Religion and Politics in the context of COVID-19 Narratives: A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

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Abstract

The end of the year 2019 brought to the world a new and problematic coronavirus which has claimed many lives in various parts of the world. The human race is still perplexed by the viciousness of the novel disease since the worldwide death toll continued to rise. This resulted in the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaring the COVID-19 pandemic as a public health threat globally and it announced a raft of mitigatory measures to be undertaken by countries across the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated numerous but conflicting conspiracy theories and religious responses which explain the genesis of the disease. It was against this background that the study was motivated to interrogate and problematize the political and religious conceptualization of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is informed by insights from critical discourse analysis to examine the dialogics and semiotics of power embedded in conspiracy theories and debunking religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The main contention in this workis that interrogation of political and religious responses is imperative for a more informed conceptualisation of the coronavirus disease. It has been established that the COVID-19 pandemic discourse, just like other discourses, is never neutral since it is a locus laden with attitudes, values, hegemonic practices and power struggles. Interestingly, there is an audible semantic dissonance from both the political and religious understanding of COVID-19 pandemic. The genesis of coronavirus remains in obscurity and it thus demands further academic enquiry.

Keywords: Religion, COVID-19 pandemic, Politics, Conspiracy theories, Critical discourse analysis

Introduction

The end of the year 2019 brought to the world a new and problematic coronavirus which has claimed many human lives in various parts of the world. The world was and is still to an extent, grappling with a health emergency caused by scathing attacks of the novel coronavirus disease which has also provoked conspiracy theories (Myers, 2020; Verma, 2020; Rachman, 2020) and even the most advanced and sophisticated medical systems in developed countries have so far failed to curb the spread and threat of the virus. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO declared coronavirus to be a public health problem of great magnitude that requires a concerted health intervention at a global level in order to control the spread of the pandemic (WHO, 2020).The global super powers were baffled and people all over the world were trapped in a limbo state in the 'locked up' social spaces, and were muffled with grief as the world leaders and health systems failed to come up with a medical breakthrough that could usher relief and a new defining moment for humankind. This study as part of a growing body of research on the COVID-19 pandemic focuses on the political, religious dimensions and mitigatory measure in coronavirus discourse with the intention to provide a

nuanced understanding of the disease and how Zimbabwe in particular and the world in general have responded to the coronavirus challenges. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How the conspiracy theories and religious responses construct the genesis of coronavirus and serve as a locus of semiotics of power?
- What are the challenges faced by Zimbabwe in response to WHO's mitigatory measures to curb the spread of COVID-19?
- How can the insights from critical discourse analysis facilitate reading of nuanced political, religious and mitigatory measures embedded in COVID-19 discourse?

The ideas and arguments submitted in this study are shaped by these research questions.

Conceptual Framework: Discourse Critical Analysis

This article adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis model (CDA), as a conceptual tool in order to interrogate the COVID-19 pandemic discourse and explore Zimbabwe's political, religious and mitigatory responses to the disease. According to Van Dijk (1995), CDA is a special approach in discourse analysis which focuses on discursive conditions, components and consequences of power abuse by dominant (elite) groups and institutions. It examines discursive strategies of mind control performed by those in the corridors of power in society. This means that CDA examines ideological construction practices in discourses with the central view that language use is never neutral but a process of knowledge creation and transmission. The insights from CDA are essential for the reading of dialogics of power in constructed conspiracy theories on the origin of coronavirus. Furthermore, religious responses to COVID-19 are framed in socio-political context that becomes part of the semantic field for the conceptualisation of the pandemic. This resonates with Fairclough and Wodak's (1997) claim that CDA follows a critical approach to social problems in its endeavors to make explicit power relationships which are frequently hidden. From CDA perspective, discourse is a form of social, political and religious actions and the key aim of CDA is to uncover opaqueness and power relationships. In this regard, discourse is utilised in pursuit of hegemony (van Dyke, 1995). Thus, CDA attempts to expose complex practices of power (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). CDA as a research method is interpretive and explanatory. It focuses on understanding the ideological machinations of discourses and aims to produce a critique of how discourse operates to effect certain agendas (Fairclough, 1989, 1992 and 1995). The adopted model for analysis is most suitable in this study because it offers a conceptual framework that serves as a hermeneutical tool that could be utilised to examine and interpret the various perspectives proffered in media, political and religious circles as part of the COVID-19 metanarrative.

