure of churches, these lockdown measures threatened the existence of theological basis of Christian identity. Christians value church worship not only for defining who they are but also for sustaining Christian corporate identity. The reasons for this contestation provided by the dissenting voices were mainly theologically backed because they centered on worship, participation in the Eucharist (Holy Communion), prayer, God’s omnipotence and omnipresence. What values do these theological reasons bear that compels these Christians to contest government lockdown orders particularly on the church? It is the objective of this study to answer this question by addressing the main questions raised earlier. But before we do that a brief review of three recent research on the Coronavirus is important for providing academic viewpoints emerging from on-going research on the pandemic.

In his recent article, Meylahn (2020) description of the governmental efforts to lockdown the church in response to Coronavirus as the enemy of God the Father, depicts his distastefulness of the government’s use of its authority to silence the church’s voice during the pandemic (Meylahn 2020:5–6). Addressing the question of eschatology (end time) provoked by the emergence of 2020 Coronavirus, De Souza’s major advice is for Christians to offer “deeper personal commitment to Jesus” without necessary getting hooked up on expecting Coronavirus to usher the second coming of Jesus to the world (de Souza 2020:4,7). Attempting to answer the question whether God is responsible for the emergence of coronavirus, Donkor response point to the spiritual origin of Coronavirus by attributing its emergence to Satan who takes advantage of irresponsible use of human free will (Donkor 2020: 1–3). Given this brief literature review, the following two issues that resonate with theological reason given for contesting government lockdown orders by a segment of Christians begin to emerge. On the one hand, Meylahn presents a theological reason for his distastefulness on the government lockdown orders by regarding the government as the enemy of the church; similarly, De Souza’s call for “deeper personal commitment to Jesus” presents an ethical reason backed by theological convictions. On the other

10. Kaveel Singh, “Covid-19: Controversial KZN clergyman pays fine for not staying home during lockdown” <<https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/covid-19-controversial-kzn-clergyman-pays-fine-for-not-staying-home-during-lockdown-20200515>>: Accessed 18/10/2020.



hand, Donkor's acknowledgement of the spiritual origin and sustenance of Coronavirus in effect points to a theological cause of the virus that goes beyond mere use of scientific or/medical expertise to tackle. Given these theological reasons, it becomes obvious that a more plausible response to Coronavirus requires a collective consented response embracing theological perspectives, medical expertise, among other players. This paper employs the Eucharist to describe Christian's theological response to the Coronavirus which in effect explains the rationale for Christian contestation on government lockdown measures on the Church during Coronavirus pandemic. To achieve this objective, it is crucial to engage a qualitative research methodology that blends literary analysis with social identity theoretical model. While the literary analysis is useful for analysing the discourse of Matthew 26:26-28, consequently, the social sciences will explore the issues of identity legitimation and maintenance emerging from the literary analysis. The social setting of the community of Matthew helps to clarify issues of identity legitimation and maintenance by providing first century CE social situation in the Roman Empire as the backdrop for the identity formation in the community of Matthew. This point is important to note as we will find out that claims to identity formation are mostly provoked by group interactions and relationships. In what follows, I briefly explore the analysis of Matthew' discourse (Matt 26:26-28) before observing the social setting of the community of Matthew in the Roman Empire.

Discourse analysis of Matthew 26.26-28

A brief discourse analysis of Matthew 26:26-28 presents Matthew's rhetorical argument in reference to Jesus' sayings on his 'body,' 'blood' and 'covenant.' So, this discourse analysis attempts to answer the question; what significance did Matthew derive from Jesus' sayings on his body, blood and the covenant? What did this have to do with the identity of his community? While it is the task of this analysis to answer the first question, the second question will be answered after observing the social setting of the community of Matthew.

V 26: Bread and Jesus command "Take and eat- this is my body"

Matthew's Gospel narrative presents Jesus hosting his disciples.¹¹ The meal takes place during Jewish Passover festival. Why does Matthew value the connection between Jesus' celebrations

¹¹Before we explain the meaning, it is important to note three semantic characteristics of this verse. First, Matthew employs Ἐσθιόντων (*esthiontoon*), a Greek verb participle present active genitive masculine plural from ἐσθίω (*esthioo*) that denotes, *eat, have a meal* (Bible Works 2010). As an adverbial or circumstantial participle (Wallace 2000: 272) that modifies ἔκλασεν (*eklasen*), a verb indicative aorist active 3rd person singular from κλάω (*klaoo*) which means, *break, break in pieces* (Bible Works 2010), it portrays the action of 'breaking the bread' happening contemporaneous to the circumstance of eating. Matthew's narrative presents Jesus as a host breaking bread to serve his guests. Second, we also note that Matthew's introductory words, which agrees with Mark (14:22a), has "the bread" as its focal point; "while they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave to his disciples, saying..." (Matt 26:26, NIV). But Luke's shorter introductory words to his version has "the cup" as its focal point and simply states; "After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said" (Lk 22:17). What does these similarities and differences between these three texts indicate? Scholars like C.S Keener and RT France suggest that the close similarities between these texts shows that Matthew and Luke used Mark's Gospel as a sources because Mark was written first before Luke and Matthew (Keener 1999: 33-41; France



