

Research Report

Unequal yoke: The paradox of religious slavery

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Abstract - Slavery is a historical reality of most societies in Africa. Lately, there has been an outcry on the resurgence of slavery with modern trends that include religious slavery which has become the fad of many clergies, who utilize their privileged positions, capitalizing on the gullibility and desperation of members to exploit them in the bourgeois/proletariat form of relationship. Ironically, Christianity is a redemptive tool for the emancipation of mankind, yet, it has been used to entrap adherents in the bondage it purports to liberate from. Studies have paid greater attention to other forms of modern slavery, like child trafficking, forced labour, and forced marriage, but the paradox of religious slavery in Nigeria is a dialectical contradiction that requires anthropological inquiry. This paper examined the role of the clergy in perpetuating slavery to uncover the motive(s) underlying the act and its implications for society. Marxist's perspectives on religion and fetishism of commodity, elaborated by Taussig (1980) provide theoretical explanations. The study revealed that pastors use intimidating prophecies and scaring messages to enslave adherents to obtain material/financial benefits from them. It poises that such engagement negates societal expectations of pastors as advocates of morality and custodians of trust and urge them to desist from it.

Keywords: Religion, Slavery, Dialectics, Paradox, Clergy.

Introduction

In recent times, there has been outcry and concern about the resurgence of slavery which, of course, is reminiscent of the obnoxious historical past of Africa and other parts of the world, where exploitation, deprivation, oppression and injustice flaws human relations, creating perpetual boundaries and segregations. Slavery, though abolished in the 18th century, has left enduring memories of fear, distrust and insecurity that has grim consequences. Lately, slavery has resuscitated in diverse forms, differing in some cases from the compulsive sort of the earlier form. Sometimes, it is the willful and voluntary submission of oneself to enslavement through illegal migration, as was the case of Libya deportees in 2018, and the subtle deluding of many people into religious bondage.

In antiquity, slavery was premised on war and indebtedness. Presently, racism underlines slavery. The murder of George Floyd in June 2020 that led to 'Black lives matter' protest in America and other parts of the world is reminiscent of the historical past of black Americans. Other factors include migration and labour as it is in India, prostitution and sex slave commonly reported in Italy, forced labour, forced marriage and child trafficking underpin slavery which has multiplied globally with over 40.3 million people involved in modern slavery according to [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) and the [Walk Free Foundation](#) (2017). This paper focuses on religion, specifically Christianity, as liable for the entrapment and subjugation of many people in modern slavery. Ironically, Christianity is renowned for its redemptive role as epitomized by Jesus' death on the cross, consequently, it should liberate the oppressed from bondage. [Akinfenwa et al. \(2014\)](#) buttressed this point when they noted that religion engrosses man's anguishes, and replaces it with hope, beyond the mundane world into eternity (heaven). This being the hope, religion holds great expectation for its adherents who sometimes have to forebear the difficulties of the present world in the hope of eternal rest. Lately, religion has become a mechanism of oppression, exploitation, domination and control signifying departure, deviation, and contradiction from the form of Christianity prescribed and exemplified by Jesus Christ, to the reinvented form practiced by some clergymen. Who artfully devise strategies to lure unsuspecting adherent to their doom. The subtlety employed in

perpetuating this ungodly act makes the motives difficult to detect though. Ideally, slavery is associated with physical torments, subjugation and psychological trauma that reduces, debases, and devalues the individual to mere chattel and commodity object with a price tag. In contrast, religious slavery promises blessings, breakthroughs, and spiritual security in a world full of uncertainty. It thus conjures hope that leaves victims unsuspectingly entrapped in what may appear as voluntary, yet, exploitative relationship, at personal and collective whims and caprices. Little wonder, Marx implied that religion significantly impairs and hinders reasoning.

Anthropological documents on slavery date back to the classical works of [Boas \(1938\)](#), [Patterson \(1982\)](#), [Meillassoux \(1986\)](#) and a host of others, but the focus has been on ancient slavery, particularly the transatlantic slave trade in Africa, leaving a huge gap in the exploration of modern slavery in anthropology literature. Even with the deportation of many Nigerian youths from Libya in 2018 that stirred up media publicity and scholarly research on the resurgence of slavery, the reinvented form of voluntary enslavement and the ambivalence of religion as the underpinning force driving it is rare. It thus becomes necessary to explore this development with the anthropological lens, primarily to examine the role of the clergy in perpetuating religious slavery and uncover the motive(s) underlying the act. Also, to examine the strategies employed, in other to reveal the artistry that shroud and sustain the obnoxious practice. Lastly, to analyse the ambivalence of religion (Christianity) perpetuating slavery and oppression that it should emancipate from.

