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Applying Participatory Methodologies in Understanding the Impact of the COVID-19 Epidemic on Religious Communities in Nigeria

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This chapter discusses the fieldwork experiences of using participatory methods in studying religious minorities in Plateau State, Nigeria, during the COVID-19 epidemic period. The research, conducted for CREID between February and April 2021, among communities perpetually vulnerable to violent conflict and now the COVID-19 epidemic, helped provide an insight into their experiences and coping mechanisms. This chapter is primarily a discussion of the author's experience while using specifically the 'River (or Road) of Life' and the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) matrix ranking with a group of Christian men. The team also used focus group interviews (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews (SSIs), and so was able to see first-hand the unique values of the participatory methods relative to the FGDs and SSIs. The uniqueness of the participatory methods is in their intentionality towards making the respondent create a more vivid picture of their experiences using the picturesque details that they themselves created. Furthermore, the PRA matrix ranking provides a minor but efficiently clear set of quantities, which can postulate a mixed-method approach. More interestingly, the study brought the researcher to the acknowledgement of his subjectivity in the research, and how the field helps researchers to overcome these subjectivities.

Introduction

In Nigeria, as with most developing countries, the disconnect between marginalized groups and state systems makes religion and religious organizations influential gatekeepers. In fact, a journalist in one of Nigeria's influential economic daily's summarily puts it thus:

> The sad reality faced by most Nigerians is the need for them to provide their own electric power supply, security, basic health care, quality education, good shelter, basic means of transportation and other essential services for themselves with little or no government support whatsoever. Nearly every social or public goods that should be a dividend of good governance and provided for a large number of Nigerians are privately sought-after by only those few Nigerians who can afford it. This has widened the social equality gap between the rich and the poor. (Victor, 2021)

A few others such as Elias, 2020, Agbormbai, 2021 and Utomi, 2021 have noted this and the agency of religion in the political manipulation of the populace. Religion has been the major gatekeeper in Nigeria's politics and society; politicians and government agents have for long used religious organizations and their leaders for access most especially to their poor adherents. These gatekeepers transmit both information and opportunity to their congregation, thus providing access to politicians. Without a doubt, religion (primarily Christianity and Islam) has been a major instrument in conflicts, political determinations and power-sharing in Nigeria.

It is in this gatekeeping process that even within the religions, marginalization occurs based on class, ethnic relationships or even geography. In many cases, religious minorities emerge due to the idiosyncrasies of identities such as noted above, and so even within religions there are quite a number of uncomfortable relationships and discontents among followers. This is not necessarily novel information, as quite a number of studies have been carried out looking at access and opportunity within marginalized groups in general and religiously marginalized groups specifically (Malik, 2002; Silimane, 2003, Hasan and Hasan, 2013; Oza, 2020).

This CREID project, comprising a concurrent study (in India and Nigeria) of religious inequalities and their intersections with other inequalities (class, caste, gender, age) in the context of COVID-19, was aimed at understanding the impact of the epidemic on communities already impacted by other challenges, in order to develop policy recommendations for responses which are sensitive to the experiences of these affected groups.

The fieldwork activities were conducted in Kaduna and Plateau states (both in Nigeria's north), between 2 and 5 March 2021. The author conducted

fieldwork in Plateau State, where two local government areas, Jos North, which is the state's urban capital, and Bassa, an adjacent and more rurally based local government area compared to Jos North, were chosen.[1]

Plateau State has since 2001 been embroiled in a series of inter-religious, inter-ethnic and resource-based conflicts.[2] At various times, these conflict labels have been known to intersect, leading to what has come to be termed the 'Plateau Crisis'. Although the state is predominantly Christian in population and identity, it is located within the largely Muslim north of Nigeria. There is, however, a reasonably large population of Muslims living within the state.[3] Bassa LGA is mostly rural, although it headquarters of the country's second biggest army division. It comprises predominantly Christian autochthonous ethnic groups: the Buji, Irigwe, Kitche (Rukuba), and Pengana. Also living among these groups are a reasonably large population of Fulani and Hausa communities who are predominantly Muslim. Since 2001 there has also been a lot of conflict in Bassa between the mainly Christian farmers and the mainly Muslim cattle herders.