of the Last Supper with Jewish Passover? This and any other question that will arise will be answered in due course. Besides Passover coincidence with the Last Supper, Matthew also seems to give special attention to the seating style and arrangement at the table, for he tells us “Jesus was *reclining*’ at the table with the twelve” (Matt 26:20). What are they reclining to do in Matthew’s Gospel narrative? They are reclining to “take and eat the bread|” which according to Jesus commands refers to his own body.¹² What does the “bread” and Jesus command “eat this is my body” mean? Was Jesus referring to his physical body as bread for the disciples? The significance of the elements of the Lord’s Supper either as symbolizing or marking the actual presence of Jesus during the celebration of the Eucharist has been a matter of debate among scholars. We shall revisit the debate to resolve it, at least from the semantic function of the elements of Eucharist, in the next section.

V 27-28: The cup and Jesus’ command *‘Drink from it, all of you; this is my blood of the Covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’*

In verse 27 καί (*kai*) translated ‘and’ in KJV and ‘then’ in NIV in the statement “*And he took the cup*” (KJV) is a coordinating conjunction that marks a continuative that connects clauses and sentences (Friberg, *Analytical Greek Lexicon*). By its nature of continuative, καί (and) connects

2007:90–92). This suggest that the similarities, at least in wording, between Matthew and Luke in relation to Mark, indicate that Matthew follows Mark’s version closely than Luke. Of course, all the three evangelists agree that this event of the Last supper took place during the Jewish Passover festival (Mk 14:12; Lk 22:7; Matt 26: 17). Mark and Luke tell us that during this day “it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb” (Mk 14:12b), or “the day ... which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed” (Lk 22:7). Third, it is important to note the *position* of seating for Jesus and his disciples while they were celebrating the Last Supper. Matthew tells us that “When evening came, Jesus was *reclining* at the table with the Twelve” (Matt 26:20). The original word translated “reclining” by NAS and NIV but is totally avoided by KJV and NRSV, is a verb indicative imperfect middle 3rd person singular of ἀνάκειμαι (*anakeimai*) which denotes *lie down* (Bible Works 2010). As a customary imperfect that describes the internal aspects that “portrays the action from within the event, without regard for beginning or end” (Wallace 2000: 232, 235), the verb *anakeimai* here depicts the Last Supper as a customary event commanded by Jesus to be regularly celebrated by his followers, the church. During the emergence of early Christianity, *anakeimai* portrayed a Christian and Roman imperial usage of this verb. According to Danker, *Greek NT Lexicon* (Bible Works 2010), in the New Testament times, *anakeimai* portrayed a privileged seating position (Jn 13:23) mostly accorded to guests at a wedding (Matt 22:10) or at an outdoor banquet (Jn 6:11). France has noted that *anakeimai* was “especially used for more formal or festival meals, when diners reclined in the Roman style around a central table” (France 2007: 854). Does this mean then Matthew was deliberately using Jesus’ story to spread Roman food culture?

¹²The verb ἐστίν (*estin*) which NIV translates to “is” is a verb-to be that refers to an indicative present active 3rd person singular from εἶμι (*eimi*) (Bible works 2010). According to Friberg’s *Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Bible Works 2010) the verb-to be *eimi* as a predicate refers to *be*, that is, it signifies what exists, either in terms of God's existence (Heb:11.6) or in Christ's self-designation of himself (Jn 8:58).



verse 26 to verse 27.¹³ This connection suggest that rhetorically the ‘bread’ and the reference to ‘Christ’ body’ and the ‘cup’ and the reference to ‘this is my blood’ symbolizes the redemptive event of God in Jesus in order to activate the metaphysical presence (reality beyond a merely physical presence) of Christ in the individual communicants and in the church during the celebration of the Eucharist. This symbolic presence of Christ in the church is what Paul calls a ‘mystery’ (Rom 16:25). How did this symbolic presence of Jesus and its attendant reminder of the redemptive event of Jesus inform the identity of the community of Matthew? The answer to this question requires a brief reconstruction of the social setting of the community of Matthew because New Testament scholars tell us that we express who we are in reference to other people’s group in our social environment (Wanamaker 1987:4; Esler 2014: 28; M’bwangi 2020a: 4). This means, unlike biological identity, social identity formation is a relational enterprise.

