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Fight Against COVID-19 and the Role of Traditional Rulers in Northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disease affected almost every aspect of the society including our everyday life activities, thus, it has propelled the reshaping of daily life activities across the world. As the wave of pandemic disease affects the global health and economic community, the traditional rulers are having much role to play in supporting government to engage local community people as part of concerted efforts to reverse the trend of the pandemic. This engagement builds on the lessons learned from the critical role played by traditional and religious leaders in the achievement of a polio-free status in Nigeria. The traditional leaders in their domains would address the challenges of misconception, denial of COVID-19 disease, low risk perception, and stigmatization in the communities, all of which hugely affect COVID-19 prevention and control. Therefore, neglecting such powerful partners within the communities would have probably been the biggest mistake in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic disease control and eradication initiative. The central concern of this paper is to examine the major roles of traditional rulers in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic disease in Northern Nigeria. However, it is the contention of this paper that efficient and effective fight against the pandemic disease would continue to be a mirage if due recognition is not given to the traditional authorities as critical stakeholders in the health architecture of the region under discourse and Nigeria in general. Data for the study was generated from secondary sources while analysis was affected through documentary analysis.

KEYWORDS: Traditional Authorities, COVID-19, and Northern Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) is a novel disease that became known when it was identified as the causative agent in reported cases of patients with pneumonia admitted in hospitals in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Munster et al. 2020; Zhu et al. 2020). Many health experts believe that the new strain of coronavirus likely originated in batsor pangolins. It is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. The first transmission to humans was in Wuhan, China, among people linked to a local seafood market ("wet market").

The virus has mostly spread through person-to-person contact (Aaron, 2020). This disease is spread through airborne zoonotic droplet, and people can get infected when in close contact with the cough and sneeze of persons who have symptoms from the virus (Kumar et al., 2020).

Symptoms of Covid-19 infection include: fever, dry cough, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing, muscle aches, headache, sore throat, or diarrhea, runny nose, tiredness (CDC, 2020b; Foundation for Medical Education and Research [MFMER] 2020). The incubation period lasts up to 14 days and the symptoms may appear 2–14 days after exposure.

In March 12 2020, the WHO officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Egypt was the first African country to account a case of COVID-19. Since then, Africa has witnessed more than 6.6million cases with over 160,000 deaths and over 5.8 recoveries(Africa CDC, 29 July 2021). The first case of COVID-19 was reportedin Nigeria by the Federal Ministry of Health on 27th February, 2020.

This was the case of an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria and returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos, Nigeria on the 25th of February, 2020 (Maclean and Dahir, 2020). Since then, the number of confirmed cases of infection keep rising in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the world of work. Millions of enterprises face an existential threat. Nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion global workforce were at risk of losing their livelihoods. Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable because the majority lack social protection and access to quality health care and have lost access to productive assets. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, many were unable to feed themselves and their families. For most, no income means no food, or, at best, less food and less nutritious food (WHO, 2020).

Nevertheless, the vast majority of countries around the world as a result of the COVID-19 have preferred to temporarily halt the bulk of their economic and social activities, so as not to overburden their health systems, giving priority to saving lives rather than maintaining a façade of normality. It is important, however, apart from the debate that rages surrounding the contribution of the health sector in the fight against COVID-19, to identify other factors contributing towards the fight of the virus. It is on this note, that this paper tends to presents some of the roles of the traditional rulers in the fight against COVID-19 in Northern Nigeria.

Problem Statement
The focus of leadership within health systems to date, in respect of public health, has been on leadership in the formal sector (Roncarolo et al. 2017) with a lack of attention to the role of traditional leadership in the community. Likewise, the role of leadership in health policy implementation primarily focuses on the formal sector (Gilson and Raphaely 2008). Although a small number of studies recognized the importance of traditional rulers in the fight against COVID-19, we did not locate empirical studies that analysed in detail their role in the fight against the virus in Northern Nigeria.