This chapter focuses on my own experience with the findings related to the inquiries with Christian men in Miango, Bassa LGA, although the whole study in Plateau State also included another local government area, Jos North. The study also comprised inquiries with Christian women, and Muslim men and women. Particular attention for this chapter will focus on Bassa, where my fieldwork was conducted among Irigwe Christian men, because my religious and gender identities were the same as theirs.

Methodology

The team in Bassa used three instruments. The first was a two-pronged approach using two inquiry group methods: the 'River (or Road) of Life' and the PRA matrix ranking. The team then conducted comparator focus group discussions with participants from the earlier inquiry group sessions. Lastly, the team conducted semi-structured interviews with two participants from the comparator focus group discussions. Two researchers were assigned to each inquiry group, FGD or semi-structured interview. While one researcher was facilitating the process, the other researcher was taking a record of the proceedings.

'River (or Road) of Life'

The 'River (or Road) of Life' instrument is an inquiry group method that generates the respondents' lived experiences through symbolism. The illustration of a 'river' or 'road' represents the lived experience of the respondent, over a period of time. In the case of this study, this comprised the one and a half years from the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The team used prompting questions similar to those in focus group discussions; however, their uniqueness was that they didn't generate debate as with the focus groups, but rather generated detailed personal experiences of the respondents. This was a big change for me specifically as a researcher, who has been used to using detailed question guides, to now use simple prompting questions which elicited varied and sometimes deep experiences. We used simple questions such as:

- What are the most important challenges you have experienced in your daily life starting from before the pandemic, and during it?
- What factors have helped you to cope?

In the facilitation process, the team leader gave an example, using a big flipchart, of a river/road running across the board, and he/she in agreement with the respondents agreed on the river/road to be the symbol of their movement in life from before the COVID-19 pandemic to the present. The symbols they drew along the 'road' represented their lived experiences, issues such as relationships with people, groups/organizations, events and situations they found themselves in, all of which characterized either positive or negative experiences.

All respondents were given large cardboard sheets and markers. They were also encouraged to improvise by using objects like rocks, sticks, leaves and so on, to further illuminate their experiences. They were then allowed between 10 and 20 minutes for drawing and setting their process. After everyone had finished drawing, each participant was in turn given the opportunity to present their river/road and narrate their story within five minutes. However, depending on how elaborate their narration was, some took up to 20 minutes.

Furthermore, the facilitator asked the following:

- What exactly did each symbol represent in your life?
- What were the critical moments, for example health, farming, work, business and so on?

The facilitator then wrote down the key points as they emerged into two lists:

1. Challenges
2. Enablers

The 'Road of Life' instrument presented quite a novel and interesting approach for in-depth qualitative focus group methods. Unlike the conventional focus group interviews, in which various points of view are elicited through heightened discussions among the group, the Road of Life

requires the individuals to make a picturesque view of their life's passage within the given period. In the case of the session among Christian men in Bassa, all the men had a commonality of challenges ranging from narratives of violence and death due to conflict in their communities to discussions of their fears about not being able to provide for their families during those times. As noted earlier, there has been a high frequency of violence between farmers and livestock herdsmen, and this led to hard times in most communities within Bassa, most especially in terms of basic needs, finances, health and livelihood, and then the COVID-19 outbreak, leading to lockdowns, increased these insecurities.

However, even within all these, the respondents had some positive experiences. One common positive was the fact that the COVID-19 experience forced them to interact with family (both extended and nuclear) more than ever before. Another was an increased devotion to their Christian faith.

Now although all of this information can be acquired through a conventional focus group discussion, it was very noticeable that more passion and emotion were exuded by respondents while discussing their individual sketches of the 'Road of Life' than it would have been with an FGD. Also, unlike the conventional FGD, the listeners didn't have the option of interjecting but were encouraged to hold back and relate to the others' comments when presenting their own 'Road of Life'.