Social setting

Identity, Power and culture in the Roman Empire

Following the evidence within Matthew’s Gospel and external evidence from Ignatius and Josephus it seems that Matthew wrote his Gospel around 80-85 CE to address a community in Antioch.¹⁴ Thus, the community of Matthew was located within the larger Eastern part of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire employed assimilation as a social political strategy to spread

¹³According to Keener, this connection indicates that “[b]y identifying the cup of wine as “my blood poured out” “Jesus adds to the symbolism of the broken bread in v. 26: it is his own imminent death that is the basis of his new interpretation of the Passover” (France 2007: 866). Keener suggests that the cup symbolizes the redemptive blood of Jesus shed to complete the meaning of the “bread “and the attendant statement referring to Christ body in verse 26. According to Hartman following Jung, ‘bread’ and ‘Christ’ body’ refer to the “presence of Christ [which] is not only located in the elements of bread and wine, even primarily, in the community gathered around the elements” (Hartman 2010:54).

¹⁴ Jesus’ genealogy (Matt. 1:1), the notion that “news about him [Jesus] spread all over Syria” (Matt 4:24) coupled with Jesus’ missionary focus on Jews (Matt 10:5-6) and Gentiles (Matt 28:19), and the external evidence from writers such as Ignatius (*Smyr* 1:1–2), the provenance of Matthew’s Gospel can be identified as Antioch. Given this internal and external evidence, I propose that Matthew composed his Gospel around 80-85 CE in order to constitute a community that was mostly made up of diaspora Jews and a minority of Gentiles. Josephus, a first century CE Jewish historian, suggests that in first century CE Antioch had a sizable Jewish population that enjoyed some imperial privileges (Josephus, *AJ* 12: 119; Josephus, *BJ* 7:43). Rodney Stark, in his description of the socially deplorable condition of Antioch, paints a picture of a city of Antioch experiencing social chaos because of its overcrowded population with concomitant health hazards that would have caused despair and danger to a city in desperate need of revitalization (Stark 1991: 191–200). If we agree that Matthew’s audience was located in Syria which was a Roman Province, then to reconstruct the social setting of Matthew that relates to the celebration of the Lord’ Supper, we have to consider the social function of the Roman banquets and the Jewish Passover because they provide meals that were significant in maintain Roman identity and Diaspora-Jewish identity, respectively.



maintain its power and dominance.¹⁵ So, we shall briefly explore Roman banquets to envision how *assimilation* was employed, for example, by the Roman elites to maintain their dominance on Roman citizens and subjects, thereby subordinating the cultural identity of these people to Roman power and culture. Another question that will be answered in due course is this; for people who were aware of their identity as embedded in Judaism or in the Jesus Movement, how would they respond to this assimilation? Did they just freely acquiesce to the *assimilation* of Roman culture? By observing the seating arrangements, social integration and hierarchical dynamics in Trimalchio's banquet, not only shall we discern Rome's means of assimilation, but we shall also envision the way Roman elites attempted to maintain a common identity and establish asymmetric power relations in the Empire.

Trimalchio's Banquet in Petronius Satyricon

The source of information for Trimalchio's banquet is a first century *genre* of satire (*Satyricon*, abbreviated *Sat*) which was composed by Petronius (Heseltine).¹⁶ To be noted is that by his virtue of appointment by Nero to be a *Sevir* (a royal cultic priest), Trimalchio, a former slave, had acquired the status of a Roman elite: kind of a modern-day middle-class citizen who represented the Emperor's interest in the Empire. In his article, "Forms of Commensality in the Greco-Roman Associations", Ascough (2008:37–45), applying Claude Grignon's typology of commensality, Ascough discusses 4 types of Roman association—segregative commensality, exceptional commensality, transgressive commensality and extra-domestic commensality. These special occasions help to explain how the Romans held banquets to maintain communal life in the Empire.

The boisterous and self-display of his riches, statues and gold-adorned body that Trimalchio displayed during banquets, reveals his wealthy and social power in the Empire.¹⁷

¹⁵ In her essay, "Looking for Identity, Culture and Power" where she defines "culture" as "shared meanings" based on her conviction that when people belong to a particular cultural group they "share a set of assumptions and experiences, Janet Huskinson (Huskinson 2009a: 5) argues that the concept 'Romanization' refers to a process, whereby Roman culture was spread across the empire through assimilation. This assimilation, according to Huskinson, was achieved either through a pattern of *imitation* or *acculturation* whereby the non-Roman local elites adopted for themselves some of the Roman practices in order to leverage social status (Huskinson 2009a: 7, 21). The concept of *assimilation* here refers to the process of "social integration (becoming similar to one's neighbours): it concerns social contact, social interactions and, social practices" (Barclay 1991: 92). That means, because *assimilation* allowed people to willingly acquire Roman culture, it served a double purpose of attempting to maintain Rome's culture and at the same time maintain a *common identity* in the empire.

¹⁶ Michael Heseltine is the editor of the novel *Satyricon* which was written by Gaius Petronius Arbiter who was a Roman courtier (a royal court attendant as a companion or adviser to the Roman Emperor) during the reign of Emperor Nero (37- 68 CE).

