


The rich man and Lazarus: COVID-19, class and identity in Nigeria

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The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31) has attracted many interpretations from different cultural and theological contexts. But one thread that holds most of the works together is structural disparity in human society and the reality of judgement in the afterlife. This article re-reads the parable within the context of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This method of re-reading the parable in this particular context (of COVID-19) is to serve two major purposes within the Nigerian and global sphere. First, it demonstrates how humans in their (dis)ingenuity try to outwit the moral and theological, and even the eschatological, import it is meant to serve. Second, it elucidates that despite human efforts to manoeuvre theological truth, the faithful should be encouraged to abide in the truth.

Keywords: parable; COVID-19; rich man; Lazarus; class.

Introduction

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16: 19–31) raises issues of class and identity, which are still a matter of contemporary interest in human or societal relations. It is certainly not a coincidence that there is a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor in the Nigerian society and elsewhere, leading to 'class disadvantage ... There is no real debate about whether this heartless inequality is the case or that is getting wider' (Duckett 2021:2). Even though there have been critical interventions to change the system, those who find themselves at the top echelon have remained, and in fact, maintained an evolutionary accretive method to sustain themselves and their close kin and kith up there. Even the Western world which many developing countries look up to as 'perfect' example of class mobility has been shown to be less mobile. Historian Todd (2021) in her *Snakes and Ladders* shattered the myth of class mobility in Britain, arguing that those who have held privileged positions have continued to securely maintain them, only leaving little breathing space for mobility. She disrupted the claim of the political that there is social mobility in Britain based on hard work, presenting brutal evidence to maintain her position that social mobility is a myth rather than a reality. Duckett (2021:2) reminded us of 'how a powerful elite on the top rungs have clung to their perch and prevented others ascending'. This clique or cabal of powerful elite enjoys excessively at the expense of the hard-working, but decimated poor people.

The rich man and Lazarus belong to opposing and fixed class structure; but whilst Lazarus has a name with which he can be identified and related with, the rich man is only described and leaves much to be figured out speculatively. The second aspect of the parable that is of utmost importance to this article is the fact that whilst the rich man was buried at death, there is no record that Lazarus was buried. These two themes of name and burial are critical to the first part of the parable, and they very seriously provide the data for contextual engagement on the existential part of the parable within the Nigerian COVID-19 experience. The second part which has to do with an additional character – Abraham – provides a scintillating twist when human (dis)ingenuity comes into the picture; this will help to understand how humans, in this case, some wealthy Nigerians are attempting to circumvent the morals of the parable by trying to cast the personae in a reverse/parallel role/plot.

The fact that COVID-19 has dramatically changed the world and ways of doing things in a very short time cannot be denied. Its changes are real and concrete. Whilst government at national and global levels has concentrated on recovering from the pandemic and recovery of the economic and political shocks and exigencies that have resulted from the pandemic thus far, little attention has been paid to the fact that although the disease does not seem to discriminate in infesting people, there is conscious, deliberate human discrimination of its patients and victims. This is increasingly made clear from the way and manner in which the rich and powerful persons who

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have either contracted or died of the disease are disparately treated from other poor citizens or victims. This discriminatory treatment thus introduces class and identity into how the pandemic is conceived. Furthermore, the way the socially or politically prominent people infested with the disease or those who died as a consequence of it are treated raises serious political, cultural and theological questions. This article will be foregrounded on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to demonstrate the twist that has taken place in class and identity issues in relation to COVID-19 in Nigeria. It will suggest a theology of hope for the underprivileged who as it seems at present, have lost both name and identity and proper or decent burial.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus

This parable of the rich man and Lazarus is situated within the first century Palestine to demonstrate 'the great class disparity' between the 'urban elite' and 'rural peasantry', superabundance and abject poverty, upper and lower class, exploiter and exploited, and the economic injustice that prevailed in that society (Van Eck 2009:1). It is 'largely based on issues of wealth and identity' (Van Groenigen 2021:27). Some scholars argue that the parable shows Jesus as interested more in political restructuring of society than religious or theological activity. According to Van Eck (2009), for instance, the name of the poor man – Lazarus, that is, one whom God helps – resounds the premium Jesus places on the poor, the socially-discriminated, the impure and the neglected. The gap between the rich and the poor is so wide and it is maintained in such a way that one cannot cross from one side to the other. This social gap is replicated in a reversed position when the rich man indirectly requested Lazarus to fetch him water to drink. He argues that it is because the wealthy people neglect to care for the poor that societal chasm is created. The rich man's fate is not because of his wealth, but his total neglect of the plight of Lazarus.