I also realized during the session that I had come into the field with a major bias, perceiving that the group we were dealing with, being from a rural area, and mostly non-formally (or only partially) educated, would be apprehensive of putting pen (or marker) to paper. This flawed presumption was totally wrong, because although most of the respondents were not formally educated, they easily grasped the concept of the 'Road of Life', and within the 15 minutes they had all understood the process and followed it passionately.

Three issues took centre stage in their 'Roads of Life':

1. Violence and death
2. The lockdowns
3. Religion

Violence and death

The long history of violence between the mainly Muslim herders and mainly Christian farmers in the area featured regularly in the respondents' descriptions and narratives during the 'Road of Life' session, where they described either their own experiences of loss within the family or those

of others they knew. There were also discussions on the loss of property, farm produce or businesses due to the violence. Every respondent had an emotional experience when explaining that aspect of his 'Road of Life'. In one particular case, a respondent who had lost both a brother and father due to an attack during the COVID-19 lockdowns broke into tears while describing how he now has the responsibility of his brother's children, and with help coming from nowhere, he only 'looked onto God and neighbours'. This episode brought tears to a number of the other participants, who tried to calm him down, and we had to take a break for a bit, to calm down. However, interestingly, he showed a high sense of upliftment when he subsequently moved along in his 'Road of Life' description to the present time, which he described his family trying to reorganize and forge ahead with life. He noted that being able to go back into farming with his family members was one of his greatest joys, because it helped him both physically, emotionally and economically, considering that he now had to carry the added burden of his brother's children. In his words:

> 'During the lockdowns, when we were forced to stay indoors, and the attacks then continued leading to the death of my brother and father, I felt as if the world was just coming to an end, I asked myself why God would allow such a thing to happen, how can I cope with my brothers children? I knew I couldn't question God, and somewhere inside me, I was telling myself that it will be over. Now I'm back to teaching in the primary school, and my brothers children are doing OK. God has given me rest.' (He uses the word 'salama', which in Hausa means 'granted peace'.)[4]

An interesting thing I noted in his narrative was the way in which his 'Road of Life' revolved around church, death and the responsibilities ahead. I had asked them if the events had made them question their beliefs in God, and the general response was no; however, a few admitted that they had begun to drink alcohol more during the lockdowns.

For me, the emotional responses were quite unexpected: considering that the men came in high spirits and had started on a high note, the particular images they drew, which depicted dead bodies or coffins, brought a lot of memories. The activity of drawing the events of their 'Road of Life' was quite unique; the respondents' sense of creativity and their emotions as they described their life experiences during the period made me realize how powerful the inquiry group instrument is as a qualitative research tool. Indulging the respondents in not just discussion but in a creative activity that they could further elaborate on provided a much deeper and wider picture than conventional focus group methods.

Table 6.1: Bassa, Plateau State, Nigeria: PRA matrix ranking for Christian men (challenges)

Names	Lack of income	Ethnic violence	Domestic violence	Church & lockdown restraints	No (access to) education	No safety measures	Lack of health facilities	Lack of mobility
Anonymous	3 beans	1 bean	0 beans	1 bean	3 beans	3 beans	2 beans	2 beans
Anonymous	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans	3 beans	1 bean	3 beans
Anonymous	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	2 beans	2 beans	3 beans	2 beans	2 beans
Anonymous	3 beans	4 beans	3 beans	2 beans	1 bean	3 beans	1 bean	2 beans
Anonymous	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans	3 beans	1 bean	3 beans
Anonymous	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	2 beans	2 beans	3 beans	1 bean	3 beans
Anonymous	3 beans	2 beans	1 bean	2 beans	2 beans	3 beans	1 bean	3 beans
Anonymous	3 beans	3 beans	1 bean	2 beans	3 beans	3 beans	1 bean	3 beans
Total	24	22	16	15	19	24	10	21

Table 6.2: Bassa, Plateau State, Nigeria: PRA matrix ranking for Christian men (enablers)