¹⁷ As host of the banquet, during dinner time, Trimalchio displayed not only his wealthy stature by displaying his golden finger rings and bracelet and ivory bangles, but he also distinguished himself from the various slaves and guest at the banquet by conspicuously being ushered into the dining table by the "sound of music" and occupied "the first place kept for him in the new style" and "he picked his teeth with a silver quill" (Petronius *Sat* 31-33). During the banquet, not only were the

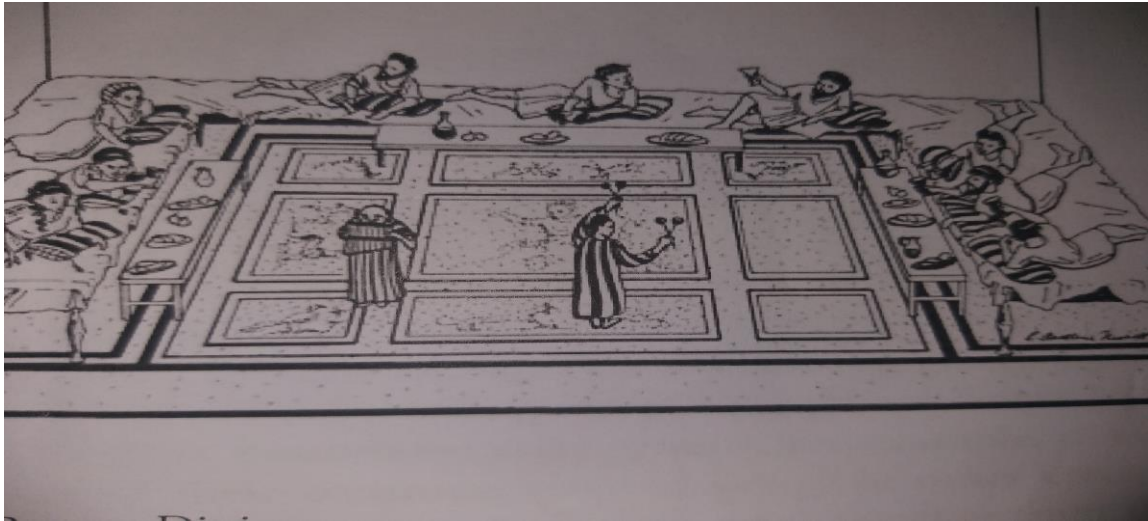


Figure 1: Roman-style Triclinium with traditional 9 diner guest (Smith 2012: 27).

In his book-chapter, “The Greco-Roman Banquet as a Social Institution,” Smith, following Roller, explaining the significance of *reclining* in Roman banquets comments that:

[t]he Greco-Roman banquet is characterized most specifically by the practice of reclining. This practice was virtually universal throughout the Greco-Roman world as a marker for the formal banquet of significance. In the Greek tradition, such a banquet had two main courses. The first course was the *deipnon*, the eating course proper, a term which is translated “dinner” or “banquet.” The second course was the *symposium* (Greek: *symposium*) or “drinking party” [whereby]... the entertainment of the evening would take place while the dinners lingered over cups of wine (but wine mixed with water, which allowed for a full evening of “lingering”) (Smith 2012: 24).

Given Smith’s brief exposition of the Greek banquets, Trimalchio’s celebration of the banquet indicates that Roman banquets were a modified tradition of meals borrowed from the Greek Republic. This banquet reveals asymmetric power relations between the Roman elites and Roman subjects and citizens in several ways. For instance, a special highest reclining seat than that of the guest was preserved for the host; not only were slaves expected to entertain the host and their guests without participating in eating the meals with them at the same time, but they were also to be punished on the spot by the host, for instance if a spoon accidentally dropped

slave-servants expected to serve, but they were also not allowed to seat and eat at the same time with the host and guests. They were also intimidated by being forced to sing as they swept the floor during the banquet. If the Slave-servant caused plates to fall during the banquet, they were “punished by a box on the ear [A physical blow struck on the ear usually as a punishment or reprimand]” (Petronius *Sat* 33, 36). During dinner conversations, Trimalchio interpreted zodiac signs to justify and sustain Roman culture of social inequality and power by assigning peoples fate to the star to which they belonged (*Sat* 39).



during the banquet. In all of its manner of celebration, the banquet focused on elevating the social image of the elite above the guests and the servant-slaves.¹⁸ This brief exposure of Trimalchio reveals that Roman banquets procured the Roman program of assimilation not only by striving to maintain a common civic identity through the uniform characteristics of the banquets in the Empire (Smith 2012: 28), but also by creating and sustaining rigid boundaries of identity between the high ranking Roman officials and the low ranking slaves and common people. Given social function of Roman banquets in assimilating Roman citizens and subjects to Roman culture, as presented by Trimalchio's example and elaborated by Smith and Ascough, how did the Jews in the Diaspora and members of the community of Matthew respond to this Roman social political strategy (of assimilation into the Roman culture)? It is the task of the next two sections to answer this question.