The absence of analysis of the role of traditional leaders in promoting health service utilization in the published literature is surprising, given the recognition of their role within the community system (Kululanga et al. 2012; Greeson et al. 2016). Although performing many roles, there is paucity of data specifically about the roles of traditional rulers in promoting public health in Northern Nigeria. It is important that the roles of the traditional rulers be studied, this may enable policy makers to include their views during planning for public health interventions and other relevant policies. This article seeks to analyse the role of traditional leaders in the fight against COVID-19 in Northern Nigeria at the community level

2. METHOD
This paper is qualitative in nature because it is based on organized review of related literature and a subtle examination of secondary data. Document analysis was done guided by the study objective. Use of documentary analysis has become quite popular within public health research, especially if trying to evaluate the impact of an initiative, for example the focus of this paper that centered on the role of the traditional rulers in the fight against COVID-19 public health crisis in Northern Nigeria.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW
Traditional Institution in the African Societies
Traditional institutions in the African societies are the age-long administrative system that is in existence since before the coming of colonials into the African region. Traditional institutions have been identified by Yadava and Gautam (1980) to include: traditional rulers, kin-groups, farmers' forum, age groups, women clubs, sacred institution (church, temple, mosque, etc.) obtainable in the rural societies. Orji & Olali (2010) cited in Nweke (2012) defined traditional institutions as "the indigenous political arrangements whereby leaders with proven track records are appointed and installed in line with the provisions of their native laws and customs... they are the custodians of their people's norms, cultures and practices".

Indeed, the power, authority and legitimacy of traditional rulers were derived from traditions. A study by Isaac (2018) in Ngwu, (2018) disclosed that in the olden days, traditional institutions are the administrative organizations and these establishments are entrenched in the history, cultures, and the traditions of several ethnic groups and cultural background.

Before the arrival of the British in the late 19th century, the history of Nigeria was turbulent with periods when empires such as those of Oyo, Benin, Kanem-Bornu and Sokoto gained control over large areas, and other periods when the states were more fragmented (Thornton, 1999). Although political structures differed widely between different ethnic groups, it was common for each town or collection of towns to have a recognized ruler, who might in turn be subordinate to the ruler of a larger polity (Johnson, 1967).

In Nigeria, the heads of traditional institutions are called different names according to the language and culture of a particular community. Most communities in the Northern Nigeria which is predominantly made up of Hausa/Fulani people addressed heads of traditional institutions as 'Emirs' or 'Sultan' and their councils, depending on the ranking of the traditional rulers.

After the colonial era, the traditional rulers are attached with some important functions among which are contributing to development administration, linkage or "brokering" between grassroots and capital, extension of national identity through the conferral of traditional titles, low-level conflict resolution and judicial gate-keeping, ombudsmanship and institutional safety- valve for overloaded and sub-apportioned bureaucracies. In addition to the above roles, traditional rulers are meant to create educated chieftaincies meaningfully improves the success of traditional rulers (Miles, 1993). Furthermore, traditional rulers serve as another institute of conflict resolution in any nation where the state legal system is weakening to fully provide the judicial requirements of the country (Zeleke, 2011).

The Role of the Traditional Rulers in the Fight Against COVID-19
➢ Policy Implementation
➢ Community Sensitization
➢ Vaccine Acceptance
➢ Community Mobilization
➢ Community Entrance

Policy Implementation
Although they have no formal role in the democratic structure of modern Nigeria, the traditional rulers play a prominent role at the community level in particularly in the Northern Nigeria in exercising power and authority towards implementations of government provisioned policies. The traditional rulers have many policy implementation roles in the fight against COVID-19, and these roles include advisory, encouragement, regulating and restricting cultural practices, formulating bye-laws and handling preventive measures violation complaints.

As the second wave of COVID-19 affects the global health and economic community, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized the particular role of the traditional rulers in policy implementation at the local level, and it is supporting government to engage the traditional rulers as part of concerted efforts to reverse the trend of the pandemic. This engagement builds on the lessons learned from the critical role played by traditional and religious leaders in the achievement of a polio-free status in Nigeria. Recently, with WHO's support, government engaged 7,350 traditional and religious leaders across 11 priority states to execute community-based interventions including sensitization for voluntary testing, survivors' declaration of status during heroes' campaign, voluntary declaration of contacts by confirmed cases and adherence to preventive measures.

4. COMMUNITY SENSITIZATION
Since 2009, the key role played by traditional leaders in Northern Nigeria under the auspices of Northern Traditional Leaders Committee for Polio and Primary Health Care (NTLC) remains one of the top strategic partnerships in community sensitization that saw the end of polio in Nigeria. This particular role when channeled to the fight against COVID-19 in the region will help immensely to control the spread and end the corona virus.

To have a vivid example, in 2008, a community communication and awareness enhancement methodology known as Majigi (a roadside film show) was pilot-tested in Gezawa, Kano State, located in northwestern Nigeria (Nasiru, et al, 2012). In this pilot campaign, coordinated by the National Primary Health Care Development Agency (the agency responsible for developing primary health care programs and policies in Nigeria), the participation of imams (Muslim clerics) was solicited through the traditional rulers to sensitized people at the community level which was found to have a great impact to the achievement of the project goal.