Names	Unity within families	Personal upliftment	Individual increase in faith	Decreased violence	Better sales of harvests such as vegetables	Rest and increased wellbeing	Increased childbirth
Anonymous	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans	1 bean	0 beans
Anonymous	2 beans	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	0 beans
Anonymous	2 beans	2 beans	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans
Anonymous	1 bean	3 beans	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans	1 bean	0 beans
Anonymous	2 beans	1 bean	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans	1 bean	0 beans
Anonymous	2 beans	2 beans	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	2 beans	2 beans
Anonymous	1 bean	2 beans	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans	2 beans	3 beans
Anonymous	2 beans	2 beans	3 beans	3 beans	3 beans	2 beans	1 bean
Total	15	17	24	19	15	15	9

There is an ethical issue, however. As noted earlier, one of the respondents became highly emotional, and this also radiated to some other members of the group. We had to take a break, and allow the emotions to simmer. Furthermore, in order not to infuse too much trauma we changed the questioning to generate a more positive outlook, asking if there were more positive experiences during and after the lockdowns. Interestingly, quite a number of their responses from here on helped to calm them down and, in some cases, bring about a bit of laughter.

The lockdowns

One of the reasons why this particular discussion brought up a lot of interest was that it helped to provide a clear understanding of the fact that most of the respondents, and also probably most people within their communities, were oblivious of the general essence of the lockdowns, but they were not oblivious of the impact of the lockdowns on their livelihoods. In their views, none of the respondents believed they had personally experienced a COVID-19 death, as no one in their communities had died in any manner that presented as that. In fact, as one respondent in the focus group interview stated, 'We have never seen anyone with COVID-19. Sometimes on our phone (through social media) we saw dead bodies being carried out of hospitals. They said it came from China, but we didn't believe it will come to Africa, and God protected us.'

The view that the disease was rather far away from them seemed to be the generally accepted perception among the men: even when they heard of COVID-19 killing prominent Nigerians, it further instilled the idea that it was not a poor man's or local disease but one that seemed to affect mainly the rich, who had money to travel to places like China.

Furthermore, information concerning the pandemic seemed just like other government propaganda on the radio or other media. Thus they experienced the pandemic as quite distant from them, and the lockdowns seemed unnecessary. However, there was a clear agreement among all of the respondents during the session that attacks by suspected herdsmen escalated during the lockdowns.

Another emotionally charged issue had to do with lockdown restrictions on churches and other religious groups. One respondent was very bitter about the fact that during the lockdowns the Plateau State governor banned the celebration of Easter, forcing churches to close. The people of Miango annually combine their cultural day with the Easter period, and this meant no celebration in 2020. However, to their dismay, the same State Governor was alleged to have allowed Muslims to celebrate Ramadan, which came a few weeks later. The group was so angry about this in both individual comments and affirmations during the session. This sparked off a lot of

questions about the Christian faith of the state governor, with one respondent jocularly saying:

'It is possible that he [the governor] has covertly converted to Islam and is only pretending to be Christian so that he is not impeached as governor. He seems to favour Muslims more, he gave them political leadership in Jos North and also even with our legislative seat. I don't trust him.'

Religion plays a significant role in the politics of Plateau State, and any action by political leaders could be misconstrued by people of one faith as favouring the other. This transpired in quite a few ways during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as seen with the case of festivals above, and even in issues relating to the sharing of food and other commodities as palliatives during the lockdowns some groups assumed that sharing was done to favour others more than them, and the blame was aimed mainly at the government.

Religion

Religion also presented an interesting emotional perspective during the 'Road of Life' sessions. While discussing their experiences during the lockdowns, a good number noted that they had not been regular churchgoers before COVID-19; however, the lockdowns and apparently the apocalyptic news about COVID-19, motivated quite a number of them to reinvigorate their pursuit of faith. Although devotion was limited by the lockdown, their personal and family devotions greatly increased. Most respondents were clear on their renewed devotion while discussing it in their 'Road of Life'. One respondent, though, in the focus group discussions presented quite a contrary view. He noted that at a point during the lockdowns he was angry with God.