Diaspora Jewish Hybrid Identity

The purpose of *assimilation* in the Roman Empire was to effect Rome's ideology of domination through Roman and Jewish elites.¹⁹ Given Trimalchio's banquet, which attempted to subordinate Diaspora Jews to Roman culture, was contested by Diaspora Jews through the celebration of the Passover. In this case, contestation refers to "a social practice [that] entails *objection* to specific issues that matter to people" in authority (Wiener 2017: 112). Given that contestation "allows citizens to critically engage with the norms that govern them" it provides a "*facilitative* condition for citizens to obtain freedom from domination within a given society" (Wiener 2017: 112). Because contestation is observed in "speech and language" (Wiener 2007: x), rhetorically it can

¹⁸While the Greek banquets mainly constituted two-meal course; dinner, drinking part--the Roman banquets (as illustrated by Trimalchio), had a three course--variety of fruits, wine and then dinner. Roman banquets portray a specific structure that focused on elevating the social image of the host. The host facilitated meals which were introduced by eating a variety of fruits that included grapes, then food that constituted of a variety of meat was followed by drinking wine, a symbolic actions in praise of Bacchus (Roman god of agriculture, wine and fertility) accomplished by a boy with vine leaves and ivy in his hair who was then dismissed by Trimalchio, concluded the eating of food (Petronius *Sat* 39-41). After the dinner, finally the banquet was closed with a conversation (*Sat* 41). Ascough's research helps us to classify Trimalchio's banquet as a type of "extra-domestic commensality" whose social function "seems to have provided wealthy freemen, who were barred by their status from holding municipal magistracies [office of magistrate in the Roman Empire], with an opportunity to acquire public prestige" (Ascough 2008: 44).

¹⁹ In his monograph, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James Scott noted that Rome extended its asymmetric power of domination through three types of domination, namely, *material* domination, *status* domination and *ideological* domination (Scott 1990: 198). Our concern is limited to *ideological* domination which according to Carter, following Scott, refers to utilization of "a set of conviction ... that justified and expressed elite oppression, privilege, self-benefit rule, and society inequality...cultural hierarchical order and exploitative practices (that) were sanctioned as the will of the god" (Carter 2011: 297). Trimalchio's behaviour in his celebration of the banquet in all manners reveals elite's *ideological* domination in the Roman Empire. To negotiate their identity in the context of this ideological domination promoted in the context of assimilation, in a manner that avoids violent repercussions from the Empire,¹⁹ the oppressed group not only employed *contestive* practices (Carter 2011: 298), but they also *identified* with a superior identity to esteem the self-image of the minor groups (M'bwangi 2019: 128).



be inferred from written text, cultural and archaeological artefacts and sites, for instance as noted from Jewish celebration of the Passover. Rabbi Jack Abramowitz and Joshua Kulp translations of the Mishnah *pesachim*, are instructive.

The declaration in Mishnah *Pesa* 10 that “even the poorest in Israel must not eat (on the night of Pesah) until he reclines” not only presents a borrowed Roman practice of seating (reclining) but which was modified to make Passover more inclusive than was the case with the Roman banquets, but it contested asymmetric power relations that had become normative in the Roman Empire and were procured, for instance, by the celebration of the Roman banquet. Consequently, the during the Passover meal all the people, irrespective of their social status, could participate in the meal together with the host. Moreover, the Passover, unlike Roman banquets, became pedagogical because according to Raban Gamaliel’s (*Pesa* 10:3-5) instance that during the Passover the host is supposed to tell the participants that the reason for eating “matzah (Bitter herbs),” offerings”, “Jerusalem Temple” and “the lamb”²⁰ is to remember how God redeemed their ancestors from Egyptian slavery (*Pes* 10:5), not only presents the Passover as a pedagogical moment, but it also facilitated the freedom of Diaspora Jews to ground their identity on Israel ancestral traditions. Thus, the connection of the Passover with Israel Festival offering and the Jerusalem temple marked the celebration of the Passover among the Diaspora Jews not as an inheritance of the Roman tradition *per se* but instead it marked Jewish *hybrid identity* in the Diaspora; an identity which was acquired through the practicing of ancient Israelite temple traditions in the context of borrowed Roman banquet traditions.