Conceptual and theoretical explanations

Religion as a concept has no singular definition. Scholars conceptualize it from various theoretical and disciplinary perspectives as functionalism, symbolic interactionism, conflict, anthropology, sociology and religion, respectively. Anthropologists are more inclined to examine the significance of religion to the group or society that practices it. Therefore, religion in its complexity encompasses culture, belief systems, and world view that relates mortal beings with a supernatural being.

[Hamilton \(2001\)](#) perceives religion as a psychological factor inherent in all human beings and provides support for social values and social stability. Thus conceived, religion is universal and important as functionalists like Durkheim would opine, arguing that

religion is integrative and provides social cohesion, group solidarity, and collective consciousness (Durkheim 1976). Weber's stake is that as a cultural and belief system, religion builds support for other social institutions in society. Religion, therefore, plays a very crucial and supportive role not only for institutions in the society, much more, for individuals that need such support to wither through life's challenges. Thus, they hold tenaciously to it, expressing their faith in the hope that it will alleviate suffering and conquer fear.

Regrettably, for some, that faith has been betrayed by clergymen, who capitalize on the gullibility of members to exploit them in feudal/serf or bourgeoisie/proletariat like relationships. They capitalize on divine injunctions and their privileged position to take advantage of the unalloyed trust bestowed on them as the shepherd and spiritual guardians to cajole and exploit members of their hard-earned resources. This observation is not lost to scholars, who noted that some religious adherents are exploited by their leaders who prosper at their expense (Akinfenwa *et al.* 2014, Agazue 2015, Udoh 2020). Ignorance, fear, and insecurity have kept some church members sheepishly following their pastors and church leaders that assume dominance and control over them like the historic master and slave relationship.

Slavery on the other hand, is a form of control or dominion exercised by one person over another, Ali (2010). Todedano, in Udoh 2020, perceives slavery as a reciprocal relationship, stating that it is "a form of patronage relationship formed and often maintained by coercion, but requiring a measure of mutuality and exchange that posits a complex web of reciprocity."

Religious slavery as conceptualized in this paper is the exploitation, domination, and control of church members by the clergymen who capitalize on the desperation of members premised on real and imagined life challenges requiring divine intervention. In part, it relates to the idea of reciprocity posited by Todedano, as members render services, offer material and financial resources and submit themselves to the control and domination of the clergy who in turn proffers spiritual remedy to their problems.

Religious slavery is not significantly different from other forms of slavery which Udoh (2020) identified to include enslavement by marriage, debt bondage, legislation, indentured servants, and voluntary enslavement. Modern religious slavery latches on

voluntary enslavement, except that while it was necessitated by the need for food, shelter or debt payment (as noted by [Udoh 2020](#)), the latter is precipitated by the desire for a spiritual solution to lives' challenges such as sickness, unemployment, barrenness, witchcraft and other acts of evil. Also, that the mode of entry into the relationship is not glaringly compulsive. Rather, the people are subtly, wittingly, and eloquently lured through persuasive preaching, scary messages, intimidating prophecies, and motivational talks that psyche them into submission.

Karl Marx's metaphors on religion and fetishism of commodity are employed as theoretical explanations for this paper. Karl Marx's perspective on religion, specifically his metaphoric phrase that describes religion as the opium of the people was used to elucidate religious enslavement discussed in this paper. Although Karl Marx extensively focused on capitalism and conflict, his view of religion as the opium of the people, as contained in the introduction to '*A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*' ([Marx 1844](#)), has become a phenomenal contribution on the discourse of religion. Like most of his works that situates social conflict in capitalism, Marx opined that in a capitalist society, religion plays a critical role in maintaining social inequality in which certain groups of people have more resources and power than others. He explained that the bourgeoisie uses religion to keep the proletariat conciliated. This he believed religion does by promising rewards and hope for the life to come (heaven). He, therefore, described religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people.... The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness" (p.72). Thus expressed, Marx highlighted how religion functions to maintain social inequality by providing a worldview that justifies oppression. Some would argue that Marx's idea is the expression of his scruple about religion, noting that like capitalism, religion enslaves or alienates its adherents. This argument is supported by his use of Opium, -a drug that dulls the senses and helps one to forget (at least momentarily) the miseries of the present and so does religion. Such a viewpoint portrays Marx as opposed to religion.

Neo-Marxism, however, holds divergent views. To them, Marx's idea does not necessarily indicate opposition and condemnation of religion itself, but the society that has used religion to shroud reality. They explained that the phrase could imply that religion

offers respite, as sigh could be a sign of relief to the despondent in a precarious world of uncertainty, and an extension of hope for the world which is to come (heaven). To them, Opium is a multidimensional metaphor that can dull the sense of pain and cure illness, and so is religion. Therefore, the metaphor of religion as opium may not be oppressive but therapeutic (Ivanovich *et al.* 2018). It is in the light of this ambivalence of religion, as conceived and interpreted in Marx's metaphoric concept, that this theory is employed to explain the paradox of religion, which promises hope on the one hand, and on the other serves as an oppressive instrument to enslave the very adherents it purports to liberate.