Scott (1989) also made the point that the parable clearly depicts the boundaries that exist between the rich and the poor in the first century. The rich remain within their cosy palaces and eat sumptuously, whilst the poor are outside having their sores licked by dogs whilst waiting for crumbs to be thrown at them. Although the rich deliberately do not cross the boundaries to meet and help the poor, the poor however are fenced out in order to not access the rich. In fact, in the modern world, the dogs are guards that are positioned to prevent the poor and unwanted people to come close to the gates of the rich. The poor having access to the rich tends to stigmatise the rich; the social class has to be distinctly maintained so that the rich will enjoy their status without interference from the poor. This socioeconomic injustice that prevails in human society calls for Jesus' attention; Jesus steps into the gap in favour of the poor (Scott 1989).

Szukalski (2012) viewed the parable as problematic in the sense that it appears that only economic injustice is the sole criterion for the determination of the eventual fate of the rich

man in the afterlife. In any case, in the context of a social structure that only accommodates the upper and lower classes, socioeconomic powers play significant role in identity and class relations – one is either poor or rich. Szukalski's concern here raises social ethical questions rather than theological. He may ask, for instance, whether the rich man is responsible for the poverty of Lazarus? Is the rich man obligated to help Lazarus given that he is not directly responsible for his penury? Shouldn't the rich man's decision not to help Lazarus be within the remit of his right? Why, therefore, should his decision not to use his wealth to alleviate the plight of Lazarus be used as the sole criterion for the determination of his ultimate fate? Such questions do not express the ethos and morals of the first century Palestine; they appear as though modern standard is used to evaluate the period of the parable.

In any case, Johnson (1977:165) suggested that the use of 'rich' and 'poor' should be understood metaphorically. He posited that the socioeconomic interpretation that the parable has elicited should be expanded to designate 'conditions of powerlessness and power, being outcast by people or accepted by them'. The rich man's status confers power on him, whilst Lazarus's powerlessness stems from his economic disadvantage. The rich man has power and access to the powerful in the society; he has a voice as well as influence. On the contrary, Lazarus operates from the position of powerlessness and has to suffer hunger and injustice associated with his status. He is:

[N]either in a place to have access to higher positions nor in a place to work his way up into one. He would have been compelled to live such a life, devoid of affection and the favour of others and destitute, with no hope of gaining access to the basic minimum he needed to survive. (Van Groenigen 2021:39)

Szukalski (2012) extrapolated the class differentiation in the following submission: Lazarus means 'God has helped me', rather than man's help. The meaning of the name nicely depicts the class and identity that existed in the first century where the rich extravagantly socialised with their own class and spitefully related with the poor – leaving the poor to be helped by God even though man has the capacity to help, but refuses. Lazarus' poverty readily shows in his lack of clothes, having sores all over his body, and lack of food, having to wait for the crumbs that may fall from the rich man's well garnished table. Lazarus's status means he is an outsider, dehumanised and marginalised by society and helpless, perhaps, his only hope is death as a necessary end to his existential suffering. He will also not quicken the process of death; he waits patiently whilst in pain for it to come. Szukalski (2012) described it as follows:

[T]he dogs are neither friendly companions, nor do they provide comfort by licking the poor man's sores. Rather, they are wild scavengers roaming the city streets 'that detect and taste the "fresh meat" that the sores on Lazarus would present to them'. They wait for his death. (p. 90)

Furthermore, David van Groenigen (2021) examined how ascribed and acquired high social status helps the rich man to

maintain his socioeconomic profile or identity in the society. The rich, who probably was a patron to many clients, lived a ritzy life, fed sumptuously and regularly organised banquets where his clients and class would fete. From his daily lifestyle, it is clear that the rich man spent money lavishly on himself rather than show any kindness to those around him. In other words, he lived a selfish life: 'the Rich Man was supposed to spend money on the community, but he did not spend much on his community' (Van Groenigen 2021:41). In addition:

[H]is social identity 'rich' means, to him at least, that he has to associate only with those who share his identity and those that can increase his social credit ... His identity ... entitles him to the group benefit of being allowed to increase his wealth in any way he pleases ... (p. 46)

Another significant aspect of the parable to this article is that both Lazarus and the rich man died. There is no record that Lazarus is buried at death; he is only carried by angels, as if on a flight, to Abraham's bosom. Of course, as a poor person perhaps his relatives could not afford to give him a burial. But when the rich man died, he was buried. In Genesis 50:1–14, for instance, we can glean what it means to bury a wealthy person. The entire cabinet of Pharaoh and other important dignitaries in Egypt followed Joseph to Canaan to bury Jacob after 40 days of mourning and embalment. Berman (2006) pointed out that the burial of Jacob (Gn. 50:1–14) is one of the most elaborate narratives in the entire Bible. It is a reflection of the status of Joseph, a man of economic and political influence in Egypt.