'Why would God, after allowing such a terrible thing like COVID-19, leading to lockdowns, then allow Fulani to attack and kill people? For me, God has not been fair, bad things and bad people everywhere, and some people are now saying that going to church will help us?'

Many people had to rethink their religious values during the lockdown. Among the groups interviewed for this work, most respondents feared the apocalyptic nature of the COVID-19 events, but even at that, some questioned the intentions of God in allowing this alongside an already existent crisis of conflict, poverty and other disease.

PRA matrix rankings

The PRA matrix rankings are used to assess and study the preferences of participants for a particular issue or issues over others. In this case study, the PRA matrix ranking was done in relation to the challenges and enablers the respondents faced during the peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Tables 6.1 and 6.2).

The facilitators drew two matrix boards, one representing challenges while the other represented enablers. On each board the names of the participants were written down on the left column, while along the top row of the matrix table the various possible issues which posed as possible challenges or enablers were listed. The participants were asked one by one, to choose on a scale from 0 to 3, which signified how important each of these challenges or enablers was for them. They were each given a handful of beans and asked to use either none for the unimportance of the challenge or enabler or, at the most, three beans to signify how important the challenge or enabler was. Here, the more the beans, the more important the issue was.

The various quantities of bean seeds placed by each participant for the different challenges or enablers were totalled and, based on these quantities, the priority challenges and enablers were figured out from the quantities provided. As seen from the two images acquired from the PRA matrix ranking for Christian men in Bassa, lack of income and safety were the biggest challenges, followed by ethnic violence and the lack of mobility. On the other hand, views on domestic violence and issues related to health were less challenging. The facilitator tried to encourage further discussion on why domestic violence was less of a challenge, and a respondent noted that those issues were usually short-term and commonly resolved domestically, so did not present a major challenge. While this was the perspective of the men's group, that of the women was quite different. In the women's view, issues on domestic violence and those related to health were rated higher in the matrix. One can understand why domestic violence was a bigger challenge for women than for men. Most times the men were the perpetrators of domestic violence and in most cases they cared less for the larger health of the family, and so they would rather push away such incidents from their memories, while, in contrast, women who live with the bruises and the responsibility for health take it more to heart. That is why such issues were usually short-term for the men, and more long-term for the women.

Enablers

All respondents were in common agreement that the news of the emergence of COVID-19, and the events that followed, were quite terrifying to many. These fears led many to rethink their worldviews, and many became religious. In response to why they became more religious, one respondent noted: 'We

thought the world was coming to an end … this has never happened before, and the news about deaths kept on getting worse, so we were preparing for the end-time.' Interestingly, although they complained about poverty, most respondents talked about the experience of 'lack' in a lockdown as teaching 'prudence and contentment', and although there was anxiety about what to eat and other basic needs, it also gave them a break from paying the children's school fees, buying new clothes or even having to travel.

Other interesting enablers were the fact that they had time for retrospection, and also it was an opportunity to bond with family more, especially for the male respondents. The lockdown seemed to have fostered new family ties. While the enablers are more introspective and ephemeral, they seemed to have quite an impact on the worldviews of many of the respondents. A number of them noted that they had greatly reduced their drinking and had thought up ways to supplement their incomes, just in case they found themselves again in another tight situation similar to the lockdowns.

It is quite interesting to note that in both inquiry group sessions the respondents were highly motivated to talk after the activities they had either done themselves or had helped to do. For instance, during the 'Road of Life' the respondents were more interested in providing the narrative based on what they drew along their 'Road of Life'; in most cases, their drawings followed the sequence of the events of their lives during the period, and so when verbalizing that, they were able to make further visualizations. In the matrix rankings on the other hand, respondents found it easier to explain reasons why they had allocated more bean seeds to any particular challenge or enabler with more emphasis than if they were asked to simply respond to verbal rankings. The motivation seems to have come from the fact that they had been instructed to place the bean seeds based on their convictions. Therefore, when asked to explain why there seemed to be more emphasis on one rather than the other, they would not contradict themselves, but rather emphasise why they seemed to agree on one issue rather than another.

