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“Noah’s Family Was on Lockdown”: Multimodal Metaphors in Religious Coronavirus-Related Internet Memes in the Nigerian WhatsApp Space

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the forms and functions of religious Internet memes that relate to Covid-19, with a view to identifying the conceptual metaphors that underlie the creation of the memes. The data, which consist of thirty religious Internet memes shared in the Nigerian WhatsApp space, are analyzed qualitatively using the categorization of religious Internet memes, and the concept of multimodal metaphors. The memes contain (non-)linguistic metaphors such as the picture of Biblical Noah’s ark and expressions such as *Noah’s family was on lockdown*, which reveal underlying conceptual metaphors such as LOCKDOWN IS A GODLY INSTRUCTION and COVID-19 IS A WAR. The memes are used to allay the fears of people in the face of the disease, and encourage adherence to lockdown orders, amongst others. The study concludes that the forms and functions of these religious memes assist in revealing the multimodal conceptual metaphors underlying the memes.

Introduction

Nigeria has been described as one of the leading religious nations in the world (see Chiluya, 2008a, 2012). Although it is stated in the Nigerian Constitution that Nigeria is a secular nation, religion plays vital roles in the country as well as in the lives of her citizens. Christianity and Islam are the two dominant religions practised in Nigeria, with estimates at 46.3% of the population as Christians, 46% as Muslims and 7.4% as traditional worshippers (see Ayeni, 2020). While Christianity is fairly predominant in the southern part of the country, Islam is fairly dominant in the northern part of the country (see Chiluya, 2012). All three religions (traditional religions are grouped into one) are discussed at primary school levels while Christianity and Islam are taken each as full-fledged subjects in the secondary schools (see Okoh, 2012). Thus, religion occupies a central domain in the consciousness of most Nigerians, and this is reflected in the use of car stickers (see Chiluya, 2008a), SMS text messages (e.g. Chiluya, 2008b), and naming patterns (e.g. Chiluya, 2010). While it is commonplace in the Nigerian (African) worldview to attribute negative occurrences such as poverty, diseases, and death to some evil forces, it is believed that such negative threats can be overcome through a supernatural being (Magbadelo, 2004). This belief system is portrayed in the way many Nigerians have reacted to Covid-19, a virulent pandemic that has ravaged the entire world, claiming the lives of over one million, seven hundred thousand people as at 30th December, 2020 (John Hopkins University, 2020).

Nigeria had her first confirmed case of Covid-19 on the 27th of February, 2020, and by 23rd March, 2020, Nigeria closed her international borders, and later instituted total lockdown orders in three key cities: Abuja, Lagos, and Ogun, due to a sudden increase of confirmed cases, particularly from people

who returned from abroad. Many states in the federation also gave stay-at-home orders to their citizens (Nigerian Center for Disease Control, 2020). All these created unpalatable situations which Nigerians had to deal with. Moreover, because of the lockdown orders, there was a ban on religious gatherings which was an unprecedented situation in the country, as in many other parts of the world. In order to deal with this development, religious services went online (see Ayeni, 2020), although such online religious services had been taking place, but only on a small scale to complement offline services (see Chilwa, 2012). Therefore, it was natural for Nigerians to react based on their religious beliefs to the effects of the pandemic on their faith and daily lives, especially through social media since there were restrictions on different kinds of physical gatherings. The online platform also provided a means for Nigerians to create awareness of the disease and provide care and support for others in the face of the pandemic. Such reactions took place on weblogs, discussion forums, Facebook, Twitter, and online newspapers amongst others.

One medium through which Nigerians have expressed their religious beliefs in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic is through the use of religious Internet memes, which are “memes circulated on the Internet whose images and texts focus on a variety of religious themes and/or religious traditions” (Bellar et al., 2013). In a similar vein, Aguilar, Campbell, Stanley, and Taylor (2017, p. 1500) posit that religious Internet memes are constructs made up of images and texts drawn from a variety of religious cultural themes and/or traditions, and are often “combined with popular culture elements and discourses.” These religious memes form a sub-genre under Internet memes, which are digital items that share common features such as content, form, and/or stance, and are “circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by multiple users,” (Shifman, 2014, p. 341). Studies on religious Internet memes are still few and have only begun recently (see Aguilar et al., 2017). The few scholars working on religious memes have shown that religious memes are useful in understanding religious meaning-making online (Bellar et al., 2013), avenues through which religious institutions spread their messages far and wide (Burroughs & Feller, 2015), and assist in creating a shared religious cultural experience (Brubaker, Boyle, & Stephan, 2017). Others show that they can serve as a tool to understand popular conceptions about religion within mainstream culture (Aguilar et al., 2017), interpret politics (Campbell, Arredondo, Dundas, & Wolf, 2018), and attract young people who are distancing themselves from institutional religious affiliation (Church & Feller, 2020). These studies appear to focus on religious memes that are shared in western societies, without investigating the use of these memes in non-western societies or multimodal metaphors in the memes, particularly during a global health crisis which affects the religious practices and the daily lives of the people. This paper, therefore, extends previous research on religious memes by interrogating religious Internet memes shared in the Nigerian WhatsApp space in reaction to the current coronavirus pandemic. In particular, we examine the forms and functions of these religious memes from a social semiotic approach and explore the ways in which religious tropes serve as multimodal metaphors for these religious memes. This will provide deeper knowledge and greater understanding of the use of religious Internet memes in a non-western society, especially in the face of a health crisis.

Since we have dealt with the background to and objectives of the study in this section, we explore religious Internet memes in greater detail and present the theoretical guidelines in [section 2](#). Thereafter, we provide information on the data and method for the study in [section 3](#), and analyze our data in [section 4](#). Finally, we conclude the study in [Section 5](#).

Religious internet memes and multimodal metaphors

Taking a cue from Shifman (2014) and Aguilar et al. (2017), we define religious memes as digital items that draw from a variety of religious cultural themes and/or traditions, which are often combined with popular culture, and circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by multiple users. These religious Internet memes contribute to the concept of lived religion which “focuses on how people actually express their religiosity in everyday life” and “promotes a form of religion that is flexible and personal” (Aguilar et al., 2017, p. 1499). This is possible since digital culture contributes to a