Burial is very important here because it carries forth the social status that in life separated the rich man from Lazarus. In fact, the rich man takes with him the aura of his social status on earth even in the place of great torment: His audacious request for water from Lazarus whom he had treated as a pariah whilst on earth eloquently affirms this. His consciousness of his status rather than sobriety in his new place of torment further demonstrates how ingrained class consciousness has functioned in keeping the low-status people under the rung. Groenigen (2021:96) even saw this as arrogance on the part of the rich man: 'He will not even deign to fetch his own water; because he occupies a high status as a rich man, he expects Lazarus to do his work for him'. He will not even directly speak with Lazarus, a former beggar; he prefers to associate with Abraham, and sends Abraham to talk to Lazarus on his behalf. Whilst on earth he avoided Lazarus, and even at death he will still not talk with him. In any case, the rich man got 'a glorious burial' (Van Groenigen 2021:17). As Szukalski (2012:183) described it, 'the rich man dies while feasting sumptuously and is most likely buried with all the pomp and ceremony befitting his elite status'. But the gate which Lazarus could not cross into the house of the rich man on the first part of the parable has parallel on the second part also. Namely, the rich man, seeing Lazarus in Abraham's bosom could have wished to pass over to meet him, but for the gulf in between, a similitude of the gate Lazarus was not allowed to cross whilst on earth. The difference here is that whilst Lazarus was not allowed to cross the gate, the rich man was unable to cross the gulf.

For Lazarus, not being buried means that he is cursed; cursed by his social status. 'In Jewish tradition, to be refused burial, to be left exposed as carrion for scavenger animals... was tantamount to bearing the curse of God' (Szukalski 2012:183). Giving a Jewish Palestinian background to the parable, Regalado (2002:341) noted that 'with regard to the burial of Lazarus, the text implicitly states that he was not buried, while the rich man is described as being buried'. The implication of this, he argued, is that Jesus's audience would have been shocked if Jesus had said that Lazarus was buried. The class distinction and the everyday experience of the Jews would have been blurred had Jesus ascribed burial to Lazarus. 'Jesus emphasizes the destitute condition of Lazarus in contradistinction from the luxurious and better condition of the rich man by indirectly stating that Lazarus was not properly buried' (Regalado 2002:342). Regalado further asserted that 'the idea of not receiving a decent burial is a strong Jewish element in this parable' (Regalado 2002:342). However, Szukalski's (2012:88) emphasis on the rich man being 'properly buried' resonates so much with African belief that proper burial is a condition for eternal rest. Scott (1989:152) also holds the view that lack of decent or proper burial is not only scandalous and a curse, but also capable of denying one resurrection or afterlife. This aligns with Koka's (2002:47) thought when he argued that burial brings the past, present and the future together in a common thread. In his words, 'Burial is a theater where ancient rituals and ceremonies are enacted by the living to appease the dead, and thus to ensure the future'. In fact, funerals are 'moral orders' and 'moral economies' of Africa, which help to bind and bond the social body, social order and hierarchy as well as the otherworldly realm. Whilst for the West burial is private, it is communal in Africa, and every aspect of it gives meaning and points to eschatological ramifications (Jindra & Noret n.d.a, p. 17).

What is interesting here is first, that the rich man was buried when he died and Lazarus was not; and second, Lazarus has his name mentioned, identified and can still be related with even now, whereas the rich man has no name and identity, but class. These two points raise issues for African Christian theology and normative nuances and interpretations of death and burial in responding to COVID-19 victims. In Nigeria, whereas the rich and powerful patients and victims of COVID-19 have both names and identity, and therefore accorded burial, the poor patients and victims are denied same, and are even stigmatised at death. This is where and why a re-reading of this parable becomes pertinent and urgent.

The parable in the context of COVID-19 in Nigeria

The coronavirus disease broke out in Wuhan province, China, in December 2019, and quickly spread across the world, leading to fatalities and political and economic shocks. Zizek (2020) argued that COVID-19 brought sharp awareness of the people whose presence was taken for granted before the pandemic. He added that instead of the national leaders to be

concerned about the masses, they concentrated more on how to recover the economy, which has been adversely affected by the pandemic. According to Zizek (2020), the European economy was already showing signs of stagnation as imports and exports came to a standstill during the lockdown. The forceful reopening of the economy in the absence of vaccines was a political strategy to address the economic shocks. He quoted Dan Patrick, the governor of Texas thus: 'My message: let's get back to work, let's get back to living, let's be smart about it, and those of us who are 70-plus, we'll take care of ourselves' (Zizek 2020:101). He thus argued that it is capitalism that is the underlying factor that recognises the survival of the economy over the human beings. This Marxist conception of the lockdown explains that the capitalist government wherever it exists, undermines the rights and choices of the people, except where such rights and choices are in tandem with economic gain. However, 'in the choice, human lives lose' (Zizek 2020:101).

