

Church, Community and Charms

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Abstract

The astronomical increase in the loss of lives and property in Nigeria gives the impression that nowhere is totally safe anymore. Religious leaders' calls for prayer and fasting to ward off these attacks and robberies, in addition to public-spirited efforts in the face of the police's seeming helplessness in the face of these attacks, has not yielded any meaningful result. Due to these incessant attacks several communities have come up with different ways to secure themselves. One of these is the use of traditional means to secure and fortify the communities. Basically this involves the use of local charms and juju to help keep the communities safe. Being part of the community, the church has a role to play in collaborating with the community leaders to adopt the best security modality. The fact remains that the church has also had its own fair share of these attacks. A lot of churches have been burgled, church members returning from vigil raped, etc. Since the church had no immediate solution to the problem of insecurity, then joining the communal effort may be the most viable option. But will the church not compromise its principle of exclusion from the world system and idolatrous traditions in an attempt to keep its host community safe? This qualitative study uses the theoretical frameworks of inclusivism and exclusivism to interrogate the perception of evangelical and pentecostal church leaders on the use charms to secure a community. The position of the church leaders on this issue is not precise. This could be because they have little or nothing else to do to bring safety back to the community. This study therefore concludes that most churches do not want to directly get involved in the use of charms to secure themselves, but they would not mind if the community leaders use that means to secure the community. This study therefore recommends that church leaders should be very proactive in community-related activities so as not to put themselves in situations where they would have no option but to compromise their faith.

Keywords: insecurity, community policing, evangelical, pentecostal churches

Introduction

The spate of attacks on different communities in Nigeria is quite worrisome. Apart from attacks by bandits, Fulani herdsmen, kidnappers, among others, there are pockets of daily challenges in local communities from armed robbers and other undesirable elements that keep on terrorizing the people. Cases of houses being burgled, people being used for money ritual, some are kidnapped for ransom. In several communities, residents live in fear when it gets dark due to the possibility of being attacked in the middle of the night. Some communities hire private guards, some lean on the services of the police, while others resort to self-help by organizing themselves into small groups of local vigilantes.

Despite the spirited efforts of many communities to protect themselves and secure their belongings, it seems the end to all these criminal acts is not in sight. One of the independent, nongovernmental security outfits that had partnered with the government in helping reduce criminal activity is Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN), which was established over 20 years ago to work within communities to help reduce criminal activity and give the police useful and actionable intelligence that will help arrest undesirable elements tormenting the people.¹

While submitting a report of the committee on strengthening internal security framework and community policing in Nigeria, held at the office of the secretary to the government of the federation, the Inspector General of Police (IG) said that the proposed community policing is better than the state police being clamored for by many Nigerians.² The IG spoke against the background of inadequate manpower and gross underpolicing since the total strength of the police force is about 370,000, serving a population of over 180 million.³ Despite the seemingly popular acceptance of community policing as the way to go using British and US models, the challenge now has to do with the use of weapons while defending the communities. The law prohibits the proliferation of small arms in Nigeria and restrictions on the use of firearms by private security agencies.⁴ Though they could have been licensed to carry arms, but what is the strength of local rifles held by two or three ill-prepared makeshift community police officers do when confronted with superior firepower of about 10 or 12 daredevil armed robbers who may even have been retired servicemen or dismissed police officers? Then, the community police officers or members of the vigilante groups, or private guards need reinforcements that would give them an edge over the invaders so that they would save their lives and help secure the communities that employ their services.

One of the most common means of fortification is the use of protective charms.⁵ In Southwest Nigeria, some of the security men do fortify themselves with such potent charms which often make them invincible and do keep their communities safe. But, more often than not, these charms may fail and this could lead to the death of such security man in face of a deadly attack. That led to the call for the use of local knowledge in the use of native charms that would be buried in the communities for protection or hiring strong witchdoctors/medicinemen who would be paid to secure the community in a local way. Being part of such communities, the church which has had its own share of security challenges as well has two options: support the concerted effort to use powerful potent medicine to secure the communities of which the church is a part of, or proffer another workable solution. If the church or church members fund the security project using local medicinemen or witchdoctors to secure their communities or pay part of the cost of making potent charms to safeguard the communities, then, the church may be seen as funding or supporting a “satan-

ic” agenda. But in most cases, the churches may not be able to come up with security solutions that would yield both immediate and long-term solutions. The increase in the attacks on churches which had led to destruction of lives and loss of valuable property had also made the church to lose its sacredness and its stance that prayers only could be used as a potent weapon for security check. This study examines the justification for the support of the use of traditional charms for the protection of communities. The question is: Should the church contribute financially to support the use of charms or medicine men to secure their community?