Myths and Theories of COVID-19

The polyvocal and dialogic nature of the COVID-19 discourse brings to the fore the semantic dissonance embedded in controversies around this new phenomenon. This creates sites of semantic ambivalence, power wrangle, contestations and inconsistencies which arise from the multi-perspectival narratives of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of this section is to discuss some of the theories that have been constructed to explain the novel COVID-19 disease. Among the available theories, the first one to be discussed is:

The Christian myth

The Christian myth's conceptualisation of COVID-19 discourse is based on the Roman Catholic influence in Italy which is utilised here as an example to debate the construction of reality during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Bull (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic caused socio-political and religious divisions in Italy. The Roman Catholics in Italy thought that they would be saved by God and did not take heed of the various global lockdown measures pronounced by WHO to contain the spread of coronavirus. Bull (2020) further states that other sections of the society in Italy wanted to oblige the WHO's call and implement the coronavirus

mitigatory measures. It could be argued that the Catholics in Italy were guided by Mark 16:18 (KJV) which states that "God gave the church power and authority over diseases and sicknesses. They shall put hands on the sick, and they shall recover." This message encourages Christian community in Italy and world over not panic because there is nothing insurmountable to God. Drawing from the Italian experience, it is observed that religion has capacity to influence attitudes and construct knowledge with regards to COVID-19. It is therefore imperative to rethink such myths in the context of a life–threatening coronavirus. In view of the danger posed by the virus the church in general should rise and fight the COVID-19 pandemic by complying with measures which were put in place to control the spread of the coronavirus.

The center-periphery myth

The monolithic and hegemonic view about the supremacy of whiteness over blackness requires re-assessment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic discourse. Such a view forms part of the toxic politics of representation in language use (Austin, 1962). Racial segregation is captured in COVID-19 pandemic through lexicalization of othering to endorse some desired social and political order in the human world. The construction of 'Other' is done through scapegoating and blaming certain social groups for the spreading of coronavirus. There is scholarly evidence against group dichotomies based on race, gender, class, and geographical territorials vis-à-vis the risk posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Marcus, 2020).

In a different context, Heleta (2018) posits that the Eurocentric epistemic constructions of the world usually present Europe as a model of civilisation, intellectual capacity and advancement in the areas such as technologies and health systems. Yet, this view is contested and subverted in the present COVID-19 discourse where the Europeans' normative medicines have shown limitations by failing to cure the COVID- 19 disease. The perceived 'centre' of human civilizations and knowledge creation has failed to provide solutions to the current public health emergency pointing at faults in human knowledge. Therefore, there is need to rethink the civility discourse which has for years been a defining aspect of Europe casting Africa as a primitive continent lagging behind in medical and technological advancements. In other words, there is need to forfeit divisive and discriminatory constructions of humanity and take new epistemological trajectories that bring together the human family. It also important to note that, the COVID-19 pandemic exposes inconsistencies and ambiguities of such long held Eurocentric hegemonic tendencies that regard non-European nations as the primitive 'other.' Fairclough (1989) observes that attitudes, perceptions and values are embedded in language and discourse for economic and socio-political hegemonic purposes. The centre-periphery masks the indiscriminate nature of COVID-19 and becomes what Laruelle (2010) a French thinker, terms a philosophy of difference which is meant to marginalize and stigmatise Otheredbodies. COVID-19 pandemic challenges these discourses and (mis)conceptions based on stereotypes, prejudices and discriminatory practices directed at non-Westerners. The COVID-19 pandemic contests and disrupts such exclusionary views and unhealthy power relations between nations. This study seeks to demystify conceptualizations of the world in binary terms which reinforces discrimination and fragmentation of the humankind.