Perhaps, their preference for non-human system to human lives is responsible for the gross lack of trust in the government during the first round of the pandemic:

[P]eople needed to have faith and trust in their government while the uncertainties of the new outbreak were worked out by the scientific community ... You need extra trust, an extra sense of solidarity, an extra sense of goodwill, all of which have been completely used up. (Zizek 2020:10)

Zizek (2020:10) argued that 'only a mutual trust between ordinary people and the state can prevent this from happening'. But the way some national leaders handled the pandemic left much to be desired. The case of Nigeria during the lockdown expressly drives home this argument. Even though almost all activities were affected by the lockdown, corruption in high places, in fact, corruption of COVID-19 palliatives, was not shut down. The massive corrupt practices during the lockdown negatively affected how the poor perceived the pandemic, as will be elucidated later. Even though the slogan seemed to be that the coronavirus was non-discriminatory in terms of race, age, status, religion, gender and so forth, the manner with which certain group of people was perceived and treated raises the issue of class and identity. Many studies have shown how the lower class suffer disproportionately from the disease around the world. They lose their jobs, suffer pay cut, suffer discriminatory educational opportunities and so on (Soria & Horgos 2020).

The first index case in Nigeria was an Italian man who flew into Nigeria in February 2020. As more cases of infection were recorded, the government felt the need to lock down Lagos, Ogun and Abuja which were the most hit as the gateways into the country. The impact of the lockdown varies from upper class to lower class. Even though the lockdown was meant to be obeyed by all and sundry, reality showed that there are those who seem to be above the law. In any case, it was the social deprivation that the lower class people suffered that led to their perception of COVID-19 as 'the rich man's disease' and a 'divine and deserved

punishment from God upon them' because of their corruption that has brought the country to its knees (Onwughalu 2020), even though Zizek (2020) will want us to believe that it is purely a natural pandemic. The perception of COVID-19 being a rich man's disease (RMD) is important for this article because, first, those whose names were/are published to have either contracted or died as a consequence of it are mainly politically influential persons (PIP); second, those who have also requested for prayers nationally for recovery from the RMD are PIP; third, those who have publicly shared testimonies of survival from RMD and have attracted nationwide interest and accolades are PIP; fourth, those who have publicly and fragrantly flouted the safety protocols of the RMD are PIP. Hence, it is reasonable for the masses of the country to describe COVID-19 as RMD! Despite this, COVID-19 also created corruption pipelines through which humongous sums of public money were embezzled without call to accountability, which Vincent Onwughalu (2020:1456) referred to as 'Covidpreneurs'. In fact, those who have been accused of embezzlement from the RMD's fund are PIP.

The concept of RMD in reference to COVID-19 resonates with class and identity discourse in Nigeria where there is a wide gulf between the rich and the poor. The social chasm that has defined class structure in Nigeria has continued to enervate the poor. To a very large extent, it can be argued that the poor have lost faith in the capability of the leadership of the country to ameliorate their plight because of the unconscionable corruption in high places. Loss of faith or trust in government by the poor affected how COVID-19 was perceived and responded to. Apart from it being referred to as RMD, the poor doubted the reality of the disease. They thought it was a political ploy or scam to hoodwink them as usual, especially with the promise of aids from international bodies. It is also widely believed that the number of infections being announced daily is grossly falsified. The people believe that the numbers were exaggerated in order to access the aids. Two states (Kogi and Cross River) out of the 36 states in the country maintained that COVID-19 was a hoax, giving vent to the suspicion of the people. The government itself seems to support the people's suspicion in the manner with which its palliatives were administered. For instance, during the #EndSARS protests in October 2020, COVID-19 palliatives were found hoarded in politicians' houses and warehouses, traditional rulers' palaces, whilst some markets were flooded with them at high prices. This 'coup' against the poor, which has been referred to as 'Hovid' (Karam & Ali 2020),¹ clearly depicts how the rich treat the poor as dispensable.