The fetishism of commodity portrays the dominance of commodity over people. The theory explores the disruption of social relations by the intrinsic value or worth attached to articles or objects due to the capital that accrues from it, at the expense of the producer (humans who should be the main concern). The theory highlights the dominance of commodity as attributes of life, power, autonomy, and dominance in society. In our context, it portrays the value attached to social capital- materialism, visibility, and influence- that the clergy derives from the domination of members who have become victims of pastors' manipulations at the expense of the people themselves.

Michael Taussig's *Commodity fetishism (Devil belief model)* derives from Karl Marx's but goes deeper into pre-capitalist societies from which emanate the organic unity between persons and their products. Taussig's (1980) observations were based on the rural peasants in the sugarcane plantations of the Cauce valley, and the tin mines of highland Bolivia, in South America. Taussig noted that peasants invoked the devil to increase and maintain productions as they became landless wage labourers (perhaps due to the incentives they are likely to derive from their employers as a result of increased productions and profit that will accrue from it). As peasants, cultivating their land, they did not invoke the devil but did so much later, as a reaction to the supplanting of their traditional mode of production by the exploiting capitalists.

This theory illustrates the situation in our context, where men of God employ the concept of evil-witches, sickness, misfortunes, aptly represented by the devil, and his malevolent acts as causative factors and the basis for the explanation of the sufferings and mishaps that befall people/members. To remedy these misfortunes, people often resort to spiritual help-seeking, they recourse to the clergy as spiritual guides, thus, inadvertently

submitting themselves to the control, enslavement, and exploitation of the clergy that capitalize on their desperation. This machination, in Taussig's theory, will represent the changes in the material conditions of life and the changing criteria in the concept of creation, life, and growth through which the material conditions and social relations are defined (Taussig 1980). Among the Bakweri of West Cameroon, this source of wealth acquisition that contradicts normative order is perceived as evil. The perception of evil reflects their disapproval of individualistic value and the profit-oriented norm of capitalism. The inherent value of capital in Marx Fetishism of Commodity and the invocation of evil as a necessary condition for increased production in Taussig's analysis as elucidated in this paper is the exploitation of vulnerable members for financial and social capital. Such act, as in Bakweri's illustration (contained in Taussig's theory), contradicts societal expectation of the clergy as custodians of moral ethos and standards and negates their roles and positions as image-bearers and ambassadors (representatives) of Jesus Christ.

Research methodology

This qualitative study draws samples across all social boundaries, age, gender, social-economic and membership status, among other demographic information was sought in the ethnographic study conducted in Eket, Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria, Eket community and three churches. The community, Pastors, and members of the three churches formed the study population. Random and purposive sampling techniques were used. Random sampling was used because it is inclusive and offered every member of the community/church an equal chance of being selected for the study. Purposive sampling was used for some informants and the clergy in the three churches. They were purposively selected due to their involvements and experiences as it relates to the theme under study.

Primary and secondary data were used. Primary data was incorporated from data extracts obtained from previous research conducted by the author on religious profiteering. The qualitative data was sourced through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focused group discussion. Other information obtained from secondary data was sourced via journal articles, books, and the internet.

An in-depth interview of forty-five (45) informants randomly selected from the community was conducted. They include men and women, family members, neighbours,

and other members of the community. Forty- five (45) members of the sample were selected from the three churches for interview. Fifteen (15) people were interviewed from each of the three churches covered. They were randomly selected to include all categories of worshippers-pastors, elders, prophets, regular members, and visitors. Within this group, 15 were purposively chosen, five from each of the three churches. They were chosen because of their positions and involvements and were personally interviewed by the researcher in the company of a research assistant, who had to interpret or elucidate on the question in the native language when necessary. An unstructured interview based on a question guide was used. The questions were designed to give informants room to express themselves freely and give other information that was useful in the direction of the research. However, the researcher guided the informants to ensure they maintain focus on the study objectives.

Focused group discussion

Two sessions of focused group discussion were conducted. The first one was with members of the community. They were reached through the personal effort of the researcher. The second discussion group was with the pastors drawn from the Pentecostal fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) Eket branch. The pastors were reached through a pastor friend who was the secretary of the group at the time of the study. Each of the groups comprised five members, in all, 10 people were used for the focused group discussion.

Participant observation was carried out in the churches. Regular visits were made to the three churches selected for the study. The programmes attended included Sunday worship service, weekly prayer meetings, and counselling sessions. These were much preferred because prophecy and sermon/messages are avenues for visibility and influence. Thus, pastors showcase themselves and make impressions that determine members' enthusiasm and readiness to submit to their corralled and control. In addition to service programmes, the researcher visited as a client during a counselling session in one of the churches. In all, participant observation was very useful and aided the understanding of the dynamics from participants' viewpoints.