Thus, Keener’s observation that the Diaspora Jews “who ate the Passover commemorated the deliverance of their ancestors [and that] [t]he language of the Passover assumed the participation of current generations in the exodus event” (Keener 1999: 773), underscores the pedagogical role of the Jewish Passover that symbolized the deliverance of the Diaspora Jews by God of their ancestors from the first century Roman imperial domination. Consequently, Diaspora Jews concluded the Passover with the host calling the participants to “extol and acclaim the One Who performed all these miracles for our ancestors and for us...He brought us forth from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to rejoicing, from darkness to great light and from servitude to redemption. Therefore, let us say before Him, Hallelujah! “(*Pes* 10:5). By implication, these hymns, which in Mishnah is referred to as “hymns of Hallel” (*Pes* 10: 6), which Keener say they “fit [as ... most ancient Mediterranean banquets” (Keener 1999:773) and which according to the school of Shammai “were chanted after the second cup (France 2007: 869) indicate a further contestation of the Roman banquet accomplished by attributing praise and worship to Israel God instead of to the numerous Roman gods. If the celebration of Jewish Passover was employed by Jews in the Diaspora to contest Roman assimilation in order to procure a Jewish hybrid identity, how would the community of Matthew respond to Roman assimilation and promotion of Jewish hybrid identity through the Passover? Answering this question is important because according to Malina (1993:63-81) in the Mediterranean antiquity, people expressed their identity *dyadically*, that is, in relation to other people, communities, institutions, families and associations within their proximity.

20 . Abramowitz, “Pesachim.” In MISHNAH YOMIT-OU TORAH. <<https://outorah.org/p/13385/>>: Accessed on 15/10/2020/.



Identity of the community of Matthew

Three social sciences concept that will help us to elaborate Matthew's usage of the Eucharist to inform the identity of his community in a social setting that included the celebration of the Roman banquets and Jewish Passover are *identification*, *accommodation* and *legitimation*. By engaging these concepts, I want to support a two-fold argument that Matthew accommodated Jewish cultural tradition of the Passover to legitimate the Christian identity of his community, on the one hand. On the other hand, Matthew identified with tradition of the Eucharist in the Jesus Movement to contest Roman imperial assimilation in order to maintain a Christian identity for his community.

Accommodating Jewish Cultural Tradition

Given the social context of the Roman banquets and Passover celebration, we propose that, Matthew employed the Eucharist to legitimate and maintain a Christian identity for his community. In this case, *Accommodation* refers to merging of cultural traditions whereby some cultural traditions are subordinated to the other for the purposes of reinterpretation (Barclay 1991, 96). In this study, *legitimation* refers to the use of traditional sacred texts or practices to rationalize and validate the religious status of a movement.²¹ In Matthew's version of the Eucharist accommodates Jewish Passover mainly in two ways. By these two actions of accommodating Jewish use of the lamb and the wine with the bread and his blood, respectively, Matthew's Jesus reinterprets the Jewish tradition of Passover to point to the redemption of mankind that will be accomplished through his sacrificial death on the cross. Consequently, Jesus' death at the cross establishes a new covenant whose value supersedes that of the Israel by embracing not only Jews but all human kind. This is the significance emphasized by the section of the verse stating "this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for *many* for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:27c-28a).

By accommodating the Passover in such a way that it pointed back to the covenant of Moses (Ex 26:6-7 and Jeremiah (34: 31-34, Matthew's provides the rationale for *legitimizing* the identity of his community by symbolizing their belonging to the God of the Israelites and by implication God of the Jews. Thus, in his Gospel Matthew values Jesus' command to his disciples to reach out to the Jews (Matt 10:5-6) and the Gentiles (Matt 28:19). By appealing to Israel covenant, Matthew employs Israel's sacred traditions to legitimate the beliefs of his community in a manner that transcends the community's own history (Berger 1969:33-34). Matthew accommodated Jewish Passover to legitimate a Christian identity by emphasizing that the Jewish Passover which provided the moment for Diaspora Jews to look backward to the deliverance of their ancestors from Egyptian slavery, for Christians it pointed to Jesus' sacrificial death on the Cross for the purpose of delivering human kind from sin (The words of Jesus 'Take and eat; this is my body': Matt 26:26).

21. Max Weber and Peter Berger proposed two ways in which movements rationalize their social status. On the one hand, Weber noted that adherents of charismatic movements tend to either traditionalize or rationalize the status of a movement in order to legitimate their charismatic authority (Weber 1968: 246). On the other hand, Berger contends that some leaders tend to legitimate the beliefs of a movement through a sacred frame of reference to bestow ontological status to the movement and facilitate its validity and sustenance in a manner that transcends its own history (Berger 1969:33-34).



Contesting the Roman Banquets.