The Five Generation -5G theory

The 5G is another conspiracy theory which claims that the coronavirus is spread by radiation from the advanced technology of the mobile services. This conspiracy theory has circulated on social media and it began when a Belgian doctor linked the "dangers" of 5G to the COVID-19. Shanapinda (2020) postulates that there is a group of Australians who are lobbying against the 5G technology citing that it is a health hazard causing the spread of coronavirus. Shanapinda (2020) adds that about 20 mobile masts in the United Kingdom have been destroyed by protestors who would not want the 5G technology. It has been established that 5G is harmful to human beings but its connection to the spread of COVID-19 is not yet scientifically proven (Ahmed et al, 2020). What may cause people to accept that the 5G is

harmful to humanity is the difference between the 5G and previous generations of mobile services that is, 4G and 3G, where the latter used lesser frequencies (in the 6 gigahertz range) whereas the former which is, 5G uses frequencies in the range of 30 to 300 gigahertz. Shanapinda (2020:7) further argues that "in the 30 to 300 gigahertz range, there is not enough energy to break chemical bonds or remove electrons when in contact with human tissue." This implies that the range of 30 to 300 megahertz could be referred to as "non-ironising" electromagnetic radiation. This range was approved by the federal government's Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency as not harmful to people. Radiation can come into contact with the skin, for instance, when one puts a 5G mobile to his or her ear when receiving or making a call. Shanapinda also explains that one is more exposed to non-ironising radiation when using the 5G to make or receive calls. However, this exposure is way below the required safety level. Although the claims about the 5G theory remain speculative and mythical due to lack of scientific evidence is it important not to dismiss this theory without proper scientific investigation because countries with 5G technology are having more COVID-19 victims than those without. Probably there is need for further research to establish whether 5G mobile radiation can spread the coronavirus as currently claimed by some quarters mentioned above.

Lemons, ginger, orange prevent the coronavirus

The origin of this myth is not known, but what is available, however, is the fact that Zimbabweans scrambled for lemons after it was rumored that they can prevent COVID-19 disease by eating these and other citrus fruits. The demand for lemons rosesignificantly for a number of days in Zimbabwe. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020:7), "there is no scientific evidence that lemon or ginger prevents COVID-19." The WHO has only encouraged people to eat fruits and vegetables as part of a healthy diet. The vitamin C supplements myth collaborates with the above mentioned myth. Swindlers across the globe are creating a number of consumer products which are advertised as being able to prevent and cure COVID-19. The WHO emphasizes that to date there is no cure for the COVID-19 but its symptoms can be treated by the various available medications. According to The Sunday Mail (2020), the United States of America issued warning letters to different companies for selling fraudulent products with the misleading information about the cure, treatment or prevention of the COVID-19 disease.

Kids cannot contract the COVID-19

A number of people who are being infected by the coronavirus are adults. There is a general perception that children may not be infected by the virus. According to the Zimbabwean newspaper The Sunday Mail (2020), research has revealed that there are fewer cases of coronavirus infections in children than in adults. A Chinese study published in February 2020 established that from more than 44 000 cases of COVID-19, a small percentage of 2.2 involved children under 19 years of age. Nevertheless, The Sunday Mail (2020) notes that recent evidence show that children are prone to be infected just like adults.