In addition, the manner and speed with which the National Assembly attempted to pass the Infectious Disease Control Bill 2020 and the National Health Emergency Bill 2020 in the absence of any vaccine raised the suspicion that it was a coup against the people. The coincidence of the fire that gutted the

1. Agatha Chikelue, the Executive Director of the Cardinal Onaiyekan Foundation and Coordinator of Religious for Peace's Interfaith Women's Network observed, 'people are afraid of dying of "Hovid" – the hunger caused as a result of loss of livelihoods from the lockdown' than COVID-19 itself. For details, see Karam and Ali (2020).

Office of the Auditor-General of the Federation when the National Assembly was to begin a probe into the disbursement of COVID-19 palliatives further heightened the position of the people that COVID-19 is a scam. The near-total neglect of the health workers and facilities in the midst of the severity of the pandemic which led to health workers embarking on nationwide strike to demand for their allowances and health materials to work with, despite the government announced N100 billion intervention funds for health sector are quintessential in supporting the position of the poor (Onwughalu 2020).

In spite of the discrimination against the poor and the unfair treatment meted out to them during the lockdown, there is one equilibrium that COVID-19 has occasioned, namely: unlike the pre-COVID-19 era no person, whether PIP or otherwise, could travel abroad for medical attention and even now that restrictions have been relaxed in many countries. Voice of America (VOA) reports that at least 1 billion US dollars is spent on foreign medical tourism by the Nigerian PIP annually (<https://www.voanews.com/africa/nigeria-losing-1b-annually-medical-tourism-authorities-say>) (VOA n.d.). With the reality that COVID-19 forced on the country generally and the health sector in particular, one would have thought that the government would reconsider its negligent stance towards the health sector in the country. Unfortunately, the PIP and government have quickly forgotten the lessons of the lockdown and how they were unable to access medical care abroad (Muanya, Jimoh & Olaniyi n.d.). It is even suggested that the number of COVID-19 deaths amongst the PIP would have been lesser than what it is if there were no lockdown and restrictions at the international levels.

Another leveller COVID-19 occasioned is 'forced' realisation of the inevitability of death – a concept that is a universal truth. It is also believed that the rich can enhance their lives in such a way that they may live longer. Their access to the finest medical personnel and facilities is one of the ways they have maintained their health. But COVID-19 has compelled them to realise the inevitability of death when their wealth could not help them to access health facilities they had been used to. According to Mbiti (2002:119), 'the death that has come to a soul cannot be prevented by a wise person', in this context the PIP. He emphasised the point that death does not respect a chief or his or her servant. This impartial knell of death was brought home more pungently during the lockdown where little or nothing could save those who believed that their wealth could ordinarily save them. Death blurs the line of social segregation that wealth creates in human society.

The causes of death are very important in African religious thought. They determine what kind of burial will be accorded the deceased. There are good and bad deaths. Good death is one that occurs at old age in a peaceful manner. Bad death is one that occurs violently or is caused by a bad disease. Whilst those who die good death are accorded proper burial, those who die bad death are not buried; they may be thrown into

the evil forest. The significance of this distinction is that death resulting from COVID-19 was initially regarded as a bad death by the Nigerian government. Despite the burial protocols that recommend 'dignified burial' in accordance with 'customs' in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of death resulting from COVID-19 was still maintained by the Federal Government. In the burial protocols, it was the Federal Ministry of Health that was empowered to dispose of the bodies of COVID-19 victims. It was even suggested that cremation might be the most suitable form of disposing the bodies (NCDC 2020). Although cremation is being introduced to some parts of Africa such as South Africa because of the devastating consequences of AIDS and non-availability of land, it is generally regarded as an 'insult to the past' and 'threatens the future with discontinuity' (Jindra & Noret n.d.b). Those who died of COVID-19 were not allowed to be placed in the mortuary for an obvious reason – the likelihood of infesting other corpses thereby spreading the disease. They were thus to be disposed of immediately without 'proper burial'. According to the Information Minister, Lai Mohammed, 'Nigerians should not forget that these are not the types of corpses that can be claimed for burial because it must be handled by the ministry of health' (Folorunsho-Francis 2020). But the twist happened when Abba Kyari, the Chief of Staff to the Nigerian President died of COVID-19. Top government functionaries flouted all the COVID-19 protocols in their bid to accord him proper burial (Ayeni 2020). 'Burial ceremonies of highly-placed government officials were also held in grand styles irrespective of the social distancing protocols' (Okoro 2021:26). The death and public burial accorded Abba Kyari suddenly changed the concept of bad death resulting from COVID-19 to good death. This again is critical to the social structure that undermines the poor. Poor people who had died of COVID-19 complications were not accorded decent or proper burial.