Church and Principle of Unequal Yoking

Jesus unequivocally proclaims: “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). The Greek word used for church in the New Testament is *ecclesia*, which means “the called-out ones.”⁶ It is given to the government of Athens, duly convoked (called-out) by proper officers and possessing all political power including even judicial functions. Obviously, the word had been used by the first church to imply people that had been called out from the Roman and Greek culture, traditions and practices, into a separate community whose foundation was laid by Christ and which was guided by the teachings of the apostles.⁷ Being called out means being separated.⁸ Separation would not have taken place if the people had accepted the traditions, practices and culture which they were once a part of. That separation therefore could mean segregation as a result of hatred or dislike for the previous system. The new life which those believers enjoyed, having been introduced to Christianity, makes them disagree with the practices of the previous system. As Paul puts it in his letter to the people of Phillippi, “all things that were gain to me, I counted them as loss . . .” (Phil. 1). This statement depicts the perception of believers about the years they spent in the former practices. It was a lost time, a period wasted in wrong practices. Paul therefore urges the new converts who had converted from worship of other gods, apart from Yahweh that old things must pass away, while all things must become new (2 Cor., 5: 17). He further urges them to annihilate all their former practices and put on Christ (Col. 3: 1– 5).

The word “ecclesia,” which is used 109 times in the New Testament, refers to the called-out believers also signify a zero-relationship.⁹ This zero or nil relationship means that the church and the world or the world system should have nothing in common.¹⁰ Jesus describes Satan as the prince of this world (John 16); he said believers are only existing in the world, they are not part of the world (John); Apostle John says any Christian who loves the world does not love God (1John 2: 17); Paul asks believers not to be unequally yoked with the people of the world (1 Cor. 6). The cultural practices, the tradition, and the behavioral pattern of the system which believers were used to and had practiced

before they became believers were to be rejected completely.¹¹ Aside that, believers were advised to cut all ties with the old system and the people that still cling to such practices.¹²

Church and Interactions with non-Christians

While the church in the apostolic era upheld the principle of unequal yoking, yet they followed the example of Jesus, who is described as a friend of prostitutes, tax collectors and pagans.¹³ Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus befriended some of the worst elements in the society; he had a close relationship with a corrupt tax officer, a former prostitute, and also some Pharisees, who were his main critics. The aim of Jesus was to seek that which was lost (Luke 19: 10). The apostles also followed the same trend with Peter visiting the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, John, also interacting with the Ethiopian Eunuch.¹⁴

In discussing how Christians should respond to other religions, Ben Edwards identifies four approaches: universalism, relativism, inclusivism and exclusivism.¹⁵ Universalism implies that, though religious belief and approach differ, yet the ultimate goal of every religion is the salvation of the human soul. Therefore, believers that subscribe to this do not hold the common position among Pentecostals and Evangelical believers that Christianity is the only way to salvation.¹⁶ While universalism claims that all religions lead to the truth or contain parts of the truth, relativism says that all religions have their own specific truths. Inclusivism on the other hand sees other religions as containing different shades of truth, but one's religion is superior. Lastly, exclusivism teaches that there is only one true religion. Most evangelicals incline more to exclusivism, that the only acceptable way to salvation is Christ.¹⁷ This is hinged on the statements of Christ in John that he is the way, the truth and the life; and that no one could come to God except by passing through him. Also, the words of Peter in Acts that claims that there is no salvation in no one else, since there was no other name given among men by which a person could be saved.

Christian Principle of Exclusivism and Traditional Practices

The belief system of Christianity is the Trinitarian monotheism. While God is seen as one God, he is believed to express himself as God the Father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ From the commandments that God gives to the Israelites, God is a jealous God and does not condone any form of rivalry or the use of graven image to represent him.¹⁹ Though he reveals himself to this people through many means, but no one has ever seen his form or his face. He is believed to reside in heaven, where he governs all his creative works. African traditional religion (ATR) has a belief system that is termed diffused monotheism.²⁰ The Supreme Being, who is known as God or Jehovah in Christianity is seen as the all-in-all to whom all sacrifices and worships are ultimately direct-

ed.²¹ While Christianity has a triangular relationship of coequal, coeternal distinct beings, ATR has a descending relationship of five different layers. After the Supreme Being comes the divinities, then the spirits, the ancestors and, lastly, magic and medicine. While nonpractitioners misunderstand ATR as being polytheistic, the practitioners believe that Supreme Being is the ultimate object of worship while others are just means to an end, (they are not end in themselves).²² The concept of trinity in Christianity is often misconstrued by nonadherents, especially Jews and Muslims, who believe in strict monotheism, yet Christianity insists there is only one God and the father of Jesus Christ who rules the world through his spirit.²³