The coronavirus is for the rich people

Many people subscribe to the (mis) conception that since the coronavirus originated in China, it is for those who travel abroad frequently who usually afford the airfares charged which is beyond the reach of the poor (Marcus, 2020). Apparently, this myth is constructed around the notion of social classes based on a rich-poor dichotomy. The material inequalities that create socio-economic divisions and negatively affect human relations between the 'haves' and 'have nots.' Yet, this theory is again part of misinformation in COVID-19 discourse because it has been established that the poor can also get the coronavirus. The other myth that is related to the rich-poor variable is that of color binary where black-white distinction is used. The issue of race finds its expression in very subtle and nuanced ways which demand rethinking of conceptualization of race in the face of the deadly coronavirus. The myth that COVID-19 is an elitist disease is subverted. This is because the first COVID-19 death in Zimbabwe of Zororo

Makamba, a young broadcaster, dispels the assumption that the virus infects only white people (Roberts, 2020). Furthermore, the poor- rich binary remains a mere myth because there is evidence where the poor are also victims of the COVID-19.

Getting the coronavirus is a death sentence

It is not factual that getting coronavirus is a death sentence. The Sunday Mail (2020:3) states that "[s]tatistics from Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention highlight that 81 percentage of people who are infected with COVID-19 have not died." To date, the world coronavirus cases stand at slightly above 2 million with deaths and recovery cases packed at above 1million, respectively, as revealed by the Worldometer statistics. The above discussed myths are part of the COVID-19 metanarrative which need to be re-examined and re-assessed in an attempt to establish multiple versions of the realities of this global pandemic.

A cursory glance at religion and COVID-19

Religions of the world such as Islam, Judaism, Christianity, African Indigenous Religion (AIR), among others, are failing to explain the meaning of COVID-19 pandemic in the world. To date, no single religion around the globe has offered a precise solution to the COVID-19 pandemic thereby placing religion in an ambiguous position with regards to its relevance in addressing human problems in the world.

Prophetic discourses

According to Newsday Zimbabwe on 27th March 2020, T. B. Joshua of SCOAN, and a Nigerian prophet prophesied on the 15th March 2020 that the COVID-19 pandemic was ending on the 27th of March. T.B. Joshua's reputation and credibility could be questioned since there is no cure in sight and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage the world. T.B. Joshua's predictions of world events have been previously accurate, although sceptics argue that his prophesies are always wrong. Even some Zimbabwean political leaders believe in him because they have been alleged to have visited his church in Nigeria.

In a shocking Coronavirus Medication prophecy, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa in Zimbabwe prophesied in 2016 about the coming of a deadly plague which many people recently interpreted as COVID-19 pandemic. Prophet Makandiwa prophesied that the plague would claim millions if not billions of people upon the earth if people do not pray against it. On the 1st of March 2020, Makandiwa reminded his congregants at the UFIC Chitungwiza Basilica in Zimbabwe about his 2016 prophecy on the COVID-19. He further prophesied that there will be a creation of a new disease through medical experimentation out of fear of the COVID-19. God will provide a simple cure from the existing medication which is chloroquine. It is from this medication that God will give power to the existing medication to cure COVID-19 because there is no relationship between Malaria and COVID-19. It is striking to observe that the medication for malaria is expected to cure COVID-19. The COVID-19 as prophesied by Makandiwa will disappear but people brag about their claimed health breakthroughs. Prophet Makandiwa also added in his prophecy that there is another deadly disease that will come after COVID-19 to show that God is in control and not humanity.

Another interesting religious discourse is from the American experience. According to The Guardian Weekly (2020), a number of prophets and church leaders in the United States such as Jason Wilson and Rodin Howard- Brown, and Roy Moore among others, have endangered their followers by violating the lockdown regulations by holding church services and they claimed that faith can defeat the coronavirus. From the above prophetic utterances it can be observed that there was no agreement. Surprisingly, these 'prophets' claim to use the same source, God, but there is dissonance in their prophetic discourses.

According to Machivenyika and Mugabe (2020), President E.D. Mnangagwa met with the traditional and religious leaders updating them on the COVID-19 pandemic. He highlighted the government's efforts to control the spread of coronavirus. He briefed the national executive

members of the Zimbabwe Chiefs Council and representatives of religious groups on the devastating effects of the coronavirus. The religious groups which the president met included Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC), the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe (SCIAZ) and the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-denomination Council of Churches (ZIICC).   During the meeting, each religious group presented to the president what they were doing to mitigate the COVID-19.