Ethical considerations

As a study that utilized human participants' ethical issues were considered to protect the privacy of the participants/informants. To this end, the aim and purpose of the research work were explained to all participants, including community leaders, beginning with the then paramount ruler of Eket whose permission was sought, and approval granted before proceeding with the study in the community. Verbal consent of the informants was individually sought and obtained after explaining the purpose of the research to them in the language they understand which was either in English or in the native Ibibio language/ Eki dialect, before interviewing with them.

As part of the efforts to maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used where it became necessary to use names; otherwise conscious effort was made to avoid using following the promise of confidentiality. Also, verbal appreciation, gifts in cash, and in-kind were given to the churches and participants in appreciation and compensation for their time.

Results and discussion of findings

There are several findings of this ethnographic study; however, we will be confined to those that relate to the themes of this paper.

First, the study revealed that the churches that mostly engage in religious slavery through practices like assignments are mostly prayer houses. This perhaps is due to the practice, procedures, and the methods they employ, especially in carrying out assignments that require the person to reside in the church premises while fulfilling the obligation.

Second, it revealed that Pastors/prophets play key roles in cajoling the people to submission through preaching, prophecy, and counselling. Though the motive is often latent, concealed in the care and concern shown for member/client, the goal is the materialistic, egoistic, and personal interest of the clergy.

Lastly, the study highlighted some ambivalence in the conduct of some churches that enhance the control and subjugation of members into religious slavery.

The churches used for this study are Grace Deliverance Ministry, Light House Church, and Arena of Testimonies (all pseudonyms- used in fulfillment of the promise of anonymity as agreed with the church). These churches are of interest to this study because from the perspective of the researcher, they qualify more as prayer houses, which are mostly implicated in the practice of religious slavery. Prayer houses are like Pentecostals, but they differ in practice and other respects and perhaps qualify more as spiritualist churches. Without attempting ample dissimilarity between them, it is necessary to highlight their similarities and differences.

Prayer houses are like Pentecostal churches because they admit that members are in combat with spiritual forces-devil, witches, demons, marine spirits, and other classes of evil workers. So, they prescribe exorcism and deliverance as means of getting members out of the grips and influence of the devil (Gifford 2001, Stritecky 2001, Robbins 2003). They differ in that prayer houses are harp on visions and prophecies like the Cherubim and Seraphim churches. However, they do not wear the white garment uniform that distinguishes the Cherubim and Seraphim, so, it is easy to mistake them for the Pentecostals. Prayer houses conduct are syncretic. They blend indigenous beliefs and practices like traditional healers. Their procedure for exorcism transcends prayers to the administration of concoctions, accompanied by assignments that may involve fasting, taking residence in the church, sacrifice, offerings to achieve the desired result of healing or exorcism.

The role of the clergy and the motives driving the enterprise

Pastors play prominent roles in perpetrating religious slavery. In all the three churches visited, pastors are adored almost to the point of idolizing them. They were called names like *Papa*, *Mama*, *Eteubom*, *Oku*, and likes. As “oracles of God”, they are widely consulted. Their opinions and interventions are highly sought on every matter. Thus, they serve as spiritual guides, counsellors and consultants, wielding so much influence on members. They thus pose as lords dictating and controlling their members as interviews revealed. Sadly, most of them are in the words of an informant “presidents and founders”,

whose actions are not moderated or questioned because they are not answerable to any authority. Hence, they hide under the presumed divine injunction to commit atrocities. They pretend to care for the sheep (members) but their motives are not altruistic. They are driven by their egoistic and materialistic interest shrouded in pretense and purported care and concern for members. An informant from the community said, "these men are driven by the desire for money and the popularity men of God gain from it. Pastors either charge money or members sow seed faith because of what they believe the men of God had done".

Studies have shown that some churches and pastors in Nigeria have become so engrossed with materialistic ends (Agazue 2015), so much that they dabble into unethical practices contradicting their positions of trust as image bearers that should model sound morals, good character, integrity, honesty and humility as exemplified by Christ. Like the good Shephard, the expectation is that pastors should lead by example and guide the flock (members) to the pasture; rather, they exploit, control, and possess them as chattels.

The prophet asked me to fetch ten liters of water, which I should carry on my head to the church for blessings. She asked me to buy a basket full of assorted fruits for sacrifice. She said I should put one thousand naira each in three envelopes and two thousand in the fourth envelop. The envelopes with two thousand should be dropped on the 'joy seat' (which belongs to mama) and the others should be dropped at the feet of the elders and /prophet. Finally, mama said I should buy clothes for children in the orphanage. So that my miracle will manifest (Personal field work 2010).