By celebrating a Eucharist that had Jesus as its focal point rather than the Roman elite or the Emperor, Matthew eventually contested the role of the Roman banquet in procuring Roman dominance in order to identify with a Eucharistic tradition practiced in the Jesus Movement (Mk. 14: 18; Lk 22: 12; 1 Cor. 11:24-26) that had become normative for maintaining a Christian identity. For legitimating the identity of his community on the person of Jesus and maintaining it in reference to the Eucharistic tradition practised in the Jesus Movement, theologically Matthew validates a double identity for the church; an earthly and a heavenly identity. This resonates with Paul's view of the church as the 'body of Christ' (Rom 12:5; 1Cor 12: 12-27) having Jesus Christ as its 'head' in heaven (Col 1:18). That means, for Christians, Eucharist Fellowship is a continuous declaration of the legitimation and maintenance of their double identity. Consequently, Christians uphold a double identity; an earthly one to which they belong with other fellow Christians and heavenly identity in which individual Christians are mysteriously represented by Jesus in heaven. In other words, customary celebration of the Eucharist as a sacrament for Christians, is a strategy for Christians to maintain this double identity.

This insight of the Eucharist as a reflection of Christians' strategy for *legitimizing* and *maintaining* a double identity reveals the importance of the church for Christians' performance of their collective identity. To lockdown the church is to lockdown a social institution that is crucial in legitimating and maintaining self-understanding of who Christians are. This prompts the question: what kind of message did African government lockdown on the church during Coronavirus send to Christians who saw the church as a cradle of their double identity? To answer this question, a brief evaluation of the recent lockdown of the church by some African governments, is crucial.

Evaluation of African response to covid-19 Kenya

At the onset of 2020 Coronavirus in Kenya, President Uhuru Kenyatta's remark during National Prayer Day that 'With this in mind and after consulting a cross-section of ordinary Kenyans as well as our religious leaders, I have decided to declare this coming Saturday, 21st March 2020, as a National Day for Prayer,'²² seems to reveal Uhuru's acknowledgement of the Church's authority which is essential in addressing pandemic. However, when juxtaposed against reports indicating that "Dozens of people, including a 13-year-old boy, have been killed" and hundreds injured by Kenyan police ²³ and persistent contestation by a segment of Christians to President

22. See the article, "Uhuru set for National Prayer Day against Coronavirus at State House," published in the digital version of *Star* (March 21st, 2020: < <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2020-03-21-uhuru-set-for-national-prayer-day-against-coronavirus-at-state-house/>>Accessed 09/10/2020).

23 See the report "Kenya: Legal action taken over cops' lockdown brutality" < <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/Africa/kenya-legal-action-taken-over-cops-lockdown-brutality/1983085>>. Accessed on 17/10/202).



Uhuru's lockdown measures on the churches,²⁴ the hopes of upholding the churches' voice signalled by Uhuru's speech dissipate away. Not only does mitigation of church worship through lockdown reveal the lack of recognition by the government of the significance of the Church in procuring the identity of Christians, but also the theological efficacy of the Eucharist to maintain this double-identity is shredded away. Hence, some Christians contested the government lockdown measures.

Tanzania

The response by John Pombe Magufuli to set aside three days for prayer to fight Coronavirus²⁵, reveals the need for spiritual weapons to fight off Coronavirus. Consequently, Magufuli's believes that "Corona cannot survive in the body of Christ; it will burn." His further comment saying "[t]hat is exactly why I did not panic while taking the Holy Communion," not only expresses his recognition of the value of the Eucharist in legitimating and maintaining the identity for Christians, but it also points out the therapeutic significance of the Eucharist; the Eucharist's potency to heal the body of Christ (church) thereby resonating with Isaiah's prophecy that through his "wounds we are healed" (Isa 53:5, NIV). Hence, no contestation from Christians observed so far on Magufuli's refusal to lockdown the church during Coronavirus.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's response to the advent of Coronavirus that did not use police brutality to enforce compliance to dissenting voices but rather encouraged the dissenting voices to keep social distance in addition to receiving a Christian Easter message from their Prime Minister,²⁶ reveals government's reluctant recognition of the church in legitimating and maintaining Christian identity. Given this response, relaxation of the lockdown rules by Ethiopian government allowed Christians to be guided by their conscious, not government strict rules, to make decisions whether to attend the church for worship during the advent of Coronavirus.

South Africa

South African government application of courts and the police to enforce lock down measures on the churches,²⁷ reveals the government refusal to recognize the significance of the Eucharist and the church by large in maintaining Christian identity. Although some churches, like the Roman Catholic, acquiesced to lock down imposed by the South African government on churches

24. See article "Covid-19: Opposition after Uhuru's tough rules for reopening churches" <<https://nation.africa/kenya/news/covid-19-opposition-after-uhuru-s-tough-rules-for-reopening-churches-1446308>>: Accessed on 17/10/2020).

25. See the article "Magufuli sets aside three days of prayers in Tanzania over Covid-19" <<https://nairobinews.nation.co.ke/general/magufuli-sets-aside-three-days-of-prayers-in-tanzania-over-covid-19>>: Accessed on 17&10&2020)

26 <<https://www.medinethnologie.net/government-church-and-the-community-of-believers-ethiopia-witnessing-corona/>>: Accessed on 17/10/2020.