In his address to the religious leaders, President Mnangagwa challenged them to play two critical roles which are the physical and the spiritual. The president said that the physical role is where the religious leaders advise and assist their congregants on the need to comply with the lockdown during COVID-19 pandemic for safety. The spiritual role comes when the religious leaders guide the nation spiritually. In another meeting, President Mnangagwa addressed the traditional leaders saying that "chiefs were custodians of the people in rural areas and thus had a pivotal role to play in educating them about COVID-19." He informed the chiefs that COVID-19 is highly contagious and therefore advised that people should maintain social distancing and wash their hands regularly. He also mentioned that the country was receiving some donations from its friends in form of masks, sanitizers and test kits. The president reminded the chiefs that traditionally, whenever there is a problem, the chiefs should be officially told since they are the custodians of the people and of the land. He asked the chiefs to intervene and plead to the ancestors for a solution to COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe (Machivenyika & Mugabe, 2020). In response to the president's plea Chief Charumbira organized with his fellow chief to visit Ematonjeni which is a traditional sacred place to perform rituals in order to curb the coronavirus. We observe that all the religious groups put in a concerted effort to mobilise resources and educate their followers on the coronavirus in Zimbabwe. The president's address to traditional leaders was a good move since about 60 percentage of Zimbabwean populace resides in rural areas where the chiefs are in control. President Mnangagwa therefore was seeking the support of chiefs to enforce government COVID-19 mitigatory measures such as banning of unnecessary gatherings but to allow at most 50 people to attend funerals and observing social distancing.

Political responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

The global politics is characterised by mudslinging, power struggle and finger-pointing when constructing discourses about the COVID-19 pandemic. The Cold War between China and the United States is not the fight of media but it takes on the medical and political dimensions. As the international community tries to contain the COVID-19 virus, some superpowers are engaged in power struggles, fighting to control the world-wide perceptions spelling out how the pandemic started, who is responsible and which country should lead the fight against it (Rachman, 2020).   China is blamed for its initial slow response and questioned for keeping the COVID-19 a secret. As a result, there was no collective global effort to bring down the pandemic. According to the GMT media (2020), China adopted Russia's strategies or tactics to use social and mainstream media to spread conspiracy theories and meddle perceptions. In the United States of America COVID-19 was branded the "Chinese Virus" by President Donald Trump, this underscores the raging dispute between America and China which has resulted in a narrative discourse of global ideologies and power politics peddled through the media. For instance, what will the world look like after COVID-19 and which super power will be the best? These and other questions convey the battle of the global mighty and the political desire by super powers to have a grip of the international political supremacy about COVID-19.

The pandemic can bring about a global shift of economic and political power relations and America is in this dilemma and uncertainty about its position as an economic power house. For instance, the Western countries are not happy with the numerous deaths which they are experiencing and America is accusing and threatening China for 'creating' COVID-19. China is accused of benefiting from the global economic recession. The global tug-of-war has started

and the world witnesses intensifying tensions between super powers as conspiracy theories are proffered and the national borders are being closed. The global politics and international power relations are at play, for instance the then President of America, Donald Trump announced that he was signing an executive order to stop immigrants entering America during the COVID-19, to protect its citizens and their jobs (. https://twitter.com/realdonaltrump/status/12:52418369170501639). A close analysis of Trump's statement reveals that America is in pursuit of its policy against immigrants who are perceived as job snatchers.