Like the 16th - 18th century slavery, exploitation, oppression, and control characterize modern religious slavery. Members are exploited through exorcism, assignments, and incessant demands placed on them. Thus, Christianity is redefined by men whose aim is religious profiteering deviously engaged to enrich themselves at the expense of the members. Of course, economic profit has always been a strong motivation underpinning slavery. Buttressing this, Siddharth (2017) noted that slavery is lucrative, yielding as much as a hundred and fifty billion (\$150bn) dollars annual profit, thus making the business more profitable in modern times than in the past.

Like the old form in which slaves were exploited through forced labour and controlled as chattels to serve the interest of their masters, modern religious slavery exhibit the same characteristics, aptly depicting capitalistic tendencies as portrayed in Taussig's theory, in which the exploitation of the proletariats serve the profit-oriented goal of the

capitalists. Similarly, Pastors derive financial and social capital from members who serve their personal and selfish interests. All of which is precipitated by capitalistic tendencies based on exploitation as Meillassoux (1991) argued. The lure for material gain and social capital accruable from the enterprise underpins the manipulation of the gullible ostensibly for money.

Strategies adopted in perpetuating religious slavery

To sustain the rapacious lifestyle that has characterized some clergymen, they inevitably must adopt strategies and schemes to remain powerful, influential, and relevant in a community saturated with churches, that have become more of business ventures established to cope with economic hardship and breach the widening gap between the haves and have-not in the oil reach community. From our observation, it appears one way of increasing their chances of survival in a fiercely competitive spiritual landscape is to psych members through intimidating prophecies and scary messages that entrap them in a web of fear. Thus employed, members become gullible and submit to the control and corralled of men of God. This is what Udoh (2020), regards as subjugation. This was evidenced in the churches visited during the study. In one of the churches, “Papa”, as the pastor of Grace Deliverance Ministry was fondly called by his members, adopted this trick in one of the meetings that have to do with counselling.

As part of participant observation, the researcher went for counselling with the pastor. After completing the registration requirements for seeing the man of God, which involved monetary registration, she went in to see the Pastor, who at first sight, even before she could state her case or the reason for the consultation, asserted that she was under spiritual attack. He advised she should pray for peace to avert further attacks in her dreams. This, perhaps, is to demonstrate his wit as a “powerful” man of God, as her problem was already “revealed” to him before she mentioned it. This is one way they assert their authority and control, particularly as need for diagnosis and solution puts the client (member) in a subordinate power relation with the pastor, who exerts influence through his position as the “oracle of God”. In any case, the researcher refuted his divination, but he insisted, adding that she may not understand. The irony is how can a man understand another’s experience in the dream yet claim the dreamer does not understand it? This again

highlights their presumed superiority over others. In his assumption, his position bestows on him the intuition for a divine revelation which he presumes is his exclusive reserve. Anyway, he went on to say that she has been going through spiritual attacks and claimed there are evil forces responsible for those attacks.

Evil forces, demons, and witchcraft are some of the sources of attacks they claim members are exposed to and since these forces are spiritual, the problem or situation translates into the metaphysical realm, which transcends the resolution of mundane men. This is often sought through prayers, prophecies, “assignments” or exorcism to deal with the situation. Like [Agazue \(2015\)](#) opined, the ability to deal with such forces through exorcism has become a lucrative business as well as an opportunity to secure clients. These clients are won through scary messages that deceive them into giving out what they have.

This supports Marx's view of religion as the expression of economic injustice and material reality, religion is the instrument oppressors engage to soothe the exploited. [Taussig's \(1980\)](#) Commodity Fetishism illustrates the manipulative scheme of these men of God, who turn their members into money-spinners. Pastor, Nyong, in one of the focused group discussion sessions, succulently captured the schemes of these men of God, likening it to “sheep allegiance to the shepherd”, tantamount to taking advantage of the weak. The reason is simple; religion alienates its adherents the same way capitalism does. Members' commitment to their pastors could amount to self-alienation and loss of their discretions to him. Little wonder Marx likened religion to opium, which in its addictive and sedative effects dulls reasoning. Similarly, adherents/members are inclined to succumb to the dictates of their faith or pastors. Like slaves, they are tied to the wills and dictates of their masters. Else how does one explain situations where people abandon their families and even forfeit their businesses/careers on the instruction of men of God as this study discovered?

In the same church, another scenario was observed at a prayer meeting where scary prayer points were raised by one of the pastors in the church. For instance, he led the congregation to pray that “anybody who wants to sacrifice my blood on evil altars, oh God! Kill that person”. We were also led to thwarting evil plans aimed at manipulating our destinies to bring ill-luck. The leader insisted that ‘anybody who does not pray the prayer is a ‘witch’. He claimed what he was doing was prophetic, so he raised more prayer points

along the same line. Such prayers allude that evil looms around and indeed, family members or colleagues could be enemies perpetrating evil. Insinuations like that ensnare members and subject them to fear that keeps them glued to the church under the manipulative control and further exploitation of pastors.