Recently, in Sokoto, WHO State coordinator, Dr Habibu Yahya reaffirmed this function of the traditional rulers, when positing that "the increase in community testing was associated with the sensitization and engagement of the traditional and religious leaders led by the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar. That, since the engagement of the traditional leadership of Sokoto under the Sultan, community testing increased from less than 100 as of September 2020 to over 200".

5. VACCINE ACCEPTANCE

Many referred to the traditional rulers as being influential leaders of the community, primarily guide the direction of development agendas in the form of making bye-laws for the local community to follow. It was widely believed that the traditional rulers have legitimate authority, because they are chosen by the people and are trusted by government. The fight against COVID-19 in Northern Nigeria may suffered many setbacks, due to challenges of poverty and illiteracy among the majority in the region particularly those in the rural areas, the major challenge will be the widespread misconception about the COVID-19 vaccine, which may lead tomany communities to be reluctant to have the vaccine.

However, when unfounded rumours led to COVID-19 vaccines boycott, some traditional rulers in the Northern Nigeria, teamed up with the Federal Government to lead the COVID-19 sensitization campaign on the importance of vaccination. In Kwara state, the traditional leaders' engagement resulted in an increase in individuals presenting for COVID-19 testing. Traditional rulers playa critical
role in increasing vaccine acceptance for polio vaccination and are credited for the successes of other health interventions in Northern Nigeria.

According to Professor Oyewale Tomori, neglecting such powerful partners within the communities would have probably been the biggest mistake in the polio eradication initiative. The WHO Country Representative/Head of Mission, Dr. Walter Kazadi Mulombo, is optimistic that engaging the traditional and religious institutions will enhance community acceptance of COVID-19 vaccine. "As Nigeria introduces COVID-19 vaccine amidst low-risk perception, myths and doubts about the reality of the disease among the populace, the engagement of traditional leaders will be vital to address these among other erroneous impressions.

6. COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

Traditional leaders have been reported as one of the most important stakeholders in the fight against communicable diseases and promotion of good health in the communities. They have ability to influence their subjects through multiple routes. Mobilization through formation of bye- laws, use of fines, fear and coercion have been mentioned in other studies as some of the ways used by the community leaders in influencing their communities. Therefore, partnership with the traditional rulers will provided a golden opportunity to forge a clear path forward in the COVID-19 campaign in Northern Nigeria. To affirmed this role of the traditional rulers, the WHO State Coordinator in Kwara State, Mr Mustapha Katibi stated that, "Shortly after our sensitization of traditional leaders in Kwara state during epidemiological week 46 in 2020, testing increased from zero to 875 by week 52,".

7. COMMUNITY ENTRANCE

Studies found that traditional rulers played an active role in supporting health workers community entrance. A study of community health workers (CHWs) in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique, also found that the traditional leaders fostered CHW relationships with the community, through enhanced community respect and credibility towards these CHWs. In another study, it was reported that one of the major problems in addressing public health issues was the low use of services of the traditional rulers. Thus, this put the traditional rulers at the centre stage as they are the custodians of cultural practices and beliefs to educate the general public in the respective communities on risks posed by the corona virus.

8. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is a global health crisis that is killing people, spreading human suffering, and upending people's lives. But this is much more than a health crisis. It is a human, economic and social crisis. The disruption of societies and economies caused by the pandemic is aggravating the pre-existing global social and economic crises and particularly is impacting local economies in unprecedented ways.

The COVID-19 pandemic disease affected almost every aspect of the society including our everyday life activities, thus, it has propelled the reshaping of daily life activities across the world. As the wave of pandemic disease affects the global health and economic community, this study concluded that, the traditional rulers are having much role to play in supporting government to engage local community people as part of concerted efforts to reverse the trend of the pandemic.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that, there is need of upward recognition amongst policy makers, health-care and development practitioners and researchers, of the importance of traditional rulers in fighting COVID-19 and the spread of the disease in Northern Nigeria. It is confident that their efforts would address the challenges of

misconception, denial of COVID-19 disease, low risk perception, and stigmatization in the communities, all of which hugely affect COVID-19 prevention and control. In a similar vein, accommodating the opinions of the northern traditional rulers would greatly help in securing the much-needed trust, which would offerthe fight against COVID-19 program a platform to suc

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