There is a convergence in the concept of Supreme Being that is seen and unseen. But the belief systems are different. Christianity, especially the pentecostals and evangelicals, believe that prayers and fasting are the major tools for spiritual protection. Most do not believe or subscribe to any form of protection aside from the invisible power of God. That is what obtains in principle. Some notable pentecostal and evangelical leaders were in the news for using “native” means for personal protection other than the popular position of their sect, such as the case of Sunday Egbo, the founder of Christ Deliverance Ministry in Nsukka, in the East, who publicly confessed that he used juju to lay the foundation of his church (*The Punch*, Nov. 24, 2019).

Most evangelical and Pentecostal Christians see any form of close interaction with other religions as an attempt to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Most churches in this line of thinking do not subscribe to any form of syncretism. The use of any form of protection that is not prescribed by the New Testament is seen as a form of idolatry.²⁴

The questions that this research seeks to address are: Should the practice of Christianity exclusivism restrict individual Christian from using spiritual protective devices to keep them safe in cases of danger to their personal lives? Should the church situated in local communities support and finance the community’s effort to secure them from incessant armed robbery attacks, especially when other means have failed? It is believed that such things have been dedicated to Satan.²⁵

Christian Principle of Exclusivism and Use of Protective Charms

“And say, thus says the Lord God: Woe to the women who sew magic bands upon all wrists, and make veils for the heads of persons of every stature, in the hunt for souls! Will you hunt down souls belonging to my people and keep your souls alive?” (Ez. 13:18) God vehemently condemns the use of armlets and protective charms for his children. This tradition had been sustained by the church over several centuries.

When Christianity came to Africa, it came with Western civilization and cul-

tural practices of the Europeans and the Americans that brought it.²⁶ Due to more enlightenment and drive towards indigenization, some of these cultural practices are gradually being rejected and the ideology of anything black is evil is being replaced with devil was not a black man, rather a fallen angel of God.²⁷ The implication of this is that certain cultural practices are gradually being introduced into the churches, which by nature were indigenous. The music, the dancing and other acts performed during traditional worships are now being introduced into worship and some of the foreign practices are being rejected. Even at present, the use of herbal drugs is having more preeminence over the western drugs.²⁸ Celebrities are now being used to promote such traditional medicines and the use of such is no longer condemned outright by evangelical and pentecostal Christians as it used to be.

The challenge is, if a Christian could use herbs to protect his body from sickness and disease, why can't he use the same herbs to protect himself from spiritual attack and enemies who intend to kill him? If a Christian is empowered by the law to defend himself through the use of gun by killing an intruder that wants to terminate his life, how can that Christian not use local intelligence to stop that intruder from coming to his house in the first instance? The question that begs for a logical answer is: Which is morally justifiable: to kill an intruder before he kills one, or to safeguard himself by making it impossible for the intruder to come in at all? Though the use of gun for self-defense is not yet part of Nigerian culture, but here may be a preference of life over death. If the use of small arms for self-defense is justified, the use of charms to prevent such harm in the first place may be justified.

This position may not be rejected by those who subscribe to the fact that local intelligence is connected to Satan and by extension an anti-god affair, but can't it be said about guns and ammunitions that are used to kill thieves and armed robbers? The Law of Moses says "Thou shall not kill." While this research does not intend to argue in favour of the use of charms for personal protection, it intends to note that, if the milder approach of use of local knowledge in crime prevention is not acceptable, then the morality of the more complicated and deadly approach should be put to question. All the weapons of mass destruction are the invention of man and the use of such cannot be morally justified by the word of God. If this could not be justified, then, the use of local charms for crime prevention cannot be condemned by standing on the same point of view.

Christian Principle of Exclusivism and Use of Charms for Community Protection

There have been several cases of theft in the different churches in the southwest. Several churches were burgled and musical and public address systems carted away. Several churches have been burgled at night, especially the ones

without private nightguards. Now that the churches are no more sacred or immune to attack from robbers and thieves, who may even be church members, what should be the response of the church if the community intends to pay a security guard who wants to use native intelligence to secure the community? Should the church make donations or financial contributions towards such project? If the church pays, wouldn't it be termed as funding Satan or a form of indirect idolatry?