Tereene (2020) observes that Internet chat rooms in China were awash with speculations that COVID-19 was manufactured in America to destroy the Chinese nation. However, the Chinese authorities have not expressed conspiracy theories of this kind but their counterparts in the United States could not restrain themselves. One American senator, Tom Cotton a republican with presidential aspirations has suggested that the COVID-19 was manufactured by a bio-weapon programme in a laboratory in Wuhan China (Myers, 2020; Rachman, 2020; Verma,2020). Another version of these conspiracy theories is from Iran where a senior government official was infected by the virus. The Iranian president has argued that the spread of coronavirus was a conspiracy by Iran's enemies, thereby accusing other nations of the manufacturing and spreading of the virus (Rachman, 2020). From the foregoing discussion it is observed that the COVID-19 pandemic discourse has become a site of political pragmatism for the battle of ideologies where super powers construct and present to the world their monolithic narratives based on a single truth. These narratives are instruments of power which obscure other potential realities therefore should be questioned and assessed critically by constructing competing epistemologies.

Regionally, where politics has been personalized the death of a leader by COVID-19 may generate a succession battle which encourages military coup. It is disturbing to note that senior political officers and leaders have been victims of coronavirus resulting in possibilities of political instabilities in countries such as Burkina Faso and Nigeria (Cheeseman, 2020). These countries have unstable political environments. Africa's slow response to the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the sharp rise of coronavirus cases in a day posing a great threat to political stability. For example, Tanzania and South Africa took time to introduce the global lockdown safety measures. Regionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted on everyday food supplies, with Zimbabwe as a case in point where a large number of the population survives on informal economic activities. The Zimbabwean political COVID-19 perspective is interesting in that a senior government official claimed that COVID-19 is a punishment from God and America is punished for its economic sanctions on Zimbabwe. Yet, the President of Zimbabwe Emmerson Mnangagwa, diplomatically corrected the damaging statement made by one of his ministers by saying it was not the Zimbabwean government's position but an individual perception. The legitimacy conflict between the ruling party and the opposition parties in Zimbabwe has lost its momentum during the national lockdown since the focus has shifted from national politics to the discourse of COVID-19 mitigatory measures.

From the foregoing discussion in this sub-section, it is apparent that COVID-19 has transformed the global and national politics leaving humanity wondering about the future. We observed that the COVID-19 pandemic brought back re-bordering practices where nations jealously guard their borders and surveillance mechanisms are put in place to keep non-citizens away.

The future of the diaspora is bleak as countries which do not want foreigners in their national territories may take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to deport foreigners back to their home countries. Such countries may also introduce stringent border control measures. The discourses of continental integration and African Renaissance previously foregrounded in decolonization narratives in Africa might be put to question during the COVID-19 era. The African nations such as Botswana, Namibia and South Africa have shifted from embracing fellow Africans by deporting non-citizens or 'African foreigners' back to their countries. We

note that these countries have previously attempted to deport 'foreigners' but were prevented from doing that by human rights organisations. It is from this context that we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic discourse could be utilised as an excuse to dispose of the often despised immigrants.

Health interventions and the COVID-19 pandemic

According to Guterres (2020), the Secretary General of the United Nations, COVID-19 is threatening humanity globally and the entire humanity must come together to fight against the coronavirus. The task force of COVID-19, which is the Global Humanitarian Response Plan, seeks to help the world to fight the virus in the poorest countries, "and address the needs of the most vulnerable people, especially women and children, older people and those with disabilities or chronic illness" (Guterres, 2020:7). It is also the mandate of the United Nations to supply laboratory materials for testing coronavirus cases, provide protective clothing for health workers and medical equipment that will be used to treat the infected people. Guterres (2020:14) states that: " I see three critical areas for action: First, tackling the health emergence. Second, we must focus on the social impact and the economic response and recovery. Third, and finally we have the responsibility to recover better."

The United Nation Secretary General highlighted their preparedness to deal with COVID-19 as well as the plans for life after the pandemic. Guterres (2020) also appealed to all governments to support the humanitarian response plan which will assist in reducing the impact of the coronavirus in the marginalized humanitarian contexts. The United Nations stamps its power and authority to dictate and chart the way forward in mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. If we look at this critically, it could be argued that the power which is exercised by the UN is actually coming from the super powers who have a more expressive veto and economic muscle to control the running of this institution. The super powers therefore have a more audible voice to be listened to by other less powerful nations across the world. The World Health Organisation (WHO), among other organisations such as World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), compliments the United Nations' efforts in the fight against the COVID-19 disease. The World Health Organisation is working in partnership with other Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) through pooled funding mechanisms to the vulnerable countries.