The third church visited was the Arena of Testimonies headed by a woman, who commands great respect from her members, judging from the way she was addressed and the aura of authority she commands. The meeting was scheduled for prayer and fasting, which was an avenue for prophecies the researcher had the opportunity of witnessing. Prophecies are ways of captivating people because through it, divine revelation is made and direction for action, including soliciting for divine intervention in the affairs of humans, as well as solutions are worked out. There, a motivational approach was used to psyche people into believing the prophecies. One of the members interviewed, disclosed that she has been in that church for fifteen years and one of the things that have kept her there is prophesy. She stated with a note of confidence that “whenever you come to church, the prophet will reveal your problem to you”. This notion allure members to the pastor who has become “all-knowing” in the perception of members who are obsessed with life’s challenges. Suffice to state, that life itself is full of real and imagined problems. The ability to surmount them largely depends on individuals ‘efforts and the support system available to them. But, in a country where the government capacity to deliver support in form of social welfare is minimal owing to systemic failure, poor leadership and corruption, that have destroyed the fabric of the social system. [World Bank \(2000\)](#) noted that corruption in developing countries is a result of the system’s weakness, governance failure, and institutional dysfunction. Anti-Slavery International also posited that though modern slavery is global, it flourishes more in places with high rates of corruption and weak rule of law, and Nigeria is culpable. With the 2020 index ranking of 146 out of 180 and 26 over 100 scores, of Niger in the Transparency International ranking, corruption is rife in Nigeria and could account for the obsession for material accumulation that engenders religious slavery.

Sequel to the government’s inability to render adequate support and forester social wellbeing, individuals are left to seek support either through kinship system or other affiliations such as the church. Regrettably, individualization has altered the kinship support system available to most Ibibios as [Modo and Chineyemba’s \(2015\)](#) posited. So,

being a highly religious group of people, spiritual help-seeking becomes the viable option, among the people as Ekong (2001) noted, stating that spiritual help is commonly sought over challenges of life including, but not limited to security/safety of lives, and misfortunes all believed to have a spiritual undertone, requiring spiritual solution.

Suffice to state that there is also a cultural dimension to it that relates to the belief system. In a developing nation grappling with inaccessible quality health care, insufficient financial investment in the health sector and poor health infrastructure to diagnose peoples' problems, especially in rural communities, a spiritual explanation is often adopted to explain perplexing and inexplicable circumstances that befall individuals. So, when people suffer from sickness, barrenness, death or any medically related problems, worst still, when they face other challenges like unemployed, delayed marriage, marriage breakups, poverty, failure in the exam and any other misfortune that could be a result of personal or systemic failure, it is aptly interpreted and given spiritual connotation as masterminded by enemies, typically represented by witches. Because as earlier mention, witchcraft, evil, demons subsume the suffering of the average Ibibio whose worldview is centered around the belief in the malevolent acts of malefactors whose plans must be aborted through divine intervention. So, they resort to prayers, prophecy, and assignments which men of God are apt to provide/recommend, to unravel life's challenges. However, the nature of the assignment and the procedure employed in executing it also reflect indigenous beliefs and practices with the administration of concoctions, like the practice of traditional healers. One informant at Arena of testimonies has this to say:

I came for prayer and fasting because I am long overdue for marriage. Every man that comes around me will just disappear for no reason. Luckily today, as I came, Prophet called me out and said that one of my family members does not want me to marry. She said the enemy has put a mark on my face that is why I am not married. So, she said I should sow seed faith of N2, 000 naira. But I did not have the money, so she asked somebody in the church to lend me the money. With that done, Mama poured water and olive oil and some other ingredients into a bowl and used it to wash my face. She said it is the washing of separation. She also asked me to buy olive oil and a tin of milk, which I will mix and drink first thing in the morning for the cleansing of my womb. She asked one elderly woman in the church to drink part of the olive oil I bought before handing it back to me. According to mama, that signifies transferring the anointing of fruitfulness to me as the woman had passed childbearing age. (Personal field work 2010).

Further buttressing prophecy as a strategy, was another scene observed in the church. A man was called out by 'mama', who ordered two male elders to bring him out for ministration (prophecy). As they were approaching the altar with him, she asked another person to intercept them in a manner that looked like an enemy is out to obstruct/hinder him from advancing. The two elders pleaded with the intruder to let go, but he was refused. At that point, mama sent a prophetess to order his release. At her intervention, the 'enemy' gave way, and the man was brought to the altar where mama told him, "you would have been a star, but members of your family blocked you. Now that you have come to the church, your problems are over". Though it appeared dramatic, it is symbolic in many respects. First, the existence of enemies set to obstruct advancement on life's journey. This is critical because one motive that drives human endeavours is growth, improvement, and progress in life. So, when it is apparent that one's efforts to achieve progress are inhibited by enemies, then, solutions must be sort and pastors are recourse. Two, the indictment of family members as enemies, obstructing progress. Prophecies that implicate family as masterminds of the affliction and predicament of loved one's breed suspicion and distrust of the other. Whereas family provides strong support for members especially in times of need, such indictments ruin relationships and weaken family bonds. Third, the indispensability of the intervention of the pastor/prophetess is critical to the resolution of problems. Fourth, the certainty of the client/member's solution tied to their presence in the church. Such assurances keep members fixated in the church and explain why people take residence in church, as solution and testimony centers as implied in the name of one of the churches.