Preliminary exploration has shown that some of those who have contracted the disease are not usually mentioned in the various lists of updates daily announced by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). But the media, especially the social media outlets, freely publish the names of politicians and other wealthy persons in the country who have contracted or died from COVID-19. These personalities are carefully monitored and their response or otherwise to treatment is also shared in the media. In addition, prayer requests have been made, often placed on the media, asking the whole country, irrespective of the citizens' religious affiliations to pray for this set of people to recover from the disease (Olasupo 2020). Here, the much-advertised stigmatisation of COVID-19 patients is blurred, and it appears that their class or status in society has helped them to deal with stigmatisation that was rife with the disease initially. Conversely, when one subtracts the number of these rich people from the list of names of those who are infested with the disease, one can conveniently surmise that the rest are patients who are less known, that is, they are not PIP. Here, the empathy that the rich patients of COVID-19 have been accorded is consciously or unconsciously the poor patients

were denied. For instance, a former Nigerian Vice President tweeted that his son had contracted COVID-19, was in isolation, and requested all Nigerians to pray for his recovery. The criticality of this request is that it came from a prominent person, who has a 'name', that is, social status.

According or denying empathy is connected with human names within the African tradition and Christianity; name creates image and relationship of a person in the mind of the imager. In Africa, name is life because it is whoever that has a name that exists. In other words, names confer some level of existence on what is named. To be named is to have identity amongst people in human community. Name identifies individuals and also confers status on them. Names evoke feeling and emotion (Igboin 2004, 2014, 2018). This is why empathy cannot be showed to poor people who cannot be connected with by their names in the COVID-19 situation.

The same discriminatory treatment is also being meted to the rich and poor victims of COVID-19. Thus far, whilst the names of rich and powerful people who died as a result of COVID-19 are being made public and physical and e-sympathisers or e-mourners send their condolences to the families, the poor victims do not have any announcement except that they form part of the general number of those who have died of the virus. Again, when a simple calculation is performed on the number of the rich and powerful victims publicly announced being taken away from the total number of victims, it will be certain that poor people have died more of the disease than the rich. As of 30 May 2021 there were 166 285 cases of coronavirus infection, 2071 deaths and 156 557 recovered. Table 1 sheds light on the names of those announced to have either contracted or died of COVID-19.

TABLE 1: Some prominent names of those who have contracted COVID-19 in Nigeria.

S/N	Name	Status	Outcome
1	Abba Kyari	Chief of Staff to the Nigerian President	Died
2	Abiola Ajumobi	Two-time Governor of Oyo state	Died
3	Wahab Adegbenro	Commissioner of Health, Ondo state	Died
4	Nasir El-Rufai	Governor of Kaduna state	Survived
5	Bala Mohammed	Governor of Bauchi state	Survived
6	Baba Tela	Deputy Governor of Bauchi state	Survived
7	Okezie Ikpeazu	Governor of Abia state	Survived
8	Rebecca Apedzan	Former state law maker	Survived
9	Terwase Orbunde	Chief of Staff to Benue state Governor	Survived
10	Veronica Onyeke	Head of Service, Benue state	Survived
11	Anthony Ijoho	Secretary to the Benue state government	Survived
12	Samuel Ortom	Governor of Benue state	Survived
13	Charles Aniagwu	Commissioner of Information, Delta state	Survived
14	Okowa	Governor of Delta state	Survived
15	Chiedu Ebie	Secretary to Delta state government	Survived
16	Kayode Fayemi	Governor of Ekiti state	Survived
17	Muazu	Former Works Commissioner, Kano state	Survived
18	Rotimi Akeredolu	Governor of Ondo state	Survived
19	Wole Oyeibamiji	Secretary to Osun state government	Survived
20	Seyi Makinde	Governor of Oyo state	Survived
21	Lawan Nguru	Lawmaker, Yobe state	Survived
22	Buruji Kashamu	Former national lawmaker	Died
23	Raymond Dokpesi	Owner of Africa Independent Television	Survived
24	Dan Foster	OAP – On Air Personality	Died

But why is death an important identifier here? It is partly because the cause of death is important to African religious eschatology as well as Christian theology and eschatology. Before I explore this point, it is pertinent to clearly understand that there are also class and identity issues in the death and burial of the victims of COVID-19 in Nigeria.