African nations' voices are muffled and silenced in the global institutions because they belong to the category of the 'vulnerable countries' which rely on donations hence they just take directives from the 'haves.' In addition, the French doctors wanted to test their COVID-19 vaccine in Africa. However, this was rebutted by the United Nation Secretary General who argued that the move was racist (Okwonga, 2020). The United Nations Secretary General states that, "Africa is not a laboratory... do not take African people as guinea pigs!"(Okwonga, 2020: 2). The proposal by the French doctors received public condemnation from Africans who are reminded of their colonization and enslavement by the West.

The Zimbabwean government heeded the call made by the United Nation Secretary General and took measures to fight against the coronavirus, such as the national lockdown, encouraging citizens to observe social distancing, washing and sanitizing of hands among others. The United Nations has fulfilled its mandate by the provisions of test kits, medical equipment and funds to support vulnerable communities in Zimbabwe (Dzinamarira et al., 2020). The government guided by the WHO and with the support of the UNDP has focused on increasing the testing, surveillance and contact tracing, identification and equipping of isolation and treatment centres across the country. In addition, there is a broad national response plan budgeted at US $212 million. The UNDP has provided financial support of US$26.7 million from which 6.3million was mobilised by the Global Fund (UNDP, Zimbabwe, 2020).The UNDP has major three areas of intervention in Zimbabwe which are; building

resilient health systems, inclusive and multi-sectorial management and response and socio-economic impact assessment (UNDP, Zimbabwe, 2020).

Although the Zimbabwean government has received considerable support from world organisations, it still encounters a number of challenges which include shortages of test kits, unavailability of equipped isolation and treatment centres, lack of funds to revamp the health delivery system, shortages of protective clothing for the health workers, shortages of material for fumigation of public places which are potential sites for the spread of coronavirus and a shortage of health workers. The health workers demand adequate risk allowances during the COVID-19 pandemic. Citizenry compliance to the lockdown mitigatory measures in Zimbabwe has also been negatively affected by problems which are linked to poverty, the informal economy, poor law enforcement measures and retaining citizens from abroad who are bringing in the coronavirus thereby exacerbated the number of the COVID-19 cases. There is also poor support meted out to vulnerable groups in terms of a poor dissemination of information about the COVID-19 disease especially in the remote parts in Zimbabwe.

It is interesting to note that the elite in Zimbabwe who used to seek health services abroad, which is no longer sustainable during the COVID-19 pandemic, are now forced to use the locally available medical facilities. The elite-poor divide in the COVID-19 is no longer visible. Probably this could be a learning curve for those in authority to provide medical facilities with international standards locally. It must also be noted that those in positions of power are responsible for making decisions on what should be done and what kind of knowledge about COVID-19 pandemic should be disseminated. In other words, the COVID-19 discourse is regulated, politicized and managed by those in positions of authority. Foucault (1972) posits that discourses are not only about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, (for instance, UN, UNDP and WHO), when, and with what authority. Weedon (1997:105) aptly asserts that discourses, in Foucaultian perspective, are ways of constituting knowledge, and together with the social practices, present forms of subjectivity and power relations. Discourse transmits and produces power (Weedon, 1997:107).