There are several approaches to this issue. The church could follow the principle of exclusivism and decide not to participate in any project that uses native medicine to stop armed robbery attacks on their community? But, in the end when the charm is applied or buried in the community, it works for every household and institutions in the community, church inclusive. Who would the church praise if they enjoy rest from incessant attack: God or the community? The church would be asked why God did not protect them ab-initio before the medicine was applied. In this case, does the church have moral justification for not paying for the local charm used for the protection whereas they enjoy its services? This research does not intend to argue in support of the use of local charms in securing a community. Secondly, the church may give a support for whatever means the community intends to use for protection, but will not participate in the process. In this case the church may pay its own part of the contribution as security/community due, but decline from following up with the process of how the community is secured. This is a form of give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. If this process of turning a blind eye is followed, will the church not be guilty of abetting evil? The bible encourages believers not to join hands with anyone to do evil. The bible further says that anyone that knows what is good and does not, he would be punished severely. In this case, is the church not doubting the capacity of God to safeguard and protect his people?

Conclusion and Recommendation

This work does not intend to take any position on the morality or otherwise of the use of local charms for either individual or community security. Rather, it raises pertinent questions which pentecostal and evangelical Christian leaders need to address. Since the church has lost its immunity against attacks from armed bandits, church leaders need to look at what is wrong and do the needful to get the church back to such an "untouchable" status or settle for what is an obvious solution. Unless the church and Christians could prove to the community that they are immune against attacks with evidences to prove, sermonizing about the evil of using African intelligence as a means of security, which may not actually affect the church or church members in a direct way, may be an effort in futility. The early church was able to stand tall because of such au-

thority they commanded which made evildoers to be afraid of them and even arsonists like Saul of Tarsus to be compelled by a superior power to join their ranks. This kind of power is lacking in 21st-century money-loving churches, and as such it lacks the moral authority to stop the community using whatever means at their disposal to secure itself and the institutions situated within it, since it is left with no other viable option.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://vigilante of Nigeria has its national headquarters in Kaduna. Its motto is say no to Crime. As a voluntary security operative, its role is to reduce criminal acts, protect lives and properties, assist in accidents or other occurrence of natural disasters, arrests and handover suspected criminals to police and provide intelligent information to police.>
- 2 *ThisDay*. Community, Not State Police for Nigeria says IG Adamu. Sept. 14, 2019.
- 3 *ThisDay*. 14/09/2019
- 4 Fire Arms Act, chapter 146, Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1990.
- 5 John Pobee (1976). *Aspects of African Traditional Religion*.UK: Oxford University Press,
- 6 Robertson, A.T. (1919). *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*. London: Hodder& Stoughton
- 7 Peter Ditzel (nd). Ekklesia or Church, Does it Matter? <https://www.wordofhisgrace.org> on 31/10/2019.
- 8 Laytham, D. Brent (Ed.) *God Is Not: Religious, Nice, “One of us,” an American, a Capitalist* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004),12.
- 9 Thayer, Joseph (1996). *Thayer’s Greek–English Lexicon of New Testament*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers.
- 10 *Watchman Nee* (2009) *Love Not The World: A Prophetic Call to Holy Living*. CLC Publications.
- 11 *Watchman Nee* (2009)
- 12 *Watchman Nee* (2009)
- 13 Jesus had a close relationship with people that were tagged sinners and rejected by the strict religious sect-the Pharisees. (Matt. 11:19; Luke7:34, 37-39; Mk.10:21).
- 14 To a large extent the disciples of Jesus also had close relationship with sinners though there ethnic bigotry influenced their decisions from time to time. (Acts 8:26-40; 10:1-48).
- 15 Ben Edwards. <http://biblestudytools.com/how should Christian respond to other religions?>
- 16 Hanson J.W. (1899). *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During its First Five Hundred Years*, Boston: Universalist Publishing House.

- 17 Vincent, Ken R. (2006). *The Universalist Herald*. Where have all the universalists gone?
- 18 Frank Sheed. Theology and sanity. ignatiusinsight.com.
- 19 The Law of Moses contains several warnings against idol worship (Ex. 20:1-7; Deut.5:6-9).
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- 25 Okere et al.
- 26 William Bascon (1953). *African Culture and the Missionary*. Institut de Sociologie de l'Universite de Bruxelles. <https://www.jstor.org>.
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