'Even Jesus wasn't buried in this kind of grave'

There is the need to discuss the twist in the fate of the rich man in the context of the grave of Senator Abiola Ajumobi. Ajumobi was a Nigerian Senator, two-time governor of Oyo state, and Deputy National Chairman of the Nigerian ruling party, All Progressive Congress (APC). By the positions he held in the country, it can safely be argued that he was extremely rich in a country where political positions constitute the easiest way to access public funds without accountability. Ajumobi died as a result of complications from COVID-19, and his burial ceremonies also defiled the government protocols in a bid to accord him befitting and proper burial. That all protocols were flouted demonstrates that he was a PIP who died of RMD. But what is more pertinent to this article is the nature of his grave, which has widely elicited comments. Like the rich man, Ajumobi was buried. Even though there are no details of the grave of the rich man, those of Ajumobi seem to twist the fate of the rich man. The rich man was in a state of torment in hell, where the fire was making him to thirst. The heat of hell must have been very great regardless of the fact that he could still recognise Lazarus and Abraham. The grave of Ajumobi that went viral on social media reveals that it is made of world best marble, tiles, and is fully air conditioned with constant electricity supply in a country that hardly enjoys electricity (Vanguard n.d.). The cushion chairs that surround the grave room are exotic, neatly positioned in the form of an executive office. At the top of the grave stands an imposing statue of the dead, probably meant to stimulate the reality of his presence. The air conditioner is meant to cool the mausoleum and perhaps, the soul of the dead. The furniture is probably meant to make visitors comfortable in the grave room. All this is meant to give maximum comfort to the dead. One commentator even estimates the cost of the mausoleum as capable of paying emoluments of '500 pensioners' (Falade 2020) in a country where senior citizens are literally hastened to die because of government non-payment of pension.

It seems to me that with this ritzy mausoleum, there is the belief that the dead should continue to enjoy what they enjoyed whilst alive. This will mean that there will be no need of thirst, heat of hell, isolation that made the rich man reach out to Abraham for help. A belief that a comfortable mausoleum for the dead translates to repose of the same soul is antithetical to the morals of the parable. Even though the rich man seemed to want to maintain his superior class in Hades, he found out that it was not practicable. The dismissive responses of Abraham to his requests are a good point to argue that no matter how

beautiful a person's grave is, it has nothing to benefit the soul of the dead. It is this that must have led to Moturola's exclamation that 'Even Jesus wasn't buried in this kind of grave' (Falade 2020).

What is therefore the implication for the contemporary poor Christians who must have been through this experience of denying their deceased a decent burial? How would they relate in a society that has different standards for the rich and the poor, and yet keep their trust or faith? How would they minister to others who might be in the same situation? I think that Moturola's response is enlivening in the sense that Jesus, who was buried in Joseph of Arimathea's grave never remained in the grave. The empty grave of Jesus instantiates the fact that what happens after and beyond the grave is more important than how the grave is decorated, maintained or animated. Grave has no comfort for the soul of the dead; the soul certainly lives outside the grave. Humans can attach light or obsessive attachment to the grave, but the reality is that no matter how exquisite the grave may be, they also believe that much of it is emotional attachment. Conor Omecinski (2018) drove home this point thus:

The respective burials of the rich man and Lazarus serve as the earthly perceptions of each character against which their post mortem destinies would be emphasized. Just as Lazarus was perceived (and certainly would have been perceived by the audience) to have been a poor, sinful beggar who was unworthy of eternal treasure in paradise, the parable shockingly describes Lazarus not as rotting in some mass grave after his death, but instead demonstrates that Lazarus is carried 'to the bosom of Abraham by angels'. In contrast, the death and burial of the rich man (who most-likely represented the Pharisees in this tale), which was 'presumably elaborate', did not bring him eternal bliss, but rather brought him to torment in Hades. (p. 6)

What Omecinski is emphasising is that humans attach so much meaning to burial; they are the ones that classify it as either proper, decent, befitting or otherwise. Whilst this should not be interpreted to mean that Omecinski is advocating that the dead should not be properly (in the terms of earthly measure) buried, he is indeed drawing attention to the fact that burial, after all, will not be the yardstick to gauge the character of the dead. As the parable illustrates, the rich man was not in torment because of elaborate burial, but his deeds.

How does this resonate with the African who believes that the grave is a scene of presence of the departed? It is to be noted that it is not every one who dies that has a grave. Grave is an entitlement only to those who live and die well; those who have names amongst the community, and those who are saved – those who lived an exemplary life (Shipton 2009; Turner 2017). 'The ancestor is the definition and epitome of salvation, since the ancestor is the living embodiment of the exemplary life, the life worthy of emulation' (Clark 2012:117). Can the life of the rich man be regarded as exemplary, given his character to entitle him to a grave in the real African sense of grave?