A return to *Unhu/ Vumunhu/ Ubuntu/* Humanness in times of distress

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought moments of human fragility, uncertainty and anguish across the world. The cry of the COVID-19 victims whose fate is not clear registers and intensifies helplessness and misery that have come to characterize the COVID-19 experience. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured the existential circumstances of humanity in the sense that it provides sites for articulating counter-discourses that uncover loopholes in previous human relations. In the present context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tenets of *Ubuntu*, a humanist philosophy such as humanness, empathy, global brotherhood, sharing, solidarity among others, redefine human relations. Dolamo (2013) observes that the dictates of *Botho/ Ubuntu* philosophy promote a universal way of living for humankind. A humanist approach as enshrined in *Unhu/ Vumunhu/Ubuntu* philosophy is also observed in Zimbabwe where national political leaders have toned down their usual divisive or toxic political discourse, and have adopted the national unifying language imploring all citizens to come together and help in stopping the spread of coronavirus. Mangena (2012a), Mandova and Chingombe (2013) are some of the scholars who have previously explored the *Ubuntu* philosophy in the Zimbabwean context. The aspects of empathy and kindness enshrined in *Unhu/ Vumunhu* are demonstrated by the collective effort from the corporate world, church organisations and the government which work towards achieving a common goal to save the Zimbabwean nation from COVID-19. In this study we submit that the COVID-19 pandemic has refashioned the political relations in Zimbabwe as well as making the world re-interpret humanity in general.

The COVID-19 Mitigatory measures in Zimbabwe

Several measures have been put in place to contain the coronavirus in Zimbabwe. These include media awareness, the active role of the Zimbabwean universities, the prompt response

of the government of Zimbabwe, assistance from the churches and the corporate world. Both the electronic and print media in Zimbabwe have an ambiguous role since it informs the public about COVID-19 updates as well as causing panic and pandemonium to some extent. The media outlets used celebrities and other well-known figures in Zimbabwean society such as people from the sporting fraternity, business community, church leaders, musicians and politicians to alert the nation about the dangers of the COVID-19 disease and give advice about the safety measures to be taken. From the sporting fraternity, the former captain of the national soccer team Willard Katsande and his colleagues Esrom Nyandoro and Marvellous Nakamba encouraged people to stay at home. They also mobilized resources to buy face masks and sanitisers to be used in their home areas in Zimbabwe. Marvelous Nakamba is currently playing in England for Aston Villa. In addition, church leaders in Zimbabwe from different denominations complimented the government's efforts in implementing the COVID-19 national lockdown and in its adherence to the requirements of preventing the spread of the coronavirus. The church also participated actively in mobilizing resources especially for the more vulnerable communities. The other significant contribution from the church during the COVID-19 pandemic was to give hope and reassurance to the nation. The church stepped up its efforts through televised gospel sermons that emphasise hope in these trying times. Some of the churches which participated actively on Zimbabwe television during the lockdown were the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe, The Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Methodist Church, among others.

A number of Zimbabwean universities have also responded positively to the mitigatory measures taken by the government to curb the spread of coronavirus. These universities are: Midlands State University, Bindura University, Great Zimbabwe University and National University of Science and Technology and University of Zimbabwe. They helped in the massive manufacturing of face masks and sanitisers which were donated to different communities in Zimbabwe. The Harare Institute of Technology invented a ventilator which is a critical medical piece of equipment used to treat the hospitalised COVID-19 patients.

The government of Zimbabwe was swift in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Chirau (2020), a Zimbabwe African Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), the Zimbabwean government declared the COVID-19 as a national disaster and the president made pronouncements on restrictions on foreign travelling particularly outside Africa to reduce risk of being exposed to and to import COVID-19. The Zimbabwean Government followed suit and closed its borders. The security agents in Zimbabwe enforced lockdown measures to ensure there is compliance and safety of citizens (Dzinamarira, 2020).

Conclusion

As a way of concluding, this article has explored the COVID-19 disease discourse with regards to religious and political dimensions that are projected. The utilization of the Critical Discourse Analysis as the interpretive framework in this study has helped to shape the tone and presentation of arguments proffered. It has been established that the COVID-19 pandemic discourse, just like other discourses is never neutral, since it is laden with attitudes, values, hegemonic practices and power struggles. These aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic discourse, require further scrutiny to challenge the monolithic or single truth narratives from the global powers who have political motives to dominate and control the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought the globe together in times of misery where collective efforts are being made to curb the spreading of the coronavirus.

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