27. See Zamandulo Malonde - 27 July 2020, "Lockdown regulations ignoring our rights — Port Elizabeth church" < <https://www.heraldlive.co.za/news/2020-07-27-lockdown-regulations-ignoring-our-rights-bay-church/>>: Accessed on 17/10/2020). See also Arisa Janse Van Rensburg, "South Africa: Lockdown - Tshwane Pastor Says Cops Scaled Church Wall to 'Arrest People' - Report" (<https://allafrica.com/stories/202005200715.html>: Accessed on 17/10/2020).



during,²⁸ some churches, such as the Word of Faith Christian Centre and individual leaders, like Bishop Beki Ngcobo of Zion Church,²⁹ contested these lock down measures for limiting church worship to only a few people. The observation by Nkanjeni of Ngcobo contesting lockdown measures saying “the banning rule would not apply to his church because the president ‘is not God,’” resonates with the petition raised by Word of Faith Christian Centre through their lawyers that describes the lock down on the church as a form of injustice leveraged upon Christians by the government. This contestation on South African government by these church leaders reveal efforts of citizens striving to defend the significance of the Church in sustaining a double-identity; contestation here is applied by Christians as an attempt to subordinate government authority to that of the church in matters of worship.

Despite the varied responses accorded to African government lockdown on the church measures by Christians during the advent 2020 Coronavirus, a steady protestation against these measures by a segment of Christians exacerbated by their conscious knowledge of the theological significance of the church in legitimating and maintaining Christian identity, has been observed through this evaluation. The contestation noted here against African governments during Coronavirus resonates with the contestation of Roman banquets reflected in the celebration of the Lord’s supper in Matthew’ community; the common element is that in both cases, the contestation has been applied as a strategy that reveals the uncontested theological significance of the church, as body of Christ, in maintaining Christian identity.

Conclusion

Summary of the findings

The study has defended the argument that when circumstance that tend to subordinate the significance of Christian identity to earthly authority, the disadvantaged Christians will normally appeal to theological significance of Christian traditions, beliefs, norms and values to contest those authorities in order to legitimate and maintain a double identity. The use of assimilation to explore Roman Empire has enabled this study to observe how Trimalchio, a Roman freed slave, employed a Roman banquet to promote Roman culture that mainly focused on elevating the social image of the Roman elites. The application of accommodation to read Jewish celebration of the Passover in the Diaspora, enabled the study to reveal how Jewish Passover contested the Roman strategy of assimilation in Empire to legitimate a Jewish hybrid identity in the Diaspora. Roman imperial banquet celebration and the Jewish Passover provided the social setting of the first century CE as a backdrop for the emergence of Matthew’s Community. To respond to this situation in a manner that avoids assimilating his community to the Roman Empire or subordinating it to Diaspora Judaism, Matthew employed the Eucharist to accommodate Jewish Passover to legitimate the identity of his community, on the one hand. On the hand, he employed the Eucharist to identify with the Jesus Movement to protest the Roman Empire in order to

28. See Crux Staff, “Church in South Africa supports government’s COVID-19 efforts, archbishop says” <<https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2020/04/church-in-south-africa-supports-governments-covid-19-efforts-archbishop-says/>>: Accessed on 17/10/2020).

29. See Unathi Nkanjeni, “Pastor Bheki Ngcobo insists Easter services should continue: 'We will worship the Lord in numbers'” <<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-03-20-pastor-bheki-ngcobo-insists-easter-services-should-continue-we-will-worship-the-lord-in-numbers/>>: Accessed on 17/10/2020).



maintain the identity of his community. Matthew's strategy reveals the theological significance of the Eucharist in legitimating and maintaining a double identity for the church as a body of Christ; an earthly identity and a heavenly identity. In conclusion, the study has shown that the awareness by Christians of the role of worship in legitimating and maintaining Christian identity has the potency to compel them (Christians) to contest any government that attempts to subordinate this role of the church to a government authority. This has been illustrated by the dissenting voices that emerged during the recent advent of Coronavirus in Africa and the emergence of the community of Matthew in the Roman Empire.

Recommendations to Pandemic Policy Revision

Following this study, we would like to make two recommendations. First, to avoid unnecessary antagonism between governments and religious institutions, whenever a pandemic hits around, this study recommends for the revision of pandemic management policies to avoid tempering with worship as sanctioned by the constitution of a given country in order to guarantee religious institutions such churches, Mosques, Temples, the freedom of choice to worship. However, this freedom of choice to worship during the pandemic should not be forced on citizens. Those who feel the need to abstain from worship should be allowed to do so just as those who chose to attend to religious institutions for worship.

Second, whenever a pandemic occurs, to avoid applying lockdown measures that will be contested by religious institutions, African governments could institute forums that involve all stakeholder (churches, mosques, temples, medical experts, scientific research institutions, legal experts) to develop home-grown response to pandemic that avoids crippling the economy, mitigates brutal use of police force, and promotes citizens' ownership of the responses.

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