The concern of the rich man for his five brothers has been a matter eliciting different interpretations. First, is his concern borne out of love for his brothers to escape the fate he was going through in Hade? Second, if he were, would he still proudly ignore Lazarus and prefer to talk with Abraham directly? Whatever the intention of the rich man, his request was turned down by Abraham. The motive of the rich man in requesting Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers has been interpreted in different ways: borne of love and fear. It has been suggested that he made the request out of real compassion for his brothers, having realised the irreversible torment he has found himself. He is bothered about the destiny that awaits his brothers, which presupposes that they may not be conducting their lives in accordance with the scripture as he did (<https://biblehub.com/luke/16-27.htm>). In any case, that Abraham, known for his intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah would ignore the rich man's three requests raises other set of questions that are beyond the remit of this present article. But who are his five brothers that are being referred to? Some refer to the Pentateuch (that is, the five books of Moses), the five foolish virgins, the children of Leah and so forth. But I would like to see it as a symbolic reference to the rich man's class with whom he, whilst on earth, had been feasting, neglecting the poor. Of course, as one commentator puts it, the rich man's five brothers have been seeing Lazarus lying helplessly every day at the gated house of their brothers:

[T]he brothers had seen the beggar lying at his gate. If they were to see him now, as risen from the dead, they would learn how far more blessed his state had been than the luxurious ease in which they had passed and were still passing their lives. (n.p.)

In other words, the rich man's 'class' brothers, the PIP, daily see the plight of those they have, by their exploitative craft, socioeconomically decimated. As Abraham retorted, Moses and the Prophets are still in human societies, preaching. Regalado (2002:345) argued, for the Christians, Moses and the Prophets refer to the word of God.

The second twist is that all the RMD's victims known to the public by their names are PIP. In contrast, in the parable, the rich man, despite his influence in the society, had no name, at least in the Bible. According to Igboin (2005):

Names are very essential to the Africans as well as the Jews. Considering the parable from a purely African cultural setting that attaches great importance to names, the reasons for, and consequence of, the rich man in the parable not having a name are that his actions were anti-religious and anti-cultural. He therefore has to suffer the eternal fate because he lost his name. The African holds that 'because God does not like evil, he gave each person a name'.... Therefore, ... 'to save fraud, God gave each person a name'. (pp. 266–267)

In the context of the RMD, the case is that it is only the PIP that both have names and burial, whilst the low-class victims lose their names and burial in the cloud of the numbers that the NCDC regularly releases. As has been

argued earlier, proper burial is a condition for admission into ancestorhood in traditional Africa. It is believed that without proper burial the ghost of the deceased would continue to haunt the family they left behind. This is because it is believed that denial into the communion of the ancestors makes the ghost to wander, and therefore has to torment the living as a way of demanding a proper burial (Clark 2012). In other words, whilst in the parable the rich man was buried but had no name, Lazarus, at least, has a name even though he was not accorded burial.

Now is it literally possible for the rich man not to have a name? Many theologians have controversially argued that he has a name, Finees, but the more popular one is Dives, which in Latin, means 'a certain man was rich' (Van Eck 2009:6). According to Izibili and Aidenojie (2021:125), 'a name tells a lot about the person who bears it. This means that a name carries alongside with it a personality, an identity and in fact a destiny'. They further noted that 'a name functions as a stamp of identity, an expression of belief, feeling and understanding of a situation' (Izibili & Aidenojie 2021:123). Assuming the rich man's name is Dives as suggested, what he did with his wealth formed his belief, character and destiny. As he did not do what Moses and the Prophets taught him to do, he became an 'anonymous' (Szukalski 2012:210) rich man. It is indeed his refusal to carry out his social responsibility that 'he lost his name' (Igboin 2005:266). In other words, the rich man lost his personality, identity and destiny because he deliberately neglected the socially, religiously and culturally approved duty to care for the poor and needy. It can also be argued that although he literally has a name amongst the members of his community, he does not have it before God; this being the reason Jesus described him anonymously as a certain rich man.

Conclusion

I have argued that human society has had an enduring class and identity issues that continued to dictate how society responds to its challenges. The coronavirus, which has been widely viewed as a non-discriminatory disease, has become amenable to structural and hegemonic influences. The way the Nigerian government treated its citizens who contracted the virus or died as a consequence of it, has made the masses to regard it as a RMD, brought about to punish them for their corruption and oppression. Whilst this theory satisfies the poor, who have suffered also from its infectious consequences, the powerful and influential people navigate or absolutely disregard all protocols to accord themselves befitting burial. This imprudent way of handling the pandemic has continued to affect the citizens' responses even to the third wave of the virus. It is also argued that rich people have names, thus challenging the parable's moral mandate that teaches the essentiality of names. But the twist is only a manipulation as the grave does not determine the real place where the dead will spend eternity.

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