The uniqueness of these inquiry groups over a simple focus group discussion is the fact that they helped the respondents to further probe into their inner conscious minds to bring out some recessive memories, which would have been missed in an ordinary FGD.

FGDs and SSIs

A focus group interview was conducted with a different group of Christian men, mostly from different villages from those who were involved in the Inquiry Group Session. The FGD was held using a semi-structured interview outline which aided the interviewer to ask questions related to lived experiences of the respondents before, during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns. The transcript was submitted as part of the

fieldwork data. The two main differences between the data obtained and experiences of the respondents in the inquiry group sessions and the focus group session were that the responses from the 'Road of Life' were quite detailed, and could provide more insight on the individual interviews with each respondent. The River of Life exercise also elicited a high level of emotional responses, which would hardly have come from a focus group discussion.

Two SSIs were also held with Christian men in Bassa, one with a respondent from the inquiry group session – a university undergraduate – and another with a respondent from the FGD – a farmer. This enabled the researchers to gain views from two differing perspectives. The two transcripts were submitted as part of the fieldwork data. In a sense, one noticed that the participatory inquiries elicited more emotion from respondents and therefore more perspectives in description than the FGDs or even the key informant interviews.

Significance of the use of inquiry group methods

The use of the 'Road of Life' and the PRA matrix ranking were eye-openers for me. I had never encountered this approach, and I was a bit apprehensive at first, especially when considering the 'Road of Life' for the men, because I had imagined that the respondents, being African men, would come with the perspective that being made to draw on a piece of cardboard was too juvenile and demeaning for them. But I was totally wrong. I realized that the concept was not only grasped easily by them but also interested them. I had come with some bias and, although not uncommon, it is important to appreciate its impact on research and how much it should be avoided. Just because they were from rural backgrounds, I had assumed they wouldn't grasp the concepts.

The inquiry group sessions have a way of extracting emotions from the respondents' narratives, which other instruments such as the SSIs and FGDs might not. For instance, I have often observed that in an SSI the respondent might seem restrained or tend to be very careful with his/her responses; also during the focus group, which could be less inhibiting in terms of responses when arguments or varying points of view are made, there still arises the tendency for superficial responses for the sake of argument. However, the 'Road of Life' deliberately drives the respondent to provide more emotive responses without inhibitions from other respondents, thereby expressing them in more detail when providing a narrative for his/her drawings. Likewise, the PRA matrix ranking generates the emotional magnitude of the respondent towards particular issues. By ranking emotions towards an issue one can quantify the levels at which the respondent finds the issue impacting him/her and their immediate community. Furthermore, it interestingly has a

relatively small but clear set of quantitative values, which makes it something similar to a mixed–method approach.

Conclusion

The use of the 'Road of Life' and the PRA matrix ranking were eye–openers. Although we were initially a bit apprehensive about using it with the male respondents, they surprisingly grasped the concept and appreciated it in a manner we had least expected. The discovery in the study that the COVID–19 period encouraged respondents to be more religious, is not surprising, in that the choice to hold on to religion as a primary has arisen from the fear of losing paradise after the losses experienced on earth due to the disconnect between these marginalized groups and government, and furthermore between them and their parent religious groups. Most respondents seemed oblivious of government presence and appreciated religion more from their personal experiences rather than its larger structure. In their views, if COVID–19 portended the end of the world, then 'Heaven' became the final (and most optimistic) option.

Notes

[1]   Nigerian states are further divided into local government areas (LGAs), most of which are created on the basis of population size, ethnic clumping or for purposes of gerrymandering.
[2]   Plateau State lies between latitude 08°24′N and longitude 008°32′ and 010°38′ east, with coordinates: 9°10′N 9°45′E. Located centrally, within Nigeria, Plateau State is bounded by Kaduna State in the west, Nassarawa State to the south, Taraba State to the east and Bauchi to the north.
[3]   I discuss this dynamic in Mang (2012).
[4]   This respondent is a primary school teacher in one of the remote villages of Bassa that was attacked by the Fulani in August 2020.

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