Another man was told that he was marked for destruction and that his problems emanated from his family. As he was further interrogated by mama, he disclosed that his father has a house under construction. Mama cautioned that he should not go to the site; neither should he contribute to its completion. He was warned not to sleep in that house even after completion, else he will die. These threats and frightening prophecies intimidate and coerce people to submission, all in the bid to dominate and exploit them. Unfortunately, members/people presume these prophecies always come from God. [Agazue \(2015\)](#) noted that

whatever the men of God say is accepted and believed as divine revelation. Little wonder they remain glued to them. The point is who dares divine injunction or revelation? Once it translates to spirituality, people succumb, as the belief is that the spiritual controls the physical realm. This perhaps explains why people can and do desert their homes, truncate their careers, abandon their families, and even disown their children on the instruction of “men of God”. Incredibly, these instructions are carried out unquestionably by members who believe it is divine revelation. For instance, Evelyn Usman of Vanguard newspaper reported the case of one Bose Oluwole who set her nine-year-old daughter ablaze on the claim of divine revelation. Similarly, in Agbor, Delta state, a Pastor was reported to have asked a member to divorce his wife and he obliged ([Ika Weekly Newspaper 2012](#)). More pathetic was another case narrated in the same magazine ([Ika Weekly Newspaper 2012](#)), where a member of a spiritualist church stated that her father forced all of them (his entire family) to join him in membership of the church. She narrated thus:

The Pastor prophesied to my sister that she has the call of God. So, she must live in the church. For over two years now, my sister has been held hostage in the church, hypnotized, and not even knowing what to do about her future ([Ika Weekly Newspaper 2012](#)), in [Agazue 2015](#).

Again, in all the churches visited, one key observation is that the ritual of assignment has become indispensable to the resolution of problems. It has been used in disguise to enhance religious slavery as can be deduced from the foregoing. Assignment, as it is used in the churches we studied, includes the demands, obligations, offerings, practices, and sacrifices that people are required to perform to appease God to avert the impending danger. It often follows prophecies and involves financial or material items in addition to prayer and fasting. Members revealed that some assignments require that the individual concerned should reside in the church while performing the assignment. To buttress this, one of the ladies I interviewed at Arena of testimonies, stated thus:

I have been staying with Mama for the past two weeks. The prophet said that I should serve mama for my miracle to manifest. She said that I should stay with mama for twenty-one days; I cook, wash her clothes, and fetch water for her to take her bath. I do everything she asks me to do. The prophet also said that I should use the same water Mama has used to bath also ([Personal field work 2010](#)).

When asked why she had to stay in Mama's house for that long, she explained it is what the prophecy says. It is also to avoid distraction and enable her to concentrate fully through the spiritual exercise as she claimed. On why she would bath with the same water mama had used, she could not explain but simply stated that if that is what it will take for her to receive her miracle, she would not mind, after all, it is a divine injunction. The above shows the desperation of people in need of solution and the extent of their debasement. When a full-grown woman had to subject herself to using the same water another person had used to bath, and could not even explain why she had to do so, it portrays the level of subjugation and the extent to which she has yielded her herself to enslavement, such that her power of will is lost in the process. She also had to remain in her service without remuneration. Of course, other members had stated that a person can remain in the service of the church and the pastor without remuneration. This is somewhat like the Trokosi ritual servitude in Ghana where shrine slaves (usually females) remain in perpetual servitude to the priests, elders, and owners of a traditional religious shrine and could be converted to wives or objects of sexual gratification to satisfy their inordinate affections. Unlike the Trokosi case, the ritual servitude camouflaged as an assignment is not debt bondage, but consensual. However, it is more of obligatory consent because once a matter is life-threatening, and the individual has been psyched or coaxed into believing that the only remedy is to comply with the divine injunction, freedom of choice becomes limited, especially when the "enemy" is a close affinity as the prophecies suggest. The dilemma, however, is that those who practice the ritual of assignment remain in servitude engrossed and unperturbed, they remain alienated to themselves having lost their power of choice, as slaves, they are conquered. Otherwise, what justifies voluntary enslavement or the reckless abandonment of one's life to uncertainty as evident in the cases cited above?

The ambivalence of religious slavery

Religious enslavement presents a puzzling ambivalence difficult to unravel. How a redemptive mechanism translates to an oppressive and dehumanizing tool reveals the dilemma of adherents in a changing social context that defines modern Christianity.

Although there has been a longstanding debate as to whether Christianity furthers enslavement or obliterates it, with all its academic magnetism, this paper is not poised to dabble into that discourse. Rather, it attempts to briefly highlight the ambivalence of religious slavery.

First, Christianity preaches salvation, redemption, and emancipation. It thus becomes oxymoronic when it turns to the instrument of enslavement, exploitation, domination, and control of the same people it purports to liberate. Intimidation and threats are coercive, so when they are employed (as observed in the churches) in disproportionate power relations involving divinity and humanity, then the motive is presumably dubious and cynical, geared towards estrangement and self-alienation that has characterized most devotees. The modern religious slavery attributes to Pastors the control of the people like the ownership of slaves as chattels in the old order. Although it appears voluntary superficially, the manipulative machination engaged sways the people into total submission in such a way that their discretion and will power is subject to control at the whims and caprices of their pastors, this in our view enhances and reinforces religious slavery.

Next, Jesus Christ, the progenitor of the Christian faith exemplified humility and selflessness, evident in his relationship with his disciples. Though he was their master, he related with them as though they were at par. On the contrary, Pastors as we observed, place members' in an unequal power relation with domineering control like the master/slave relationship of the old form. As 'Men of God', they assume superiority over the people. One Pastor interpreted biblical example of the good shepherd to indicate Shephard's (Pastor) superiority over the flock (members), stating that "shepherds drink milk while sheep eat grass". Although milk and grass are good, they are valued differently. Milk is a necessity for children and a preferred choice of affluence, while the grass is a cheaper option for commoners. It is thus, indicates class disparity. Such self-conceptualization and perception, bestow a sense of superiority over members who though the Goose that lay the golden eggs, can be placed in a subordinate position. This in Marx's fetishism of commodity is disruptive of social relation, as the value bestowed on pastors overrides that of members. This perceived superiority perhaps informed the aggrandizements and ostentatious lifestyle commonly demonstrated by some clergymen. This contradicts and undermines the lesson of humility and selflessness implied in the analogy.

Further on the ambivalence of religious slavery, it is unimaginable and inexplicable that Clergymen perpetrate the obnoxious practice. Pastors qualify as those [Berker \(1974\)](#) classified as 'moral entrepreneurs. Therefore, the societal expectation would be that they should model integrity, honesty, uprightness, and transparency in their dealings. This expectation perhaps contributes to members' gullibility, as they presumably entrust themselves to men in God in the faith that they are what they represent. However, in a community where there is competition for survival among churches, coupled with the redefinition of success in ministry, measured in material wealth and social visibility, anything is possible. The manipulations and stage performances that translate as prophesy, exorcism, assignment, ministration, are calculated attempts by pastors to gain members and increase their capital base.

Conclusion

In sum, this paper holds that religion, specifically Christianity as it is practiced in some churches (prayer houses) tantamount to the enslavement of adherents perpetrated by the clergy through scary messages, prophecies, prayers, and the rituals of exorcism and assignments. The assignment in some cases requires that the member resides with the pastor or in the church premises for some period rendering unpaid services under the control and dictates of the man of God. At other times, financial and material demands are placed on members who are coaxed to comply, and if one does not have, then he must borrow to pay the demand because prophecies and assignments must be sealed with money either as offering or seed faith that accrues to pastors and prophets. This act of money-making equates Christianity with capitalism in a competitive market with articles of healing, deliverance, miracles, blessing, and breakthroughs auction to customers /members. The merchants, whose motives are to acquire financial and social capital, artfully advertise their products through church programmes like fasting and prayer, counselling, preaching and prophecies devised to psyche and cajole adherents into submission, thus enslaving them. The enslavement takes the form of exploitation, domination and control that subjugates members, especially when the problems are perceived to have a spiritual

undertone that can only be mediated through divine intervention sought through men of God. As ‘oracles’, they must be consulted, and their prescriptions are indisputable and indispensable to the resolution of life’s challenges.

In conclusion, the ambivalence of religious slavery and the scheming machinery employed to elicit compliance from adherents enhanced slavery, it thus undermines the redemptive purpose of Christianity. The paper submits that the engagement of Christianity for the resurgence of slavery would have to be assessed and appraised on the destructive and devastating effect on the victims and the overall image and reputation of the church at large. It thus recommends that training and reorientation programmes that highlight the roles of Pastors as shepherds and custodians of trust and moral standards should be introduced by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). Also, that Pastors should reverend the holy calling by refraining from spreading scary messages and prophesy that enslave members and concentrate on the propagation of the gospel as was demonstrated by the love and care which Jesus Christ epitomized.

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